

The Station and the Wharf, Boston

Donlyn Lyndon



I Back Bay/South End station in Boston.
The venting towers, the main hall, and the
brick exitway kiosk viewed from Columbus
Avenue looking west. Photograph by Steve
Rosenthal



Two recent buildings in Boston may be seen as heralds of a renewed concern for the specifics of place. Back Bay/South End station by Kallman McKinnell & Wood and Rowe's Wharf by the Chicago office of Skidmore Owings & Merrill both occupy significant points in the structure of the city, and each is crafted to the conditions of its site.

Back Bay/South End Station

The Back Bay/South End station is located at the point where railroad lines leading out of Boston diverge and set out for New York and Western Massachusetts respectively, severing the city geometrically into two distinctly different areas. Copley Square, the setting for several of Boston's most distinguished buildings, is a few hundred paces to the north in Back Bay, and an enormous new shopping mall, deceptively named Copley Place, is just to the west.

That there is a station for Amtrak near Copley Square, only minutes from the end of the line at South Station, is itself remarkable, a fortuitous residue of the history of Boston's linkage to the development of the rail system. The importance of the station was reinforced by the recent decision to relocate the Orange Line of the transit system to the rail corridor and to combine the stations.

That the station is called Back Bay/South End, rather than simply Back Bay Station, as its predecessor was, is also remarkable. At one level this is only an acknowledgment of the relocation here of the transit line

