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# ArchitectureBoston

July/August 2003

## Peabody Terrace

entire magazine issue devoted to a 40-year-old building? Before you hasten to assume that after five years of publication, *ArchitectureBoston* has been launched as a history journal, consider this: *The Boston Globe* recently reported that a Cambridge neighborhood overturned a proposal for a new Harvard art museum because residents have still not forgiven the university for the intrusion of the high-rise Peabody Terrace student apartments, which opened in 1964.

tonished? So was the editorial board of *ArchitectureBoston*, which met the morning the story ran in the *Globe*. By all accounts, the proposed museum, designed by architect Renzo Piano, would have been an elegant, small-scale structure; the site, a former garden shop and greenhouse on the banks of the Charles River, seemed an appropriate choice. But the neighborhood, which even now sprouts signs protesting Harvard's latest building incursions, is undeniably bitter. And it is undeniably far better organized than it was 40 years ago.

This episode could be dismissed as yet another example of town-gown friction, perhaps as a New England version of ancient tribal enmity and spite. But the real story of Peabody Terrace is the story of good intentions gone awry, of misunderstandings, of cultural conflict. Above all, it is an allegory of the schism between architects and the public. Architects love Peabody Terrace. The public hates it.

Designed by Josep Lluís Sert, Peabody Terrace is a Modernist icon. Its great irony is that it is also a terrific case study in Postmodern theory. Was there ever a better example of architectural relativism? It is a building that is at once beautiful and ugly — not in the “so bad it’s good” sense, nor in the French sense of the *le laide*, of beauty derived from quirky ugliness. Architects believe Peabody Terrace is beautiful. The public believes it is ugly. They are both right.

Peabody Terrace is a product of the '60s, when Cambridge was an architectural mecca of high energy, idealism, and creativity. It is an era now on the cusp of rediscovery, as the revivalist engine, having lingered long enough on the 1940s and '50s, seems ready to move on in its inevitable fashion. Exhibit 1: The Harvard Design School's upcoming exhibition and symposium, “Josep Lluís Sert: The Architect of Urban Design, 1953–1969.”

But there are other reasons to devote an entire issue of a magazine to Peabody Terrace. The maelstrom that has surrounded Peabody Terrace also threatens new buildings. Harvard University has tried to avoid the obvious comparison to its first high-rise riverfront housing project, One Western Avenue — surely a displaced fear, as One Western would be lucky (and unfortunately, seems unlikely) to earn equivalent affection from architects. Other area universities, faced with high housing costs, are building dormitories, sometimes in existing neighborhoods. MIT professor Larry Vale notes, the need for sensitivity to “design politics” may be at an all-time high. But something else is also at an all-time high in Boston: a yearning for the invention, clarity, and social spirit that made Peabody Terrace a landmark in American architecture.

Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA

Editor

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Cover: detail of Peabody Terrace, Cambridge, Massachusetts  
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# Letters

**I graduated from** The Cooper Union with  
a BArch 31 years ago. In all this time I have  
never been mentioned in the alumni news-  
letter until the current issue, when I was  
mentioned for having published an article in  
*ArchitectureBoston* ["Architecture and the  
Pro-Forma," Summer 2002]. The pen is  
clearly mightier than the pencil.

Willy Scarsic AIA, Senior Vice President  
Wingate Development Corp.  
Needham, Massachusetts

**"Land" is another great issue** [March/April  
2003] that clearly shows just how open-  
minded *ArchitectureBoston* is. Landscape  
architecture is a topic that many architects  
and students certainly need to be more  
cognizant of. You bravely included articles  
that criticize architects (justly so!) for not  
recognizing the importance of landscape  
architecture, and you juxtaposed articles by  
American Society of Landscape Architects  
(ASLA) members with stories from landscape  
architects who are not ASLA-affiliated. In the  
theory of architecture course that I teach at  
Wentworth Institute of Technology, I have  
invited a National Park Service ranger from  
Frederick Law Olmsted's National Historical  
Site in Brookline to talk about Olmsted's  
Boston legacy. I have also used Olmsted's  
Back Bay Fens as an assignment study. This  
assignment, in particular, was an eye-opener  
for students who never thought that archi-  
tecture went beyond the footprint of the  
building, let alone had a social conscious.  
Olmsted's aesthetic, social, and forward-  
thinking ideas left an impression on them.  
Of all my assignments, this one has brought  
the most inspiration to students for their  
later architecture projects. This from the non-  
architect, Frederick Law Olmsted.

Richard Moore AIA  
Brookline, Massachusetts

**Your "Class" issue** [May/June 2003] was by  
far the very best, both informative and  
entertaining. It was a study in sociology as  
well as architecture, and shows just how  
related our industry is to so many others.  
I'm going to look for several of the books  
reviewed in the "Books" section. Keep  
up the good work; your magazine is a true  
reflection of the high standards of our field.

Diana Rubino,  
Vice President/Director of Marketing  
CostPro, Inc.,  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

**Ted Landmark's** "Class Dismissed" [May/J  
2003] presents thoughts that are sobering b  
regrettably, not new. I remember that abou  
40 years ago the US Department of Justice  
accused the architecture profession of delib  
ately keeping women out of the profession  
This allegation was based on the claim tha  
the percentage of registered women archite  
was lower than that of lawyers, doctors, an  
engineers. The profession responded with  
attempts to correct the situation, but if the  
11 percent figure mentioned in this article  
accurate, we haven't made much headway.

I am pleased that in my former firm, Shep  
Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott, the  
chairman of the board is female. There are  
several women architects in responsible  
positions, one principal is African-America  
and one is female. I hope, however, that th  
firm will not rest on its laurels in this respo

The Boston firm of Stull and Lee is doing  
well, and Robert Coles FAIA, an African-  
American former staff member from our fi  
won the Rotch Scholarship and established  
successful practice in Buffalo. It can be do  
but I'm sure it isn't easy. It wasn't so long a  
that Irish-American architects experienced  
discrimination, and firms such as Maginn  
Walsh & Kennedy found success through  
work for the Catholic Church. Perhaps too  
minorities can find similar paths to accept  
ance. One deterrent for minorities thinkin  
joining the profession may be the low leve  
fees and resulting underpayment of staff. I  
would think that other more lucrative  
occupations would be far more attractive.

Ted Landmark's ideas of how to improve  
this situation are a start, but I think the A  
will have to handle the implementation.

Hugh Shepley FAIA  
Manchester, Massachusetts



reading Ted Landsmark's article, "Class Dis-  
cussed" [May/June 2003], I recalled a meeting  
recently at the Boston Architectural Center  
where, as a volunteer thesis advisor to a graduat-  
e student, I met the Thesis Review  
Committee and the students preparing for the  
thesis studio.

The dozen or so reviewers, none was female,  
average age was 55, they were nearly all  
white, and they all wore the black suit of the  
academic male architect. It was exactly the  
stereotype of "erudite males with good breed-  
ing" that Mr. Landsmark refers to. Differences  
of class, education, color, gender, age (and  
sex) all hovered above the long black table  
that divided the reviewers from the students.  
When we broke into smaller groups, these  
divisions grew more apparent as the reviewers  
struggled to relate to the thesis topics, trying to  
push them into an academic format that often  
obviously missed the student's point. How can  
Mr. Landsmark say that "most of our design  
schools are startlingly complacent in their  
efforts to diversify their faculties and student  
bodies?" Is he complacent? As the black  
president of the largest architecture program  
in New England, he must have invaluable  
knowledge about why, even with the best  
intentions, diversifying and declassifying  
academia is so difficult. Had he shared his own  
struggles and his observations of the struggles  
of others, we might have learned where the  
specific weaknesses in the system can be found.  
Where has he encountered resistance? Is it the  
entire system, accreditation requirements,  
faculty pool, the terrible hours or the dismal  
pay? What new educational and professional  
models has the BAC itself tried?

The question is not, "do we discriminate?" —  
that's a given — or even "why do we discriminate?"  
The questions that will produce change are *how*  
do we discriminate and *how* can we stop.

Marina Roy AIA, Senior Project Designer  
Lucas-Manfredi Architects  
Boston

Attracting more African-Americans to the  
profession of architecture is more than a matter  
of class. Aside from talent and motivation  
and even the opportunity to gain the requisite  
professional education, the aspiring African-  
American architect must secure an apprentice-  
ship and later, of course, clients willing and able  
to afford his or her services. Today, the problem  
of the African-American seeking a professional  
education is not usually one of securing accept-  
ance into graduate school, but for the architect,  
the critical problem is getting the necessary  
apprenticeship. What established firm will take  
him or her? Occasionally, white firms for reasons  
of humanity or sensing outstanding ability will  
accept a black architect into the firm. This was  
the case when Horace Trumbauer employed

Julian F. Abele on the design of Harvard's  
Widener Library. Abele, the first black graduate  
of the University of Pennsylvania School of  
Architecture, also designed the Philadelphia  
Museum of Art, the Free Library of  
Philadelphia, and several buildings on the  
campus of Duke University. The Abele story,  
regrettably, is unusual. Pioneering African-  
American architects started their own firms —  
the McKissaks in Alabama, the Cassells in  
Washington, DC, and Paul Williams in Los  
Angeles. These were the stars, but for the most  
part, these architects had to depend on  
designing black churches or black institutions  
of higher education.

To change this picture, white firms must be  
willing to have African-American architects in  
their firms who are accepted on the basis of  
their talent and education. Also, African-  
American firms must aggressively move into the  
mainstream and find ways of attracting clients  
from the corporate world and individuals of  
all means, both black and white.

Adelaide M. Cromwell  
Brookline, Massachusetts

**Your roundtable discussion** ["Life After 40B,"  
May/June 2003] reminds me of a line  
from Charles Euchner's report *Getting Home*:  
"Whatever the respective merits of the  
Chapter 40B law, it has sucked the oxygen out  
of the housing debate. Rather than seriously  
considering other approaches to the housing  
crisis, state and local officials are locked in a  
bitter battle over 40B."

Chapter 40B is not the disease; it is the  
symptom of the disease. Other symptoms are  
our alarming national rankings: 47th in  
building permits per capita; 45th in home-  
ownership ratios; 2nd highest national median  
price. Massachusetts historically participated in  
2 percent of all housing starts nationwide. We  
are now participating in 1 percent of building  
starts nationwide — a 50 percent decline in  
market share. Our competitive edge for busi-  
nesses and employees is being undermined by  
the high cost of housing and will eventually  
choke our economic engine.

Well-intentioned local land use regulations are  
the disease. When looked at collectively, these  
regulations are choking the supply of housing.  
Examples in Eastern Massachusetts include:  
50 communities that limit the number of  
residential building permits on an annual basis;  
130 communities that override the Department  
of Environmental Protection (DEP) with more  
restrictive wetland by-laws; 100 communities  
that override the DEP with more restrictive  
Title 5 regulations; "out-zoning" of most multi-  
family housing; "in-zoning" of housing without  
children. We need a law that affirms  
communities' responsibility to the "common  
wealth." Communities should plan and zone for

housing (of all types) that is proportionate to  
our growth rate. With that kind of mandate,  
plans will get enacted that promote our  
uniqueness and grow our housing supply. It is  
high time to stop treating the problem with  
aspirin. With our current land-use regulations,  
will your children be able to afford the house  
they grew up in?

Kevin Sweeney, President  
Home Builders Association of Massachusetts  
Boston

**I commend** *ArchitectureBoston* for its insightful  
and informative article devoted to examining  
Chapter 40B ["Life After 40B," May/June  
2003], the Commonwealth's comprehensive  
permit law.

In keeping with his assertion to double housing  
starts in Massachusetts, Governor Romney  
has stated that he will not agree to new 40B  
reforms which serve to hinder the production of  
affordable housing. Preserving the intent of  
the statute will increase the state's affordable and  
market-rate housing supply, and that is a key  
initiative of the Romney administration.

While the law has created more than 30,000  
affordable homes since its inception more than  
33 years ago, it is well recognized that Chapter  
40B could be improved to balance the need for  
affordable housing with legitimate community  
concerns including infrastructure, environ-  
mental, public health, and safety issues. That is  
why the Department of Housing and Com-  
munity Development (DHCD) has made more  
than 15 regulatory changes to the law since  
August 2001. And that is why the Governor  
recently established a 24-member task force  
to assess the effectiveness of the law and its  
impact on communities. In May, this task force  
delivered a report of its findings to the  
Governor that provided him, as well as the  
Legislature, with guidance on how best to  
increase the supply of housing and stabilize the  
state's economy while employing efficient land-  
use planning and addressing local concerns.

Jane Wallis Gumble, Director  
Massachusetts Department of Housing and  
Community Development  
Boston

You can continue the *ArchitectureBoston* dialogue.  
Letters may be sent to [epadjen@architects.org](mailto:epadjen@architects.org) or  
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Letters may be edited for clarity and length and must  
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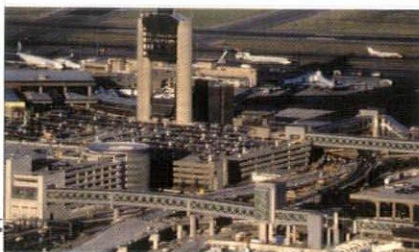
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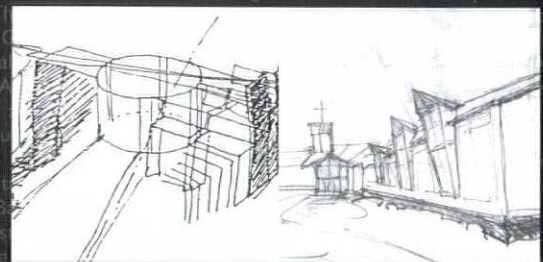
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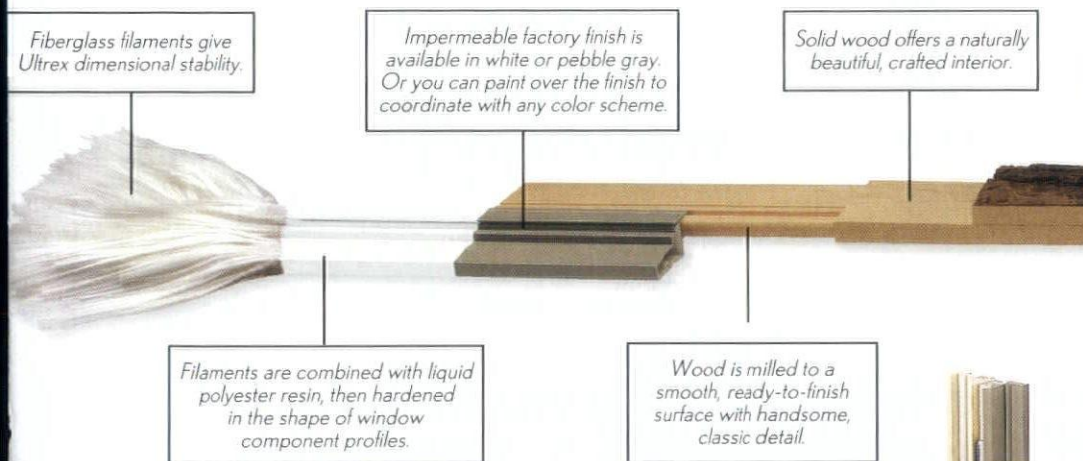
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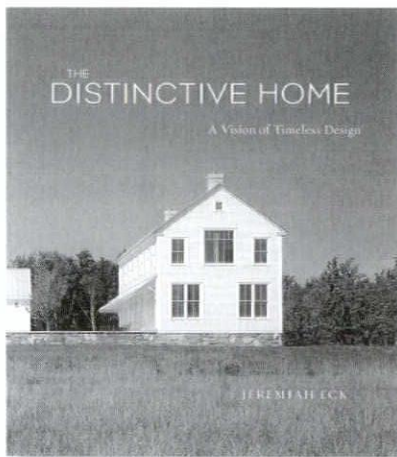
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# Talking About a Revolution: Cambridge in the '60s

## PARTICIPANTS:

**Norman Fletcher FAIA** co-founded The Architects Collaborative (TAC) in 1945, where he remained as principal until the closing of the firm in 1995. He went on to establish Fletcher Harkness Cohen Moneyhun in Boston. TAC's projects include the Harvard Graduate Center, Parkside Elementary School, Six Moon Hill, the AIA headquarters, and the IBM administrative center.

**John C. "Chip" Harkness FAIA** co-founded The Architects Collaborative (TAC) in 1945, where he remained as principal until the closing of the firm in 1995. He went on to establish Fletcher Harkness Cohen Moneyhun in Boston. TAC's projects include the Josiah Quincy School, Children's Hospital, Clark University Art Museum, and the University of Baghdad.

**Huson Jackson FAIA** co-founded Sert, Jackson and Gourley, later Sert Jackson and Associates, in 1958, where he remained until closing the firm in 1995. The firm's significant projects include Harvard's Holyoke Center and Undergraduate Science Center, Boston University central campus buildings, and housing and community developments on Roosevelt Island, New York.

**Elizabeth Padjen FAIA** is the editor of *ArchitectureBoston*.

**G.W. Terry Rankine FAIA** co-founded Cambridge Seven Associates (C7A) in 1962, where he remained as a principal for 30 years. C7A's projects include the US Pavilion at Expo '67, the New England Aquarium, design guidelines for the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, the Submarine Service and Nautilus Memorial in Groton, Connecticut, and Smith College Library additions.

**Tad Stahl FAIA** founded Stahl Associates in 1961, which in 1999 merged with Burt Hill Kosar Rittelmann Associates, where he is now executive architect. His projects include State Street Bank Building, 70 Federal Street, the Park Street Church Ministries Building, and the historic rehabilitation of Old South Meeting House.

