

25 Years in Harvard Square

What's changed, what hasn't, and why • by Nell Porter Brown



The Square has always attracted those who want to shop, eat, gawk, and play.

ciation, which celebrated its centennial last year. “But the young people who are just discovering the Square now will have their own favorite places and memories, and come back in 60 years and will still say, ‘It’s not the way it used to be.’ The Square is, and I hope always will be, a unique place.”

A dynamic microcosm, the Square has keenly reflected its times throughout its history. During the last 25 years it has changed dramatically, due in part to a real-estate boom and demand for more offices, housing, and parking spaces. “There are the obvious changes of new development, which is larger in scale

A VISITOR from Kansas City who had never been to Harvard Square recently strolled through it and then enjoyed a grilled salmon dinner at The Harvest restaurant. “The Square is wild,” the man said, his eyes gleaming with appreciation. “There’s so much going on. The street musicians. The restaurants. The bookstores. I’ve never been anywhere like it.”

Those who knew the Square back in *their* day were tempted to respond, “Well, you should have seen The Harvest when it first opened in 1975, or....” And out would spill tales of the hipness of The Blue Parrot, the mirrored bathroom of the Algiers basement café, the ice-cream counter at Bailey’s, sandwiches at Elsie’s, foreign

films at the Janus. And, of course, burgers and banter at the Tasty, whose controversial loss in 1997 and later transformation into an Abercrombie & Fitch—and now a Citizens Bank—is still a source of outrage among many.

For every generation, it seems, the Square—a small commercial district in a small city—inspires disproportionately intense emotion, even devotion. Its businesses represent one’s youth, or bohemian leanings, nightlife, intellectual adventures, and political activism—whatever interest held sway during one’s time in Cambridge. “Alumni and others who come back to the Square may say, ‘It’s not the way it used to be,’” says Denise Jillson, executive director of the Harvard Square Business Asso-

than the older buildings,” says Kathy Spiegelman, a former long-time University planning administrator. Upscale retailers and service-oriented establishments that catered to visitors followed—“more chain stores, more banks and phone stores,” she notes, “and fewer bookstores, no music stores, and fewer local residents using the Square for commercial needs.” Since 1990 the number of booksellers alone has dropped from 25 to around seven. Just this summer, the Square lost the Globe Corner Bookstore and Curious George Books and Toys.

THE CURRENT LOOK of the Square (including structures from the 1980s and 1990s) began taking shape with the Red