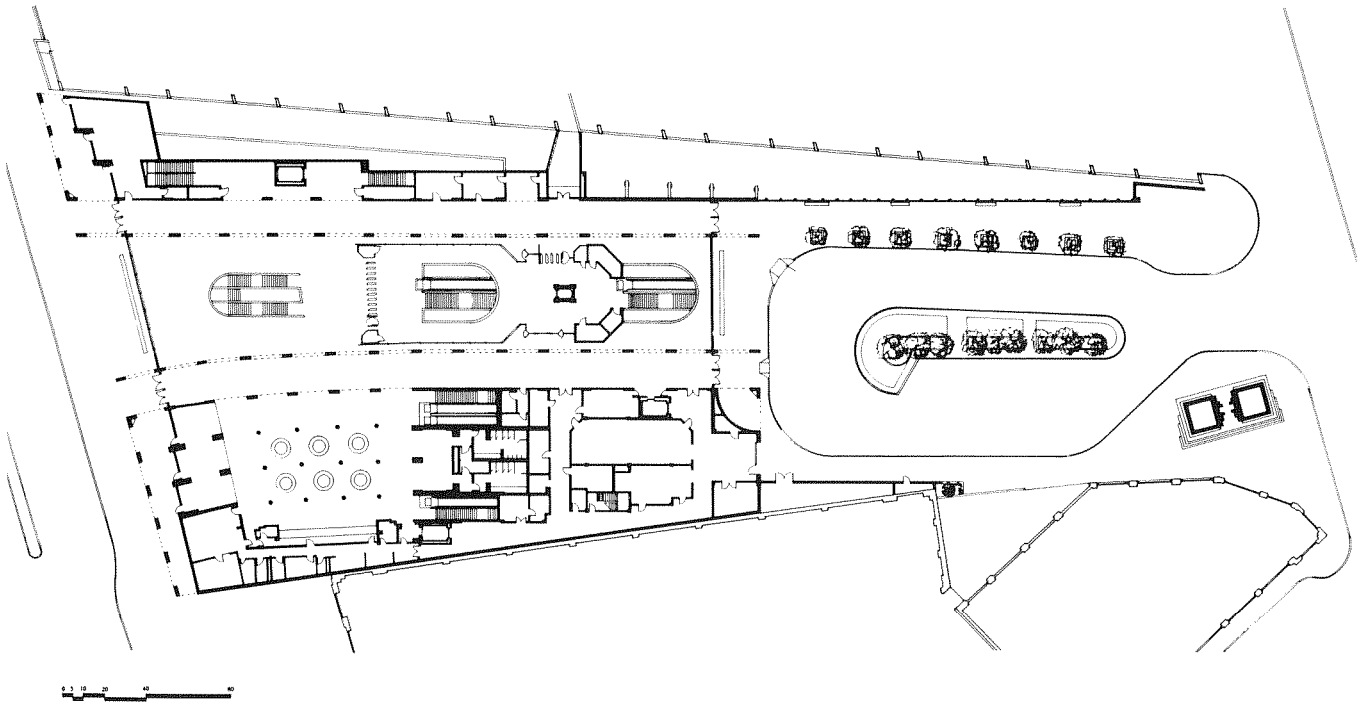


2 Main hall and station entrances as seen from Clarendon Street looking west. Photograph by Steve Rosenthal

3 Inside the main hall. Photograph by Steve Rosenthal



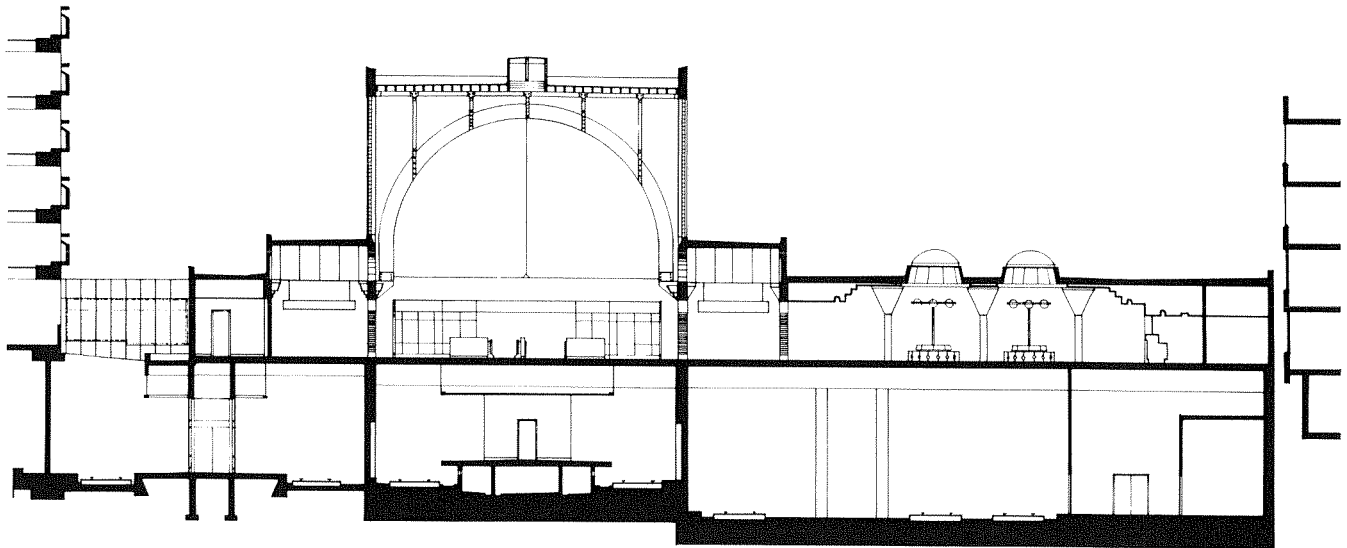
4



5

4 Dartmouth Street entry viewed from the south. Photograph by Steve Rosenthal

5 Street level plan of the station between Dartmouth and Clarendon Streets. Drawing courtesy of Kallman McKinnell & Wood



6

6 Section through the main hall, waiting and ticket area, and the track platforms. Drawing courtesy of Kallman McKinnell & Wood

7 Detail of exitway kiosk, showing reuse of architectural fragments saved from previous station building on the site. Photograph by Steve Rosenthal

8 Urban benches as the base of the venting towers. Photograph by Steve Rosenthal

that traditionally served the South End. In another sense, however, this reflects the profound change that has been brought about in the area, in part through decades of community activism. The southwest transit corridor, once a divisive gash in the city, has been covered over in this section of the city and transformed into a linear neighborhood park. The city (and its gentry) have reinvested in the once derelict South End, and it is being reintegrated into the establishment's perceptual map of the city.

The station itself is wonderful, the result of a masterly balance of impulses. It is at once a monument and a shed, at once durable and playful, at once rigorous and accommodating. It is airy, clearly organized, meticulously crafted, bold and subtle. The main hall of the station is itself a corridor, a lofty covered passage elegantly shaped by glue-laminated wooden arches. These lithe wooden members suggest the ponderous arches and vaults of traditional rooms of arrival while slyly supporting a light, flat, wooden roof.

