Commercial Buildings

Cambridgeport commercial buildings overlap more categories than do other building types, since commercial uses are frequently combined with other uses - residential, institutional, or industrial. Despite this variety, it is possible to make certain generalizations about Cambridgeport commercial architecture and to illustrate both combined-usage and purely commercial structures.

Cambridgeport has always been commercially active, unlike Mid Cambridge, which is almost exclusively residential. Commercial buildings followed soon after the opening of the West Boston Bridge in 1793; in fact the very first building in Cambridgeport, put up the month after the bridge opening, was a store erected by Robert Vose and Royal Makepeace near the western end of the bridge causeway. (The precise location was on Main Street opposite Osborn Street, now part of the site of New Towne Court.) Several other stores were built in the vicinity in the next few years, along with houses and a tavern. None of these early buildings survives, but descriptions and views of slightly later structures indicate that they were of the three-story, hip-roofed Federal type, with small, nearly square windows under the eaves - in short, not substantially different in appearance from houses of the period, except perhaps in treatment of entrances.

A mid-19th-century view of a brick store built about 1815 at the corner of Main and Osborn Streets (Fig. 258) indicates the difficulty of distinguishing one building type from another in this period. Tax records treat the building as both a house and a store. The house would presumably have occupied the right-hand five bays (with a fanlighted, sidelighted entrance), and the store would have occupied the left-hand seven bays (with two simple rectangular doors). Between the two sections, on the first story, was what appears to have been an open passageway leading through to the back of the lot.

A "store" in the early 19th century was more what would be considered a warehouse today - a place where goods are stored. There was little distinction between wholesale bulk storage and retail display and sale; furthermore, there were far more raw goods than manufactured items. Especially in the pre-railroad era, commercial wagon routes from inland towns passed through Cambridgeport; the Port "stores" were logical dropping-off points because of their convenient location near the bridge to Boston, with a consequent avoidance of bridge tolls.

An old woodcut (Fig. 259) shows a frame commercial building near Central Square as it looked when the Cambridge Chronicle occupied it from 1846 to 1854. The front portion of the structure was built about 1800; it was three stories high and hip-roofed, with small third-story windows but with larger ground-story windows than were present on the 1815 store illustrated in Fig. 258. These shop windows may have been the result of later alterations, or if original they could be an indication of the architectural difference between a warehouse-type "store" and a retail outlet. A grocer, Joseph A. Holmes, owned the building after 1842; tax records before his time refer to the 1800 building variously as a barn, "other building," store, or house, indicating the futility of trying to put such structures into too rigid categories. The Holmes-Chronicle block was substantially altered in 1886, when (in the words of the Cambridge Tribune) "large plate glass windows" were put in to "take the place of the old-fashioned small-paned sashes." Subsequent alterations made the original building unrecognizable, though a portion of it may still exist behind the facades at 636-638 Massachusetts Avenue.

Another early Central Square commercial block survives in part at 452-458 Massachusetts Avenue (Fig. 260). Originally extending to the corner of Brookline Street, this three-story, Federal-style brick block had two hip-roofed
end units (with five-window facades facing the side yards) and four narrower, gable-roofed, row-house-type units between. Referred to in tax records as "other buildings" and in deeds as a "range of brick stores" or "the brick block called South Row," the group was built in 1806 by Judge Francis Dana on part of his extensive Cambridgeport landholdings. Apparently used at an early date for residential as well as commercial purposes, the buildings followed a common pattern—stores or shops on the ground story, living quarters above. The right-hand four units of South Row were demolished about 1930 to make way for the block of one-story stores presently on the site (see Fig. 275). The remaining units have had their facades considerably altered (new storefronts, changed fenestration, stucco veneer), but their basic mass survives, as does the five-window side facade of the left-hand unit, although the ground-story openings, including an elliptical-arched center entrance, have been bricked up.

Right in Central Square, at Massachusetts Avenue and Prospect Street, stands another early commercial-residential structure, also considerably altered (Fig. 261). This three-story, hip-roofed wooden building (now aluminum-sided) was built in 1814 as the home and leather-dressing shop of Thomas Dowse, an art collector and benefactor of the Cambridge Public Library. After Dowse's death in 1856, the Massachusetts Avenue facade was remodeled with rusticated siding, segmental-arched ground-story windows, two-over-two sash, and other newly fashionable features, though the side facade (which faced an open yard now occupied by another building) retained its Federal-style characteristics (Fig. 262). In its remodeled form, the Dowse house had offices on the ground floor, including one occupied in 1861 by the Harvard Bank, forerunner of the present Harvard Trust Company. Subsequent changes have all but obscured the building's character, but the third-story window openings and the hip roof (now fortunately shorn of billboards) are visible evidence of its previous style.