**Mary Otis Stevens AIA** was a partner in Thomas McNulty Architects and a founder of iPress, established in 1969 in association with the publisher George Braziller. In 1975, she founded Design Guild, a multi-disciplinary firm with a focus on sustainability and preservation by re-use. Her projects include "the Lincoln house" (one of three concrete houses) and a music theater for the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts in Vienna, Virginia. Since 1992, she has been a music composer.

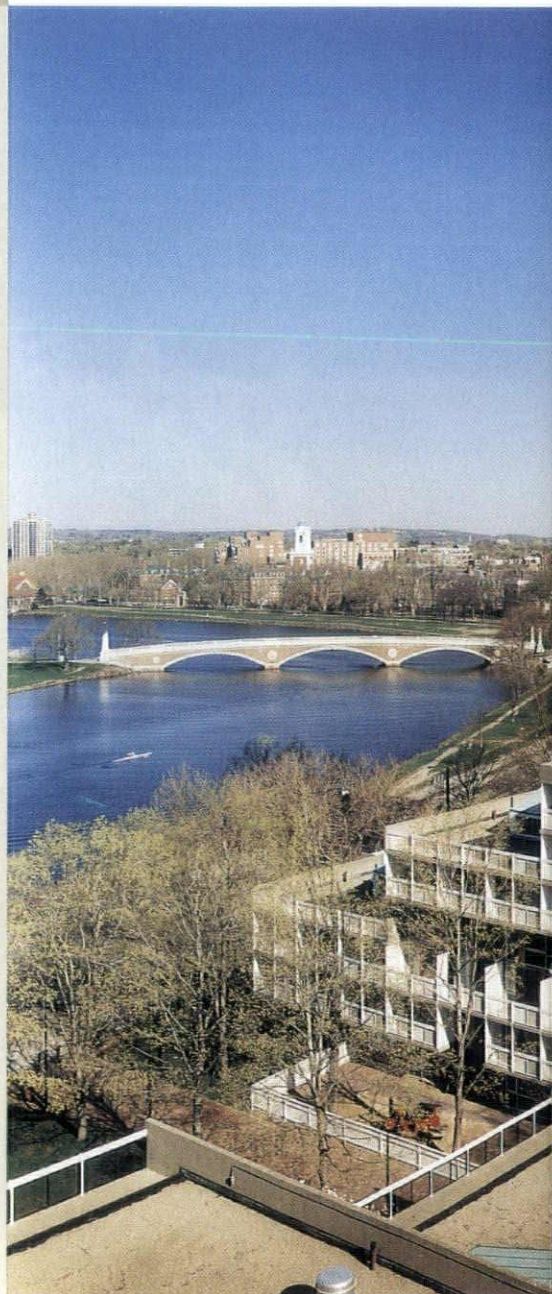


photo: © Steve Rosenthal



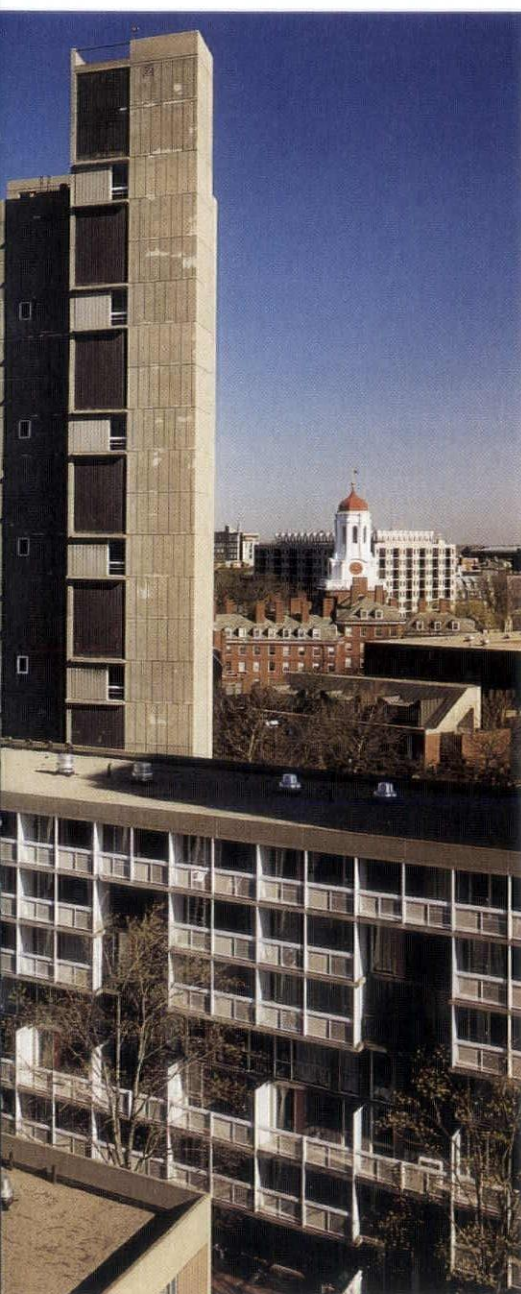
Below:  
Peabody Terrace  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
Architect:  
Sert Jackson Associates

Right, top:  
Holyoke Center  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Architect:  
Sert Jackson Associates

Right, bottom:  
Clark University Art Museum  
Worcester, Massachusetts

Architect:  
The Architects Collaborative



**ELIZABETH PADJEN:** Peabody Terrace is a landmark of what we might call the “golden age” of architecture in Cambridge — loosely, the post-war period up through the 1960s and early '70s. You were all leaders in the architectural community at that time — I think you all started to hit your stride in the 1960s. Let's talk about the reactions to Peabody Terrace — what do you remember about the controversy surrounding the building? What did it mean for architecture in Cambridge?

**TERRY RANKINE:** I don't think I knew an architect in Cambridge who did not like Peabody Terrace and what it represented. It said a lot about what we were all aiming for at that particular point in time. There was no doubt that Peabody Terrace was going in a direction that was quite different from so many other things.

**NORMAN FLETCHER:** I was very taken with the construction technology of Peabody Terrace. The engineer was Othar Zaldastani — one of the great engineers in Boston. But I also remember admiring the cleverness of Sert's design — the way it worked in section [the vertical relationship of spaces and elements], the way the skip-stop elevator worked, and the way he integrated the low-rise blocks with the towers.

**TAD STAHL:** This was the period when the doors opened to what I think of as heroic Modern architecture — what we all tried to stand for and tried to work toward. Peabody Terrace was a strong emblem of that.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** It was a strong emblem — and that might have been part of the reason for the controversy. Having known Josep Lluís Sert as a colleague and as a friend, I would say that his thinking was way ahead of most people anywhere at that time. He was definitely European; he was also very urban. He designed a social

photo: © Steve Rosenthal



photo: © Steve Rosenthal



Facing page, top:  
State Street Bank  
Boston

Architect:  
Stahl Associates

Bottom:  
New England Aquarium  
and plaza  
Boston

Architect:  
Cambridge Seven  
Associates, Inc.

community for Peabody Terrace, and the people living there represented many different cultures and countries, even different ages. But they met in these communal settings — the childcare center, the plaza, the street-like walkways. It didn't follow the rules of other conventional high-rise housing projects, which were almost like vertical gated communities. Peabody Terrace was not gated. I think that may have caused some of the difficulties with the neighbors because, suddenly, this whole other way of life was presented to them. It was revolutionary on many scales. And Josep Lluís knew it. I think he thought it would be a progressive thing for the community, that it would have a positive social impact, and that neighbors would come to approve of it. But that didn't happen.

**HUSON JACKSON:** I don't know to what extent there was thinking about a real interrelation between the community and the inhabitants of the student housing. But I can tell you about some of the other things that were considered at that time. Peabody Terrace was previously the site of a factory, which was fairly typical of development along the river. Back then, riverfronts weren't used much for residential or recreational purposes — they were considered wasteland and were developed for industry and commerce. At the same time, we were aware that people from the community did want to reach the river, so the design included an important connection to the Charles. There were discussions of this with community members. I can't remember any significant objections or input that came from those discussions. The thrust of the design was to develop the site — land being a precious commodity in Cambridge — to the extent we considered appropriate. If the local community expected two- and three-story houses like the ones that were already there, it didn't articulate that. We did try to keep the scale along Putnam Avenue in accordance with the existing scale of the houses and to keep the taller buildings toward the river — an open space that had enough breathing room around it. Those are design considerations that may not be particularly appreciated by the laity, but they were intended to avoid an impact on the residents along Putnam Avenue and the surrounding neighborhoods.

**TAD STAHL:** I recently walked around Peabody Terrace in the rain. I was struck by how the scale had been handled very successfully relative to the neighborhood, and how well the pedestrian area worked. A large area is automobile-free. Apart from the geometries, the colors, the rhythms, I was looking for aspects of the project which might turn people off. I learned that some things are definitely worse in the rain. The smooth, concrete walls can be pretty oppressive when they are rain-soaked, especially because they lack punctuation or scale elements or texture. The other façades — the ones with the balconies and the rhythms and colors — are very successful.

**TERRY RANKINE:** The community believed that Harvard was building a wall between the residents and the river. That seemed to come up over and over again. Sert, however, talked about clusters of high-rise — the Harvard cluster, the Boston University cluster, the MIT cluster — as a progression up the river. Buildings as incidents, but never as a continuous barrier.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** Kevin Lynch, who was teaching at MIT, had an influence on that discussion, too, with his development of the high-spine concept — a line of high-rise buildings in Boston. But Kevin also understood that Boston was a city of neighborhoods, so the question became, how do you link the neighborhoods? And one answer was to use the river to link them and to build in clusters. Peabody Terrace fits into that greater scheme. I know Josep Lluís was aware of this; he talked about it. He wasn't doing something arbitrary. This was an era when architects worked together really well — a collegial feeling existed in the '60s, and I think still exists in Boston.

**ELIZABETH PADJEN:** I wonder if tall buildings were considered a novelty in the Boston area at that time. Think of the long mid-century period when Boston really didn't build much of anything. Then the Prudential tower came along in the late 1950s, followed by Peabody Terrace and the State Street Bank building, which were finished around the same time.

**TAD STAHL:** Substantial completion of the State Street Bank building, one of my firm's projects, was between '64 and '66, so we were a little bit behind Peabody Terrace. Our clients were from Britain. They didn't have any prejudice against high buildings or high density. And they had a good laugh when they were told that everybody in Boston thought the center of the city, the financial core, was going to move toward the Prudential. They were extraordinary clients and I don't think I've had another like them. They said, "You're the local architect, you know what a Boston building should be. Why don't you go to work and when you've got a scheme together, give us a call and we'll come see what you've done? How could we, coming from London and Birmingham, tell you what's appropriate for your city?"

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** I think that Harvard served as a similar kind of client for Sert. Sert was very close to Harvard's president, Nathan Pusey, which meant he had somebody who was going to back him all the way.

**CHIP HARKNESS:** The whole question of how a building fits into the context of the community is very tricky. I think Peabody Terrace is a great project. One of the things that we architects struggle with is how to make buildings that are comfortable and respond to the culture and the traditions around them. Our firm did enough buildings for Harvard that I know the reaction of Harvard people to building materials, for



ample. They much prefer red brick. The Graduate Center that Gropius designed for the Law School was brick, but it was a smooth, buff-colored brick and I think was not as well-liked for that reason. But the whole question of how the architecture fits into the environment is certainly a very key one. The design of Peabody Terrace grew from the concept that we were now living in an industrial age. The building materials are industrial, and the building has an industrial quality to it. And that is one of the great things about it.

**TAD STAHL:** Harvard, for many years, had very carefully worked its way along the river in the Georgian Revival style, and then, all of a sudden, with Peabody Terrace, there was a complete break. That was a shock, and I think still is a shock to the conventional view.

**ORMAN FLETCHER:** Chip's mention of the Graduate Center brings up another point that's worth mentioning. That project was a breakthrough — a piece of Modern architecture where Gropius didn't pull any punches and did what he thought was right. At the same time — this was around 1949 — there was another wonderful project being built by MIT: 100 Memorial Drive by Rapson and Koch and their colleagues. A beautiful building, with Le Corbusier's skip-stop elevators, which were considered quite innovative. And, of course, there was Aalto's Baker House at MIT. These projects were shakers in the sense of signaling a very early acceptance by MIT and Harvard of Modern architecture. In other words, those stuffy boards of trustees were accepting great pieces of architecture.

**TAD STAHL:** That also underscores Chip's point about red brick. Both of those early MIT buildings are red-brick buildings. You can do just about anything around here if it's red brick.

**TERRY RANKINE:** You mean from the point of view of the community?

**TAD STAHL:** Yes. It is so depressing sometimes. We've had 20 years of serious efforts in Boston to rebuild the city and it is drained of any vigor and insight. It is all red brick and traditional hole-in-the-wall windows and trim. Even if it isn't overtly historicist, it still looks pedestrian.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** Exactly. But just think, Josep Lluís not only got Harvard to build two very urban, very radical buildings — I'm thinking also of Holyoke Center — but he also got Le Corbusier's only building in America. He persuaded Pusey to put up with Le Corbusier, who didn't like America and was very difficult. Le Corbusier's famous comment when somebody asked his advice on the old brick Faculty Club at Harvard was, "Tear it down."

**TERRY RANKINE:** Peabody Terrace was a perfect example of a designer trying to come to grips with a new building and its relationship to the environment. I think we all feel that our buildings fit into the environment reasonably well. But it is quite different to talk about a building's relationship to the community. Peabody Terrace is high density, but you're not aware of that when you are walking around it — one of its strong points. But for some reason the neighborhood was stirred up. Let's be critical, just for a minute. Not about Peabody Terrace, but about us as architects. We get so incestuous at times. We only listen to each other. We love getting accolades from each other and we give each other awards and we all get excited. Meanwhile, there is the community

photo: © Phokion Karas, courtesy Tad Stahl



photo: © Steve Rosenthal



saying, "We think this is ugly!" How is it that we as architects are so sure something is good, and the people we are building for are not with us on it? I've come to the conclusion that it is because we build for each other to a far greater extent than we build for the people who are going to occupy our buildings.

**HUSON JACKSON:** But at the same time — going back to Tad's comment about the banality of recent buildings in Boston — does anybody here want to cite a case where heavy community input has made the design better? I think it's hard to find.

**CHIP HARKNESS:** When we go to foreign countries, we are for some reason much more ready to try to get a sense of the local architecture and to respond to the local culture. I look at the work that our office did, for instance, at the University of Baghdad, and it is certainly not something we would have designed for Harvard or Yale or Princeton. I once worked on a project in Tunisia, where the client insisted that I take a trip all through the country so I could understand the culture. Somehow, when we work in foreign countries we are much more willing to actively look for the culture than we are right here, where we think we know the culture and we don't pay attention to what other people think.

**TAD STAHL:** I agree that we are often anthropologically unsophisticated in this way, especially compared to some of the other players in our industry. We live in a market-driven era, and most developers have a very sophisticated idea of the market, in terms of the cultural wants and needs of different segments of the population. Residential developers especially — they think in terms of a much broader and much more elegantly detailed spectrum than architects do. Architects tend to think of the human figure in the abstract.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** To some degree, Peabody Terrace itself represents different cultural expectations for the students who live there. For example, Dolf Schnebli, the Swiss architect, loved living at Peabody Terrace while he taught at Harvard. He said that the Europeans and Asians who lived there also loved it, but the American graduate students had many more problems adjusting to the small units. Culture affects how you use the apartments: How do you store your possessions? How many possessions do you even own? Do you eat out? Eating out is much more European, so you don't need a big kitchen, and you don't need a big freezer, because you don't stock up. It's a different concept of living, and this is what Peabody Terrace is about. The interesting thing was the neighbors understood. They didn't like it, but they understood that it was different, and it was the difference that stuck out. It's no accident that Peabody Terrace turned out as it did. It was the natural cultural expression of a very sophisticated, urban architect whose friends included artists like Picasso and Miró.

**ELIZABETH PADJEN:** I think it's relevant to talk about Sert as a person and a personality. It seems to me that the personality of the author or the artist is evident in the work and at some level influences its interpretation. If you learned that Sert was arrogant and cold, you might develop one interpretation of Peabody Terrace. But if you knew that he was a warm, inventive, liberal-minded person, you would have another interpretation.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** He and his wife Moncha were very rare people who led a remarkable life. They were great hosts — very affectionate with everyone — and had enormous generosity. They lived an elegant life wherever they lived. And they had fun — an utter enjoyment of life. That's what I loved.

**ELIZABETH PADJEN:** What was the dynamic like in the office? How did Sert work with the other partners?



## Huson Jackson on Josep Lluís Sert

José Luis Sert was born in 1902 to a wealthy and prominent Barcelona family. Castilian was spoken in his home, but Catalan, the popular language of his home city, which he told me he had learned in the streets, was his preferred language. And Catalan was the identity he preferred; in later years, he adopted the Catalan spelling of his name — Josep Lluís Sert.

His studies in Barcelona included painting as well as architecture, and he retained a keen interest in art throughout his life. The work and publications of Le Corbusier were a strong influence in Sert's early years, and in the 1920s, he worked in Le Corbusier's Paris studio and took part in the early meetings of CIAM, the International Congress of Modern Architecture, of which he later became president.