Walls of concrete with inset panels of glass block track the length of

the corridor, paralleling the train lines beneath. At either end the walls and arches pass on beyond glass enclosures to form large welcoming porches. These ends of the passage are, of course, what reach the streets of the city, with their arches scaled to announce public entry without pomposity.

There is more to the station, however, than the light-hearted, sun-dappled hall. Exitways and venting structures string out along the tracks. The way in which these take their place in the fabric of the city is one measure of the skill and imagination these architects bring to a task. Rather than being obsessed, as so often designers are, by the wish to make their work be all of a piece, they have let each part be informed by its surroundings.

The walls of the hall themselves are a very light, well-cast concrete that is easily affiliated with the earlier parking garage to the north. They gather that much larger mass into the composition—as though the garage had always been meant to have a fine urban passage completing its south side. The south wall of the hall curves slightly to the south as it follows the tracks

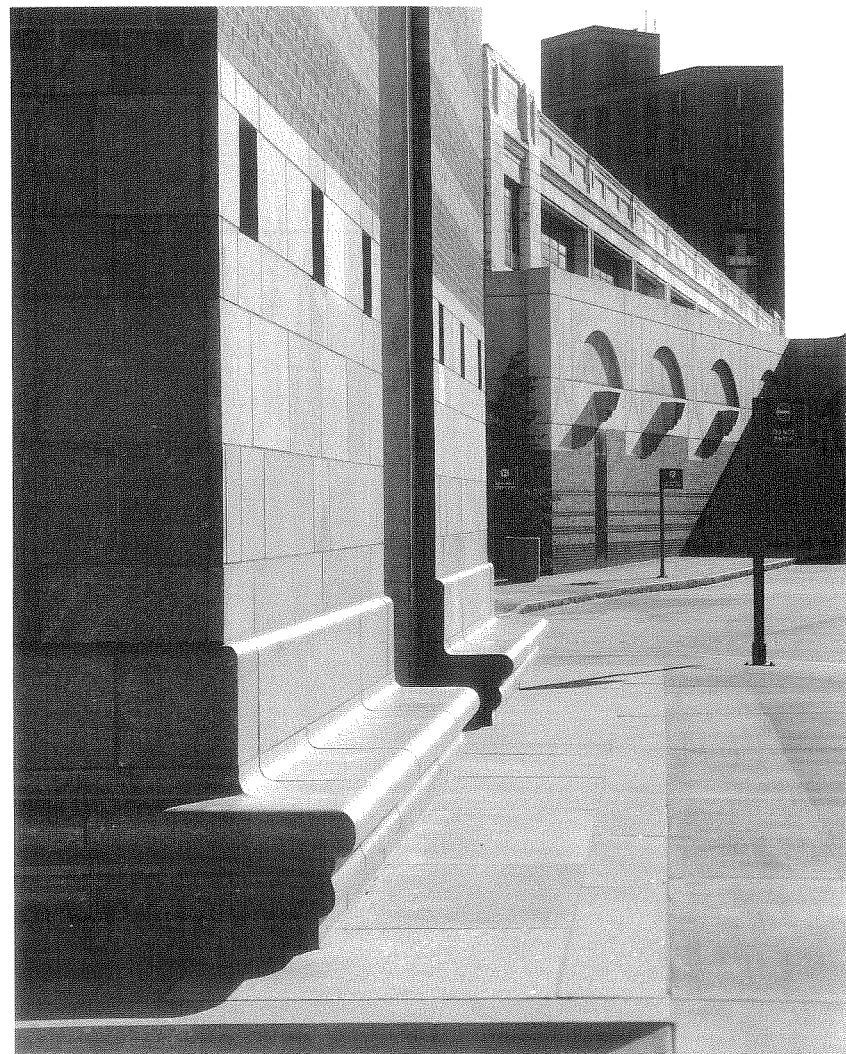
beneath. This ties the structure precisely to its site, giving a subtle liveliness to the building. Light modulates on the curving wall, and the arches on the inside change configuration slightly from one end to the other, becoming wider and elliptical as they approach Dartmouth Street to the west.