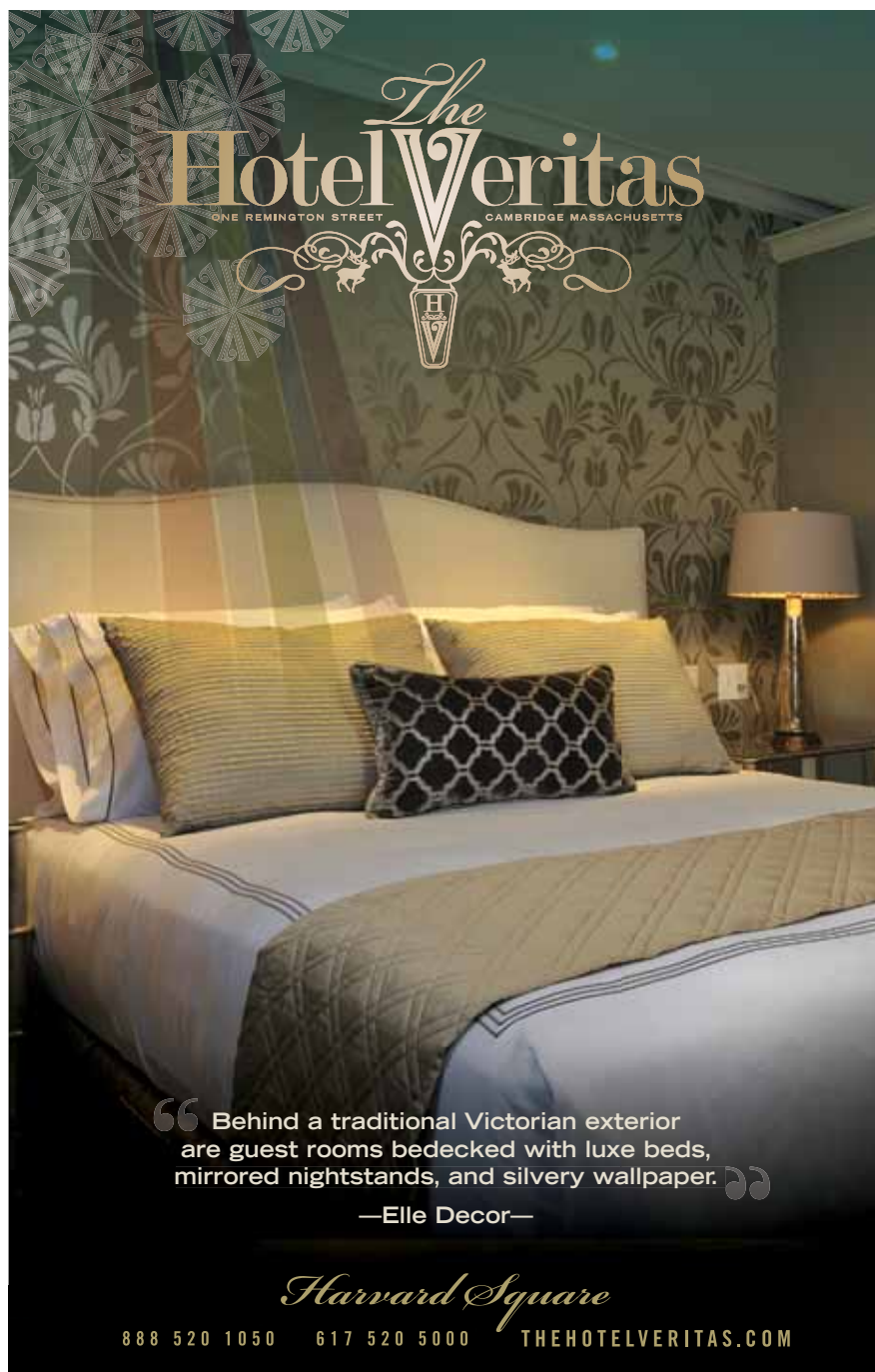
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Line subway extension project. The discombobulating construction, which included opening, then closing, a canyon-like chasm in the heart of the Square, began in 1978; the new \$72-million subway station opened in 1983. Many people were “afraid suburbanites would park at Alewife, get on the subway, and go right through to Boston,” so local businesses would suffer, says Gavin Kleespies, executive director of the Cambridge Historical Society. Some people say the foot traffic never did recover, but Kleespies says business actually increased.

The Square has been a thriving commercial area since before the American Revolution, and long supported several department stores, including a Saks Fifth Avenue branch; the last one, Corcoran’s, closed in 1987 (in its place is Urban Outfitters). It even had chains and franchises, according to Charles Sullivan, M.C.P. ’70, executive director of the Cambridge Historical Commission, including a Howard Johnson’s (later the site of the Curious George bookstore), the Waldorf Cafeteria, and the Hayes-Bickford.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Square was catapulted to national prominence as a hub of radical and creative activity with its cafés, coffeehouses, diners, bars, and music clubs, like Club 47 (which morphed into Passim and now Club Passim, still a music venue, but also home to the Veggie Planet restaurant), as well as numerous book and record shops. Add to the mix hippies and buskers, freewheeling social and political happenings, and a general overflow of youthful energy day and night. “Beginning in 1968,” Mo Lotman wrote in his 2009 book, *Harvard Square: An Illustrated History Since 1950*, “the Common was transformed every warm Sunday afternoon into a bohemian free-for-all, with drum circles, bead-sellers, tranced-out dancers, and a ton of pot.”

Following the tumult and protests of that period, the gleaming new underground subway complex (which many found unappealing compared to the 1912 station with its wooden escalator), when it finally opened, “radically reshaped what Harvard Square looked like,” says Kleespies, a Cambridge native. The central subway entrance, topped by glassed-in escalators, sat beside a newly constructed



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A veritable bird's-eye view of Square and the restored 1912 subway headhouse, home to Out of Town News.

concrete plaza known as The Pit. Vehicular traffic was re-routed around that plaza (and the iconic Out of Town News stand was housed in the restored, original subway headhouse) to create a more pedestrian-friendly milieu, Sullivan explains. Dignified red brick sidewalks replaced ugly sections of asphalt. Neoclassical light fixtures replaced aluminum highway-style goosenecks. Brattle Square was reconfigured to make a permanent outdoor performance space with granite bollards.