At the east corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Douglass Street, a commercial location since early Cambridgeport days, Royal Douglass in 1849 built a three-story brick structure with granite first-story front. Listed as a "store block" in tax records, the building was referred to as a confectionary factory in a contemporary Cambridge Chronicle. Probably there was also residential occupancy of the upper floors, as there is today (above a furniture store). A remodeling in 1886 gave the building a mansard roof, but the paired chimneys on the end wall, the plain brick frieze under the eaves, and the granite pillars on the first-story front are Greek Revival characteristics compatible with the building's 1849 date (Fig. 263).

A more interesting mid-century commercial building stands at the triangular intersection of Cambridge and Hampshire Streets, in Inman Square (Fig. 264). Built for Charles Waite in 1855-57, the building was first listed in tax records as "2 brick stores," later simply as a "brick block." Three stories high with a hip roof, it follows the shape of its triangular site (known as a "heater"), with a curved bay at the intersection. Greek Revival characteristics include a plain brick frieze and brick dentil cornice. The window sash have been changed, and the ground story (now occupied by a drug store) is completely altered. A two-story commercial building with stores below and offices above was added at the rear in 1916 (Newhall and Blevins, architects).
Diagonally across from the Waite building in Inman Square is a handsome brick structure occupied by the Middlesex Bank (Fig. 265). Built in 1874, the three-story building (listed as a “block of stores” in early tax records) has granite pillars dividing the ground floor into store fronts, which now have inappropriate small-paned sash – an attempt to be “Colonial” on a Victorian building. The upper floors, with their two-over-two sash, projecting stone sills and lintels, and bracketed cornice peaking up at the center of each facade, are entirely original.

From the same period, but more elaborate in style and detail, were two commercial buildings in Central Square – Hyde’s Block (1868) on the site of the present Woolworth’s and the Grant Building (1873) on the site of Central Plaza. Hyde’s Block (Fig. 266) was noteworthy for its French Second Empire characteristics, particularly its symmetrical facade framed by end pavilions carried up into the mansard roof. The brick building was elaborately trimmed with granite – corner quoins on the end pavilions, two-story arched openings for the pavilion windows, and blocky projecting sills and lintels on the windows of the center section. (The second-story windows, as well as the storefronts, had been remodeled by the time the photograph published here was taken in the 1930’s.) The neo-Georgian Woolworth’s building that has occupied the site since 1950 seems bland by comparison, although it has a similar composition of end pavilions flanking a center section (Fig. 267). The Grant Building, High Victorian Gothic in style, had brick as well as stone ornament and a lively, varied surface treatment, again within a symmetrical composition (Fig. 268). Spiky iron cresting originally embellished the parapet atop the facade.

Typical of 1880’s style as well as of the sort of mixed usage that could occur in commercial buildings is the towered stone structure at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Inman Street (Fig. 269). Illustrated in Mid Cambridge (p. 96) as an example of the work of local architect John A. Hasty, the former Cambridge Mutual Fire Insurance Company building has shops on the ground floor, offices (entered from Massachusetts Avenue) on the second floor, and apartments (entered from Inman Street) on the third and fourth floors. Built at the same time as adjacent City Hall, the Hasty building is also Richardsonian Romanesque in style, with round-arched ground-story openings (some now altered) and beige and brown polychrome masonry. However, its composition is asymmetrical rather than symmetrical, and its detailing is fussier than that of City Hall.
The early 20th century brought to Central Square several white, Renaissance-inspired business buildings, two of the handsomest of which are located at Massachusetts Avenue and Temple Street. On the site of N. J. Bradlee’s 1865 granite Masonic Hall (Fig. 249) stands the Cambridgeport Savings Bank Building, built in 1904 to designs by W. E. Chamberlin and C. H. Blackall. Though the cornice has been simplified and some changes have been made at the entrance, this white marble-clad structure is still the very image of a Classical, turn-of-the-century bank (Fig. 270). Appropriately, it is shared by the Cambridgeport Savings Bank and the Harvard Trust Company, both of which had their origins in 19th-century Cambridgeport. Across Temple Street, the former Gas Light Company Building is more specifically Italian Renaissance in derivation. Designed by Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge in 1912, the two-story arcade structure has seven arched bays on Massachusetts Avenue and three on Temple Street (Fig. 271). The massing resembles that of Renaissance loggias such as Michelangelo’s on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, though the arcades here are glazed rather than open.