At street level, inside and out, the lower walls that you pass along are brick, with inscribed arches in their concrete upper sections that set a traditional measure to these surfaces. The exitway kiosks, which are separate from the station, are executed all in brick, with bands of relief and fragments of detail rescued from the previous station building on the site. The brick and its detailing on these kiosks carry the themes of nearby South End buildings into the complex without replicating any stylistic forms. They could easily have been built at another time, and they seem perfectly at ease appearing incidentally along the street. Farther along the tracks a set of utterly simple wood sheds cover the tracks in a way that is thoroughly unassuming and melds into the utilitarian character of the transportation corridor, which by this point is uncovered.

Train stations underground need massive amounts of ventilation. Ducts that carry smoke exhaust must, like chimneys, rise above adjoining buildings. The smoke stacks here have been transformed into an obscure urban monument that resides like a campanile in a small entry plaza for taxis and short-term parking at the eastern end of the station. The paired

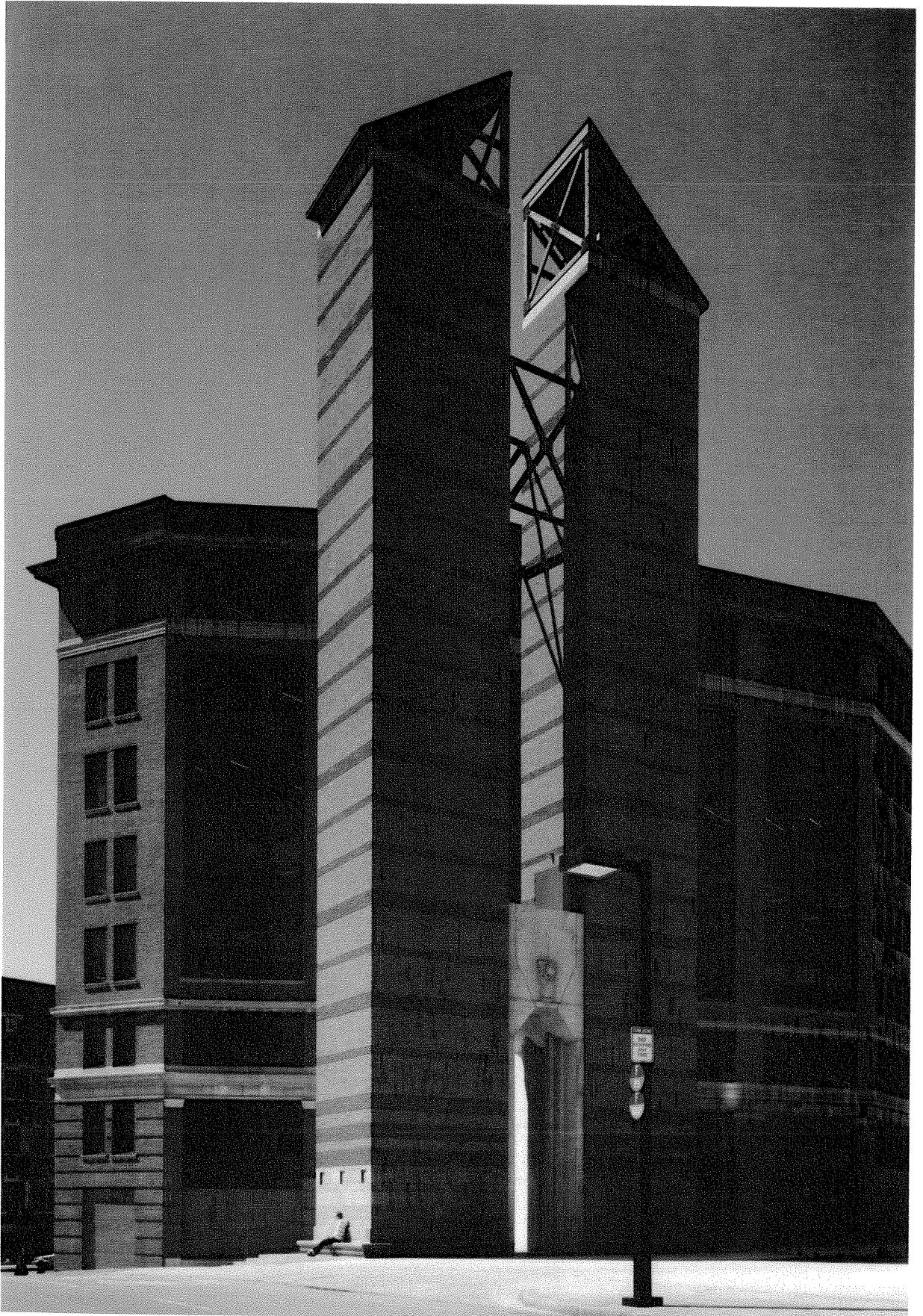


7



8

7





10

stacks, each roofed with a half-gabled wooden shed at the top, rise from a common base at the bottom. This base is surfaced in granite and is shaped, like that of the Boston Public Library nearby, as an urban bench. Technical requirements that inevitably would have loomed large in the place are here transformed into a handsome and urbane landmark that takes its own place in the city.

