CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

831 Massachusetts Avenue, 2nd Fl., Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139
Telephone: 617 349 4683 E-mail: histcomm@cambridgema.gov
URL: http://www.cambridgema.gov/Historic

Chandra Harrington, *Chair*; Elizabeth Lyster; *Vice Chair*; Charles M. Sullivan, *Executive Director*
Joseph V. Ferrara, Gavin Kleespies, Paula Paris, Kyle Sheffield, Yuting Zhang, *Members*
Florrie Darwin, Scott Kyle, Michael Rogove, *Alternates*

February 26, 2026

To: Members and Alternates of the Historical Commission

From: Eric Hill, Cambridge Historical Commission

Re: Case D-1802, MIT Building 39, 60 Vassar Street (1968)

A demolition permit application for substantial destruction of Building 39 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) at 60 Vassar Street was received on February 5, 2026. Institute officials were notified of an initial determination of significance, and a public hearing was scheduled for March 5, 2026 before the Cambridge Historical Commission.

Building 39 (center) Vassar Street façade Building 37 (right) and Building 38 (left). CHC Photo 02-2026.

In 2015, the Cambridge Historical Commission and MIT developed a written protocol with respect to the review of the Institute's historically significant properties in the Kendall Square Landmark Group (236 Main Street, 264 Main Street and 292 Main Street) as well as Institute-owned properties listed or

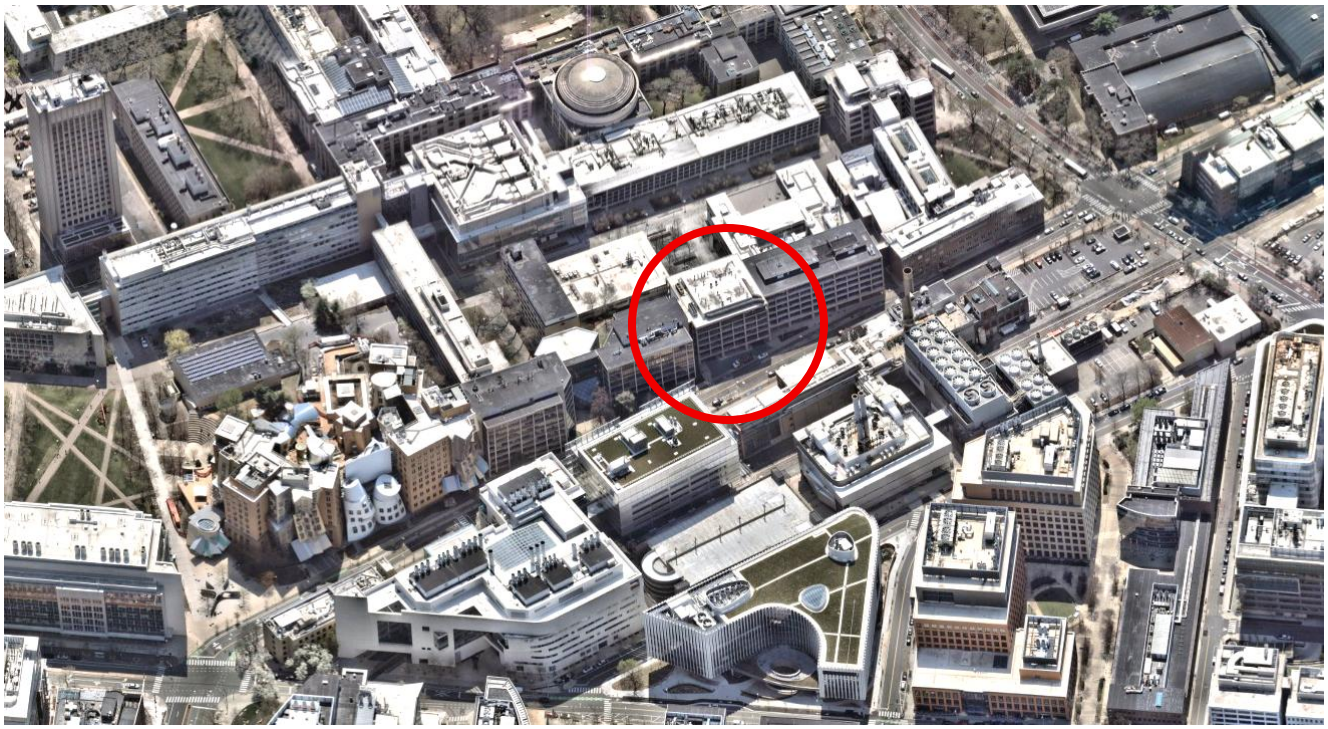
considered eligible for listing on the State or National Register of Historic Places. Previously, MIT and CHC staff consulted informally on alterations and repairs to buildings that listed on the Register.

