

THE BULFINCH TRIANGLE

Past, Present, Future in Brief

Location and Description

The Bulfinch Triangle Historic District is a part of the Downtown North/West End community that lies between the North End and Beacon Hill neighborhoods, with City Hall Plaza to the south and the Charles River to the north. As shown on the attached map, the Triangle is bounded by Causeway, Merrimac and North Washington Streets. Its original apex at Haymarket Square is now occupied by the Government Center Garage; and at present, its southern boundary is New Chardon Street, making the Triangle, at least for now, a quadrangle.

The principal interior street of the Bulfinch Triangle is Canal Street, which intersects the district from north to south; and secondary streets include Friend, Portland and Lancaster Streets to the west of Canal and Haverhill, Beverly and Medford Street to the east. Bisecting the Triangle east to west is Traverse Street, now known as Valenti Way.

A Varied and Interesting Past

Origin: What is now known as the Bulfinch Triangle was originally part of the Charles River estuary and was known as North Cove, which separated Beacon Hill from the North End and was crossable only at low tide by means of a narrow causeway. In the mid-seventeenth century, the North Cove was dammed by local millers who had been granted water rights in the area in to create the Mill Pond; and in 1804, the newly formed Mill Pond Corporation successfully petitioned the City of Boston to fill the Mill Pond to create additional land for needed development.

Design: The preeminent Federalist architect Charles Bulfinch ([link to biography](#)) was commissioned to prepare a land use and development plan for the district that has since borne his name. Bulfinch laid out a triangular street pattern with Causeway Street as its base on the north and Haymarket Square as its apex on the south. Although Charles Bulfinch did not design any of the buildings in the Bulfinch Triangle, he envisioned a mixed-use commercial and residential district.

Development: The infill of the Mill Pond was finally completed in the 1830s using excavated materials from the leveling of the nearby Beacon, Copps and Pemberton Hills. By the time it was completed, the emerging railroad industry was beginning to firmly establish itself in the vicinity. That fact effectively dictated the actual course of land development in the area, which did not

include the working class housing that Charles Bulfinch had initially proposed. Rather, the Bulfinch Triangle became a primarily commercial district of hotels, taverns, stables, blacksmiths and the carriage trades reflecting its new role as a transportation hub. That fact led quickly to its emergence as a center of hardware manufacturing and the furniture trade, which depended heavily on the access to the raw materials and distribution routes that the railroads provided.

Prosperity: The Bulfinch Triangle flourished economically as a major commercial center throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. It was during the decades before and after turn of the century that many of the most important and distinctive Bulfinch Triangle buildings were designed and built by successful Boston businesses under the supervision of many of the most prominent Boston architects.

It was also during this period that the several railroad companies that served the area began to consolidate their terminal operations at Union Station in the area immediately north of Causeway Street; and Union Station was then the largest railroad terminal in the United States, with more than 500 arrivals and departures daily. By the early 1920s, Union Station itself was becoming inadequate to the transportation needs of the area and the city; and plans were made to replace it with what is now North Station. The new terminal was developed in conjunction with a new regional sports and entertainment complex that became known as Boston Garden.

Decline: By the early 1930s, the Great Depression began to drastically change economic prospects and conditions in the country and in Boston. By then North Station had increasingly begun to serve as a passenger terminal, rather than freight facility; and Boston Garden was becoming an active and attractive recreational venue with the growth of professional sports and entertainment. Thus began a very significant change in both the social and the economic character of the Bulfinch Triangle. With the loss of its manufacturing and sales base, and notwithstanding the success of Boston Garden, the area began to deteriorate physically and functionally, along with the City of Boston as a whole.

Demolition: After World War II, this negative trend was accelerated by the suburban migration, which also resulted in the construction in the 1950s of the Central Artery. This elevated structure paralleled the elevated Green Line viaduct and intersected the elevated Orange and Green Line viaducts on Causeway Street. The Central Artery further decimated and divided the area and both literally and figuratively overshadowed the Bulfinch Triangle; and its construction required demolition of nearly a million square feet of buildings in its path. This demolition trend was then further extended with the process of West End Urban Renewal that then demolished much of the surrounding area.