In 1985, the Charles Hotel complex opened; its condos, spa, and jazz club further raised the Square's commercial stature. The hotel was built on land that had recently been cleared of the transit authority's car barns, while the adjacent John F. Kennedy Park—dedicated in 1987, 12 years after plans to site the Kennedy Library there were scuttled (largely by opposition from the Harvard Square Defense Fund)—replaced the gritty, century-old railway and trolley yards. The wall between the Harvard Kennedy School and the path from Eliot Street to the park, Sullivan notes, is the only structure left over.

The mid 1980s also brought the four-story Eliot Street Garage (1985), with first-floor retail space, across from the Kennedy School, and the nearby brick-and-glass office building One Mifflin Place (1987), which replaced the old structures at 119-123 Mount Auburn Street where tenants included The Blue Parrot, the Ha'Penny Pub, and Vincent's, according to Lotman. At the other end of the Square, meanwhile, a faux Colonial Gulf station with white columns and a blue cupola, at the foot of Quincy Street, was razed by Harvard to make way for the Inn at Har-

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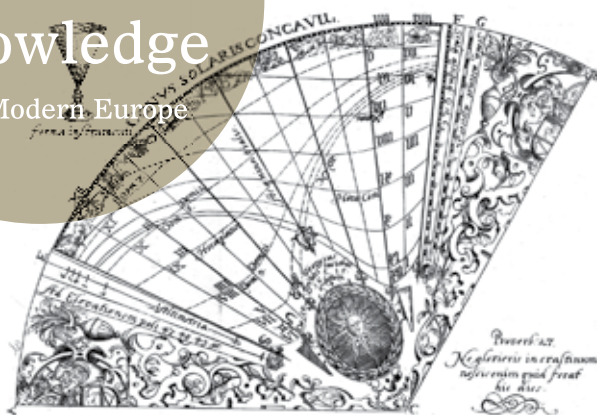
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vard and a diminutive public park, which opened in 1991.

To many, these changes cleaned up grubbiness and replaced shabby-looking structures. To others, they eroded the Square's authentic character, paving the way for yuppies instead of the "real people" who had long thrived there. "These projects combined to change not only the look of Harvard Square, but also the mindset," according to Lotman. "[The Square] was added to the National Register of Historic Places. An 'overlay district' was created by the city council to limit and oversee development. Harvard Square had become self-aware." (Test your own memory by looking at Lotman's list of the "places of yore" that once served the Square at www.harvardsquarebook.com/yore.html.)

Development continued during the 1990s, fueled by the ending of rent control in Cambridge. The 1994 decision created "a sea change in Cambridge real estate," Kleespies reports. "The number of permits pulled, the buildings that were gutted and/or renovated, went way up. This changed who was living in Cambridge and in and around Harvard Square." In parallel, development aimed at higher-rent commercial and retail tenants took place.

The resulting gentrification may be epitomized by the battle over redevelopment of the historic Read Block in the heart of the Square, which contained, among other long-time businesses, two icons: the Tasty and the Wursthaus ("Gutes Essen," its large sign boasted). The two shared a wall as well as about 80 years in business. The Tasty was a 16-stool diner open 24/7 and populated by politicians, students, indigents, and famous visitors, all seeking easy

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conversation and a double cheeseburger with fries. A similarly devoted clientele plunked down on hard benches to even heavier fare at the Wursthau.

In 1994 the Read Block was bought by Cambridge Savings Bank (itself a Square veteran since 1834) and plans were laid to replace it with a six-story office building. Despite efforts by many residents and the Historical Commission (which negotiated to preserve the building's façade), the Wursthau (owned by Frank Cardullo, whose grandchildren still run his gourmet deli across the street), closed in 1996, and the Tasty the following year. "More than any other ghost, the late Tasty Sandwich Shop haunts Harvard Square's collective consciousness," wrote Lotman in a two-page spread about the institution. (Local filmmaker Federico Muchnik captured the spirit of the diner and its demise in a stirring documentary, *Touching History: Harvard Square, The Bank, and the Tasty Diner*; see www.federicomuchnik.com.)