As provided by the agreement, in 2016 MIT hired The Public Archaeology Laboratory to assess Institute-owned structures for historical significance. MIT and CHC staff participated in the evaluation process. The updated catalogue sorted MIT buildings and landscapes into categories of high, moderate, and low levels of significance. Building 39 and other Vassar Street buildings completed in 1968-1972 were designated as having Moderate Significance. Due to this classification, an initial determination of significance was confirmed for Building 39 under the provisions of the Demolition Review ordinance.

Site

Building 39 - also known as the Brown Building - is located on the south side of Vassar Street, between Main Street and Massachusetts Avenue. The subject property is part of a large parcel of university buildings on the main campus at MIT. The building is sited on a large institutional lot (52A-21) with a land area of 1,848,666 square feet, roughly bounded by Vassar Street to the north, Ames Street to the east, Memorial Drive to the south, and Massachusetts Avenue to the west. Building 39 is within a Residential C-3B zoning district and in the MIT Institutional Overlay Zoning District, which for non-residential uses, allows for a maximum building height of 120' with a 10' front yard setback.

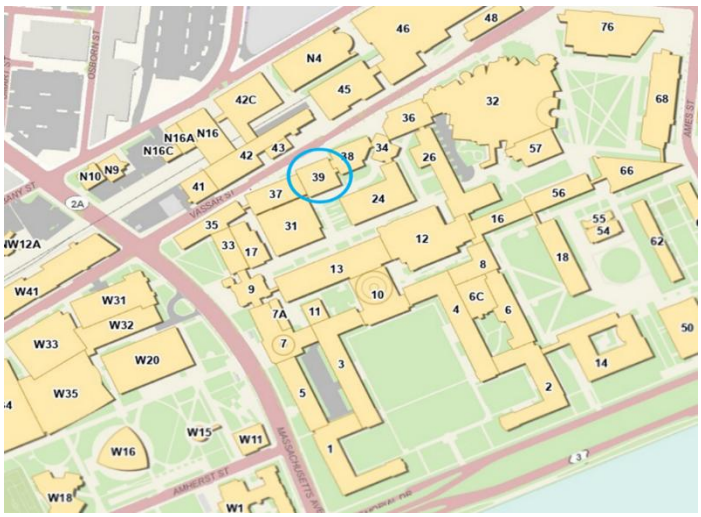
Building 39 is surrounded by MIT-owned properties on all sides and is part of a collection of mid-1960s Institute buildings designed by the same architectural firm, creating a cohesive street-edge condition on this side of Vassar Street.



Building 39 (circled) *NearMap.com*

Architectural Description

Building 39, also known as the Brown Building, is a six-story laboratory structure featuring a set-back mechanical penthouse and a flat membrane roof. Located along Vassar Street, Building 39 is connected to Building 37 on its west side and Building 38 on its east side. It is part of a group of five interconnected buildings along this stretch of Vassar Street, which were largely constructed around the same time and designed by the same architectural firm, sharing numerous design similarities. Notably, Building 39 bears a close resemblance to Building 13 (the Vannevar Bush Building, 1965) and Building 37 (the McNair Building, 1966), both designed by Walter Netsch and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.



Building 39, 60 Vassar Street (circled). MIT Campus Map, 2026.

Constructed of poured-in-place reinforced concrete, Building 39 features an open-grid structural system. The building's plan is square, and its Vassar Street façade is divided into three bays, each separated by slender concrete piers, with the exception of the sixth floor. At the base, the façade is supported by splayed concrete columns. The ground-floor central lobby is flanked by vehicular driveways, which pass beneath the building in the remaining two bays.


Building 39, Vassar Street façade. CHC Photo, 02-2026.

The structural design is accentuated by deeply recessed window banks, featuring dark, wood-framed vertical windows with dark panels below. The lobby itself is framed with metal and glass, recessed under the floors above, and includes a central semicircular glass vestibule with revolving doors at the center of both the north (Vassar Street) and south (courtyard) elevations. The building is set back from Vassar Street by a bicycle lane, sidewalk, and a vehicle drop-off driveway, all constructed with stone pavers.