Rowe's Wharf

The buildings at Rowe's Wharf occupy a site in the city that is both exhilarating and difficult. The site is fronted on one side by the harbor, on the other by a snarl of surface drives and elevated highway. The area available for building was quite narrow, the developer's ambitions quite expansive.

The adjoining wharves are used for several commuter ferries that ply

the harbor, and a new water shuttle service scurries across regularly between the wharf and the airport. All this and the presence of a hotel, office spaces, and residences make for a modest but persistent flow of pedestrians intermingling with the passing boats, trucks, and automobiles.

Pedestrians move through a truly extraordinary portal, an open domed space with arches five stories high soaring across the passage amid a lantern rising up through the center of the five more stories of building above. The vaulted space is so large and its location between downtown and the harbor so pertinent that it seems like an obvious piece of the landscape. It takes a moment of reflection to realize just how unusual it is. By creating such an enormous aperture for snapshot glimpses of the water beyond, it distracts attention from the great

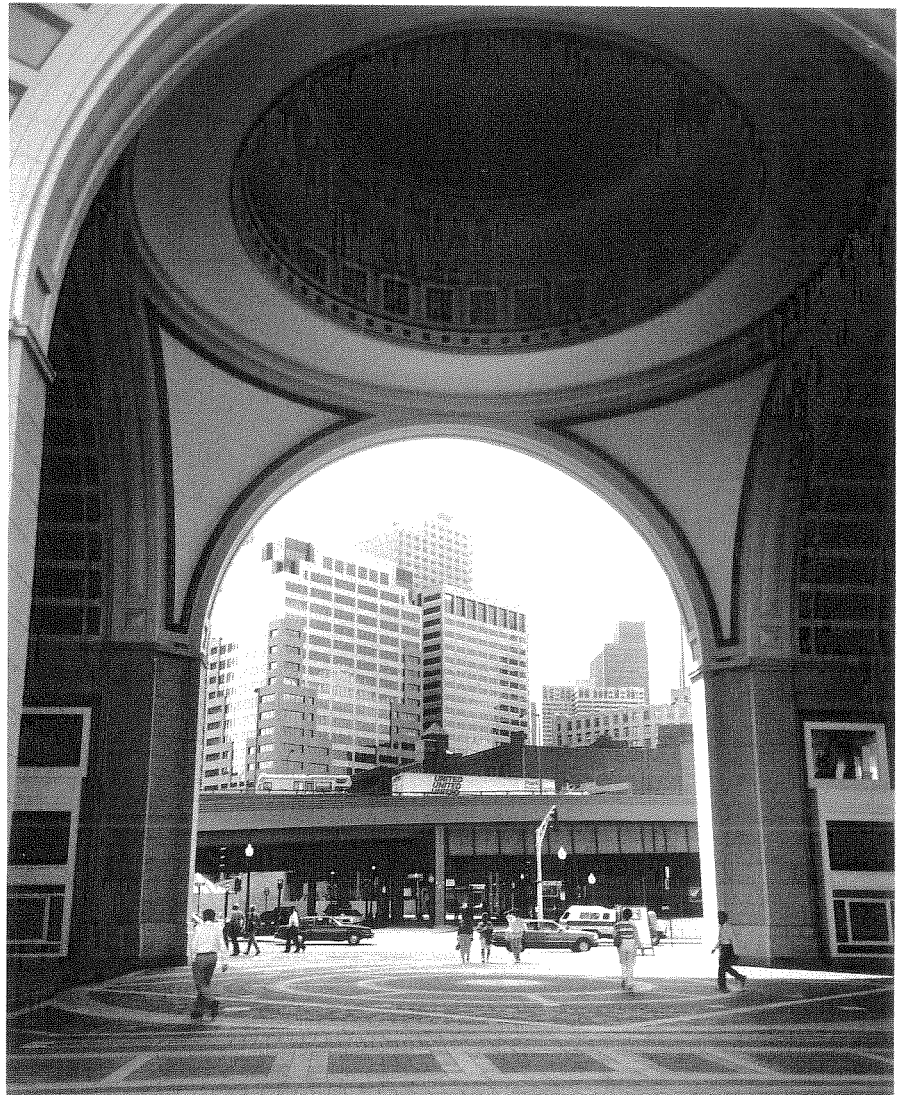
9 The venting towers. Photograph by Steve Rosenthal

