

## Self-Guided Tour of Boston's Brutalist Constructions

By Ethan Wilcox, Fall 2017

### About the Tour

- This self-guided tour takes about two hours. Participants start in front of the New England Aquarium by the harbourfront and end at the Christian Science plaza in the Back Bay. One admission onto the Boston Subway (The T) is required, from the Haymarket station to the Hynes Convention Center station.
- If refreshment is required I suggest stopping either in Quincy Market (at the beginning of the tour) or on Newbury Street (towards the end).
- [Link to a Google Map with the route and buildings](#)



### Meet in front of the New England Aquarium (T: Aquarium)

#### Aquarium (1969)

- First of its kind, combination zoo, interactive experience and graphic design center. Massive central tank that shows the full diversity of the ocean's wonders. No natural light on the inside to focus on the fish within. Like a "jewel-box." 200,000 gallons of water.
- Note how the original structure has been added to, in both the front and the back. In the front we see a metallic crystal-like structure that holds ticket office, etc. built to match the adjacent IMax theater. In the back we have a wooden and white-plastic tentlike structure built to house the seal shows. Both these additions were obviously meant to obscure the original rectangular brutalist facade. They indicate the lack of appreciation by both the public and the aquarium itself for the building's original architecture.

#### Harbor Towers (1971)

- Designed by I.M. Pei, these can be seen from the Boston Aquarium deck.

## **Walk through Quincy Market and Faneuil Hall towards City Hall.**

### **City Hall (1969)**

- Opens in 1969, it's meant to symbolize a new Boston, and a new civic engagement that turns away from the old-boys-club of the previous political generation. It resembles the "levitation of the masses" which is what New Brutalism is all about.
- Like many brutalist buildings, there is an open, glassed-in lobby at ground level. From this main assembly point visitors can take elevators up to the administrative offices, which are located on the floors above. This is a concept of organizing civic space new to brutalism. Take note of it elsewhere on the tour.
- Note how the red brick masses at the lower level reflect the surrounding architecture, particularly Faneuil Hall. This is the only building on the tour that incorporates brick into its facade, and the choice is unusual for a brutalist construction.
- The courtyard around the city hall is quite successful. It hosts concerts, farmers markets, and civic engagement fairs.

### **JFK Federal Building (1966)**

- Two, twenty-four story "slabs" with a glass circulation core. The panels are made of white concrete with quartz in them, the same as the Pan Am building (now met life) in New York.
- This building is the most regular of all on our tour. It's repetitious facade made of concrete and quartz panels create a dizzying effect from below. In many ways, this building is closest in resemblance to the International Style, with its repeating vertical forms. Note that the Pan Am building -- which shares the same quartz/concrete material -- is considered an exemplar of the international style.
- Again, you can see the open lobby that provides access to the office spaces above. Unfortunately, these buildings were built before security was such a concern for local and federal office buildings. The original designs allowed for people to enter and exit through multiple directions, tearing down the concept of a "formal" entrance direction that was so common in more traditional civic architecture. This is no longer the case. You need to go through security at one specific entry point, ruining the effect. How can we make the original design of these buildings work with contemporary security needs? Is there a way to preserve the original flow and also create a safe space for federal employees?

### **Government Center Garage (1971)**

- 1,865 parking spots on nine levels. Built by stacking pre-cast concrete pillars, kind of like a lincoln log cabin. Each beam weighs twenty-two tons, and rests on rubber pads to dampen the vibrations. Nowadays, people want to dismantle it.
- View it from the balcony on the far side of the JFK federal building (you'll go under it later in the tour).
- The garage is, above all else, a monument to the car and an attempt to integrate American automobile culture with urbanism. It is both a home to cars and built over a roadway. Now, as Americans turn away from consumer autolocation and towards communal transit, many perceive the garage as a symbol of mistaken priorities.
- The garage is currently under demolition. It will give way to two mid-level residential towers and one tall commercial building. Importantly, this development (glass and steel) will disrupt the core of brutalist buildings that extend from City Hall to the Government Services center. While the development is a symbol of progress to many, few recognize

the quality of the building they are destroying. Like the aquarium, this demolition symbolizes a perpetual underappreciation for brutalist architecture.