The new era shuttered many other beloved local businesses (the Janus Cinema, Elsie's, Patisserie Française, Pangloss, and Reading International Bookstore) as rents rose, more chains moved in, and the consumer base changed. The Square shifted away from "being a commercial center used mostly by Cambridge residents and Harvard students, staff, and faculty for day-to-day activities," Kleespies says, "toward more of a shopping district for special occasions and gift-buying for people visiting from out of town." Not all the changes are due to Square-specific demographics and economics, of course. Larger forces like the Internet and technology took out the book and music stores that drew hordes of youthful browsers. For those who are counting, the booksellers remaining include: Harvard Book Store, Grolier Poetry Book Shop, Raven Used Books, Schoenhof's Foreign Books, Harvard Book & Binding Service, James & Devon Gray Booksellers, and the Harvard Coop. "For alumni coming back, it's a terrible shock," Sullivan notes. "But we've been like frogs in the boiling pot; the



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changes happened so gradually that we got used to it and it wasn't disturbing until it was too late."

BUT ALL IS FAR FROM LOST—as the fresh perspective of a Midwestern visitor reveals. Spiegelman, Jillson, and others choose to point to the number of new independent stores that have opened within the last decade. "Places that have been opened by young women entrepreneurs... are doing very well," Jillson reports, including the clothing stores Mint Julep and Forty Winks, TistiK (artisanal jewelry), Crema Cafe, Sweet (for cupcakes), and Follow the Honey. "What does that tell you? That their rents are reasonable," she says. "They are not places with a lot of money, but they have good business plans and vision and landlords who are giving them a chance. [Although] you still have to sell an awful lot

of cupcakes and coffee to make the rent."

In fact, nearly 80 percent of the businesses in the square are still locally

owned, according to Jillson; 15 percent are national chains and 5 percent are regional chains, such as Boloco (burritos). The



The Square has always reflected its time and place in history.



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idea that chains have overrun the Square stems from the fact that all the banks are clustered in the center near the subway, she adds, and because chains have the most retail space. "They need it and they can afford it," she says, "so visually, they are what people notice first. The reality is, you need anchor stores and you need a

Fixtures and Followers

The lists below include many of the oldest and newest Harvard Square businesses, according to information provided by the Harvard Square Business Association.

OLDEST

- Cambridge Savings Bank (1834)
- Cambridge Center for Adult Education (1876; a nonprofit, rather than a business)
- Harvard Coop (1882)
- Leavitt & Peirce (1883)
- Cambridge Trust Company (1890)
- J. August (1891)
- La Flamme Barber Shop (1898)
- Alice Darling Secretarial Services, Inc. (1913)
- Felix Shoe Repair (1913)
- Dickson Bros. True Value Hardware Store (1920)
- Brattle Square Florist (1925)
- The Sheraton Commander Hotel (1927)
- Grolier Poetry Book Shop (1927)
- Harvard Book Store (1932)

NEWEST (2010 and 2011)

- Follow the Honey
- Al's Sandwich Shop
- Chutney's
- Clover Food Lab
- Forty Winks
- Hotel Veritas
- The Maharaja
- Otto Pizza
- Pinkberry
- Russell House Tavern
- Starbucks Harvard Square (bi-level store)
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mix of retailers”—both local *and* national.

More interesting than who has left the Square, Spiegelman thinks, is who has remained, and how (see “Fixtures and Followers,” on page 36M). “For every Wursthau that has disappeared, there is a Cardullo’s that has stayed,” she notes. “Elsie’s is gone but Darwin’s,” a breakfast and lunch spot, now has two locations that bookend the Square. She still gets her hair cut at Gino’s and loves to shop for jewelry and artisan-made home goods at Motto and MDF (each opened in 1988). “There is no one better than Joe at Rizzo Tailor, and Pure Line Skin Care upstairs on JFK Street kept me looking young,” she adds. “In other words, with all of the changes and loss of small businesses, as a Harvard Square office worker looking for high-quality services, I was able to cover a lot of territory.”

