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PATRICK AHEARN

ONE OF BOSTON'S MOST PROLIFIC ARCHITECTS TALKS WITH *NEW ENGLAND HOME'S* STACY KUNSTEL ABOUT HIS ROLE IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE BACK BAY FROM DILAPIDATED TO DESIRABLE.



Perhaps more than any other architect, Patrick Ahearn has had a transforming impact on Boston's Back Bay. From the neighborhood's downtrodden days in the early 1970s to today's residential and commercial success, Ahearn has worked on more than 400 of its buildings. We talked at his offices at 160 Commonwealth Avenue.

SK: For those of us who have only known Back Bay as a shopping and dining destination, give us a glimpse of what it was like when you moved here in 1973.

PA: I had my first apartment at 72 Commonwealth Avenue between Berkeley and Clarendon. Back Bay at that time was boarded up and burned out. Banks wouldn't lend past Dartmouth Street. There were only a couple of restaurants on Newbury Street. There were no upscale boutiques, there was no celebration of street life. The whole neighborhood was not appealing.

SK: What did an apartment go for at that time?

PA: My apartment was \$125 a month for a one-bedroom with parking.

SK: Now it's one of the most desirable neighborhoods. How did that all change?

PA: In 1972 a condominium law came into effect. A friend of mine bought a burned-out shell at 129 Marlborough Street for \$42,000. We added a top floor and a garage at the back and made the building into five units. The building had a modern interior and sold out really quickly. We quickly did another at 179 Marlborough.

SK: At this time you were moonlighting doing condo conversions for people. Did you ever buy a building of your own to rehab?

PA: In 1976 I bought my first building at 165 Commonwealth Avenue. It cost \$145,000, and I sold my car to come up with more money. I renovated and converted the space to condos. I was the architect/developer/real estate broker/contractor on the project. I did everything.

SK: Did you feel like you were making a significant impact on Back Bay at that time?

PA: I could walk up and down the street and see the Ahearn signs lined up in front of the buildings. It was like Ahearn-ville.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WEBB CHAPPELL

SK: Physically, how did the neighborhood change?

PA: The Commonwealth Mall, which had always been there, was redone. Trees were replaced, irrigation systems were added, the public realm was being restored. You could buy a studio apartment for \$15,000 or \$20,000 then. Most of the buildings at that time were about sixty-five feet tall, so we started adding another floor to each building to get more square footage out of it. We were adding garages in the alleyways. I was teaching at the Boston Architectural Center at night so I did a thesis on the redevelopment of the alleyways and had

ed into new residential space. The idea of defensible space—you have your own front door, your own outdoor space, your own courtyard—these are all conditions that people desire. A lot of these things I learned in graduate school—in terms of understanding the urban psyche—I directly applied to what I was doing in Boston.

SK: You collect cars, so a space for the car is an important idea in your philosophy as well. What was your concept there?

PA: The idea of inner-alley or backstreet garages was important. When there was concern about infilling the alleys, I came up with the idea of parking

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all my students work on it and present it to the neighborhood association.

SK: What was your vision for the alleyway system?

PA: You could have gardens and enclosed parking and trash contained. You could have brick walkways and balconies in the alleyway system and improve the lighting.

SK: Were any of those suggestions ever implemented?

PA: Yes, a lot of them, but then there were people who said, "We don't want to infill the alleyways because that would make it dark." Well, that was stupid, because if you look at what's happened on the lower side of Beacon, all of the garages and roof decks have worked out well to frame the backstreet part of Beacon Street and at the same time create courtyards and gardens between the garages and backs of the buildings. Every time I did some of these new things—we built balconies or terraces off every floor of each unit—people would say it looks like a tenement or a Dorchester triple-decker. At the same time it was creating meaningful outdoor space in the city. I was pioneering this kind of stuff.

SK: Where were the ideas and influence to do this coming from?

PA: You look at English and Italian cities and you see these mews with narrow alleyways that had coach houses convert-

courts. They were brick paved, surrounded by brick walls with gates. The car was secure but you could see in.

SK: How did Newbury Street get from quiet brownstones to a major shopping destination?

PA: There was recognition that there was a populace moving into Back Bay who were looking for goods and services. So what we started doing on Newbury was digging down below to create a "second first floor." All of these spaces that you see on Newbury Street today didn't exist before then—they were residential buildings with steps to go up to the first floor. There was no retail activity. So in doing these half digging downs we created a half floor of retail space.

SK: The first time you said, "We're going to dig out everything underneath this building and create another floor," did people just look at you like you were crazy? Didn't they worry that the building would collapse?

PA: Oh sure, but it was already basement space, and it was just that the piles had to be lower. The zoning at the time allowed us to do that as well as add a floor on top of the building. Then there was some concern—wrongly I believe—and the zoning changed and they lowered the height because they didn't want to see these rooftop additions. The ones I did were more sympathetic to the architecture, but there

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were others that were not. The zoning was more of a knee-jerk reaction to some bad rooftop additions.

SK: These days people want to live where the action is. They want to be able to walk to retail and out to dinner, but it wasn't always that way, was it?

PA: No one thought you could sell a condo on top of retail. The real estate people would say it wasn't possible, or a bank wouldn't lend to you for that.

SK: During this redevelopment of Back Bay and particularly Newbury Street, were there any missteps?

PA: There were a couple of absolutely spectacular buildings that were torn down and replaced by junk. Where Stephanie's is on Newbury Street, that was a spectacular Richardsonian Romanesque building that wrapped the whole corner that was torn down.

SK: That couldn't happen today though, right?

PA: Today you can't change a door-knocker without offending somebody.

SK: Did you ever do a full comprehensive plan for Back Bay like you have for Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard?

PA: Yes. I believe, again, that there is a missed opportunity with the alleyway system. All of the goods and services, trash, is handled by the alleyway, which is terrific. All of the utilities are underground. All of the parking is done by the alleyway system. Generally the rule in the Back Bay today is that they don't want to see garages in the inner alleys. I think that's a huge mistake.

SK: Are there still areas developing as they did in the 1970s and 1980s?

PA: Up until even the last five years, if you went up past Massachusetts Avenue or Commonwealth you could just forget it. All the brokers would say you couldn't sell anything there.

SK: But once again you've proven them wrong?

PA: We just finished phase one of a three-phase project at Charlesgate and Commonwealth Avenue. It's been very successful so far. No longer is Mass Ave. the absolute line of demarcation for condo conversions.

SK: What's the next hot space?

PA: We just finished another building at Berkeley and Commonwealth Avenue. There are still pockets of buildings to be developed. **NEH**