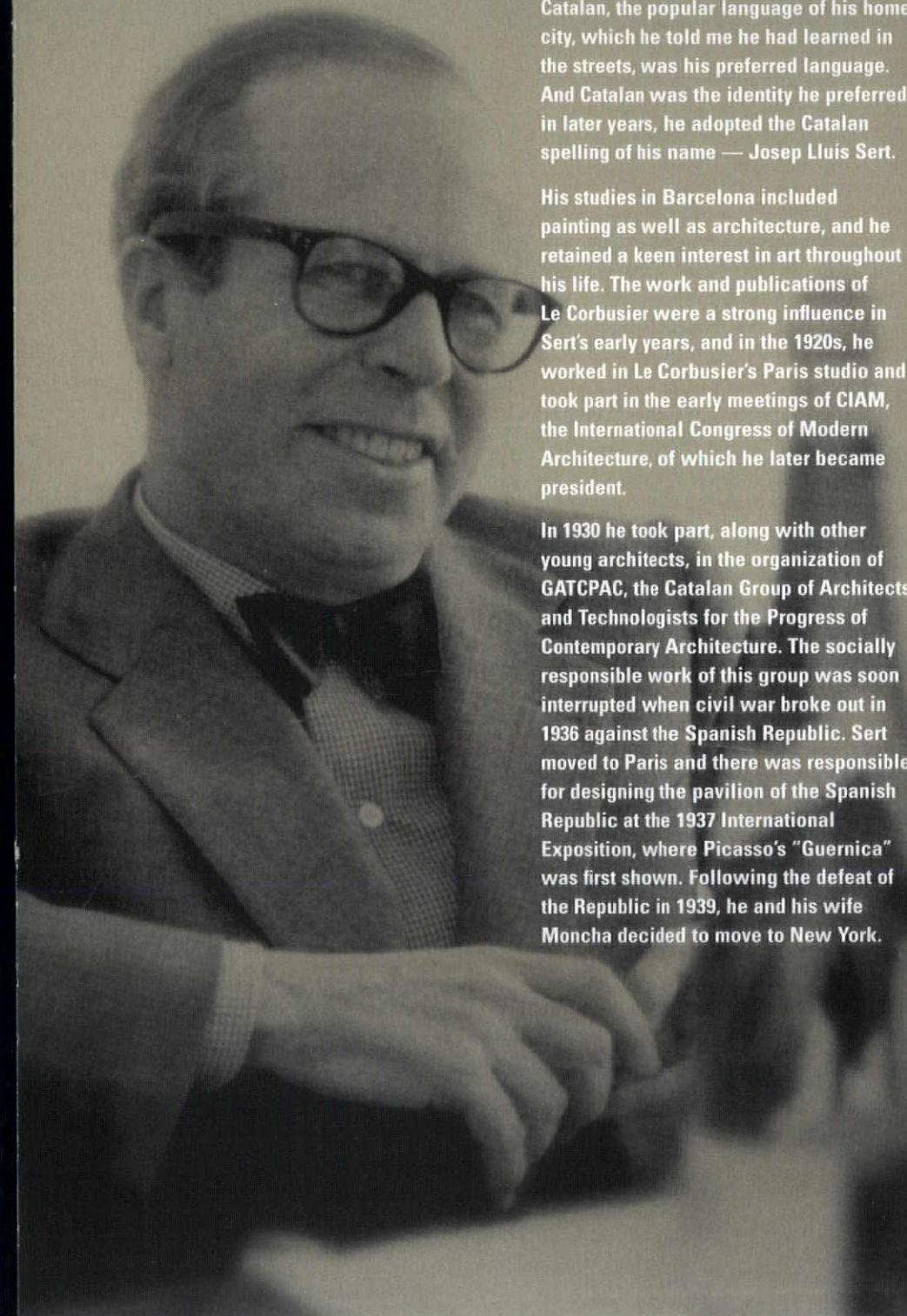
In 1930 he took part, along with other young architects, in the organization of GATCPAC, the Catalan Group of Architects and Technologists for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture. The socially responsible work of this group was soon interrupted when civil war broke out in 1936 against the Spanish Republic. Sert moved to Paris and there was responsible for designing the pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the 1937 International Exposition, where Picasso's "Guernica" was first shown. Following the defeat of the Republic in 1939, he and his wife Moncha decided to move to New York.

In New York, Sert established contacts with other expatriate intellectuals and artists and with kindred American spirits. He joined in the firm Town Planning Associates with Paul Lester Wiener and Paul Schulz. This office was responsible for major town planning and urban design projects in Latin America.

In 1953, he was invited to become dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He considered the administrative side of his deanship a burden; his work as teacher of architecture and urban design was the rewarding part. By agreement with the University, he reserved half his time for the practice of his profession. For the first five years, he maintained his practice with Town Planning Associates in New York, then decided to give up the long-distance commuting and to establish a practice in Cambridge more focused on architecture. He invited Ronald Gourley, Joseph Zalewski, and me (until then I had also maintained a New York office) to join him in the new firm.

The Serts' personal magnetism attracted a rich variety of friends, and among them were many university and museum people. But I believe they were most at home among creative people — artists and architects. In later years, they built a vacation house on the island of Ibiza and rekindled friendships with old friends and associates separated by the civil war. Sert is widely admired as a "culture hero" by Spanish architects and students.

He and Moncha were Mediterranean people with an ample love of life and good conversation. Their cosmopolitan grace and understanding made them at home in our more northern society and especially qualified to bring the richness of Mediterranean life to America.





Talking About  
a Revolution

Facing page, top:  
Fletcher House  
Six Moon Hill  
Lexington,  
Massachusetts

Architect:  
The Architects  
Collaborative

Bottom:  
Lincoln House  
Lincoln, Massachusetts

Architect:  
Thomas McNulty  
Architects

**HUSON JACKSON:** I think we all recognized that he was the dominant talent, but he was very open to others. Josep Lluís was looking for ideas; he wasn't imposing ideas. It was a very rewarding working relationship. He was tremendously full of life, and it showed not only in the life he lived, but also in his ideas for design. Working on the apartments at Peabody Terrace, we were thinking of the design of the units in great detail. The ultimate issue was the life that was going to be lived there.

**CHIP HARKNESS:** I'm curious about the organization, the way the office worked. Did you have a system like the one at TAC, where someone was designated as the principal-in-charge of the job, and that person was the one who signed the documents and was really responsible for the design? Or was it more focused on Sert?

**HUSON JACKSON:** I think it was broadly consensual and collaborative, but Josep Lluís was the most powerful designer. He took the lead on every significant project.

**ELIZABETH PADJEN:** How many people were in the firm?

**HUSON JACKSON:** It varied. The largest number we had was about 60 when we were doing considerable work for the New York Urban Development Corporation. Normally it was smaller. We were probably 30 people at the time of Peabody Terrace.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** It's also important to know that Sert was a member of CIAM [International Congress of Modern Architecture], so he was working on the international exchange of ideas with other architects all of his life. For instance, he was a supporter of the United Nations Housing Bill of Rights, which would have set standards for living conditions. It was something the American building industry wouldn't go for, but I admired the fact that he would lend his name to it. He was very involved with social politics. Most American architects are afraid to open their mouths because they might lose a client.

**CHIP HARKNESS:** The great thing about this roundtable group is that now we don't have that problem.

**ELIZABETH PADJEN:** Who would have been Sert's intellectual circle in this country? Given his European experience and connections, it almost sounds as though he might have been lonely here.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** You could put him in the middle of nowhere and he'd have a party going. He was so attractive, as was Moncha. They told me that when they arrived in New York, they used to eat at the Automat — near the Chelsea Hotel on 23rd Street. I couldn't imagine them doing it. But I bet they managed to have the most elegant dinners. Wherever they were, they had charm and they were

magnets for other people. But I would say that Willo von Moltke was one of his closest friends and colleagues here. He pulled Willo in as head of the urban design program at Harvard.

**ELIZABETH PADJEN:** I tend to think of Cambridge during this period and the ten years or so afterward with a certain wistfulness, because it seems to me that architects at that time were doing good work *and* having fun. And I'm not sure that architects today are having fun, at least not in the way that you all probably did. Terry, you started this conversation by saying Peabody Terrace represented something to people who were working here at that time. Maybe you could talk a little bit about the spirit of that time.

**TERRY RANKINE:** I wouldn't have missed the '60s for anything. It was a gorgeous, wonderful time. And I'm not just talking about the demonstrations. There was a marvelous feeling, a feeling of freedom. Cambridge Seven started in '62, and two of the original seven were very much students of Sert. Our first project was the New England Aquarium in Boston, a rather sad building now. But when we started thinking about how you poured concrete and how you made shapes with concrete, a lot of what we did came from that spirit of liberation that was all around us. Architecture itself was undergoing a kind of liberation — in our case we wanted to be very sure that we weren't simply designing buildings, but that we were addressing other issues as well — graphics, exhibits, transportation. I like to think that Peabody Terrace reflected a determination to not be run-of-the-mill, which was still a problem at that time. You have to remember that, in the '60s, high-rises were specified by developers. The architects were designing the curtain walls for them. Then along came Peabody Terrace, which was totally different.

**CHIP HARKNESS:** I agree that it was a time of great excitement — a feeling that we could do something and have a hell of a good time doing it, too. I recently happened to look back at *Process* magazine and found something I had written about the start of our office in 1945, right after the war: "This was a time of great hope and great expectations and we believed that the development of technology was at a point where it could be turned to the advantage of all people. With the war over, that potential could be put to peaceful use." I don't know if that's a great statement, but I think it does reflect the thinking that a lot of us had at that time, that carried forward into the 1960s. It was a time when we could really do something that was going to make things better and have a lot of fun going about it. It was a hell of a good feeling. I think if you look at what is going on now, it gets very discouraging.



**TERRY RANKINE:** There was no doubt about the social beliefs of that time. It was rather wonderful. If you read Peter Blake's book *Utopia*, you'll understand what I mean. We had absolutely no doubts about why we were architects or why we were city planners. I remember my old friend, Alden Christie, one of the founders of Cambridge even. He said that he could imagine Sert standing in the middle of the Charles after deciding on the main massing of Peabody Terrace and saying, "Some balconies there, none there," and so on. Making music out of it. There is something about Peabody Terrace — it's serious, straight, good stuff, but there is music there as well. There was a utopian side to what we were doing, but there was also delight.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** Well, it was certainly utopian. I started iPress, a small publishing house, that was based on European architecture publications — not monographs but idea books. For those of us who were in the international loop, it was a very heady time. Then when [my former husband and partner] Tom McNulty and I built our Lincoln house with no doors, we caused a big commotion, and that was fun. The kind of cement we used in the concrete mix was what they used in basements where it would typically be covered up. I loved it because it was chalky white, not gray. But this house was about using technology and about using new materials cheaply. Gehry did this later with chain-link fencing. But we thought, why build houses out of wood, why follow the same conventions? Because construction costs were lower then, people were more willing to take chances. And we had clients who were willing to take chances with us.

**AD STAHL:** Looking back, I think it was a period in which we invented ourselves by talking to each other, weaving together a new architectural

community, learning this new language of the International Style. All of this in what was a terribly provincial city. Terribly backwards, terribly narrow, terribly unsophisticated. We were lucky to get away with that stuff, in a way. I think there are more diverse opportunities for young architects today — stylistically, philosophically — than there were back then. Yet, somehow there was an opening — nobody was looking, and Pusey pulled the switch and the train went on a different track.

**ELIZABETH PADJEN:** I'd like to follow up on your comment about Boston being a provincial place at that time, which is undoubtedly true. You have all also talked about international influences on the architectural community. There are some very big differences between now and then. We had Le Corbusier doing his thing on Quincy Street, but generally speaking, there were fewer international celebrity architects. Where did new ideas come from? What were some of the influences? Was there a sense of being provincial? Or was Harvard Square considered one of the centers of the architectural universe?

**TERRY RANKINE:** Cambridge was a hotbed of architectural thinking.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** I think that Cambridge has always been open to new ideas. Harvard Square was a mecca. I still love Harvard Square, even though it's not a square and it's very ordinary in its architecture. But there is a vibrancy — every year there is a new feeling, a new generation coming along. One of the downsides of the educated community in this country is that it is incestuous. If you are part of the university, as were the Serts, you are part of a network. We all lived in our bubble. And this is what the problem of Peabody Terrace came down to. The people who were the Peabody Terrace abutters weren't part of that bubble. That tension exists to this day.

photo courtesy Norman Fletcher

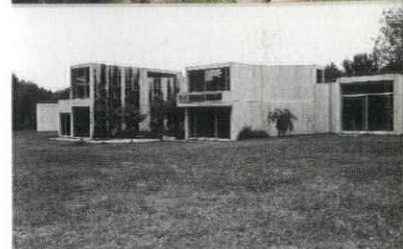


photo courtesy Mary Otis Stevens



**TAD STAHL:** To some degree, the architectural influences varied with the schools. I spent a year at Harvard — Sert arrived as dean the year after I left — and two-and-a-half years at MIT, so I got a sense of both places. They had very different approaches. Harvard was very much in the Bauhaus tradition, which we considered to be the mainstream. MIT represented more diverse traditions, such as the work of Aalto and Rasmussen. It was not the International Style. The faculty there included people like Ralph Rapson, Bucky Fuller, and Paul Rudolph.

**NORMAN FLETCHER:** I wouldn't say there was a polemic at Harvard in terms of preaching Modern architecture or the International Style. Gropius ran the master's class, and once in a while he would give a little presentation on construction details, but not about the design or the students' work. He would criticize a student individually only if you wanted it, but he was very open-minded and very permissive, not at all dictatorial. The same was true after we founded our office. He liked to think of himself as the catfish in the boat — the fisherman brings his catch home at the end of the day with a lot of fish in the boat, and Gropius was the catfish that keeps them jumping around. That was his idea of what his role was.

**CHIP HARKNESS:** He was absolutely adamant about the International Style not being what Modern architecture was about. He wrote a great deal about that.

**ELIZABETH PADJEN:** The Boston architectural community is nationally known for its collegial culture — a spirit of collegiality, of intellectual generosity and, at the same time, of civic responsibility. My sneaking suspicion is that it came from the era we've been talking about or perhaps the half-generation before you. Would you agree?

**CHIP HARKNESS:** I think many of us had a shared sense of being part of a group that was making progress against the institutions that previously existed. The

opposition was the old-fashioned architects, people my father's age. We were breaking ground, moving in a wonderful new direction. We all agreed with each other. We competed to get jobs, but we didn't hate each other. We were one group trying to accomplish things together.

**HUSON JACKSON:** I think we always had a strong collegial sense, a sense of broader purpose, of something more than just making a career and getting work. Architecture was a social undertaking, a contribution to the culture. I would attribute that attitude to Gropius. And it continued later, after Gropius had retired and Sert became dean. He brought in a parade of CIAM people. CIAM itself was very collegial.

**MARY OTIS STEVENS:** I agree that Gropius was behind much of it. He had co-founded the Bauhaus on the foundation of social responsibility. He brought that ethos to Cambridge, and the result was this burst of idealism, which was manifested in all sorts of wonderful ways. TAC's residential development at Six Moon Hill was as revolutionary in its way as was Peabody Terrace. I thrived on Serge Chermayeff's book, *Community and Privacy*. Those were the questions and issues of the time: What does privacy mean in a democracy? How does the individual relate to the greater good? What is democracy?

**TERRY RANKINE:** This wasn't a revolution that happened overnight. It took a long time. There were a lot of us who started our design education in the Beaux-Arts tradition. In my first few years in college, I drew columns and entablatures. When I came back from the war, the revolution had begun. The Beaux-Arts training I knew was gone, and it was all Bauhaus. It was an amazing contrast, pre-war and post-war. But the change led to a growing excitement. Peabody Terrace, Six Moon Hill, Five Fields — they were all products of that excitement. It was a heady time. I don't get the feeling that today is as heady as it was then. We were wrong about many things. It wasn't all perfect by any means. But it represented a great surge forward, and it was delightful to be carried by that tide. ■ ■ ■



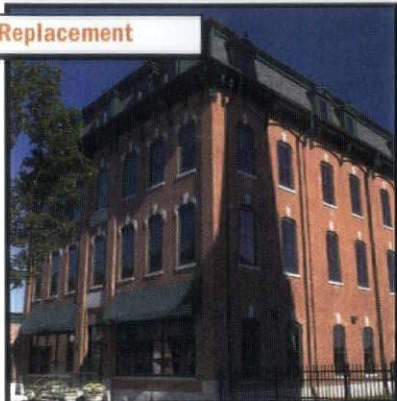
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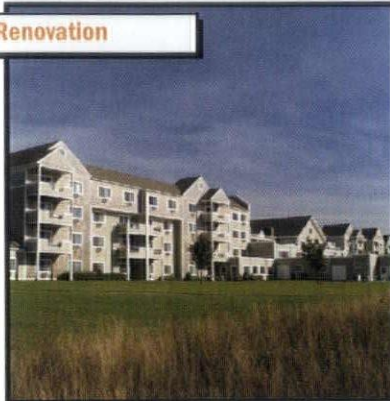
## Replacement



**Savers Co-operative Bank – Southbridge, MA**

Architects: Dixon Salo Architects, Worcester, MA  
Gen Contractor: Builders Systems, Inc., Auburn, MA

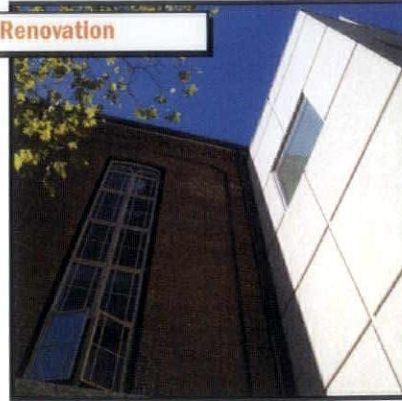
## Renovation



**Sakonnet Bay Manor – Tiverton, RI**

Architects: The Salisbury Group, Providence, RI  
Gen Contractor: O. Ahlborg & Sons, Cranston, RI

