

CENTRAL SQUARE

MY PART IN URBAN DECAY

text by Conn Nugent
photographs by Steve Button



It is a confused, unsightly, often dirty commercial strip It has evolved into a characterless, centerless sprawl, most of whose architecturally interesting buildings have been marred by excessive signs and ugly synthetic facades. —Colin Diver, "The Evolution of Central Square," unpublished report to the Cambridge Historical Commission

Central Square is the second-busiest intersection (after Harvard Square) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Cambridge is a city of 95,000 people, immediately north of Boston.

Steve Button comes from Newcastle-on-Tyne. When I saw some photographs he had taken of his old hometown — unpretentious, rather dilapidated — I knew he was the man to capture Central Square. Steve is at HOME, Inc. (not the same H.O.M.E., Inc. described in the Summer 1982 CQ), an organization of artists who work with teenagers from Roxbury and the South End of Boston.

For purposes of this article, you may want to know that I come from Irish families out of New York and Pennsylvania. I have lived in Cambridge since 1964, with two-year hiatuses in Costa Rica, California, and Cape Cod. —Conn Nugent

THE WINDOW IN MY OFFICE above the five-and-dime reveals the whole mess. It is a warm summer Saturday. Merchants have placed their wares out on the ample sidewalks, creating the noisy ambiance of a bazaar. You

can imagine a Phoenician trading post: Africans and Latins, Jews and Celts. They disparage the merchandise, talk volubly. The lingua franca is English, but Spanish is common, and Portuguese and Greek and Creole. Dance rhythms pound everywhere, from the conga drummers near Prospect Street to the radio shop blasting salsa and *merengues*.

Cars zip by too fast. They run red lights, turn without warning, and swerve around the sudden walls of double parking. Pedestrians ignore signals and jaywalk defiantly, en masse. The police look on. This is a culture — or better, a mix of cultures — that follows some regulations, but they are not necessarily the regulations of the state.

Many of the people outside my window are trim and fashionable in a sassy urban style. Some are stout and ruffled, but respectable. Others are stout but rather less respectable looking. In truth, a lot of people here are pretty fat. This generalized obesity will often put off the puritan or the Californian, but it's a comfort to me. Someone who can always stand to lost 15 pounds feels at peace in the land of the 38-inch median waist. All in all, a healthy level of self-esteem is easy to come by on a street like Massachusetts Avenue, with its relentless reminders that everything is relative. If I deal unfairly with my children some morning, I draw solace from the casual mistreatments by some Central Square mothers at the lunch counter. If I worry about the checkbook balance, a look out the window reminds me that I'm richer than most people around here, and enjoy better prospects. And for the benefit of about 90 percent of us, Central Square attracts a reliable population of poor street alcoholics who have come near the ends of their ropes. The dynamic can flip on you, of course, and things can turn depressing, but the overall sensation of not-hiding is generally a tonic.

And on this balmy Saturday, things are downright pleasant. I can look out my window at the crazy salad of people who have come for the things that only Central Square can provide. Here are some items you can't get anywhere else in Cambridge:

- chocolate-chip-banana-bran muffins;
- real army-surplus gear;
- Trinidadian phonograph records;
- tap-dance lessons;
- a Chinese lunch for \$2.98;
- the writings of the Defender of the International Proletariat, Comrade Enver Hoxha;

- macrobiotic fast food;
- back issues of pornographic magazines (covers removed);
- pawned saxophones;
- meat-loaf specials, choice of peas or wax beans.

LUCKILY OR NOT, the official revitalization of Central Square is at hand. My building will be demolished soon, along with its three sisters to the west. They will be replaced by a block-long reflective-glass structure that will feature offices, shops, and a cinema. Out go the Marxist-Leninist Bookstore (Albanian loyalties); the florist; the Mandala Folk Ensemble; a couple of conspicuously unsuccessful older dentists; the derelicts who block the door and sleep on the stairs; and me and a few other marginal enterprises. In come consultants and software specialists and shoppers in search of tweed.

Not much misery will result. The tenants in these doomed buildings are fairly resilient types. It's other things I worry about. I regret the personal loss of a work environment which is convenient, entertaining, and radically unconcerned with what sort of degrading shape my office or I may be in. And I'm saddened by the erasure of these relics from an honorable past.

FOR IF CENTRAL SQUARE has never been posh before, it hasn't always been seedy. From 1910 to 1945 — the heyday of most Northeastern cities — this section of Massachusetts Avenue was a reputable hive of commerce, a family-style boulevard of department stores and grocers and cobblers and bakers and doctors and movie theatres (this was in the time before cinemas). It was regarded as a handsome if utilitarian section of town, and it was very popular. One old-timer remembers "when crowds used to jam the sidewalks on Thursday and Friday nights so tightly that it was hard to walk." The sidewalks are 18 feet wide.