Full-height ogival arches characterize the facade of the four-story Chronicle building at 620 Massachusetts Avenue (Fig. 272). Designed by Newhall and Blevins in 1908, this facade has white terra-cotta ornament against a buff-colored brick background. Small terra-cotta panels were less expensive than stone and provided more ornament for the money. Despite these advantages, this form of decoration was relatively short-lived, being in vogue principally in the decade or two preceding World War I. The equivalent after the war was cast stone—panels or blocks of concrete intended to resemble real stone. The advantage of cast stone over terra cotta was that the individual elements could be made in larger sizes and did not have to be glazed or baked; unfortunately, however, the material has not weathered as well.

Cast stone was extensively used on the city’s first “skyscraper,” the Central Square Building (Fig. 273). This ten-story office building by Blackall, Clapp and Whittemore was built in 1926. As on other urban office buildings of the period, the structural steel skeleton is obscured by cast-stone cladding, which forms the principal decoration (along with metal window frames and highly ornamented spandrels). Though not reflecting any interior functional change, the fourth story is set off by horizontal as well as vertical divisions, providing a break between bay-window and individual-window fenestration patterns.

A building comparable in size and use, though without superficial decoration or artificial attempts at variety, is Central Plaza (Fig. 274) across Massachusetts Avenue. Replacing the Grant Building (Fig. 268), this square, thirteen-story, reinforced-concrete structure with attached two-story wing along Prospect Street was designed by Eduardo Catalano and Associates and built in 1967. Its presence in Central Square is a welcome one, both as a companion to the Central Square Building (long an isolated landmark) and as a relief from the banality and clutter of most of the Massachusetts Avenue commercial strip. Particularly noteworthy are Central Plaza’s small but distinctive horizontal hanging signs.

Contemporary with the Central Square Building are a large number of one-story store blocks with cast-stone facades. One such block replaced the former Athenaeum and City Hall (Fig. 233) in 1922; another replaced a portion of...
Francis Dana’s South Row (Fig. 260) in 1929. The latter block (Fig. 275), designed by F. A. Norcross, consists of stores of various sizes fronting on both Massachusetts Avenue and Brookline Street. Under the portion of the building at Brookline and Green Streets is a basement bowling alley. Separation between the different stores is expressed on the facade by cast-stone pinnacles that carry up above the parapet; the parapet itself varies in height and is adorned with cast-stone plaques on the principal sections. None of these cast-stone store blocks predates World War I.

One-story stores in existing commercial areas were a step in the direction of modern, automobile-oriented shopping centers. Their success was hindered by traffic and parking problems in the congested business district, alleviated to some extent in recent years by the provision of municipal parking lots in several locations near Massachusetts Avenue. The next step came after World War II with the development of full-fledged shopping centers predicated entirely on the automobile; the principal Cambridgeport example is the Stop & Shop supermarket complex on Memorial Drive (Fig. 276), begun in 1946 and expanded several times over the succeeding years. Because of the lack of available land in Cambridgeport for large-scale, unified-design shopping centers, other automobile-centered retail development has consisted of isolated, parking-lot-surrounded structures (restaurants, gas stations, clothing stores, motels), particularly along Memorial Drive. Even in established commercial districts, some drive-in architecture has come about through demolition of existing buildings (often ones with an appropriate urban scale) and their replacement with isolated one-story structures surrounded by asphalt. An example is the Inman Square branch of the East Cambridge Savings Bank (Fig. 277), designed in 1965 by T. M. James Company, the same firm that designed the bank’s main office in 1931 (East Cambridge, p. 57). The Charlesbank Trust Company’s building at 124 Broadway is comparable, though it will have to be removed when the land on which it stands (part of the Kendall Square Urban Renewal Area) is developed. Designed by Joseph A. Donohue, it was built in 1966.
278. TECHNOLOGY SQUARE, 1961-1966. CABOT, CABOT & FORBES ASSOCIATES, EDUARDO CATALANO, AND PIETRO BELLUSCHI, ARCHITECTS

The Kendall Square area contains the largest concentration of new commercial architecture in Cambridge. Mostly the result of postwar urban renewal, it consists of three major projects—Technology Square, the Transportation Systems Center, and Cambridge Gateway. Technology Square (Fig. 278), which occupies the site of outmoded factory buildings and tenements, was developed by Cabot, Cabot and Forbes Company in association with M.I.T. The four reinforced-concrete buildings surrounding a landscaped plaza were built in 1961-1966 to designs by Cabot, Cabot and Forbes Associates, Eduardo Catalanino, and Pietro Belluschi; an additional tower is planned. The buildings contain offices and laboratories, primarily for science and engineering firms. The low, pavilion-like structure in front (549 Main Street) is the corporate headquarters of Polaroid Corporation.

