

RALPH HORNE'S HISTORY LESSONS

THE ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER OF THE SOUTH END

By Ralph A. Horne

The architectural character of the South End is perhaps best explored by contrasting it to that of Back Bay, for the two neighborhoods are profoundly different both with respect to their overall conceptions and with respect to their individual buildings.

The inspirational model for the South End was the residential squares of Georgian London and Bath, and thus continued the tradition of late colonial and Federal period Boston. Alas, many of these splendid designs (Pemberton Square, Franklin Place, Toutine Crescent) have been destroyed. The only surviving example, outside the South End, is the justly famous Louisburg Square. However, with the exception of Blackstone and Franklin Squares, most of the South End's squares have miraculously managed to survive with much of their architectural fabric more or less intact, although several are without their greenery.¹ These English squares are quiet, enclosed spaces, isolated and contained from the heavily trafficked arteries.

War is a nasty business. Rather than fight for the Union, some rich young Bostonians preferred to dodge the draft (legal then) and sail off for Paris. Some even filled their empty hours in exile by attending lectures at the Ecole de Beaux Arts. When they returned to Boston after the war they brought French fashions with them, including architectural and urban planning fashions. As a consequence, Paris, not London, provided the model for the development of the Back Bay and its principal design feature, axial Commonwealth Avenue, was a Parisian boulevard in the manner of Baron Haussmann. Haussmann had recently torn down much of the old city and transformed Paris, and his "urban renewal," like its modern counterparts, may have involved more politics than aesthetics. Crooked streets, it is said, made the Emperor Louis Napoleon

¹ Chester, Claremont, West Rutland and Greenwich Parks

nervous, whereas the straight vistas opened by the new boulevards facilitated control of the mob by artillery.

In any event, while the design foci of South End are intimate, enclosed squares, that of Back Bay, in strong contrast, is an expanse of boulevard. The character of the buildings in the two districts is just as different as the layouts of which they are elements. South End townhouses are unobtrusive; they are conceived with their neighbors in mind, and are intended to form one of uniformity, of a certain repetitious rhythm as one looks down a street or square. The buildings in the Back Bay are exactly the opposite. Rather than trying to harmonize with its neighbor, the typical Back Bay townhouse strives to compete for attention and to outdo by flaunting an excessive richness of architectural style and ornament. This tends to make the Back Bay far more "interesting" architecturally than the South end, but at the same time somewhat jarring to the aesthetic sensibilities.

Architecture is a very telling mirror of social mores. There is no worse sin in Boston society than to push, and architecturally Back Bay is pushy. Traditionally, Boston architecture, reflecting social attitudes, is very reticent. The low numbered homes on Beacon Street, for example, have an austere feeling. This reticence was carried inside and applies to furnishings as well as facades. The same reticence makes it easy to tell if a chest or chandelier is of Boston or New York or Philadelphia manufacture. Overlooking some lapses, such as the florid cast iron window lintels in Union Park² and the Allen House (1682 Washington Street), this reticence prevailed in the South End. South End facades are "proper." This is all the more remarkable when one remembers that the predominate style in the South End - Italianate - is intrinsically a highly decorative one, and one which very easily lends itself to excess. What happened to this reticence? What happened then between the buildings of the South End and those of Back Bay? Quite simply, proper Bostonians had ceased to be the tastemakers. Perhaps they were even copying New York. After the Civil War, new money was setting the pace and the old families, suddenly worried about being outdone, were following at its heels.

² Other elaborate window lintels can be found at 683 and 685 Massachusetts Avenue; 7,9, 11 and 21 Worcester Square; and even, as a broken pediment, in terra cotta at 577 and 581 Massachusetts Avenue. These last two buildings are also distinguished by their large curving roof cornice brackets and the small attic windows. The window lintels at 19 and 21 Worcester Square have carved grotesques.

The special character of the South End represents a very serious and difficult preservation problem. There are very few structures in the South End which by themselves are worth of preservation. It is the ensemble, the whole square, the whole neighborhood, which must be preserved and not the individual elements within the total composition. Destruction of any element of the ensemble destroys the total effect, yet it is this total effect which is all important. Architecturally discordant elements in the South End are particularly obtrusive, far more so than in the Back Bay where even the original structures are in certain ways discordant with one another. Breaking the repetitive harmony of the South End cityscape by gouging a gap, by destroying the continuity of the roof line with a high rise, is thus particularly destructive. Even the truncation of a church steeple, an all too familiar form of destruction in the South End, is ruinous, since these tall spires served as foci of interest, accent marks as it were, to the overall horizontality of the design.