MIT is proposing a comprehensive renovation of Building 39. To conform with present energy codes, this project will require demolition of the existing exterior façade, as well as the removal of all interior partitions and the mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems. The only elements to be preserved will be the concrete frame, including the columns and slabs, with new glazed facades to be installed on the north and south elevations.

Building 39, rear (south) courtyard façade. CHC Photo 02-2026.

Building 39, Lobby entrance. CHC Photo 02-2026.

Building 39, concrete frame and recessed wooden window, detail. CHC Photo 02-2026.

Building 39, driveway under building from Vassar Street. This passageway is proposed to be converted to expanded lobby space for new building. CHC Photo 02-2026.

History

The relocation of MIT from Boston's Back Bay to Cambridge in 1916 had a significant impact on the development of land along the Charles River. MIT acquired its first land in Cambridge in 1912. The original campus spanned about 46 acres on the east side of Mass. Ave., between the railroad line along Vassar Street and the Charles River. The first Institute buildings were completed in 1916 and consisted of the Beaux-Arts Main Group, designed by William Welles Bosworth. This interconnected complex of academic buildings surrounded the Great Court (now known as Killian Court) and faced the Charles River and Boston.

Residential and industrial development around the campus remained slow through the 1920s. By 1924, MIT had begun to outgrow its original campus and started acquiring additional land on the west side of Mass. Ave. Over the next 15 years, MIT added academic buildings, dormitories, and athletic facilities. By 1940, MIT owned approximately 80 acres along the river, with 20 educational buildings and laboratories, student housing, athletic fields, and a sailing pavilion.

During the interwar period, MIT began shifting from Classical architecture (as exemplified by William Welles Bosworth's original plan) to early Modernism, influenced by the Bauhaus movement brought to Cambridge by Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. In the late 1930s, some early Modern buildings were added to the MIT campus, including the original MIT Cyclotron (Building 44, 1938), the Wright Brothers Wind Tunnel (Building 17, 1939), and the Briggs Field House (W23, 1939, demolished in 2000). The transition to Modernism was gradual, as buildings like the MIT Sailing Pavilion (Building 51, 1936) and the Rogers Building (Building 7, 1938) continued to reflect Classical architecture.

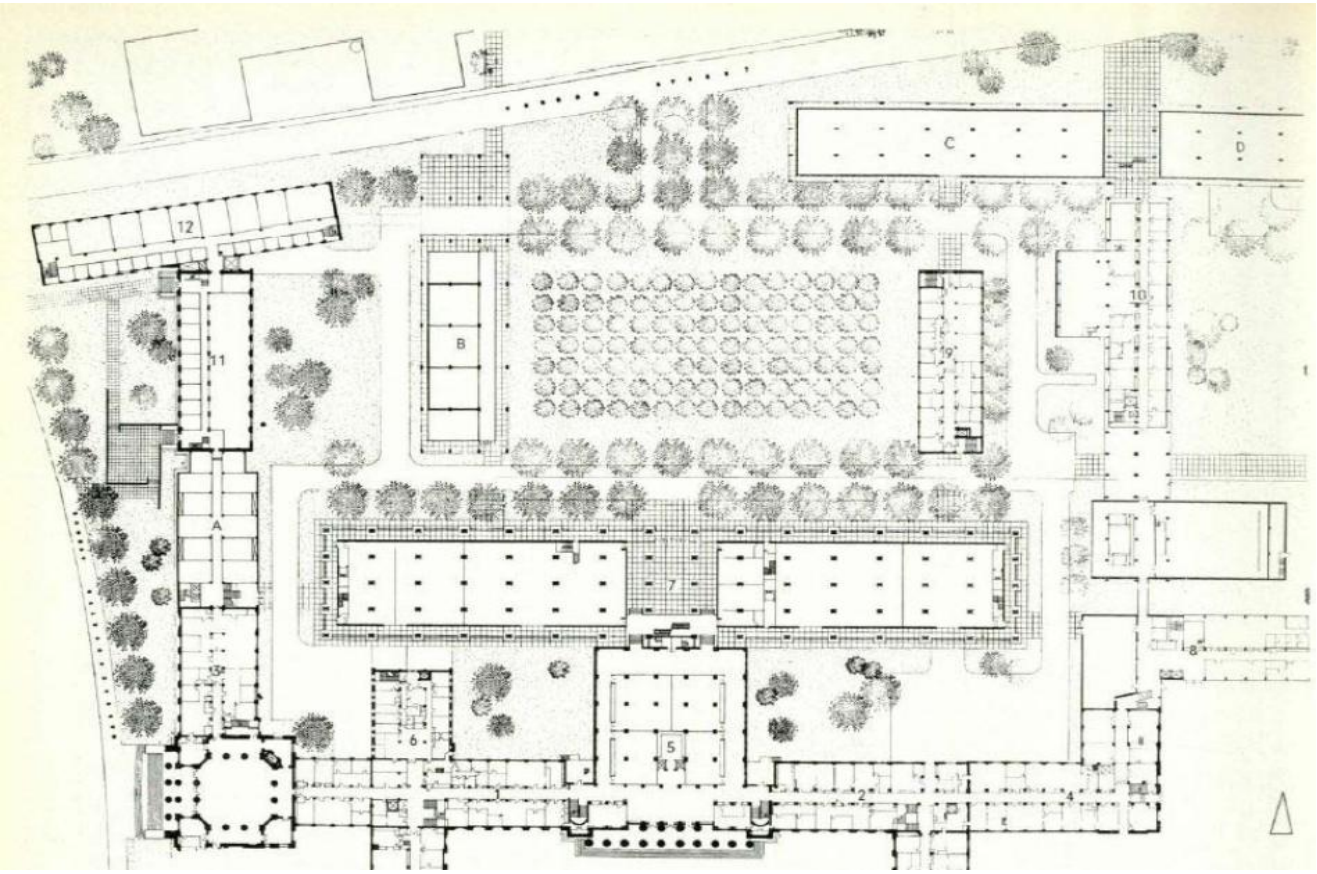
During World War II, MIT served as a national defense laboratory for research in radar, aeronautics, and high-voltage technology. New temporary and permanent buildings were constructed within the project area during and after the war. Additional research facilities were built on vacant lots in the eastern part of the campus, where former industrial buildings had begun to deteriorate.