### **Government Service Center (1971)**

- Follows the “Stake with a tail” design. One tower and a snaking complex around a central courtyard that accounts for the odd shape of the lot. The challenge (according to the architect) was to scale for both the human and the automobile. The tower was never completed due to cost, but the building was well-received. Ada-Louise Huxtable called it part of a “progressive trend” of civic rejuvenation.
- This is the most irregular of all the buildings, not only in its lot design, but also in the almost fractal-like nature of the building itself. It reduces the monumentality of the scale by providing lots of little nooks, corners, entrances and overhangs to humanize the massive space.
- While visiting this building, it’s important to note the difference between the interior courtyard and the exterior, the first built for human locomotion, the second built for arrival by car. First walk around the interior, then the exterior.
- Note how run down the building is. There are fences covering many of the entrances. There is pigeon shit on many of the walls. The trees are wilting and dying. All of this turns what once used to be a symbol of Boston civic engagement into a symbol of neglect. It’s clear that this area needs re-investment. The question is: how do we want to do this? We could tear down the structure (like the garage) and build something new. However, I would like you to reimagine what could be changed within and around the existing building to turn it from a symbol of neglect to a symbol of pride.

### **Transit: Walk underneath the garage to the T. Take Haymarket to Convention Center Boston Architectural College (1966)**

- First building built for the professional study of architecture, they hosted a competition for new digs in 1964. “An openness, lightness and a kind of athletic energy that seemed to us (the judges) more contemporary and preferable to fit with the traditional facade wall of the Back Bay.”
- This building shows brutalism at a different scale. While many of the buildings we’ve seen until now were built on their own lot, and designed to stand out from the surrounding cityscape, this building is more integrated with those around it. We think of brutalism as a grand, sweeping moment in architecture, when designers were taken with new feelings of civic urbanism. While this building doesn’t abandon these principles it invites us to consider them on a different scale.
- Enter the lobby and walk around the first floor. Try walking without a purpose. Where does the building direct you? To the stairs? To the exhibition space? To the exit?

### **Church Park Apartments (1973)**

- Master plan by I.M. Pei creates 3,500 units, this was the only realized building with 508 units. This building has a 750 foot long facade.
- One thing this building does is invite you to think about the brutalist city. Would this level of architecture be sustainable at a city-wide level. Here, we have shops on the bottom level, set back from the street, with ample room for bike lanes and pedestrians. This section of Mass Ave actually functions better than the ones closer to the back bay because the building and the space in front provides room for more traffic, plus parking.
- Unlike the BAC, it doesn’t integrate into the buildings around it, but like the BAC it provides a street-level presence. It’s not a complex unto itself, but an organic part of the city. The building provides a model for what street-life would look like in a brutalist city.

### **Christian Science Center (1973)**

- I.M. Pei, architect. Previously-owned church land and buildings were coalesced into this massive site plan. The “Administration Building” is the tall tower, 28-stories tall. It’s cast-in-place concrete. 525-foot long colonnade building and an “education center.” The pool has a red-granite rim. It was supposed to be a cooling system for the complex’s AC unit, but this didn’t work out. The trees are Linden trees.
- While many of the buildings on our tour (and many of the brutalist buildings in general) are associated with civic institutions, these are associated with a church. The reason why this space is so successful is that it makes the individual feel small and minute, like the civic buildings. But unlike many of the civic institutions, which can achieve this by making the person feel insignificant, this space is more meditative, more spiritual.
- Because brutalist architects thought large, they always attached themselves and their designs to large institutions. This space is an example of how ideology and architecture can combine to have very different effects on the individual and the city.
- We end our tour on a positive note. While many of the brutalist buildings are in either disrepair or undergoing demolition, the Christian Science church has continued to invest in this massive plaza and is currently renovating the fountain. Bostonians enjoy the space, especially the fountain at the north end of the plaza, the colonnade and the linden trees.