A prime tenant in Technology Square during the years 1964-1969 was the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s Electronics Research Center, which commissioned its own buildings nearby. Late in 1969 NASA announced its decision to close the center, and the following spring the Transportation Systems Center of the Department of Transportation took over the new NASA complex. The main building is a thirteen-story office-and-laboratory tower clad in beige brick; this and a similarly finished auditorium building parallel to Broadway were designed by Edward Durell Stone (Fig. 279). Two reinforced-concrete laboratory structures at the rear of the site were built before NASA’s decision to close; these were designed by The Architects Collaborative. Additional acreage cleared for NASA (29 acres out of 42 in the renewal area had been promised) will now be available for other development.

Across Third Street from the former NASA site is a private commercial complex, Cambridge Gateway, being developed by the Badger Corporation (Fig. 280). One tower out of a planned two has been built to date, as well as a curved garage and shopping-mall connection between the two. Emery Roth and Sons were the architects of Cambridge Gateway, which is as different as any building could be from the early Cambridgeport commercial structures that once stood nearby. Whether it is indicative of the kind of development that will occur on the final Kendall Square redevelopment parcel (the triangular tract bounded by Broadway, Main Street, and the railroad) remains to be seen.
Combined Residential and Commercial Buildings

A number of the commercial buildings mentioned thus far have included some residential use, since it was common 19th-century practice to have stores on the ground floor and living accommodations above. Certain other buildings are predominantly residential in character yet in one way or another can also be classified as commercial. In Cambridgeport, three categories of such buildings stand out – early 19th-century inns and taverns; later 19th-century tenements or apartments with one or more ground-story stores; and recent high-rise motels or apartments with some commercial occupancy.

Inns and taverns were important in the early days, when commercial trade routes passed through Cambridgeport on their way to Boston. After the coming of railroads, the need for such travelers' facilities declined, and the early inns gradually disappeared. An idea of what these buildings were like can be gained from an old view of the Hovey Tavern (Fig. 281), which stood from about 1802 until 1828 on the west corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Douglass Street. It was a three-story, hip-roofed, frame structure, indistinguishable from large houses of the period except for its tavern sign hanging from a tall standard in front. Other inns and taverns were located east of the Hovey Tavern site, toward the West Boston Bridge. Some were of brick and some of frame, but all are likely to have had similar massing and fenestration.

As pointed out in the housing-types section of this report, it was not until the later 19th century that definable forms of multi-family housing emerged. The more urban types – tenements and decker-type apartments – sometimes had stores on the ground floor. A good example (though the original storefronts have been changed) is the mansard-roofed tenement block at the corner of Main and Columbia Streets (Fig. 282). Built in 1870, it originally had four stores on the ground floor and four flats on each of the three upper floors. The living room of each flat is expressed by a bay window on the Main Street facade; an additional tier of bays lights the middle rooms of the flats on the Columbia Street end.

Across Lafayette Square, at 430-442 Massachusetts Avenue, is the monumental, five-story Kennedy block (Fig. 283), built in 1890 to designs by George Fogerty. This stone-trimmed brick building has symmetrical tiers of copper-clad bays on the four residential floors, above ground-story commercial space (which has been remodeled). There were four apartments per floor originally, each extending in the decker manner the full length of the building.
Construction of large residential structures on the city’s main commercial arteries virtually ceased in the 20th century, largely because automobile and truck traffic made these locations less desirable than before. One Cambridgeport exception is Modern Manor at 840-864 Massachusetts Avenue (Fig. 284), which adapts to its main-artery location by grouping its apartments around a sunken central courtyard. A section of the building with shops fronting on the avenue masks the courtyard and most of the apartments from traffic noise. A row of garages in back, along Green Street, is an additional feature of this project, which was designed by G. U. Jacobs and built in 1925.

Next door, 872 Massachusetts Avenue is a modern high-rise structure that protects its apartments by elevating them above the ground (Fig. 285). Parking occupies the lowest two levels (one entered from Green Street, the other from Massachusetts Avenue); offices are on the second and third floors; and eight stories of apartments (each with a projecting concrete balcony) begin at the fourth-floor level. J. Timothy Anderson designed 872, which was built in 1964 on the site of the former Briggs house (Fig. 124).

A comparable structure, serving transients rather than permanent residents, is the Fenway Cambridge Motor Hotel at 777 Memorial Drive (Fig. 286). Designed by Salsberg and Le Blanc and built in 1966, this fifteen-story building has 200 guest bedrooms, various dining and function rooms, a fifth-story rooftop swimming pool, and a parking garage. Though vastly different, it is the modern equivalent of early 19th-century hostelries such as Hovey’s Tavern, welcoming automobile travelers rather than wagon drivers to Cambridgeport and the surrounding Boston community.