Buildings constructed at MIT during the 1940s and 1950s reflected a deliberate shift from classical styles to Modernism. Some of the first buildings in Cambridge in the International Style include the Alumni Swimming Pool (Building 57, 1940) and the Radiation Laboratory (Building 24, 1941). After WWII, MIT further embraced the International Style, hiring MIT-trained architects from firms like Anderson, Beckwith & Haible and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill to design modern laboratory buildings with glass curtain walls and boxy forms, reflecting the industrial character of the surrounding neighborhood.

In 1960, a new Campus Master Plan was published to guide future campus development. A fundraising campaign raised nearly $100 million, providing capital for land acquisition, new buildings, and renovations. The 1960 plan recommended development of the "North Campus," located north of and behind the Main Buildings (also known as "the back yard").

Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) of Chicago were selected to design the North Campus Plan and the new buildings to be constructed in this area. The firm was recommended by Pietro Bellischi, Dean of the MIT School of Architecture, and Albert Bush-Brown, an architectural historian at MIT, who admired SOM partner Walter A. Netsch's recent work at the U.S. Air Force Academy's Cadet Chapel.

The North Campus plan followed elements of the original Bosworth plan, including courtyards and connectivity among buildings. It also required vehicular access between buildings, which led to the proposal for narrow roads running through the tight network of campus buildings. The new buildings to be constructed on North Campus would eventually include the Materials Science Center (Building 13), the Center for Advanced Engineering Studies (Building 9), the Center for Space Research (Building 37), the Electrical Engineering Building (Building 36), the Research Laboratory for Electronics (Building 38), and the Information Processing Center (Building 39), the subject of this report.



Proposed North Campus Plan, SOM, 1963. Plan shows Vassar Street (top) before later buildings designed by SOM following street edge.

MIT Information Processing Center, also known as the Gordon Stanley Brown Building (Building 39)

