

PROFESSOR: Think. How does one understand the passage of time? How do we understand the evolution of humanity's most dynamic invention, the city? Look closely and carefully. Try to see how the layers of history have accumulated. Cities are the products of the actions of millions of people and countless decisions, public and private. How do all the pieces, styles, and times fit together? How does one understand processes as trends, at once part of the past and of the future? And how will the new fit into the fabric when it loses that newness?

In a place as old as Cambridge, what's a dormitory today might easily have played host to critical junctures in history. Without understanding our surroundings, we can only inhabit the present. Signs may reveal that which is all but forgotten and invisible. That which may seem eternal like a river may be subject to great change. On our own campus, the Great Dome's date stone recalls its own construction, while the columns that support it allude to things far older.

Preserving the past is often impossible. All around MIT and the region as a whole, construction sites testify to the constant destruction and remaking of the city. Even when structures stand the test of time, the ways of life that they represent and that they once enabled are often irrevocably lost. In Fort Point, fading signs for leather and metal manufacturing advertise services that have long since departed. Across the channel in the city's financial district, economic trends such as the need for office space may be too great to save more than the facade of an old warehouse.

At street level, the walking city is preserved, but tall buildings now rise above the old mansard roofs. Why do office towers sprout in the center of the hub? Will spaces of work always dominate downtowns? What processes might disrupt the practice? And how will the city adapt? Adaptation is after all everywhere. This street in Beacon Hill, for example, was laid out more than a century before the invention of the car. What could have preceded the proliferation of parking here along the waterfront? In the Back Bay, signs and symbols share space on a single structure, institutions giving way to the pervasive social process of shopping.

How can you read the past and the present here on Newbury Street? Signs of the past, signs of the future, are visible in all parts of the city. With old maps in hand and a keen eye, one can sense the trends that propel the city's development and reason out whether they'll continue to stretch and flex or with the right force applied snap completely. You can read the traces of the

past, a history of the city that is visible, and can be communicated, photographed, and assembled into a meaningful form. As you walk the streets and alleys, it should become clear history is not only to be found in books.

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