## Renovation



**The Sanctuary – Somerville, MA**

Axis Design & Construction

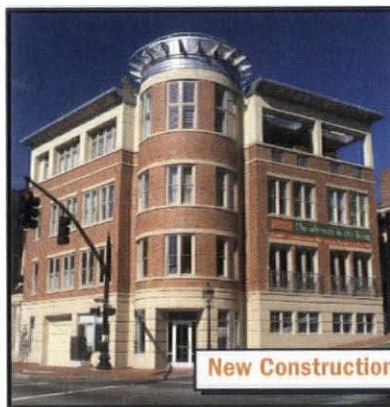
## New Construction



**Stonington Police Station – Stonington, CT**

Architects: Jacunski Humes Architects, LLC, Newington  
Gen Contractor: Uplands Construction Group LLC, W. Mystic

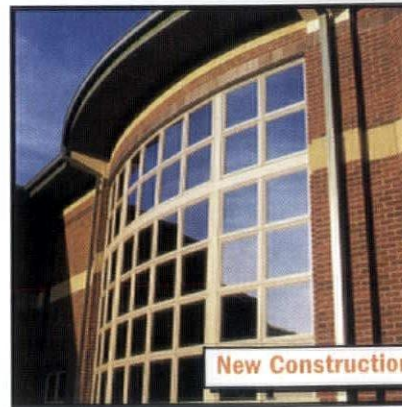
## New Construction



**2 Thomas Street Luxury Condos – Providence, RI**

Architects: Conryingham Assoc. Architects, Cambridge, MA  
Gen Contractor: Pascack Builders, Inc., N. Kingstown, RI

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**Mayo Elementary School – Holden, MA**

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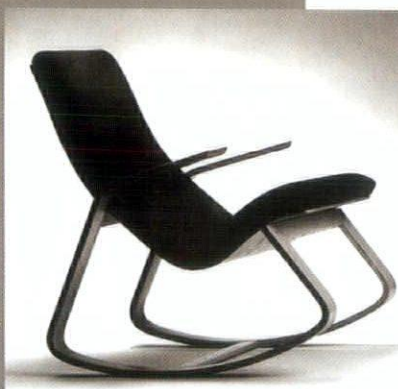
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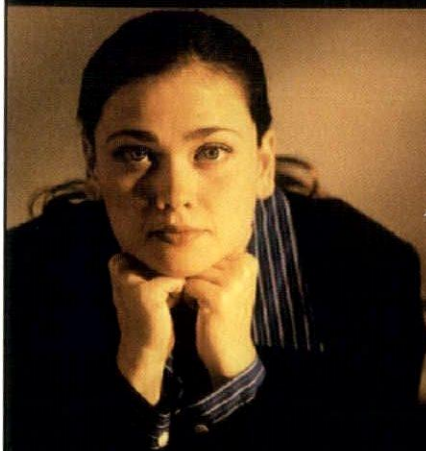
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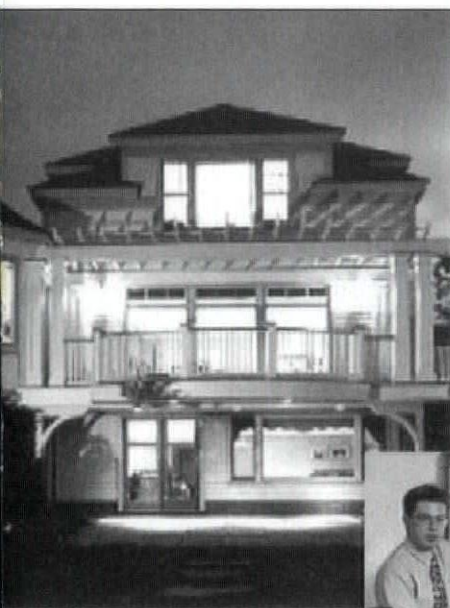
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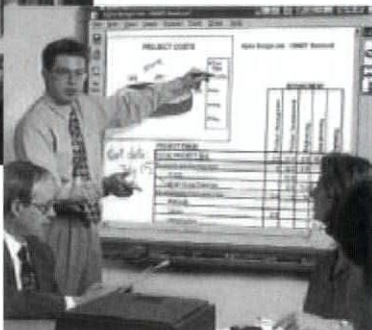
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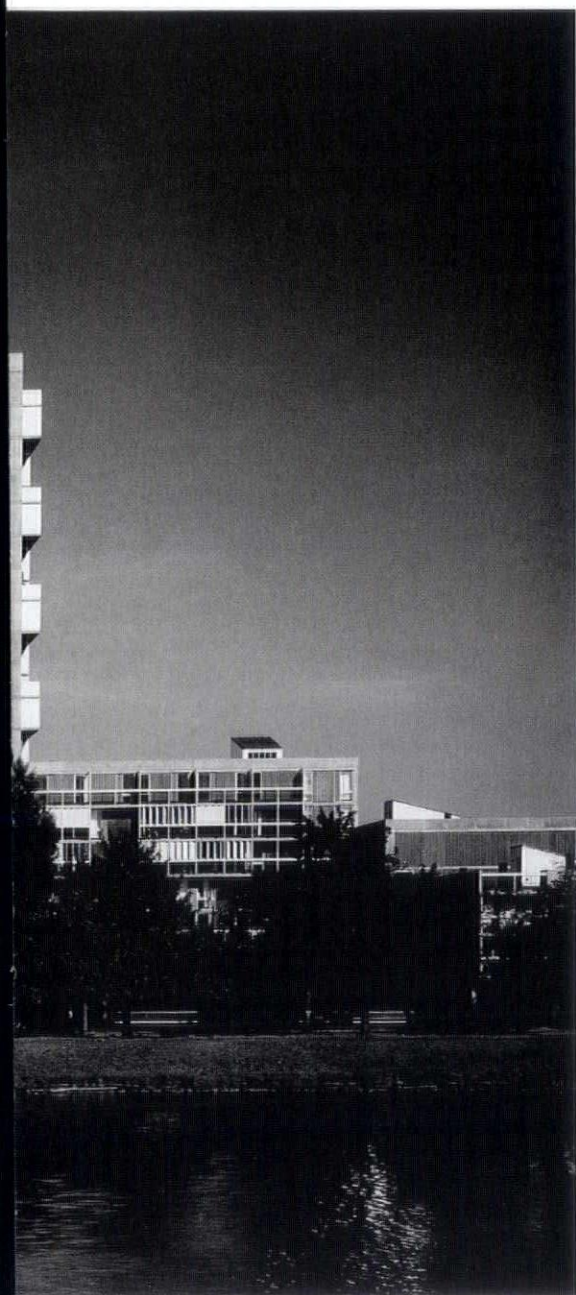


# Why Architects Love Peabody Terrace

by Lee Cott FAIA



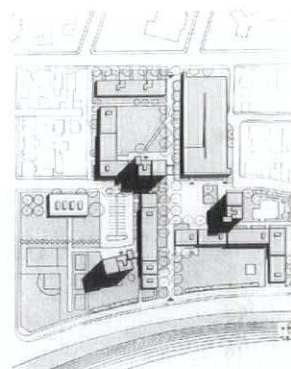




**Around Cambridge**, you can't find an architect who dislikes Peabody Terrace...nor can you find anyone else who likes it. Is there another building or complex of buildings about which the opinions are so "set in concrete"? Even Boston City Hall — another local contender for the title of most reviled concrete Modernist building — has admirers who are not architects. Peabody Terrace was conceived and constructed 40 years ago, but the feelings, on both sides, still run deep — as if Peabody Terrace had been built just yesterday.

What do architects see in Peabody Terrace that everyone else has somehow missed? Why do architects love Peabody Terrace? The answers fit into two categories: they love the architecture, and they especially love the *idea* of Peabody Terrace.

As an alternative to the run-down and substandard housing available to graduate students in the early 1960s, Harvard president Nathan Marsh Pusey suggested the creation of new University-sponsored housing. Josep Lluís Sert, the dean of the Graduate School of Design, received the commission as construction neared completion on the first phase of his Holyoke Center project — the Harvard Square project that combined shops, offices, an infirmary, a parking garage, and a pedestrian arcade in an innovative design that took its cues from urban-design concerns. Working in conjunction with the Harvard Planning Office, Sert intended that his new housing would continue the site-planning tradition of Harvard's neo-Georgian River Houses, where clusters of dormitories oriented toward the Charles River fostered a sense a community focused on discrete open spaces. But Sert took that tradition further, subjecting it to the Modernist precepts that had guided Holyoke



Peabody Terrace  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Architect:  
Sert Jackson and Associates

Above:  
original site plan

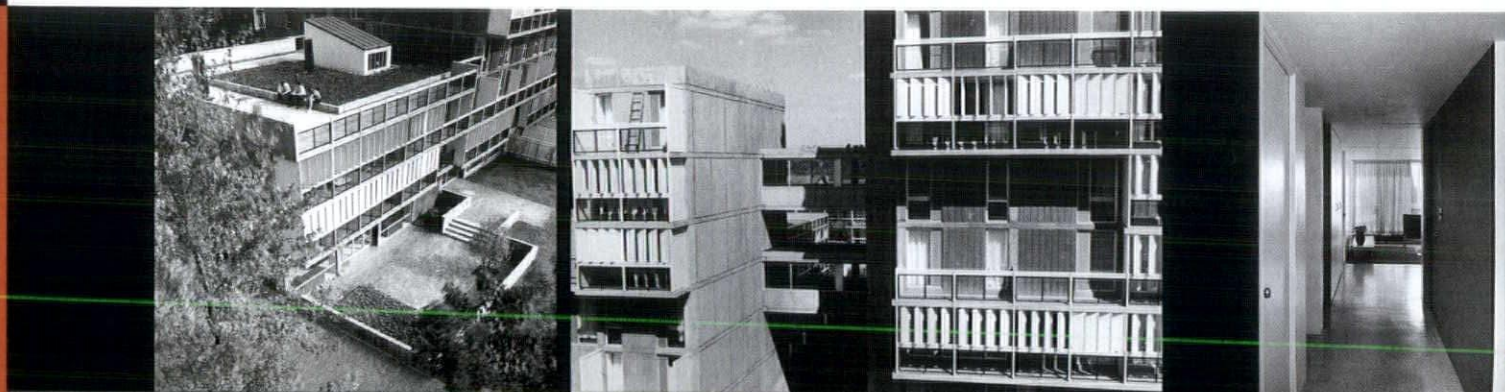
Facing page:  
view from across the  
river, vintage photo



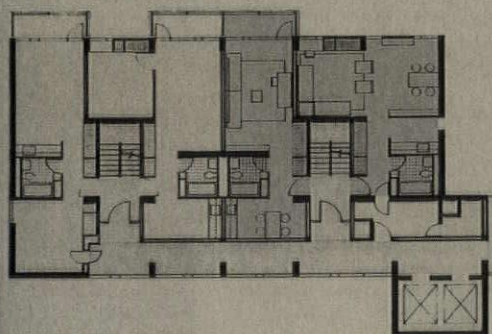
# Why Architects Love Peabody Terrace

Peabody Terrace  
vintage photos

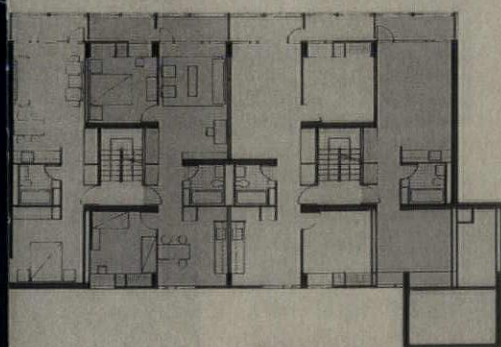
Clockwise, from top left:  
residents on town-house  
rooftop; skybridge  
connecting two towers;  
apartment interior;  
and tower lobby







**Peabody Terrace**  
Corridor floor plan  
(floors 9, 12, 15, 18 similar)



**Peabody Terrace**  
Non-corridor floor plan  
(floors 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20 similar)

Center, and thus established that the new project would be part of the surrounding residential fabric rather than be apart from it, as had been the case with the River Houses.

To accomplish this, he placed an urban plaza, internal to the complex but open to the surrounding neighborhood, along public walkways that invited the surrounding community into and through Peabody Terrace to the edge of the Charles River. Harvard had recently built its first high-rise dormitories nearby — the 12-story Leverett House “towers” by Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott — and Sert took advantage of the University’s willingness to build vertically in order to provide an abundance of open space and pedestrian through-access to the river. The result was three groupings of 3-, 5-, 7-, and 22-story buildings and a 300-car multi-level garage. Peabody Terrace became home to 1,500 residents in 497 apartments — a mix of efficiency, one-, two-, and three-bedroom units — on six acres with a density of 83 units, or 250 persons, per acre.

As built, Peabody Terrace is a successful piece of urban design in which the buildings and open spaces fit together so well that the resulting composition conveys the sense that Sert molded the desired open spaces first and then fit his buildings into the voids. It is a model of design efficiency, economy, and attention to scale. At its edges, where it meets the adjacent community along the street, its buildings are three-stories high, in keeping with the scale of the surrounding wood-frame dwellings. The mid-rise and high-rise buildings are intelligently set back from the street and in most instances do not negatively affect the neighbors. With its 7’-6” ceiling heights, these are



## Why Architects Love Peabody Terrace

Peabody Terrace had been so tightly and efficiently planned that there was little tolerance for re-configuring interior spaces.

*Lee Cott FAIA*

### THE RENOVATION OF PEABODY TERRACE

The renovation of Peabody Terrace presented serious challenges. The buildings have a primitive heating system due to the original 1963 construction-budget constraints and lack of sophistication about how to approach heating and ventilation in a complex this large. Peabody Terrace contains one heating loop and one zone; the tenants are unable to control individual apartment temperatures and rely on opening the building's colorful window panels to regulate room temperature. Sert's skip-stop elevators (the elevators stop at every third floor) and his famous six-apartments-around-a-stair module resulted in a very tightly detailed structural system with no room for vertical mechanical and electrical chases. All new systems, such as retrofitted sprinklers and fire-alarm wiring, therefore have been surface mounted and are completely visible.

Peabody Terrace's white painted-steel window frames had long outlived their useful life by 1993. Extensive rust, due to 30 years of condensation, necessitated complete window replacement. Specially constructed aluminum thermal-break insulating-glass windows were designed and installed, approximating the thin profiles of the original steel sash.

Most problematic of all was the extensive amount of exterior concrete repair needed due to poor placement of reinforcing bars during the original construction and the

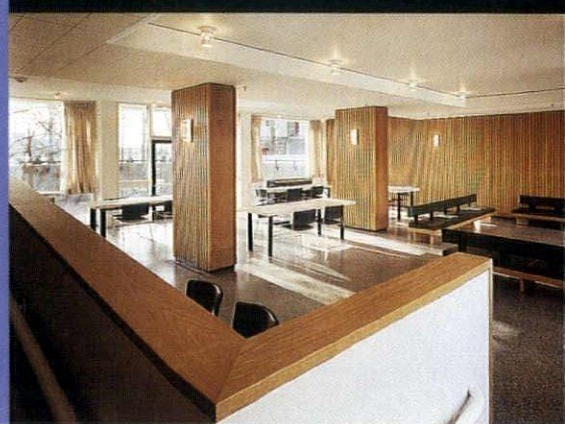
subsequent careless maintenance of spalling concrete with an epoxy-concrete mixture that was harder than the host material. Repair of cast-in-place concrete is neither a science nor an art. Success with patching concrete was largely a matter of luck, despite some remarkably sophisticated research and reconstruction techniques. Some of the patches are completely invisible, while others are as unattractive as the problem they were intended to repair.

Peabody Terrace had been so tightly and efficiently planned that, in addition to the difficulties of upgrading building systems unobtrusively, there was little tolerance for re-configuring interior spaces. The work was limited to expansion and redesign of all kitchens and bathrooms, new data systems including cable TV, new flooring, window replacement, exterior concrete repair and restoration, and the renovation of community spaces. Because Harvard was not willing to close the entire complex for the reconstruction (which would require the relocation of the entire Peabody Terrace community), the work was performed in three phases over three 12-week summer periods — 166 units per summer. Sert's original project cost \$8.4 million, including the garage. This renovation cost \$23 million.

— *Lee Cott FAIA*

Views of the renovated complex, top to bottom:

Kitchen; refurbished windows and balconies; and tower lobby



photos: © Steve Rosenthal



the shortest 22-story buildings around. Thus, Peabody Terrace's three towers are remarkably compatible with the adjacent towers of the Harvard River Houses.

And yet, the good intentions of the architect and Harvard University — to make the site open and welcoming to the public — have not resulted in a building complex that is liked by the community. Most ironic is the accusation that the site has closed off access to the riverfront, as community access to the river was Sert's central premise. Ultimately it may be the design itself that sends a negative signal to its neighbors. The unfriendly appearance of the concrete walls and perhaps the brick paving, a symbol of Harvard's wealth and power, appear unwelcoming. Sert undoubtedly recognized the potentially forbidding character of concrete, enlivening the riverfront façades with the now-iconic brightly colored panels, "eggcrate" balconies, and *brise-soleil* baffles. They are another reason why architects love Peabody Terrace; these façades are visually energetic in ways that few high-rise buildings can match.

Today, 40 years after its construction, Peabody Terrace is still loved by architects who respect not only its architecture, but also its spirit — the idea that it represents. Born of the tenets of CIAM — the International Congress of Modern Architecture that was the organizational focus of the Modern Movement — Peabody Terrace represents the nearly perfect fulfillment of the architectural and urban-design ideals of Modernism: architecture and urbanism supporting a full and healthy life for its residents. Sert's ambition was nothing less than to create a new high-density urban neighborhood in which all human needs would be cared for within an environment providing both privacy and community. (The siting of Sert's Martin Luther King public elementary school adjacent to Peabody Terrace further strengthened his vision of a new urbanism in the Riverside neighborhood. Like many thoughtful urban designers, Sert was already thinking beyond the borders of his Peabody Terrace site.)