10 Entrance to Rowe's Wharf and the Boston Harbor from downtown. Photograph by Donlyn Lyndon



11

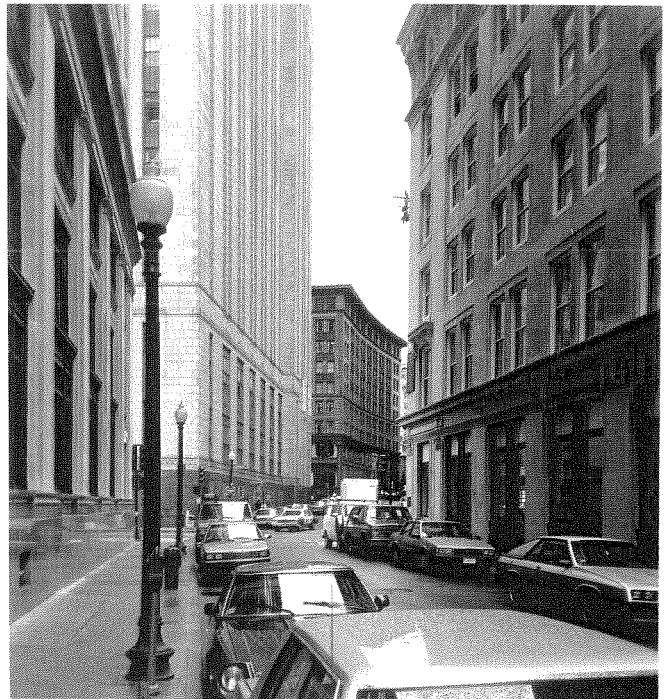
- 11 **Waterfront view of Rowe's Wharf** as seen from the airport water shuttle. Photograph by Donlyn Lyndon
- 12 **Domed portal** framing a glimpse of the city beyond. Photograph by Donlyn Lyndon
- 13 **Passageways between Wharf buildings** connect commuter ferry terminals to downtown. Photograph by Donlyn Lyndon
- 14 **Downtown buildings nearby** have a distinct urban character. Photograph by Donlyn Lyndon.
- 15 **Urban passage** bordering the Wharf. Photograph by Donlyn Lyndon.



12



13



14



15



16

wall of building through which it passes.

This wall of building, though, is a genuine extension of the urbanity of downtown. Its walls are articulated, as those of the financial district are, with a substantial granite base, visibly durable materials, and molded surfaces that could easily be mistaken for those on buildings built during the 1920s a few blocks inland. Apartment and office entries intermix around the periphery of the building, and hotel public spaces cling to the edges of a tight, carefully made, urban passage that borders the wharf. It is all very urbane, redolent of the drama of well-heeled urban life celebrated in film several decades ago and traced in the walls of Boston's establishment streets.

Rowe's Wharf is a major investment, an investment in the city, not just in real estate. Its builders have transformed a shaggy pier into a landmark that extends the character of the city, carrying it to the edge of the water as no waterfront park could. They have built for private gain and they have made a place that must feel most comfortable to those who are affluent. Yet it is a public place, more accessible than many of the older wharves and destined by its nature, I would guess, to be important in the imaginative life of the city.

12

16 Pavilion by the harbor.
Photograph by Donlyn Lyndon.