Harvard’s own impact on the Square cannot be overstated. Opposition to its real-estate expansion across the years is well documented. On the other hand, Kleespies

notes, the University is a stabilizing factor that draws visitors from around the world and has been generally “responsible toward supporting independent tenants that probably would not have survived if their landlords were totally commercial. Harvard can be very heavy-handed with local businesses, but it has also protected the smaller places.”

Spiegelman points to Harvard’s efforts to keep a mix of businesses in the Square. It took over the lease at the corner of Brattle and Church streets after Sage’s Market (in business for 92 years) closed in 2000, and attempted to find another grocery store. The space was leased for a while to a cell-phone store instead, but now does house the Market in the Square. In another move to control development, Harvard purchased the Winthrop Street building that is now the Red House restaurant (next to Charles Kitchen), she adds. The Holyoke Center arcade was revamped within the last decade “to introduce more

vibrant commercial activity along the path traveled by the River House students and in a building with a large office worker population,” she says. “But the primary tenants have been restaurants, and the restaurant businesses have changed frequently, as is common in that sector.”

IF THE SQUARE had been subjected to the local planning agenda of the 1960s, Charles Sullivan reports, “The Cambridge Redevelopment Authority would have replaced everything with buildings on the scale of Holyoke Center [completed in 1966], which replaced a whole block full of traditional buildings. The redevelopment plan would have done just about the same thing on every block.”

As it happens, development in the Square has slowed significantly since 2000. Demand for offices and housing has waned. Local planning



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Felix Shoe Repair and J. August are among the oldest Square businesses; J.P. Licks is one of many new dessert spots.

policies have also shifted development to the Alewife and Kendall Square communities.

In 2000, Cambridge also established a Harvard Square Conservation District that gave the Historical Commission more power over proposed renovations and construction, including signage. "Before that, we only had jurisdiction if there was demolition involved," Sullivan explains. "Harvard supported the conservation district and down-zoning [in 1986 new building heights were capped at 85 feet]. They finally realized that Harvard Square was their front door, and that if it was allowed to be developed as it looked like it was going to be, it would be detrimental to the University as well as aggravating to alumni." Spiegelman responds that the University's "interests have leaned toward preserving



Harvard Square as a place with character that is friendly to pedestrians, familiar to alumni, and serviceable to students."

And it is. Despite the recent economic downturn, the Square is about 98 percent

occupied, with a healthy mix of services and goods, according to Jillson of the business association. She is frustrated by those who bemoan the Square's changes and say they support local businesses but haven't,

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for example, taken in a film at the Brattle Theatre in more than a year. “People can sit around philosophizing all day long, saying, ‘There are too many banks, too many phone stores,’” she says. “But the bottom line is that students are out there shopping at Urban Outfitters and American Apparel and that’s their choice and if other people want to see eclectic, unique, funky businesses, that’s also a choice. Support those businesses. If you don’t go to the Brattle to see a film, then send a \$50 check to its nonprofit Brattle Film Foundation so it can stay there.” (The Brattle, which now serves beer and wine during movies, in 1956 became one of the first movie houses to bring foreign films to Americans. It now offers a diverse range of movies, performances, readings, poetry slams, film festivals, and special events, such as its annual Watch-A-Thon fundraiser.)

Spiegelman is among those who believe the Square will continue to fold changes into its essentially dynamic character. She misses Bob Slate Stationer, which closed its three locations earlier this year after 78 years in business (due to both declining sales and advancing age of its owners). But she is increasingly fond of Clover Food Lab, which opened last fall on Holyoke Street. “It’s not pizza. It’s not burritos,” she says bluntly. “It’s a healthy, fast menu with a no-nonsense space and delivery menu.”

Clover morphed from a lunch-truck business into a small restaurant that emphasizes fresh, innovative, and inexpensive vegetarian food—like its soy BLT sandwich—priced at \$3 to \$5. People eat in a loft-like, bi-level, white dining space with a full view of the young, good-humored cooks. Casual servers stand at the entrance taking orders by iPhone and payment, dispensing cash from metal coin-changers attached to their belts. Novel and lively, Clover is a big hit with students, office workers, professors, and everyone else who happens across it. It’s not the Tasty. It’s not Elsie’s. But compared to what’s offered in the multitude of malls and sprawling roadside shopping districts across America, it is, relatively speaking, “wild, man.”



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