Much can be learned from Peabody Terrace. It was, and remains to this day, a model for intelligently planned urban housing. But it also stands as testimony to an idealistic time of earnest intentions and the sincere conviction that architecture could be married to social purpose to produce a better way of life. ■ ■ ■

Lee Cott FAIA is a principal of Bruner/Cott & Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts and an adjunct professor of urban design at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He was principal-in-charge of the renovation of Peabody Terrace in 1993-1995.



# Why the Public (Still) Hates Peabody Terrace

by Otile McManus

**For the community,** it's not just about the dull, gray concrete, or the 22-story towers, or the way the buildings turn their back on the neighborhood streets. It's not just about the fence with the black privacy mesh. Or the 300-space parking garage with the rolling metal doors. Or the so-called public access to the Charles River that has never felt very public to many residents of the section of Cambridge known as Riverside. In the case of Peabody Terrace, the negative whole is definitely more than the sum of its negative parts.

Architect Josep Lluís Sert's 1964 ode to Modernism may stand as a lyrical icon to some, but it is a tall and brutal monument for many who live in the area bordered by Western Avenue, Memorial Drive, Massachusetts Avenue, and DeWolfe Street. The individual design elements and urban-planning features that have attracted architectural pilgrims from around the world are lost on a majority of those who must confront its presence daily.

"Monstrous," "monolith," "cold," "uninviting," "overwhelming," "hostile," "ugly" are just some of the words area residents use when asked to describe the cluster of buildings at 900 Memorial Drive. Some say the complex, originally built for married students, conjures visions of Soviet bloc housing. Some are incredulous that Sert — who once told an interviewer that Peabody Terrace was his favorite building — has been hailed as a visionary for trying to "relate" the buildings to the surrounding community. Others say Peabody Terrace is to its Cambridge neighborhood what Charles River Park is to Boston's West End: an enduring symbol of the havoc wrought by urban renewal.

"When you look at it, what you see is crates stacked on top of one another. You see crates, windows, and so much cement. Crates, windows, and so much cement. Crates, windows, and so much cement. And then more cement," ventures Lawrence Adkins, who finds no intrinsic aesthetic value in Sert's modular approach.

Adkins, president of the Riverside Neighborhood Association, who still lives in the house where he grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, continues, "The towers go up more than 150 feet, and there may be great views for the students living there. But the whole place blocks the us from the river and the river from us."

Even more important, the 500-unit apartment complex, and the difficult feelings it evokes, are at the heart of the very tenuous, and sometimes antagonistic, relationship between the Riverside community and Harvard University. Although more than 40 years have passed since ground was broken on the six-acre site, the lingering shadows cast by Peabody Terrace color the current debate about the physical growth of the university's franchise and its plans to build additional dormitories and faculty housing in the neighborhood where it owns property.

Organized resistance to Harvard's plans has sharpened over the past three years. An 18-month building moratorium scuttled the university's plans to build a riverfront museum on land abutting Peabody Terrace. The Riverside Neighborhood Study Committee, convened by the City of Cambridge, has been pushing the planning board to downzone the area and adopt measures limiting the size and height of any new buildings.

Riverside's residential streets are lined with two- and three-family houses, along with workers' cottages, on small lots with tidy, fenced yards and narrow driveways. The streets were also once home to light industry, manufacturing, and small retail enterprises. In fact, one third of the Peabody Terrace site was home to The Reversible Collar Company since the turn of the century.

Riverside has long been a working-class community of Irish immigrants, African-Americans, and a few Italians. Among its residents were firemen, policemen, municipal workers, and scores of people who worked in the dining rooms and maintenance facilities at Harvard. "Harvard students used to have maids," recalls Joan Qualls Harris, whose father was born in a house on DeWolfe Street more than 100 years ago. "Those maids lived in this neighborhood." Now there is an eclectic mix of professionals and working people.



Riverside activists calculate that Harvard has razed at least 44 houses in Riverside since the 1930s for construction of the so-called River House dormitories — which include the “newer” Peabody Terrace as well as Leverett Towers (1959) and Mather House (1970). Maps distributed by activists indicate that the university now owns an additional 36 houses in the neighborhood, now targeted for demolition and dormitory expansion.

This is the legacy of Peabody Terrace. Harvard imposed itself on the community then, and it wants to impose on the neighborhood now,” explains Phyllis Bauman, a member of the neighborhood study committee and adjunct professor at Northeastern University Law School. Bauman, a 25-year area resident with family now living around the corner, says Harvard didn’t see any need to discuss its plans for Peabody Terrace with the community in the early 1960s, and it doesn’t believe it has any obligation to do so now. “They tell you what they plan to do, and then they tell you again, and again, with no room for discussion or negotiation,” she adds.

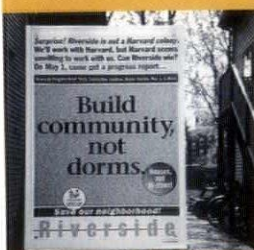
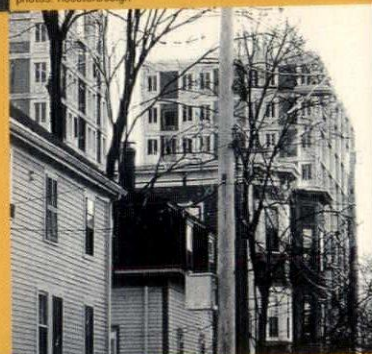
At the time Peabody Terrace was built, it would not have crossed the institutional mind of any major university, hospital, corporation, or museum to engage the surrounding community in a discussion or negotiation of its plans. But times have changed and memories die hard.

Bridget Dinsmore still bristles when she describes the way Harvard security personnel chased area children from the property after Peabody Terrace first opened. Although Dinsmore’s children made friends with children from Peabody Terrace at the Martin Luther King School — which was also designed by Sert and replaced the neighborhood’s beloved Houghton School — their families were transient. Harvard also leased some of the retail space at Peabody Terrace to Johnny’s, a sub shop that was popular with neighborhood residents, but it ultimately refused to renew the lease. Dinsmore also points out that when the complex was built, some area residents were displaced and had to move out. “It was tragic,” she says.



photos: RoosterDesign

The Cambridge “Riverside” neighborhood today.



Neighborhood posters protesting Harvard expansion (2003).



## Why the Public (Still) Hates Peabody Terrace

At the time Peabody Terrace was built, it would not have crossed the institutional mind of any major university, hospital, corporation, or museum to engage the surrounding community in a discussion or negotiation of its plans.

"My father-in-law always said that when Harvard built its high-rises, the neighborhood heating bills went up and so did the electric bills," Dinsmore recalls. "They took sun from the street so the houses were colder and darker."

Despite this history, many residents make a distinction between Harvard University and Harvard's Office of Real Estate and Planning and even take some pride that the university is internationally known and is an overall asset to Cambridge. But residents are also disappointed by Harvard's refusal to consider the options the Riverside Neighborhood Study Committee has proposed that would allow Harvard to build some smaller dormitories and in-fill faculty housing in the area. The university wants to maintain the existing height limit of 120 feet; and it has indicated that downzoning constitutes an unfair property taking, to use the parlance of eminent-domain proceedings.

Yet ironies abound. At one meeting last spring, Cambridge city councilors listened to Riverside residents, the planning board, and Harvard representatives debate the proposed zoning changes. A consultant for Harvard, arguing for 120-foot buildings, put up a chart showing the higher profiles of other Harvard buildings, including Peabody Terrace. He told the group gathered at City Hall that Harvard has learned the lessons of the 1960s and will not build like that again.

The fact that Harvard is now using Peabody Terrace to make its case astonished some at the hearing, especially those who believe that development along the Charles should be limited and that green space should be preserved. As area resident Wendy Baring Gould pointed out, one need only look across the river to Harvard's brand-new high-rise dormitory in Allston.

"I drive by it on the way to work every morning. It is horrendous," Baring Gould exclaims. "What can Harvard be thinking? Unless, of course, it hopes to make Peabody Terrace look good by comparison." ■ ■ ■

Otile McManus produced *A Decent Place to Live*, a community history of Boston's Columbia Point. The book, by Jane Roessner, was published by Northeastern University Press in 1999. McManus is currently director of special projects at Corcoran Jennison Companies.

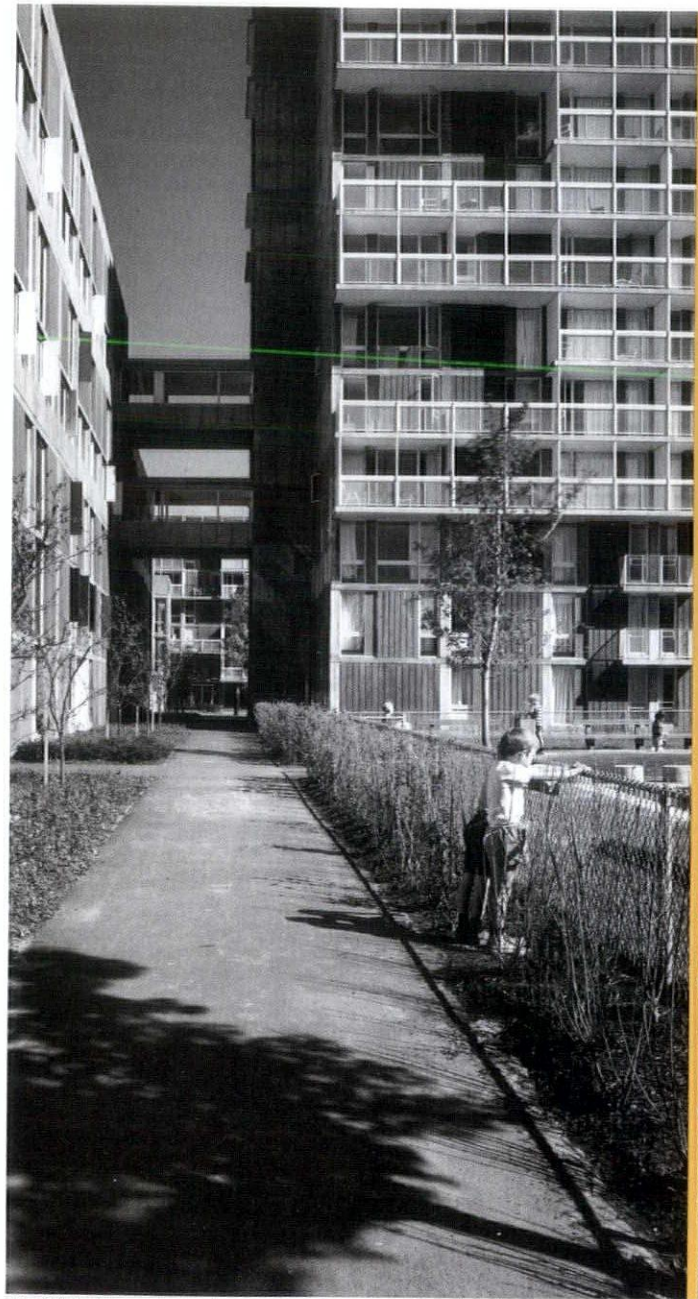
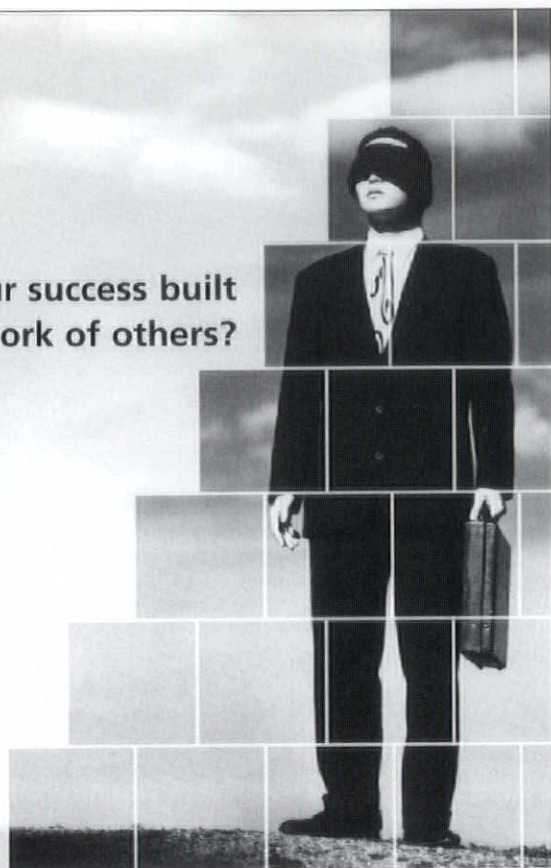


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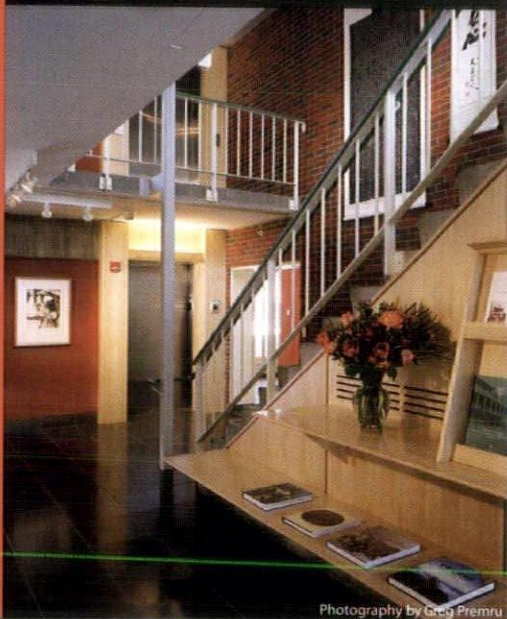
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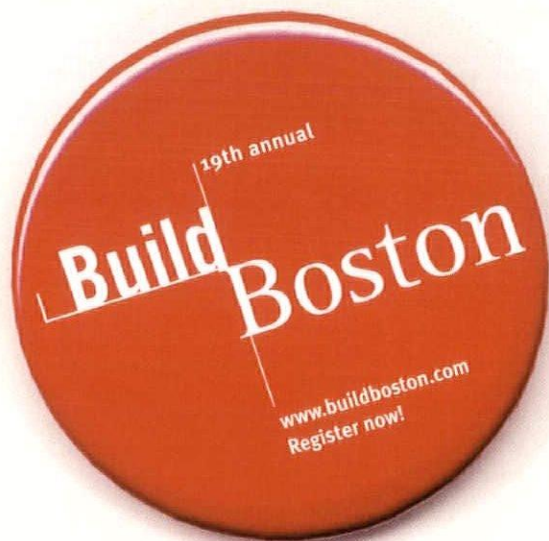
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# River of Innovation

## The tradition of contemporary architecture on the Charles River

by Max Page

**One way to define** the success of a building is that a half-century later people still hate it. Peabody Terrace remains a touchstone, generally admired by architects, generally derided by the public. But people still talk about it and argue about it. And in doing so, they are forced to think about architecture. One of the main purposes of architecture — its highest “ethical function,” as Yale philosopher Karen Harries has said — is to challenge us to argue about what it means to dwell, to make homes in the world. Consensual architecture makes no sense at all.

Peabody Terrace belongs to a generation of buildings by architects who pushed the boundaries of architectural thinking, and did so regularly on the banks of the Charles River. Aalto’s Baker House dormitory, Saarinen’s Kresge Auditorium and Chapel at MIT, and the Polaroid Building by Coolidge Shepley Bulfinch and Abbott are among the most recognizable of these. Also significant, but less well known, are early Modern buildings by Carl Koch; Perry, Shaw and Hepburn; and SOM, among others. Even Harvard’s houses along the Charles represented an important innovation in housing for Harvard College, despite their reliance upon Oxbridge models for inspiration. All of these buildings constituted an outdoor exhibition of mid-century architecture. They speak of a time when the Boston area — and Cambridge, especially — was at the cutting edge of architecture, giving humane Modernism its place.

In just the last several years, the Charles has once again become the setting for innovative new architecture. In the space of a few bends of the Charles have come Machado and Silvetti’s graduate student housing for Harvard, and Frank Gehry’s Stata Center, Fumihiko Maki’s Media Lab, and Steven Holl’s Simmons Hall at MIT. Some projects — including Renzo Piano’s proposed art museum — have fallen victim to the persistent conservatism of the region’s public processes and architectural rule-makers. For others (such as Robert Stern’s Spangler Hall at the Harvard Business School) — well, we could only have wished them such a fate. But most of the new buildings represent a return to a tradition — yes, a tradition — of the Charles as a beacon for new architecture. Together these buildings have chipped away at Boston’s conservatism, and perhaps paved the way for larger visions.

All this, however, has been done in piecemeal fashion, born in part of the desire to invite architectural stars to make their marks on the local landscape. Star architects are stars usually (although not always) because they are excellent architects who are equally adept at making and riding waves of publicity. There is nothing wrong with the quest for these luminaries. But rather than allow, as we usually do, architectural trends to haphazardly make their way onto the landscape, Boston should more consciously consider the city’s designed future. In this time of Boston’s revitalization — when the city is creating a new river for people in downtown Boston by sending the cars underground and giving the sunshine back to the people — we need a building exhibition, a grand vision for the future of the metropolitan region. And the Charles River, as the spine of the region, the natural place for these visions to play out.

One source of inspiration for such an undertaking is Berlin, which has a long tradition of building exhibitions; the most recent, the International Building Exhibition of 1978 to 1987, offers an excellent model. West Berlin developed a novel organization — IBA (the International Building Exhibition) — to deal comprehensively with rebuilding the city, much of which still lay empty and unplanned after the war and the 1961 division of Berlin. IBA brought some of the finest architects and planners in the world to Berlin to build model housing complexes and public buildings that would anchor future development. It represented the unfathomable idea that tens of millions of public dollars would be dedicated to low-income housing (new construction as well as historic rehabilitation), to kindergartens, to schools, and to public parks. The architects who built these relatively understated projects constitute a list of some of the most important architects of the last 30 years: John Hejduk, Peter Eisenman, Charles Moore, Aldo Rossi, Rob Krier, Raimund Abraham. But equally important to IBA’s approach was its mandate to look for opportunities for redevelopment beyond the center of the city, often in less visible areas. Berlin became the leader in new architecture and planning ideas, pioneering something it called “careful urban renewal.”



