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25 Years of Transformation in Boston Architecture

Astrophysicist and author Neil deGrasse Tyson reminds us that the universe is ever-expanding and never still. Similarly, the evolution of Boston architecture over the past 25 years is far from linear, expanding in all directions – and morphing rapidly.

In that relatively short time, we have seen the integration and advancement of new technology, the growth of society's commitment to diversity and inclusion, increased awareness of climate resiliency, vast economic and governmental shifts and, of course, a worldwide pandemic. Each one of these components has shaped the city, its buildings, its inhabitants, and the way we experience it.

The More Things Change...

To understand the myriad changes that have gained a foothold in Boston, one must first consider what remains consistent. As designers and architects, we are beholden to a process. Our clients' expectations, speed to market of projects, excellence in design, city agency process, and construction cost and duration have been somewhat similar in the past quarter century. Why is that? The core tenets of architecture remain: client service, excellent design, and execution. Our commission/apprenticed-based profession still has a deep and historic foothold in this tried-and-true process, since the publication of Ayn Rand's seminal novel, *The Fountainhead*, in the early 1940s.

The visual changes we've witnessed in the Boston skyline are probably the easiest to recognize. Buildings get taller, the design shifts more modern, our biases of what is good versus what is not are challenged. Recently, we have observed some of the greatest aesthetic diversity in building design that the city has seen in decades.

Coming out of the "dotcom" boom in the late 1990s and 2000s, the world, and certainly our industry, experienced one of the worst tragedies in history, 9/11. The outcome – changes in building codes, the way a building is accessed, and security check-in procedures – are the ghosts of this tragedy that still impact every building to this day.

Shifts in climate have forced our attention to resiliency and sustainability in a way unlike any other time. Boston has engaged in meaningful resiliency studies that have engaged design firms in reshaping communities, the riverbanks, and shorelines. From neighborhoods like the Fort Point Channel to the development of the Seaport, we have faced resiliency challenges like never before. On the political front, the city has experienced significant changes as the end of Mayor Thomas Menino's administration gave way to the creation and transformation of the Boston Redevelopment Authority into the Boston Planning & Development Agency and new zoning overlays designed to help enrich communities by adding housing and life sciences, thus bolstering the public realm.

Changing Demographics

Over the past quarter century, we have seen a multi-generational influx of talent – from generation X, to the surge of millennials, to the dawn of Generation Z – into the Boston workforce, forcing architecture to accommodate a new way of working, thinking, experiencing space, and fundamentally shifting how we think of design. Societal drivers and the concept of placemaking influence buildings, interior design, furniture, and even wayfinding, opening doors and facilitating the creation of places where people feel included, where there is rich diversity, and where every building and every open space is truly a place for all.

We have seen a swell of new design firms started by young designers and a fantastic push in women-owned and -led design firms. The internet and social media have given a voice to the voiceless, enabling conversation about architecture and buildings and spaces in a way they have never been discussed before. There are more developers, joint financial partners, and building owners from cities across the country and around the world, creating dynamic outcomes for projects not simply rooted in the "Boston Brahmin" way.

Not to be overlooked, an international pandemic of unprecedented proportions has left an indelible mark in the current state of Boston and its future going forward. Much like the tragedy of 9/11 and how it impacted the design of buildings, the ghosts of COVID will

define how we interact with each other, who works and when, and how spaces will look to ensure the safety and health of its inhabitants. Meditation and calm rooms, biophilic design, and flexibility of work all are part and parcel of making office buildings our homes away from homes and a better place to be.

Looking Ahead

During the past 25 years, the definition of how we see and use space is challenged more than ever. We must be more adaptable as designers and architects to make sure the spaces are timeless and forever lasting, making the cross-pollination of multiple uses and flexibility within a building an imperative. Offices want to feel like hotels, residential buildings need home offices – a sense of hospitality pervades the design of every interior space.

In a short time, we have witnessed some of the greatest innovation, design push, and integration of humankind into the process and outcome of buildings in Boston. Boston still holds an opportunity for some of the most inventive and innovative design yet to come. This city boasts a rich history, wonderful stories, and a culture like none other.

Rooted in academia, life science, and a multicultural fabric, Boston remains at the leading edge, setting the example for other cities. So what does the next 25 years hold for Boston? Without a doubt, expansion will continue to push forward at a rapid rate. Stylistically, buildings will continue to evolve and improve. Technology, artificial intelligence, and the way we design, adapt, and build will progress leaps and bounds ahead of where we are today.

I have never been more excited for the future of this city. It has borrowed from the best of the best, learned from its mistakes, and continues to be my favorite city in America.



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