The More Recent Period of Change and Transition

The Beginnings of Renewal and Redevelopment: Almost inexplicably, much of the Bulfinch Triangle survived the era of urban renewal destruction, albeit in only barely recognizable form. Having done so, it was the redevelopment that followed in what was to become Charles River Park and Government Center that began the process of revitalization for the city and the district. That fact first became evident in and around the Bulfinch Triangle with its 1983 designation as a Federal Register Historic District and with the development of the Thomas P. O'Neill Federal Building on Causeway Street. Beyond this major public investment, more than \$100M of private investments were made in rehabilitation of almost one million square feet of existing properties during the decade of the 1980s; and the first new building of the twentieth century was planned and constructed at 101 Merrimac Street.

The Impact of the CAT and MBTA Projects: Equally important, plans were then being made to demolish the elevated highway and transit viaducts that has so long divided and blighted the neighborhood, and the city, the state and community began planning together for redevelopment of the substantial rights-of-ways of these transportation properties. From the outset, the shared urban design goal was to restore the integrity, variety and vitality of the Bulfinch Triangle itself.

With a view to replacing the almost one million square feet of property that had been lost to the construction of above-ground transportation infrastructure in the twentieth century, the resulting Boston 2000 Plan envisioned for the Bulfinch Triangle a vibrant mix of residential, commercial and hospitality uses that would reflect and reinforce the quite exceptional array of transportation, recreational and institutional resources in the area and would also finally realize the plan for Bulfinch Triangle the housing that Charles Bulfinch himself has first imagined and proposed.

The Developments Results of Proactive and Collaborative Planning: During the past twenty years as this collaborative Boston 2000 planning process proceeded, the Downtown North/West End neighborhood in and around the Bulfinch Triangle began to experience the next phase of its growth and renewal. In no small part, this phase was undertaken in anticipation of the major transportation improvements of the Central Artery and North Station Improvements Projects and of the eventual implementation of the Boston 2000 Plan.

That continuing redevelopment has included a new sports arena on Causeway Street to replace the old Boston Garden, a new Suffolk County Courthouse on Merrimac Street, new residential development sat West End Place on Stanford Street and at Strada 234 on Causeway Street, a new office building at 226 Causeway Street, major new ambulatory-care and in-patient buildings at Massachusetts General Hospital, complete redevelopment of the retail and office complex at

Charles River Plaza on Cambridge Street, and three new hotels within the Bulfinch Triangle itself – as well as and another on the former site of the Charles Street Jail. It has also included a new Charles Street MBTA Station on the Red Line and evolving plans for an upgraded Science Park Station on the Green Line, a New Charles River Basin Improvements Program, which will extend the Esplanade and its shoreline park system from Beacon Hill through the Downtown North/West End community to link with Boston Harborwalk network in the North End. It also includes new residential developments north of Causeway Street in the West End Residences at Emerson Place, the Nashua Street Residences and the evolving Lovejoy Wharf Project, as well as two residential redevelopment projects in the Bulfinch Triangle on Portland and North Washington Streets.

A Bright and Productive Future

Restoration and Redevelopment of the Bulfinch Triangle: All of this ongoing or completed development will complement and sustain the planned new growth and development within the Bulfinch Triangle itself. As required by Bulfinch Triangle Design and Use Guidelines – see attached -- which were prepared together by the city, the state and the community, such redevelopment will provide hundreds of additional units of housing, attractive new restaurants and hotels, and important new retail uses, notably including a new urban supermarket. The developer designation process for the two MBTA parcels has now been successfully completed (perhaps a link to the related MBTA website); and the first of their two parcels has now been approved for development by the BRA . The developer designation process for the remaining MassPike parcels is now nearing completion as well (perhaps a link to the related MTA website), with development permitting approvals expected in early 2006.

Supportive Public/Private Partnerships: These ongoing property developments are in turn being supported by a continuing effort to improve the physical appearance of the Bulfinch Triangle itself. These efforts are being implemented through public/private partnerships on the Bulfinch Triangle Streetscape Improvements Program and the Boston Crossroads Initiative, on both of which the city and the community have played important leadership roles. It is also being extended through a district branding and promotional effort that has resulted in a new logo and slogan for a district that is fully and finally emerging from the shadows.

BULFINCH TRIANGLE

Live, Work, Play

And we hope that Charles Bulfinch would be proud that the Bulfinch Triangle that he envisioned and designed is becoming the varied and vibrant community all that he originally intended.