These nights, the square is ominous and mostly empty. The few pedestrians walk fast. And in the daytime, although there is bustle — Lord knows we have bustle — it's not much of a family kind of thing. We have record stores and liquor stores and restaurants and discount-jeans shops, but there's only one nice old department store, only one grocery store, and only a small vestige of doctors and plumbers and dentists and shoemakers.

There are many reasons for this change, of course, and lots of us amateurs can tick some of them off: Suburbs, cars, shopping centers. The closing of factories. Television and advertising. The natural deterioration of buildings and public works. But intertwined among them all, simultaneously cause and effect, is perhaps the most salient social phenomenon of American cities since the Second World

War: the departure and reduced influence of working-class families, mostly Catholics from the outer edges of Europe.

ALTHOUGH THERE WERE literally millions of exceptions, some generalities apply to those Catholic urban families between the wars. They were bound by close loyalties, ties of ethnicity or neighborhood or parish or political clubhouse or all of these. They were products of an immigration-and-settlement process that had worked well for them and their parents and grandparents, and so they tended to be patriotic and economically optimistic, even during the Great Depression. They lived in two-parent, many-children families. They tended to rely on local and informal mechanisms for preserving public order and enforcing standards of decorum, both of which were important. And they didn't particularly want to go anywhere else. Central Square reflected their needs and aspirations. It was lively, but reasonably well-behaved.

These days it treads a balance between the charm of old waitresses who call you "dear heart" and the belligerence of ill-raised teenagers. Your street manner has to be flexible, disposed to politeness but ready for rude abrasions. Beyond the question of courtesy, it is certainly true that this whole town is short on civic-minded behavior. When it snows, for instance, walks go unshoveled and the old and disabled have to negotiate the treacherous dark-gray urban permafrost that covers our pedestrian ways from January to April. Cambridge favors a chip-on-the-shoulder, consumerist posture in which you always try to compel others (the landlord, the city, the business) to perform

things you could do yourself as a matter of simple citizenship.

It will not suffice to blame this negative turn on poverty, at least not in any absolute sense. Everyone agrees that Cambridge 40 years ago was more thoughtfully public spirited than it is now, and yet the private wealth of those old-time working-class families was much less than that of comparable households today, even allowing for inflation. What was different — and again, we're talking of something both cause and effect — was that the *public* amenities enjoyed by the Cambridge families of, say, 1940 far outstripped what we count on today, and the square reflected that different emphasis. The subways were cleaner and faster. There were lots of trolleys and streetcars. The nearby parks and ballfields and other common places were better maintained and dramatically less vandalized. It was safer to get around, especially at night; crime was less common and much less likely to involve a lethal weapon. In all, there was a sense of social membership which eludes us today.

The Irish-Italian, native-Cambridge culture exists still in Central Square, and with no small force. That's one of the attractions of the place. But the culture has lost much of its confidence and potency and altruism, and its decline is evidenced all around. Many of the old ties have unraveled; the economics have gone sour; the informal rule-enforcement has been largely abdicated. Many of the ambitious young adults of old Cambridge families have gone to other places to raise their kids. In 1950, 87 percent of the households in this town were families (related individuals under one roof). Now it's 45 percent.



Central Square in November, 1920. Citizens gather at the door of the Central Square theater on the north side of Massachusetts Avenue.



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WHATEVER THE LOSS of sobriety and optimism, Central Square has gained a lot during its funky, multi-ethnic decline. I do enjoy looking out the window, and I remind myself that the old Central Square was less hospitable to black people, more confining for women, and less tolerant of the yeasty leftwingers migrating down from the university enclaves. But who can prefer the future of this place? The future will elbow aside some bums and some poor tenants and maybe some of the tough guys, but it won't bring back families and courteous trolley conductors and the dedication to place. We'll get none of the benign visionary stuff here, no small-farm renaissance, no double-envelope houses, no crafts revival, not even the imaginative recycling of older buildings. We'll get the cost-accounting and esthetics of a future that deems blighted our little building of wainscoted halls and marble sinks. The cold fact always intrudes: they're going to tear this block down.

So I'm out of an office. As it turns out, I'm also out of a job. My employers have told me that the program I run — distributing about \$450,000 a year to nonprofit neighborhood groups — should phase out by March 1983. Too bad for the neighborhood groups, not so bad for me. I gulp now, but I'll land on my feet somewhere, the beneficiary of class and education. Food and shelter and tickets to Fenway Park will be provided somehow. I love my wife and children, and they love me. Here, in Central Square, my bags ruefully packed, I count myself among the lucky. ■



The same block in '35 and '82. What was a five-story building (over Corcoran's) was reduced to a two-story building (over FF, which stands for Friendly Family Center) in the late 1940s. The author's office is in that soon-to-be-demolished building.