



# Boston: Cradle of Liberty and Architecture

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



**Massachusetts State House**  
graphite and watercolor on paper, 5x8 3/4

The “Hub,” “Beantown,” “Cradle of Liberty”—these are the nicknames by which I came to know the city of my youth. I grew up near Cambridge, and Boston, across the Charles River, was my immediate Mecca. I detested the proverbial Boston baked beans; however, my visual diet from the age of 9 was the local smorgasbord of extraordinary architecture. I delighted in structures designed by American greats from Charles Bulfinch (1763–1844) to Henry Hobson Richardson (1838–1886) to the 20th-century firm Kallmann, McKinnell & Knowles.

The latter is hardly a household name, but I became familiar with it because, on Sundays, my father would take me to major construction sites to observe new buildings. The 1962 Boston City Hall—based on the firm’s competition-winning design—was going up, and the site, amazingly enough, was completely accessible.



The building, although maligned by some and now threatened with demolition, is a highly influential structure in the style that came to be called “New Brutalism.” The architecture was a riff on that of the 1957 monastery Sainte Marie de La Tourette, near Lyon, France—a much revered design by Le Corbusier (1887–1965). In turn, the design of the Boston City Hall has been copied the world over. I’m sure that being surrounded by Boston’s interesting buildings is the reason I became an architect. Although I remained in the vicinity until going to college, I’d never contemplated capturing its architecture in graphite and paint—until recently.

**Massachusetts State House Sketch**  
graphite on cartridge paper, 6x8

Charles Bulfinch’s design of the Massachusetts State House, completed in 1798, was certainly influenced by Andrea Palladio’s Villa Almerico Capra Valmarana, constructed two centuries earlier near Venice, Italy. In my watercolor (opposite), I was able to correct the too-large dome in my pencil sketch.

## BOSTON CITY HALL BY KALLMAN, MCKINNEL & KNOWLES, 1962



**Boston City Hall Sketch**  
graphite and watercolor on paper, 6x8

In both my pencil and watercolor sketches, light and shadow are the primary definers of Boston City Hall’s form. This structure, constructed of cast-in-place concrete with base elements of brick, is set in a brick plaza, which the architects claimed was inspired by the great square in Siena, Italy—Piazza del Campo.



**Boston City Hall Sketch**  
graphite and watercolor on paper, 5x8 3/4

The portfolio presented in this article is an object lesson in the challenges of sketching and painting while traveling. My recent visit to Boston occurred on a rainy day, making plein air painting an unrealistic option, although for me, that's always the preferred approach. Not to be deterred, I drew thumbnail sketches in situ with a soft pencil on smooth paper. A week or so later, these drawings, plus reference photos, served as prompts for small watercolors in my Pentelic Aqua journal. With the pencil sketches, I captured the effects of light and shadow at the time of my visit. They also allowed me to test compositions for the watercolor paintings.

In order to retain spontaneity and avoid turning the watercolors into labored studio pieces, I set myself a time limit of about a half hour for each sketch. With this method, I could keep my commitment to capturing the journey graphically while maintaining a fast-paced schedule of moving from one site to another.

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**Trinity Church Sketch**  
graphite on cartridge paper, 8x6

My sketch captures the medieval Romanesque style that Henry Hobson Richardson adopted from the French in 1872–77. In doing so, Hobson created a fashion for the style, which came to be called “Richardsonian Romanesque.”



**Beacon Hill Sketch**  
graphite on cartridge paper, 6x8

This drawing explores the varying scales of the city and its orientation on the Charles River. The Longfellow Bridge, on the left, is nicknamed “Pepper Pot Bridge” for its four octagonal towers.

## CAMBRIDGE RESIDENTIAL STREET



**North Cambridge Street**  
graphite and watercolor on paper, 5x8¾



**North Cambridge Street Sketch**  
graphite on cartridge paper, 6x8

This quiet residential street of wood-frame houses is in the neighborhood where I grew up. The houses present a unity of frontage and of the relationship between mass and smaller elements—like porches. At the same time, a variety of expression prevents monotony. The pencil sketch allowed me to block out the masses and establish light and shadow values.