Two of today's great architects made important marks in Berlin just a mile from one another — Daniel Libeskind with his Jewish Museum and Renzo Piano with his Potsdamer Platz projects. But the real revolution of IBA lay in the middle ground, with the dignified infill housing projects built within Berlin's *hof* (inner courtyard) tradition, while also making dramatic new architectural statements. New neighborhoods emerged: One of these — the area south of the infamous Checkpoint Charlie — had become something of a no-man's land, shut off from East Berlin, but also removed from the heart of the new center of West Berlin. With much of it bombed out, it lay desolate for years. Today it is a vibrant neighborhood, reconnected to the historic core of the city.

Boston and Berlin are worlds apart in so many ways. But Berlin's decision to jumpstart its architecture culture, and to simultaneously answer the compelling needs of its citizens, was a remarkable achievement. Some architects and urbanists like to say that when the going gets tough, the tough get planning. The sorry state of our local and national economy ironically makes the time ripe for thinking big, making visionary plans for a brighter economic future. Berlin and its tradition of building exhibitions might be just the model Boston needs.

As Boston continues to wrestle with what will happen to the Big Dig land, and as contemporary architecture springs up on both the Cambridge and Boston banks of the Charles, the two cities need to launch — with public and private funds — their own building exhibition, a series of built projects that will answer pressing needs, while jolting the region out of its architectural stupor. The greatest need is housing. This is the moment to revitalize not only existing public housing complexes (as has happened recently, sometimes with great success), but also the ideal of creating common good through architecture. We are about to lose one river, a river of cars that had no place in the heart of 400-year-old Boston. We could instead gain a new river of social justice. ■ ■ ■

Max Page is an assistant professor of architecture and history at University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He is the author of *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), winner of the 2001 Spiro Kostof Award of the Society of Architectural Historians. A winner of a 2003-2004 Guggenheim Fellowship, he is writing a cultural

history entitled *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction*. He is also co-editor (with Steven Conn) of *Building the Nation: Americans Write about Their Architecture, Their Cities, and Their Landscape* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).



photo ©Alex S. Macdon Landscapes



# Family Affairs

## The children of Peabody Terrace

by Erin Graves



Drawing: Shoshanna Glee, age 8

Photos: Atsuko Short

**When I was kid** and boxes of hand-me-downs arrived at our house, my sister and I received them with both joy and trepidation. We hoped that the boxes would contain new-looking, brand-name pieces. We worried that they might hold ill-fitting clothes that were “out.”

By the early 1990s, children moving into Peabody Terrace might have approached their new home with similarly mixed emotions. Peabody Terrace had a brand-name designer but, for a child, the complex was ill-fitting, uncomfortable, and — let’s face it — out of style. After 30 years of constant resident turnover and deferred maintenance, Peabody Terrace was looking a little shabby — a long fall from its initial celebrity.

The needs of students with families are frequently overlooked in many colleges and universities. It was Anne Pusey, wife of then Harvard president Nathan Pusey, who first identified the need for married graduate student housing in the late 1950s. At the time, the Cambridge housing stock was limited and run down. Foreign graduate students were especially vulnerable to the poor housing conditions, since they often accepted apartments sight unseen. Mrs. Pusey envisioned a residential complex that would provide students and their families with modern accommodations and instant community. Commissioned to design what would become a residential development of 500 apartments, architect Josep Lluís Sert followed Mrs. Pusey’s mandate and included several features for children. The most obvious of these were the childcare center, playgrounds, and playroom. The red and green exterior vents as well as the

lattice-like arrangement of the balconies also contributed to the playfulness of the buildings.

Over the next 30 years, Peabody Terrace became worse for wear. The playroom, once a site for childcare co-ops, fell into disrepair and disuse. Families, many of whom stayed at Peabody Terrace for the entirety of their American experience, struggled to find room for the Thanksgiving turkey — plus all the fixings — in their under-the-counter refrigerators. Cambridge residents who considered Harvard to be a bad neighbor could take cold comfort that it didn’t treat its own much better.

In 1993, Harvard decided that it was time to restore the aging icon. Bruner/Cott & Associates, the architects for the renovation, upgraded the building’s systems and restored or refinished its materials. But the biggest significant changes from the residents’ point of view were the upgrades in livability: larger kitchens, more storage, built-in desks. The playroom and childcare center were renovated, following cues from the original design.

The restoration had a revitalizing effect on the complex, and it once again became a favorite among graduate students with families. With its two- and three-bedroom apartments, childcare facilities, and play space, Peabody Terrace has the effect of clustering family life at Harvard in one place.

For at least one Harvard family, the Peabody Terrace of today couldn’t be a better fit. Atsuko Short (pictured above, center) has lived at Peabody Terrace with her husband for five years. With three children ranging

in age from one to eight years old, Short is seemingly the tenant for whom Sert designed this project; she has readily incorporated all of Peabody Terrace’s amenities — the childcare center, the playroom, the many parks and outdoor play areas — into her family domain. Her younger children frequent the playroom and the lawns, and her older daughter practices the piano in the common room, which is also the site of the children’s birthday parties. All of her children have friends in the neighborhood; the local elementary school and city park encourage sociability.

Peabody Terrace is not without its frustrations. In fact, many residents of Peabody Terrace seem to be surprised to learn that they live in an architectural landmark, an icon of Modern architecture. “Icon?” jokes one resident. “More like eyesore.” Another student responds, “Oh really, you’ve made me feel much better about living here. I just thought it was ugly.” Lugging groceries and furniture up the stairs from the elevator lobbies is a chore. The residents of Peabody Terrace are not exclusively families, and students sometimes behave as students: On occasion door buzzers sound in the middle of the night with the drunken revelry of a neighbor’s late-night party.

But many residents have found that Peabody Terrace accommodates family life exceptionally well. Children can be surprisingly consistent: What they want from their clothing, they want from their housing — that it be aesthetically pleasing, allow for freedom of movement, and enable that activity which is the province of childhood: play. For a while, families seemed to have outgrown Peabody Terrace, but it proved to need only some minor alterations. Today play is in evidence everywhere in the complex — in the cheery blocks of color inside and outside the apartments, and in the well-lit and functional play areas. They reveal Sert’s understanding of the timeless essentials of childhood — and suggest that the celebrated architect and educator also understood and reveled in his own sense of play. ■ ■ ■

Erin Graves is a planning intern at the Central Artery/Tunnel Project’s architecture and urban design group and is a doctoral student in MIT’s department of urban studies and planning.





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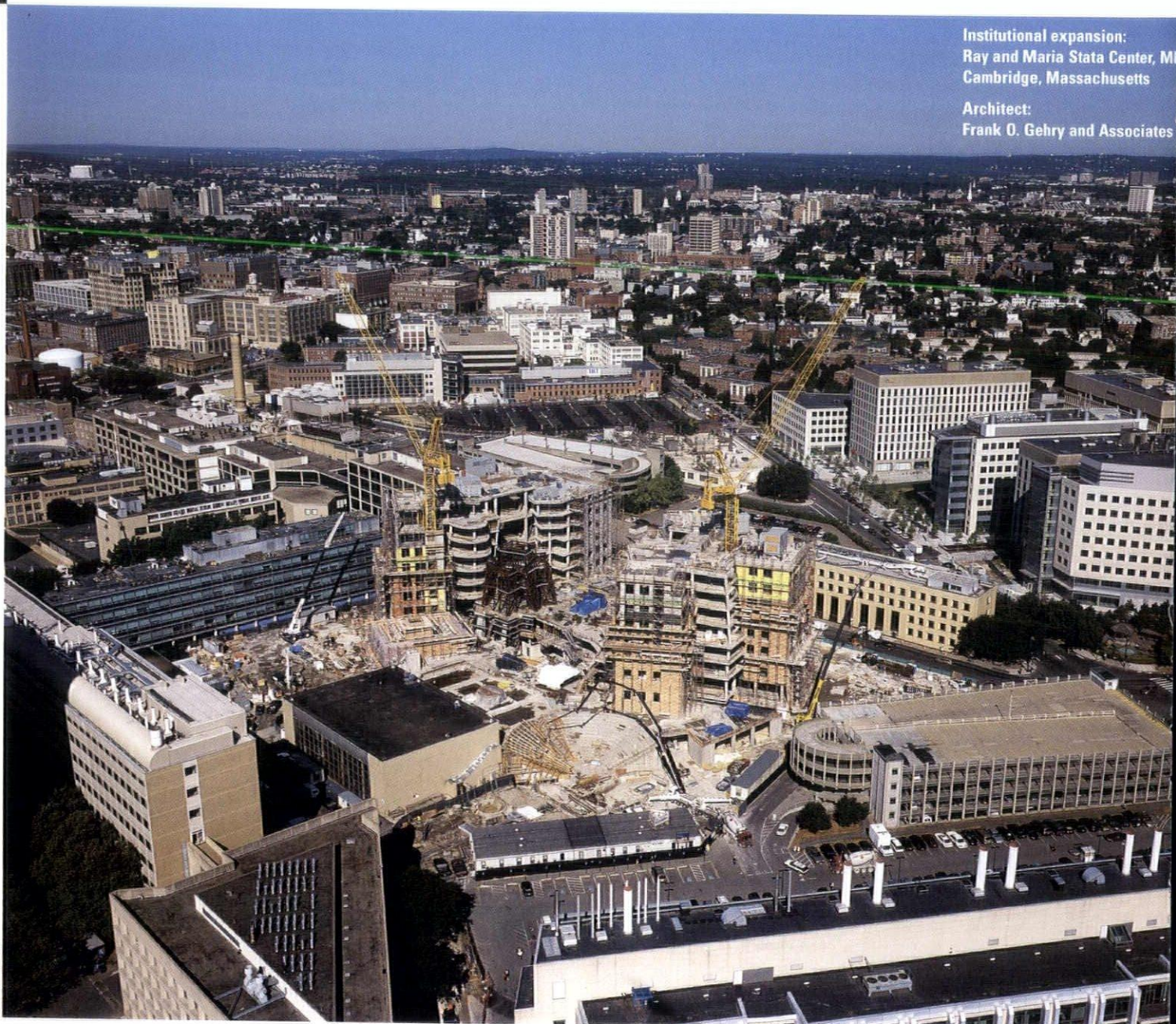
# Imposing Architecture

## The problem of design politics

Lawrence J. Vale talks with  
Hubert Murray AIA, RIBA

Institutional expansion:  
Ray and Maria Stata Center, MIT  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Architect:  
Frank O. Gehry and Associates





**LAWRENCE J. VALE** is professor and head of the department of urban studies and planning at MIT, where his work focuses on the history, politics, and sociology of urban design. He is the author of *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* (1992); *From the Puritans to the Projects: Public Housing and Public Neighbors* (2000); and *Reclaiming Public Housing: Continuing Struggles and New Directions* (2002). He is also co-editor of *Imaging the City: Continuing Struggles and New Directions* (2001).

**HUBERT MURRAY AIA, RIBA** is the principal of Hubert Murray Architect + Planner in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** It's often said that new buildings in universities should advance the discussion of architecture and urbanism at a level that matches the level of academic debate within the institution. It seems fair to view Harvard's Peabody Terrace in this light. Has this building complex served as a new paradigm for student housing — or housing in general? Has it pointed the way for architecture and urbanism over the past 40 years?

**LAWRENCE VALE:** Great architecture always needs great clients, and universities, at least the healthy ones, are great clients. In part that's because they control their own campuses and, therefore, they are their own neighbors. Sometimes, though, they build at the campus edge and are seen as moving onto the turf of others. That seems to be what happened with Peabody Terrace. It was planned during the early '60s and built in 1964 — exactly the cusp of the demand for neighborhood control over development. It came at the end of a period when whole neighborhoods were razed with little say from the residents.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** One of the formal criticisms of Peabody Terrace at the time it was built was that it was a compromised Modernism. It was much gentler and much more open to the neighborhood than a typical Modern Movement development would have been, and the distinction between high- and low-rise was somewhat muted.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** It was quite innovative in the relationship between the high- and the low-rise, that it still manages, however unintentionally, to create an enclave. The placement of that strip of Harvard between the neighborhood and the river is a diagram of power relations between the university and those who feel walled off from the view.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** The three courtyards in Peabody Terrace are in a sense a departure from the spirit of urban openness enshrined in Harvard buildings in that they are much more closely related to medieval cloisters and are therefore sequestered from the community. Even though there's an intended permeability and access to those courtyards by the general public is part of that intention, it simply hasn't happened.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** The spatial intent may be in conflict with the political reality. The unwillingness to walk through Harvard property and walk among Harvard students may simply be part of the problem, especially for those who felt uncomfortable about the presence of Harvard buildings where once there had been private-sector buildings.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** So your argument would be that regardless of the architecture, that divide might exist anyway?

**LAWRENCE VALE:** The town-gown divide certainly predated Peabody Terrace. In the earlier part of the century, the river was a less valuable commodity. As the river became a recreational asset throughout the course of the 20th century, accessibility became perceived as much more of a public right. The control of the riverfront by Harvard and MIT — not to mention Boston University on the other side of the river — would have been perceived as a potential barrier.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** And yet MIT offers an interesting comparison with two notable buildings: Aalto's Baker House and Rapson and Koch's 100 Memorial Drive — both of which were completed in 1949, both of which occupy remarkable positions on the Charles River, both of which were seen, and are still considered, models of innovative Modern design.

Great architecture always needs great clients, and universities are great clients. Sometimes, though, they build at the campus edge and are seen as moving onto the turf of others.

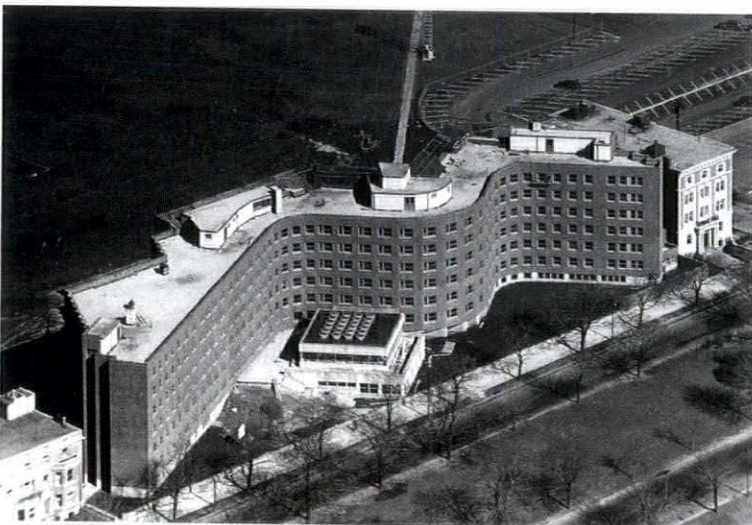
*Lawrence Vale*



photo courtesy MIT Museum



photo courtesy MIT Museum



Top:  
Model of 100 Memorial Drive  
(1949)  
MIT  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Bottom:  
Baker House (1949)  
MIT  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

But they have not engendered the same controversy as Peabody Terrace, undoubtedly because they were not sited within a residential community.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** I think that's a fundamental difference. They were built on landfill and their neighbors were other parts of the campus. They're also somewhat lower and less anomalous on the skyline than Peabody Terrace. The "wall" between MIT and its neighbors occurs farther inland and has sparked its share of controversy as well.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** What is fascinating is that the river — which is so central to the experience of both Baker House and 100 Memorial Drive and is such a formidable component of the politics of Peabody Terrace — is actually not all that apparent from inside the Peabody Terrace complex.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** It is a building that engages the river from its higher levels. It was intended to be a secure place for people raising young children and is therefore as internalized as possible. That represents an attitude typical of that time — the larger effort to accommodate a particular vision of family life in large, Modernist housing complexes. Much of the whole mentality behind the creation of the megablock was an attempt to separate children from traffic. If you go back to the 1929 plan for New York and its environs and you look at the famous monograph by Clarence Perry about the neighborhood unit, you'll see that one of his first illustrations is a map showing where fatal traffic accidents happened in Manhattan during the late 1920s.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** Separating traffic from pedestrians became a major theme of the Modern Movement. But one of the results of that approach was the loss of the street and street-generated activity as a social medium.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** Yes. You can see that in the plan for what was the quintessential Modernist housing experiment — the late 1950s plan for Brasília, just a few years ahead of Peabody Terrace. The plan presumed that everyone would gather in the open spaces within the *superquadras*. In fact, everyone flocked to the little bit of retail activity on the strips between that were the closest approximation of a traditional street.



**HUBERT MURRAY:** We are still searching for that social focus in modern-day urban design and planning. Clearly, it is something that Sert was searching for, and it is something that was central to the Modern Movement. To what extent can architecture be regarded as an instrument of social reform?

