

Traces and Trends: Architectural Guide

By Phillip Hu – Spring 2015

What does the architectural style of a building say about whom it was built for and the economics, technology, and culture of the time when it was built? The following guide is not comprehensive, but is intended as an introduction to reading architectural style as evidence of its time and place. Note that most of the examples are in Cambridge, but many of the same characteristics are found in Back Bay as well.

Forces that Influence the Character and Style of Buildings:

Economics. Land ownership, financing. Rental versus ownership.

Culture and demographics. Who was it built for? Who is living there now? What is the family structure?

Fashion. What do ornamentations and styling mean beyond a date?

Technology. How do new technologies affect buildings? New opportunities? Obsolescence?

Politics. Are there policies that provide incentives for certain types of housing?

Characteristics of Residential Buildings:

A common theme of the development in the style of homes in the 19th century (when most single or double homes on our site were built) is the translation of architectural fashions from abroad into local material and vernacular housing types. For example, while styling and ornamentation decisions changed, many homes share basic floor plan organizations until Queen Anne in the late 19th century. Similarly, Greek Revival or French Second Empire movements in Europe used primarily stone while local expertise and affordable materials in Cambridge was limited mainly to wood and brick.

Scale. Lot size, height, and massing.

Density. Lot size, the number of units or families occupying a building?

Material. Wood frame or brick exterior, stone, concrete, other.

Principal Residential Types

Early types. Single house, double house (duplex), row houses

Later types. Tenement, two-family house, triple-decker, apartment buildings (taller than 4 stories)

Overview of Styles in 19th Century

NOTE: this guide does not claim that all buildings of a certain period are exactly in the illustrated style. Frequently, there are competing architectural ideas, and architecture that borrows ideas from the past.

Federal/Late Georgian

From 1793, the first batch of surviving houses were erected after the West Boston Bridge opened. The style is relatively simple with minimal ornamentation. The façade is a single surface; even a wood structure appears like a solid piece of stone. Large chimneys generally hold the house together spatially as a center hearth.



142 Prospect Street – Note simplicity in windows and form, central fire place location. (Note this is in the style but does not mean it was actually built later).

Greek Revival

Ornamentation enters the scene as tastes change in mid-19th century. From the simple blocks of the Federal period, houses became more complex: for example, two story porticos, the introduction of more façade elements



Clockwise from left: 219 Harvard Street ,135 Cherry Street, 121 Cherry Street

Mansard (Second Empire-esque)

This style, characterized by the mansard roof among other elements, was popular in France in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the style was later imported in the United States. The roof, also known as a hip roof, has a steep pitch, quite different from an ordinary pitched roof.



Clockwise from top left: 97 Prospect St, 156 Norfolk St, 210 Harvard St

Queen Anne

The style, imported from England between 1875 and 1905, introduced more ornamentation and different materials. Because the time period spanned several decades, the styles vary, but usually can be identified by their use of ornamentation. Often, designers would play with trusses or create inventive hybrids of styles mentioned before.



Clockwise from top left: 20 Essex St, 64 Prospect Street (Google Street View), 208 Harvard St, 119 Prospect St

20th century and beyond

While it's important to note that the above examples could have been built in the 20th century, with the intention of matching their style to that of surrounding buildings. The two examples below, found in the site near MIT, show a dramatic shift in style. The first, probably built recently, is clad in metal and uses sliding screens to block sunlight, yet borrows the formal typology of a traditional house. The second typifies a kind of 'raised ranch' style with its low pitched roof; the set back is quite odd, clearly prioritizing room for a car!). Both show lack of ornamentation.



212 Harvard Street, 141 Cherry Street

Overview of Commercial Architecture in Cambridgeport

After the 1793 opening of the West Boston bridge (later rebuilt as Longfellow Bridge), Cambridgeport became an important hub of commercial activity, especially along Main Street. The form of a building is related to the type of commercial activity of a certain period. For example, an auto-repair shop is vastly different from a bank in form, façade, and details. Particularly interesting are buildings that have changed use; exploring how occupants have changed their built environment are clues that tell a story about the site.