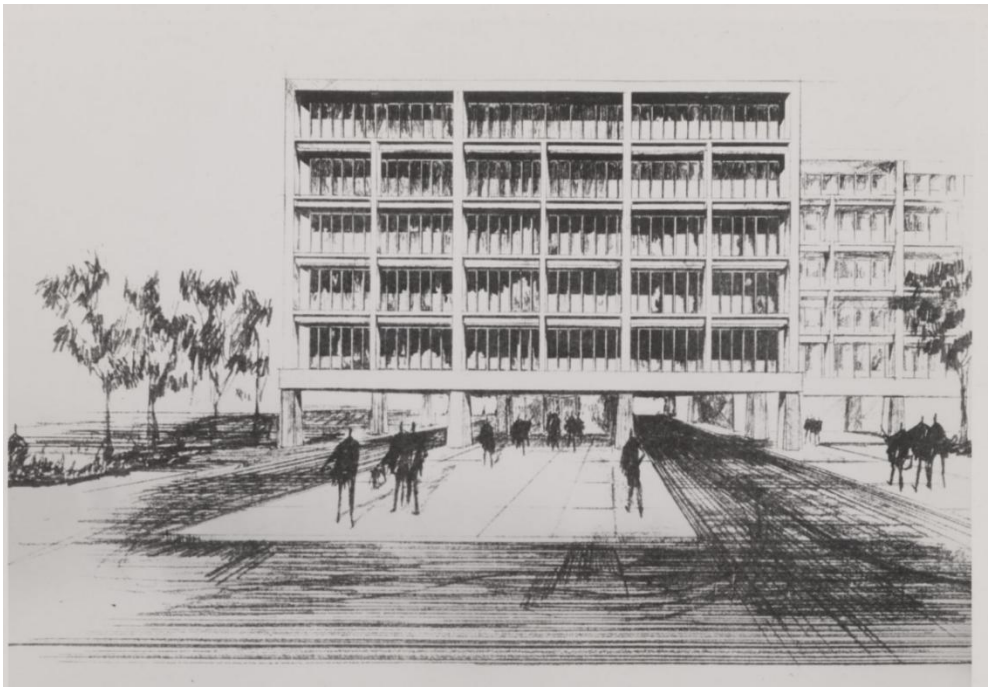
In 1956, MIT established the Computation Center to promote the application of computer technology in research and education. Initially located on the ground floor of the Karl Compton Building (Building 26), its glass walls allowed passersby to observe new computers processing information in real time. As the center grew, it became clear that more space was needed, coinciding with discussions between MIT and IBM regarding next-generation computing equipment.

In 1966, SOM architects Walter Netsch, James DiStefano, and William S. Wainscott designed a purpose-built Computation Center, integrated into the earlier North Campus plan. A site adjacent to Building 37 on Vassar Street was selected as the location for the new building, which would require 75,000 gross square feet. The design featured an open floor plan for computers, with office and support spaces. Vehicular access off Vassar Street was also necessary, so the architects proposed two parallel roadways running through the base of the building, flanking a central lobby. Additionally, they

incorporated a drop-off area in front of the building to avoid disrupting traffic on Vassar Street, setting the building slightly back to accommodate this.

With the site selected, funding secured, and designs completed in 1967, Dean Gordon S. Brown named the new building the Information Processing Center to distinguish it from the earlier Computation Center and reflect its expanded mission. Construction proceeded quickly using cast-in-place concrete, and the Information Processing Center (Building 39) was completed in November 1968.

By 1984, as new research needs emerged in the Electrical Engineering Department, the mainframe computers were moved to another building, and Building 39 became home to the Microsystems Laboratory, dedicated to studying computer chip manufacturing techniques. In 1985, after a major renovation, Building 39 was rededicated as the Gordon Stanley Brown Building. Even after this renovation, O. Robert Simha, MIT's Chief Planning Officer from 1960 to 2000, noted in his annotated chronology of MIT Campus Planning that certain shortcomings of Building 39 remained.



Building 39, Architectural Rendering by SOM, undated. MIT Museum collections.

Simha wrote, *"The renovation did not significantly improve service for Building 39 or its neighbors… The absence of basement service connection to other MIT buildings has isolated Buildings 39, 37, 35 and 33, and the lobby remains cold and inhospitable. The elevators which lie on either side of the central corridor cannot accommodate specialized or heavy equipment. I hope that one day, the Institute will have the determination, and funds, to correct these flaws to make the entrance and drive a more attractive gateway."*

The intended new use of Building 39 is a facility for quantum computing While the building is presently occupied, MIT plans to complete the remodeling project within two years.

Building 39, south (courtyard) elevation, 1968. MIT Museum collections.

Significance and Recommendation

I recommend that Building 39 be found significant for its associations with the post-war planning and expansion of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), as an example of the Brutalist style of architecture preferred by the Institute in the 1960s and 1970s, and as part of a collection of Institute buildings designed by Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in the North Campus area along the Vassar Street. The Commission should hear testimony from the applicants and public and review the plans for demolition before making a further determination.

cc: Morgan Pinney, MIT