**LAWRENCE VALE:** I don't know if Sert was as glib about those kinds of things as was Le Corbusier — or others of that slightly earlier generation. Certainly, social reform was very much at the heart of many Modernist housing schemes, whether it was the European emphasis in the '20s and '30s on 'workers' housing, or the American experiments with public housing just before and after World War II. The thought was that moral reform came out of and parcel with reforming the site plan. These new kinds of housing were intended to be qualitatively different from what preceded them, and the assumption was that the residents would be improved, too, almost as if an entirely new kind of man being would live in an entirely new kind of housing. American public housing facilitated this through a tenant-selection process that accepted only those who had the proper income, proper family structure, proper citizenship, proper credentials, and proper housekeeping. It enabled the proponents to boast about having eliminated juvenile delinquency through the force of Modern architecture, but the reality was that they had simply replaced the previous populations with a more carefully selected cohort.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** Let's talk a bit about the architecture of Peabody Terrace. I like to say that one of the ways you can tell an architect from a regular member of humanity is that laypeople don't particularly like Boston's City Hall. I think that's probably true of Peabody Terrace. Architects love Peabody Terrace. And it seems to me that what they love is the technology, what I would call the three-dimensional jigsaw of the plans and sections, the skip-stop elevators, the balconies as emergency spaces. The components contained within Peabody Terrace were, if not the first of their kind, at least representative of the Modernist vocabulary in public housing in Europe and in the US. Would you say that Peabody Terrace was perhaps a transfer point for these aspects of Modernist thinking?

**LAWRENCE VALE:** Actually, I think the transfer occurred 15 years before Peabody Terrace. The 10 Memorial Drive building by Rapson, Koch and their colleagues introduced skip-stop elevators on a waterfront dormitory site. Many of the innovations

that are credited to Peabody Terrace came earlier. Peabody Terrace came after the now-infamous skip-stop elevators of Pruitt-Igoe and other public housing projects in St. Louis. I think Peabody Terrace was really more of an attempt to adapt some of the Modernist thinking that had already been used in the public sector to a private client, and to try and do so in a way that sidestepped some of the problems. There was, for example, a great deal of concern about community and privacy — Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander wrote a book with that very title about that time, which was an attempt to understand how high-density housing could maximize both of those values. Peabody Terrace made some significant advances in that area, which had been singularly absent from public housing both here and in Europe. I tend to be quite a fan of Peabody Terrace's architecture, as I am of most of Sert's work. But it is, as you suggest, an appeal that is driven by the skill with which Sert rendered the complex façades and molded together the high-rise and low-rise buildings using a single module, and the skill with which he took advantage of cross-ventilation and skip-stop elevators [which stop only at every third floor, with stair access for the units above and below]. But when you try to apply similar technologies to a much less advantaged community, let alone one more likely to have disabled people struggling with the stairs and wondering why the elevator can't stop on their floor, and struggling to supervise children in the hidden stairwells, you end up with an opportunity for pathology rather than a simple, clever innovation. The translation never worked very well in a very low-income setting, but has worked with some success for those who have lived in Peabody Terrace over the years.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** One way Sert tried to address the community and privacy issue was in his courtyards, creating a community within the housing complex. If we look at Steven Holl's new Simmons Hall dormitory at MIT, he too is creating common spaces, but they are intended only for the resident community, not for the wider community. The same could be said of Peabody Terrace.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** I think that's right. Porosity is the reigning metaphor that Holl used in his design. However, it is not visibly porous to the community. But when you get inside, you see what the fuss — as well as much of the expense — was about. What he has done is to create student lounges in the form of vertical breakthroughs — internal, cave-like incursions into the otherwise rectilinear building — in order to create opportunities for the

Separating traffic from pedestrians became a major theme of the Modern Movement. But one of the results of that approach was the loss of the street and street-generated activity as a social medium.

Hubert Murray AIA



Student lounge  
Simmons Hall  
MIT  
Cambridge,  
Massachusetts

Architect:  
Steven Holl  
Architects

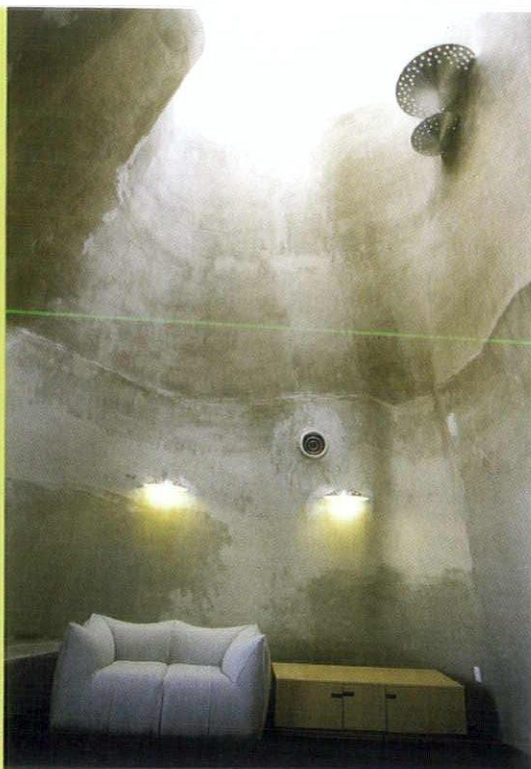


photo: © Andy Ryan

formation of varying communities. There are stairwells from multiple entrances at multiple levels that enter into these vertical spaces, some as high as four levels and some with skylights. Working with the students who would live there, he tried to identify sub-communities within the building who would use these spaces.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** These are communities of interest rather than geography?

**LAWRENCE VALE:** Exactly. Instead of simply going to the lounge that is closest to their room, people are able to identify with certain kinds of preferences and interests and to try and find each other even if they are not physically located near each other in the building. So those who are fond of cooking have a space that has a large kitchen; those who are fond of sports

have one with a large television in it. People find one another based on interests, even if they physically live at some distance within the building itself. And I gather that that aspect of it has been very well received by students.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** Whereas my interpretation of Peabody Terrace is that that level of sophistication in the programming is relatively absent. The sole communal theme in Peabody Terrace is children. But another aspect of Simmons that does resemble Peabody Terrace is that despite its intended "porosity," it still excludes the neighborhood.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** Buildings, like cities, have fronts and backs. Simmons parallels the railroad track that is already the greater barrier to the neighborhood. In the case of Peabody Terrace, which fronts onto the river, residents feel that Harvard has turned its back on them. It is a very common phenomenon. My favorite example is Lincoln Center, where you have the grand entrance to all of the palaces of high culture, and then when you go around back — and almost no one except someone driving a service vehicle would want to — you have a cliff of blankness that backs harshly onto the public housing project immediately behind the complex. It says very clearly who this cultural institution is for and who it isn't. Those kinds of juxtapositions — institution to institution, or institution to resident — are part of what I call the "design politics" of cities. People often think of design as one thing and politics as the force that constrains it. But I have long argued the two have to be seen as part of the same concept. Designers, whether they know it or not, have a political standpoint, and politics often encodes a design.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** It's interesting you bring that up in this context. In defense of Peabody Terrace, I think the low-rise apartments on Putnam Avenue are well-scaled, although they are built of concrete, an inhospitable material when compared with the stick-built vernacular houses in the neighborhood. Sert made a couple of moves, however, that are problematic. One is the parking garage that fronts right onto the street and the sidewalk, a brutal and impermeable edge to the neighborhood. The other is the King School, which Sert designed a few years later. If you look down the main pedestrian walkway of Peabody Terrace toward



the King School, you see a great concrete wall, another impermeable edge to the street. Both Lincoln Center and Peabody Terrace, in their different ways — and presumably despite best intentions — are self-contained megablocks. We have at least made progress in getting away from that megablock mentality.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** I think that's right. The barriers that were created by Peabody Terrace are not necessarily the result of design intent. Feeling unwanted in someone else's space is a question of the design politics. It happens wherever an institution orders a more diversified set of neighbors — not just town-gown situations. And you are right to emphasize that the move away from the megablock toward the small-grain residential scale ought to make these juxtapositions less likely to fester into longstanding disputes and resentments. I think the challenge is to accommodate community viewpoints, but ultimately the community changes while the physicality of the built work endures. So the building has to encode something in its intrinsic structure that outlasts the politics of that particular community.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** What's a good example of that?

**LAWRENCE VALE:** Tent City in Boston, 20 years in the making, manages the incredibly difficult transition from the brick fabric of the South End to the back of Copley Place in a very effective way.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** That's another example of managing scale and height in a residential environment. It's a four-story residential complex that rises to 12 stories.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** The problem is that for every story of the building there was a longer story about how it came to be. One could hardly credit that process as an ideal one, except that in the end, it met the needs of a very diverse set of constituencies and so is a distinguished work of architecture.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** Columbia Point's transformation from a downtrodden low-income housing project into the mixed-income Harbor Point is similar, in a sense, to the development of Tent City. Both represent the gradual transition of the heroic period of social architecture into a much more commodating form of social program in which public rental and market ownership are mixed up together. Ironically, this period also represents the transformation of thinking of housing as a fundamental right provided by government to the current

mode of thinking, which is housing as a privilege accessible through the market.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** One can view the initial wave of public housing construction in the late '30s and '40s and even early '50s as a kind of reward for the worthy, upwardly mobile working poor. But what do you do when those sorts of people are not the ones dominating your waiting list? That challenge is one that we've utterly failed to manage over the last 40 years or so. Lately the tendency has been to tear down the public housing system and to replace it with housing that serves a much less needy population. The 1998 public housing reform legislation was called the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act — you couldn't ask for a more puritanical tone to the message. It meant that public housing was not going to be for "those" people anymore; it was going to be a place where the carefully vetted working poor could live in safety. It means that we, as a society, have been collectively abandoning the effort to house the lowest-income people.

**HUBERT MURRAY:** I think that this loss of nerve about social programs is accompanied by a similar loss of nerve in architectural form-making. That is, Modernism was seen to be part of the problem — the massiveness, the megablocks. Post-modernism represents a retreat to fishing around for iconic clues to our past with almost no content, which gives rise to the formlessness we see around us. But perhaps this is now being exorcised somewhat in urban public housing and university projects.

**LAWRENCE VALE:** Yes. I think that the whole question of where progressive architecture is going when it comes to multi-family housing has, unfortunately, been dominated by a retrograde, New Urbanist vision that has tried to simply mimic aspects of the urbanism of the past without really coming up with a terribly innovative alternative. Some would say that is the problem; multi-family housing is the wrong place for innovation. You shouldn't experiment with lower-income people — that should be left to the elite who can afford to live in or replace the mistakes that they have allowed architects to make. But the message in some of the really iconic dormitory design that universities have championed is that multi-family housing can be a place for experimentation. Often with mixed results, certainly. But these kinds of projects always offer the opportunity and the possibility that we might learn something new. ■ ■ ■

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*Lawrence Vale*



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# Covering the Issues

## Periodical roundup

by Gretchen Schneider,  
Assoc. AIA

**Let's get dense...** Since 1970, the population of Massachusetts has grown 30 percent, while our developed land grew 180 percent. Something is totally out of whack, and politicians are taking notice. Or at least Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney has. Romney has created a new "super cabinet" Office of Commonwealth Development to oversee traditionally separate transportation, environment, and housing agencies, and has hired long-time environmentalist Doug Foy to lead the coordinated "stop sprawl" charge. In "The Sprawl Doctor is In," (*CommonWealth*, Spring 2003), Michael Jonas outlines the Bay State's Houston-like trends and discusses the controversial Foy. The former head of the Conservation Law Foundation, lawsuit-savvy Foy is famous for pushing both the \$6-billion Boston Harbor clean-up and the Big Dig's \$3-billion commitment to public transit. The stakes are high, but his strategy is clear: "The only way we're going to save the countryside is by making the [towns and] cities great." Hear, hear.

**I'll do it myself...** Rapper Snoop Dogg sporting a power sander? Rocker Tommy Lee's guitar skills applied to a cordless drill? These scenes and more are flooding our airwaves as home-improvement shows scramble to outdo one another. Currently over 100 programs on network and cable broadcast info on how to build a bed, refinish a floor, or surprise your spouse or neighbor with a decorating makeover. These prodigious offspring of Martha Stewart, Bob Vila, and Tim the Toolman have taken over daytime TV, replacing anguished discussions of relationship dilemmas with straightforward results and how-to. Architects love to lament our public lack of design literacy, but perhaps this sends us a sign that Martha really has sparked a national discussion on how we live and what our spaces look like. As for the more

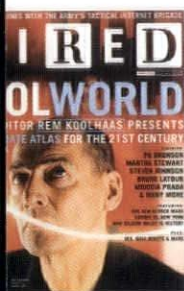
pressing question of which one to watch, in "This Renovation Will Be Televised" (*Dwell*, June 2003), Cathy Lang Ho gives us a guide to the shows.

**Guest services...** "The words and ideas of architecture, once the official language of space, no longer seem capable of describing this proliferation of new conditions" writes architect Rem Koolhaas about the borders, control zones, and markets of a deregulated, globalized world. As guest editor of the June 2003 *Wired*, Koolhaas invited 30 writers, researchers, critics, and artists to describe both the obsolete and emerging spaces of today. Using his usual formula of short essays, sexy graphics, and mundane-yet-shocking statistics, Koolhaas does here what he does best: show us the places we thought we knew through new eyes. Observations alternate between quirky and staggering. (By 2015, population will exceed 5 million in 58 metro areas, 48 located outside the developed world. "Acousmatic spaces" — spaces with hidden voices that speak to us, like elevators, T stops, and automated grocery checkouts — are growing.) All 30 essays have implications for the built environment. Koolhaas prods, but offers no answers.

**Rolling, rolling, rolling...** I've seen the future and it's on wheels. My clairvoyant is Tom Vanderbilt, author of "The New Mobility" (*I.D.*, May 2003). No longer the exclusive purview of '60s visionaries or trailer-park doyens, mobile architecture defines designers' new frontier. Today, 2.8 million Americans live in RVs, and 20 percent of new home purchases are manufactured houses. New materials, technologies, and social conditions have changed how both architects and owners approach all things mobile. (Vanderbilt includes prefab in this group, too.) In this broad survey, Vanderbilt highlights what's happening now, from transformed shipping containers to competition-winning entries for a portable HIV/AIDS health clinic to hip, high-end houses-on-wheels.

**Slow down...** Remember John Ruskin? Sure you do: he's the 19th-century British writer who elevated architectural criticism to social commentary. Required reading on most architectural history syllabi, his rants against profit-driven industrialists, Venetian decadence, and machine-made products helped spark the Arts and Crafts movement. In "Ruskin's Power" (*The American Scholar*, Spring 2003), Wesleyan professor Phyllis Rose reminds us that his message transcends his time. Though not an easy read, slowing down to soak Ruskin in again will be well worth it. ■■■

Gretchen Schneider, Assoc. AIA, teaches the architecture studios at Smith College and maintains a practice in Boston.



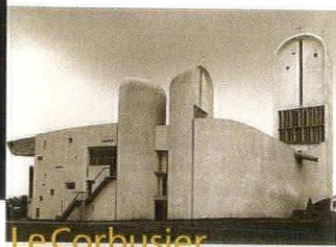


# Books

## Le Corbusier: Architect of the Twentieth Century

by Kenneth Frampton;  
photographs by  
Roberto Schezen  
Harry N. Abrams, 2002

Reviewed by  
Tamara Roy AIA



Le Corbusier

Architect of the Twentieth Century  
Text by Kenneth Frampton  
Photographs by Roberto Schezen

Do you remember when you first fell in love with Le Corbusier? There was that confused, "I've never seen anything like this before" feeling — and then, a swooning, as your earlier ideas of architecture melted away in the dark of a professor's persuasive slide show. You couldn't wait to bring "Corb" home to your parents (OK, they hated him), but that didn't stop you from following him all around Europe. Looking back on your first love, what do think now?

As Kenneth Frampton points out in *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Twentieth Century*, "We will never finish with Le Corbusier." His reasons include the fact that Le Corbusier's buildings and theories are so numerous that they defy any one historian's grasp, and that with contradictory impulses, Corb continues to influence architects of many generations. But there is a more compelling reason. Le Corbusier exposed the softer, human side of architecture with fluid forms and sensual choreographies of movement that create tension with his taut exteriors. *That* is what is enduring.

In the 10-page introduction, Frampton charts the shifting currents of Le Corbusier's theoretical and tectonic work, from his purist paintings to the Dom-ino House — his

system for concrete house construction — and *Plan Voisin* — his radical plan for Paris featuring apartment blocks in park-like settings. The body of the book focuses on 17 projects, many recently renovated, which are illustrated with new photographs by Roberto Schezen, plans, isometrics, and original sketches. The accompanying text details the architect/client relationship, the program, and Le Corbusier's intentions. The sketches reveal his simultaneous obsession with designing boxes and his struggle to make them more human.

If you were hoping, as I did, that your passion for Le Corbusier might be reignited, you may be disappointed. Kenneth Frampton is a reserved historian whose dry writing style, with its emphasis on tectonic rather than sensual qualities, is informative but not inviting. Without exception, the exterior views are so closely cropped that the projects become completely removed from their physical context — vigorously avoiding an examination of how the immutable, "modern" object has stood up to the changing landscape. Most of all, Schezen's black-and-white photographs do not make palpable the experience of Le Corbusier's architecture in the changing colors of morning, afternoon, and evening light. This is especially true of the chapel at Ronchamp, but also of the Unité d'Habitation, Chandigarh, and La Tourette.

Despite Frampton and Schezen's predictable retreat to the safety of the uncontested and defensible, Le Corbusier's work still manages to capture our hearts. We know that our "first love" hasn't changed, but perhaps we have, and we find ourselves recasting his legacy into a warmer mold of Modernism that can still inspire us today.

Tamara Roy AIA is a senior project designer at Elkus/Manfredi Architects in Boston.

## The Harvard University Campus Guide:

### An Architectural Tour

by Douglass Shand-Tucci;  
photographs by Richard Cheek  
Princeton Architectural Press,  
2001

Reviewed by  
James McCown

Elite American college campuses make for the most interesting architectural canvases. What designers wouldn't want to make their mark on one of these sylvan precincts of higher learning? Mindful of the interest such places command, Princeton Architectural Press's "Campus Guide" series takes in-depth looks at great campuses from Boston to Charlottesville to Palo Alto and numerous places in between.