Early Retail Architecture (1800-1900)

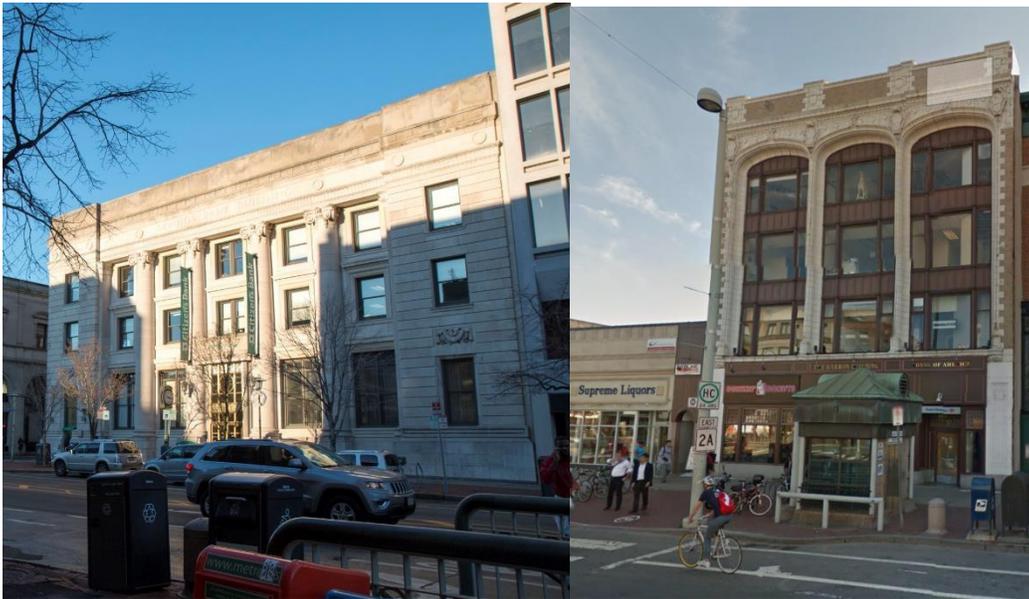


653 Massachusetts Avenue; 763 Massachusetts Avenue

Though refurbished numerous times (and possibly completely rebuilt), the Starbucks at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Prospect Street is in a similar style to the Federalist houses in the notes about residential architecture, with a low roof, simple upper design, but a changed street-level design. Many retail stores (not warehouses) harbored mixed use with residences on the upper floors, shops at street level.

A counter example to the simple corner store is the towering building in the same “Romanesque” style as Cambridge City Hall and Trinity Church, distinguished by its particular use of masonry, massing, and ornamentation.

Twentieth Century Commercial Architecture (1900- ca. 1950)



689 Massachusetts Avenue; 614 Massachusetts Avenue (Google Streetview)

These two building examples are in a neo-classical inspired style, complete with a precise organization and proportion of façade elements such as the columns and entablature. Materially, cast stone or marble panels were used to evoke a stately feel for the commercial district.

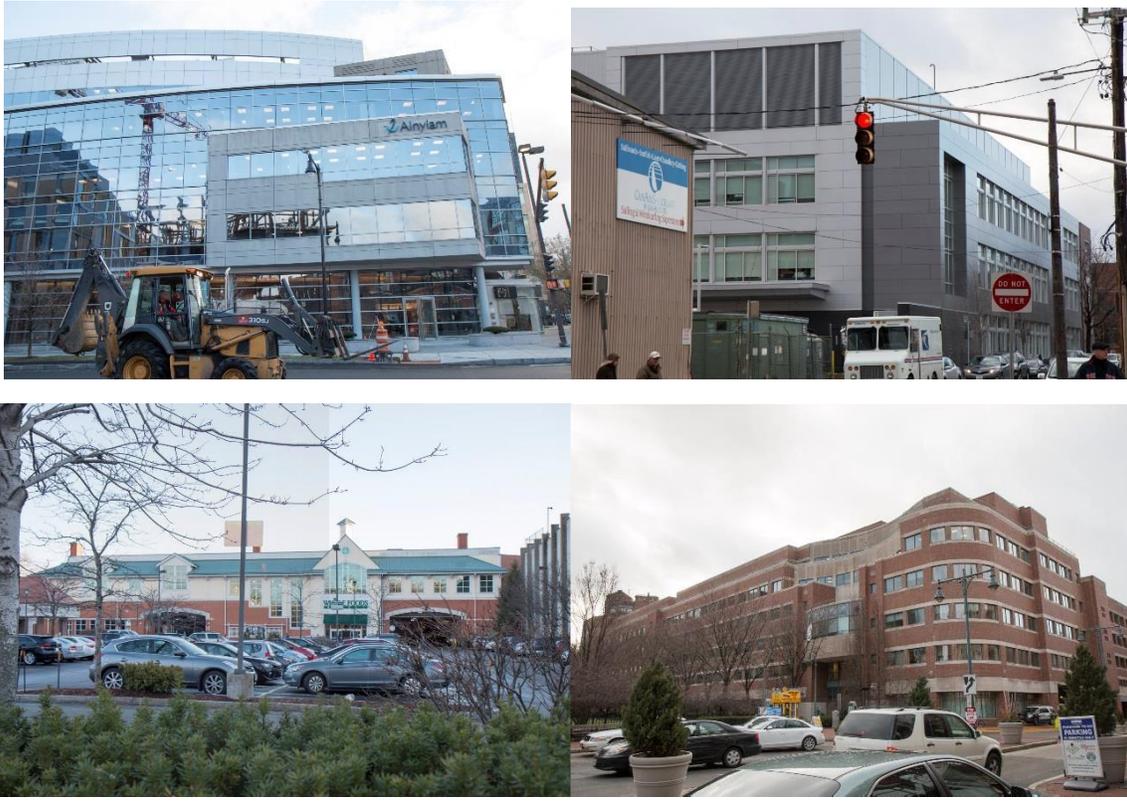
Postwar Commercial Architecture (1950-1980)