The Harvard version, written by Douglass Shand-Tucci, is filled with fascinating stories about the university's 367 years of architectural history and distinction. Sample anecdotes: The Casablanca restaurant in Harvard Square is the result of the Humphrey Bogart cult that originated in the 1950s at the adjoining Brattle Cinema; a Biblical quote about "truth" on the portal of St. Paul's Catholic Church is a defiant Roman Catholic stab at Harvard's pompous Puritan "Veritas" motto. Who knew?

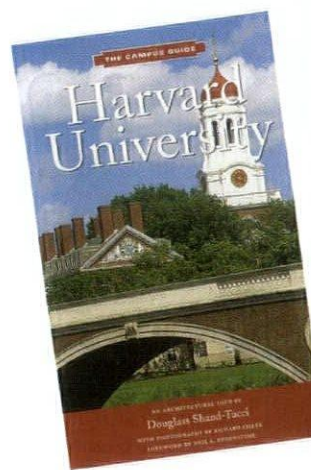
The several "walks" around which Shand-Tucci organizes the book are accompanied by maps and drawings as well as photographs by Richard Cheek. And yet, even with the author's erudition and depth of knowledge, the book is a frustrating read. Shand-Tucci is like the absent-minded professor who waxes on for hours about some subject unrelated to what he is teaching, and then apologizes for "digressing" just as the bell sounds for the change of classes. He often gets so wrapped up in a side story that he forgets even to mention anything about architecture. He calls Moshe Safdie's Rosovsky Hall "pretty interesting" without ever saying why; Minoru Yamasaki's William James Hall is "appalling," but again no architectural basis is offered for the comment. And some of the writing is just plain awful, as when he discusses the famous "city upon a hill" speech of Massachusetts Bay Colony

Governor John Winthrop: "It was Winthrop's words that three centuries later on the eve of his inauguration as President of the United States in 1961, John F. Kennedy would quote to the Great and General Court of Massachusetts of his day, whose predecessors I am far from denying were founders even before John Harvard of all you see now!" Maybe it's time for another round of trials in Salem — this time for bad writing!

For a publisher with the toney reputation of Princeton Architectural Press, allowing this kind of babble into print is outrageous, and there yet more surprising examples of sloppy editing and fact-checking. Senator McCarthy's Communist purges are said to be "in the '60s"; Le Corbusier is referred to as "the French master" (he was Swiss); and longtime Cambridge landmark, the Grolier Poetry Book Shop, is consistently misspelled — despite the presence of a contradictory photograph. And finally, the drawings that illustrate the walks are confusing. For example, one shows the landmark Adolphus Busch Hall without its signature green onion dome (As a Cambridge resident, I'm constantly using this as a visual point of reference for visitors.)

Shand-Tucci has so many interesting stories to tell. But maybe he needs some help in telling them.

James McCown is director of communications and marketing at Schwartz/Silver Architects in Boston. He also writes on architectural subjects for Boston magazine, *Art New England*, and other regional and national publications.





**Josep Lluís Sert**

(author)  
Rockport Publishers, 2003

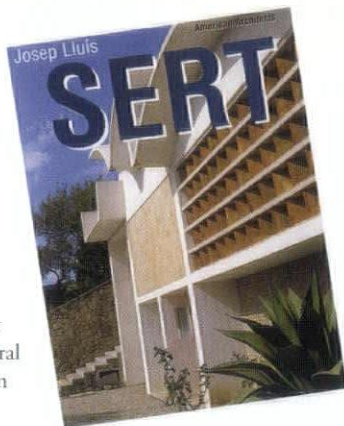
Reviewed by  
William Morgan

Josep Lluís Sert was an important influence on American architectural education by virtue of his position as dean at Harvard during the 1950s and '60s. Noted for his masterplans in Europe, masterplans in several South American cities, and his significant projects on American urban campuses, Sert was the recipient of the AIA Gold Medal. One of his most notable achievements was not his work at Harvard; he was largely responsible for bringing Le Corbusier and the Carpenter Center to Cambridge.

A devoted protégé of the master, Sert designed some of the most topologically Corbusian megastructures around: Holyoke Center, Peabody Terrace, and the Science Center at Harvard, as well as Boston University's Central Campus. Whether one sees these exercises in Franco-Brazilian modernism as monuments of heroic modernism or quaint period pieces, it is difficult to ignore Sert or their creator.

Clearly, Sert deserves a solid, critical, and well-illustrated monograph — in English. There are no non-European books on him; Josep Maria Rovira's *Sert 1901-1983* (Milan) may be the best recent study, but it costs \$135. So, we should welcome a \$15 book on Sert from Rockport Publishers.

*Josep Lluís Sert* is the second of a new series called "American Architects" (the other is *Gwathmey Siegel* [sic]). Alas, it is a thin, dash picture book, apparently a reprint from Madrid's Onlybook. The level of information presented is absurdly elementary, although at least children's books are better designed and more fun. This looks like the sort of presentation volume that a provincial city might contribute to groups of visiting Japanese firemen.

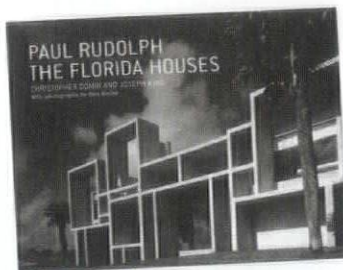


Since the book has no introduction, no focus, and no author (there is a text credit hidden in the publication credits page), one can only guess its purpose. *Sert* covers the projects at Harvard and Boston University; three cultural buildings (Maeght Foundation in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona, and Miró's studio in Palma de Mallorca), and some houses in Ibiza. Also included are a short chronology, location maps (Holyoke Center is placed half a mile north of and the Science Center a block away from their actual locations), a wee bibliography, and a mini thank-you to Sert's partner Huson Jackson.

The un-credited color photographs are quite good, but the text is painful to read. Translations are often stiff and awkward (as dean at Harvard, Sert was "substituting Walter Gropius"), and every sentence borders on the dreadful ("The treatment of indirect lighting is effected largely by the way of the large skylights"). No one's native tongue should have to wrap around bland, inane, and meaningless statements such as "The perpendicular law and matching education dominate the whole."

Cambridge readers of Sert may be perplexed to learn that Harvard's Science Center "was designed to allow for quick dismantling." Readers of contemporary architectural literature will be perplexed by Rockport's diversion from handsome and useful monographs to dreck.

William Morgan is an architecture critic in Providence, Rhode Island.

**Paul Rudolph:  
The Florida Houses**

by Christopher Domin and Joseph King;  
photographs by Ezra Stoller  
Princeton Architectural Press,  
2002

Reviewed by  
Robert J. Taylor AIA

In 1953 Paul Rudolph, then 35 years old, was "the most important architect... in the US and probably the industrialized world" according to critic Peter Blake. This acclaim began with small vacation homes, the subject of a handsome new volume, *Paul Rudolph: The Florida Houses*. Rudolph went on to prestigious commissions, many near Boston, that eclipsed the houses: the Jewett Arts Center at Wellesley; Southeastern Massachusetts Technological Institute near South Dartmouth; and the Art and Architecture Building at Yale, where he became chairman of the architecture department. *The Florida Houses* offers fresh reconsideration of Rudolph's early — and arguably best — work, covering 60 projects from 1941, the year he arrived in Sarasota, to his 1962 departure for the Northeast.

The authors let the houses speak for themselves through Rudolph's drawings and Ezra Stoller's photographs. The drawings portray the architecture with remarkable clarity, in roof-removed aerials that favor massing and cut-away perspectives with low points-of-view that favor the section. Rudolph's magazine-ready graphics boosted his career in an image-hungry system and still print beautifully.

Architect and educator, Rudolph was foremost a *maker*, and superb buildings of simplicity, rigor, and lightness grace this book. Stoller's beautiful black-and-white photos empathically portray Rudolph's

architecture in harmony with the mangrove swamps, tropical light, and easy living of mid-century Sarasota.

Two essays organize Rudolph's houses into two periods during which he explored escape paths from Modernist ideology. First, Domin covers Rudolph's work with architect/builder Ralph Twitchell, a partnership that lasted until 1951. Promoting Modern design ideas to Twitchell's open-minded Sarasota friends, they developed a subtropical American Modern architecture in which simple volumes on daring structural armatures catch breezes and provide shade with operable flaps and filigree layers. During this period, Rudolph spent two formative semesters studying under Gropius at Harvard, in breaks from his training as a naval architect during the war years. In these first houses, remarkable for their small size and big ideas, shipwright economy and carpentry transform influences from Gropius, Mies, and Wright.

King covers Rudolph's independent practice from 1952 to 1962, in which his work evolved toward dramatic monumentality, deep shadow, and internal spatial complexity. Though highly influential, it was less regional, less Southern, and certainly a more difficult way to make a house. Interesting premonitions, these later houses outline ideas Rudolph went on to develop in subsequent significant commissions.

Rudolph has long been remembered for overheating like Icarus and falling into a sea of bad luck through the 1970s. His overreach at the ill-fated State Services Building, fires at the Yale Art and Architecture building, Robert Venturi's withering critique of the Crawford Manor housing project in New Haven — each damned his "heroic and original" Modernism. *The Florida Houses* reminds us why Rudolph rose so rapidly and flew so high.

Robert J. Taylor AIA is a principal of Taylor & Burns in Boston.



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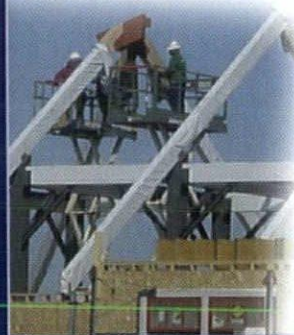
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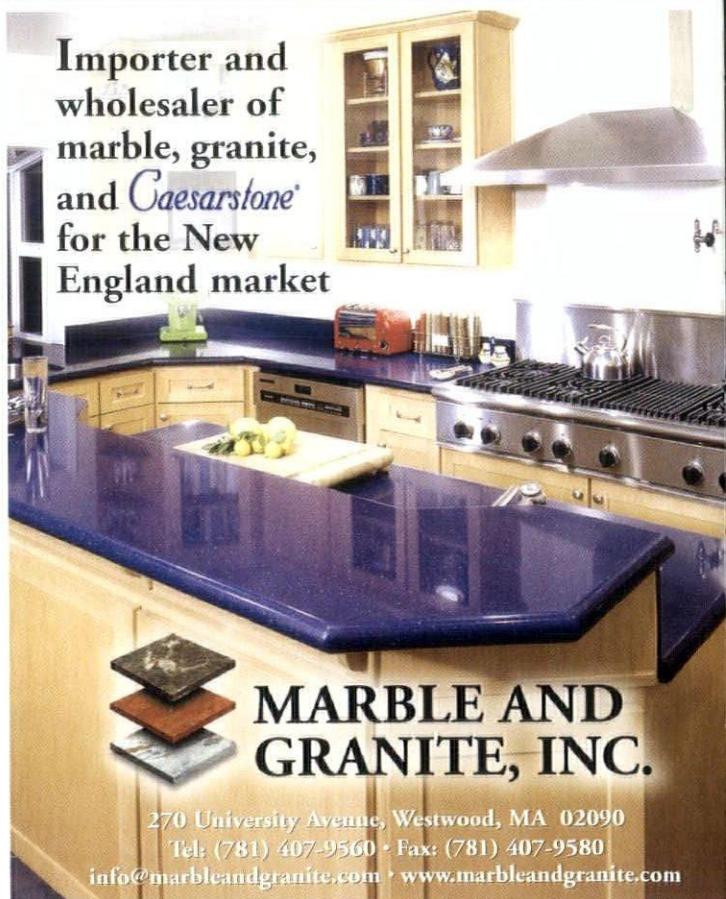
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### Maison Dom-Ino Construction Kit

<http://home.earthlink.net/~supkoff/dom-ino-ring/main.htm>

Fans of Le Corbusier, take heart! Here's an electronic time-waster far more satisfying than Free Cell and Solitaire. Build your own on-screen Maison Dom-Ino. Like Legos, but without the need to return all the pieces to your toy box.

### DOCOMOMO

[www.docomomo-us.org](http://www.docomomo-us.org)

"The acronym DOCOMOMO stands for DOcumentation and COnservation of buildings, sites and neighborhoods of the MOdern MOvement." An international organization, it has active chapters in the US. Find the one near you. The Modernist building you save may be your own.

### Housing Prototypes

[www.housingprototypes.org](http://www.housingprototypes.org)

"Dedicated to the study of international multi-family housing." This is a handy database of housing around the world, listed by place, architects, and building type. It's straightforward and astonishingly useful.

### The Collegiate Way

[www.collegiateway.org](http://www.collegiateway.org)

This site at first seems to have the unfortunate character of an Internet rant, until you realize that its author might be on to something: "The real crisis in higher education today doesn't come from the curriculum, it comes from the poverty of student life." The solution? The residential college.

### Boston's Skyscraper Guy

[www.skyscraperguy.com](http://www.skyscraperguy.com)

Quirky but endearing, this site is devoted to Boston's tall buildings. ("So, why Boston? You guessed it; it's the closest city to me. It's all I've got to work with right now.") The Skyscraper Guy seems to have lots of friends – over 100 registered users of the discussion forum where people regularly post pictures of buildings and proceed to talk about them in a civilized manner. See? People care about this stuff.

### RiverNet

[www.rivernet.org](http://www.rivernet.org)

A multi-disciplinary, multi-national site promoting "the sustainable wise management of living rivers in opposition to the exploitation, pollution, and degradation that has occurred in the past."

### Urban Rivers Awareness

[www.urbanrivers.org](http://www.urbanrivers.org)

Great domain name with unfortunately dumbed-down contents. (You probably knew that only a fraction of the Earth's water is fresh, not salt.) But the links list is a useful resource.

### Nostalgia Central

[www.nostalgiacentral.com](http://www.nostalgiacentral.com)

Your guide to the '60s, '70s, and '80s. To understand the architecture of the recent past, you need to understand its cultural context, right?

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## Other Voices by Edward Young

## Peabody Terrace



photo: Edward Young

**I used to think** that living in a concrete tower block would be terrible, that it would signify some gross lapse of taste, erode my soul, and detach me — uproot me from the warm life of the street and the rooted history of an old house.

By nature, the old me would have also sided with the residents of Cambridge who have still to forgive Harvard for the eyesore they argue blights the traditional Charles River skyline, upsetting the balance of elegant red-brick dorms and their own pretty pastel-shaded wooden New England homes. As a child living in rural England, I imagined living in a red-brick terraced house — one of the rowhouses that define so many London neighborhoods. One day, I thought, I might trade up to Early Georgian. If I were American, I would have imagined living in a slate-gray clapboard house with a porch and contrasting white trim.

But life in Peabody Terrace has been an unexpectedly pleasant surprise.

On a bitterly cold February day, I picked up the keys to the apartment I would share with my partner, a Harvard graduate student. I had never envisioned living in a concrete high-rise, but now here I was moving into Peabody Terrace. The closest I had got to becoming a modernist was to envy the wall-to-wall carpeting and stripped pine of my cousins' 1980s suburban semi-detached. (It at least seemed better than the buckled walls, thatch dust, and mismatched

colours of my parents' cottage.) At school we learned about the social dislocation caused by Britain's post-war government's attempt to re-house the poor in brave new concrete tower blocks. The message was clear: high-rise housing bred drugs, crime, and delinquency. It was a message that was reinforced when I worked in the housing office at Blackbird Lyes, one of Britain's worst housing projects. Tower after tower of wet, stained concrete housed thousands of sallow, depressed workers.

"It looks like the projects," said a friend visiting me for the first time at Peabody Terrace. At a distance — the distance most Cambridge residents see it from — there is no denying the resemblance. But up close, things come into sharper focus. The colours are bright — the walls white, the window shutters and doors painted in strong reds and greens. And what is absent is important, too: Peabody Terrace is absent of litter, absent of abandoned cars, absent of graffiti. The lifts don't smell of urine. There is a certain sense of pride and privilege among the residents, to be allowed to live in such an attractive place, in such simple, pleasant apartments.

Peabody Terrace is a 24-hour community with residents from every corner of the world — a rich Babel of languages and cultures. The graduate students and their families who populate Peabody Terrace set their own schedules, coming and going throughout the day and night. Many students work at home or within walking

distance, taking breaks to exercise or shop during the day. The kindergarten attracts children from across the area. It is a youthful vital community, a vibrant, colourful mix.

Until recently I lived in Beijing. The city was undergoing a perpetual building revolution: its winding alleyways — the *hutongs* — bulldozed to make way for shopping malls and new office buildings. But local residents are not upset; they do not bemoan the loss of history. They are excited about the prospect of central heating and flush toilets. They are optimistic about the future, optimistic about their new homes on the outskirts of the city, optimistic about living in concrete tower blocks. I lived for two years in an old courtyard house a stone's throw from the Forbidden City. I had hankered after history; I hoped to be nourished by the courtyard's historical meaning, tied to the generations who had lived and loved there before me. But two bitter winters and two sweltering summers proved I needed to be nourished by more than historical meaning.

For me, Peabody Terrace strikes a balance. It is first and foremost a clean, well-lit place for living. Floor-to-ceiling windows suck in what sunlight there is on a Boston winter day, the white walls and clean strobes reflecting and magnifying the sun, bouncing it into the corners of the room. But its local infamy gives it historical depth — it is not just any concrete tower block.

Peabody Terrace may be an eyesore for local residents; it may sometimes feel to them like the projects have crash-landed in a neighborhood of chocolate-box clapboard homes. But for me it has laid to rest the cliché that all concrete tower blocks are soulless. Peabody Terrace has a soul. ■■

Edward Young is currently a consultant at a marketing research firm in Boston. Until recently, he worked as a journalist in Beijing. He is a resident of Peabody Terrace.



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