One Broadway; 729 Memorial Drive

The post war introduced new Modernist building styles, with new form and materials. Single story shopping centers with on-site parking emerged as retailers catered to the automobile. Large office buildings in concrete or with glass curtain walls (exterior walls are mainly glass with thin metal elements framing) became a popular style. In general, buildings of this period are characterized by the introduction of concrete, un-ornamented facades, and larger windows.

Contemporary Commercial Architecture



Kendall Sq; Kendall Sq; Wholefoods on Memorial Drive; 1R Cambridgeside Place

As we are in the moment, it is harder to generalize today's styles. Here, we see a variety of styles and materials. In general, though many post-war themes are carried through, their execution is different; the top left example has glass curtain walls, but the form is free to move around, not constricted by a box. The industrial aspects of the buildings are expressed through vents. For retail, the Wholefoods is styled as Neo-Traditional, using elements such as gable/pitch roofs, a chimney, and brick, yet including large glazing to be distinctively modern. Interestingly enough is its multi-story form, with additional parking below. Brick is also used with cast concrete in the office across from the Galleria.

Civic/Institutional



Fire station on Mass. Ave; Cambridge City Hall; Cambridge Post Office; Morse Elementary School

The styles between civic and commercial buildings are similar across time. The Romanesque Cambridge City Hall falls within roughly the same time period as its commercial counterpart. The simple brick massing of the fire station on Massachusetts Avenue is close to the Federalist/neo-Georgian style (but built later, 1893). The post office matches the Renaissance style of the banks. Finally, the postwar school is low and boxy, close to its commercial shopping mall counterpart. Similarly, MIT is a prime example of architecture over time, from the neo-classical main block, to the Green Building or Stratton Student Center to Simmons or Stata Center.

Industrial

The key difference from industrial buildings and commercial buildings is ornamentation, scale, and repetition of elements.



American Twine Building; Cambridge Brands Inc.

An industrial or manufacturing building is repetitive and massive compared to its commercial counterparts. Another key aspect is how the building interacts with the street, mostly closed off. Even though much manufacturing has moved out of city centers, their buildings are being repurposed as residential or office uses. On the right, the Cambridge Brands (Tootsie-Roll) factory is an exception, but across Massachusetts Avenue, the original Necco candy factory is now Novartis, yet the labs on the ground floor are still opaque to the sidewalk user, a characteristic remaining from its industrial roots.

Differences in industrial architecture style across time largely comes down mostly to materials (though possibly a few exceptions). The brick American Twine building was built earlier, while the reinforced concrete factory is built later as a more efficient structure with more space. Both are repetitive and simple with windows and structural expression.

NOTE: this guide does not claim that all buildings of a certain period are exactly in the illustrated style. Frequently, there are competing architectural ideas, and architecture that borrows ideas from the past.

Images

Images unless noted are taken by author.