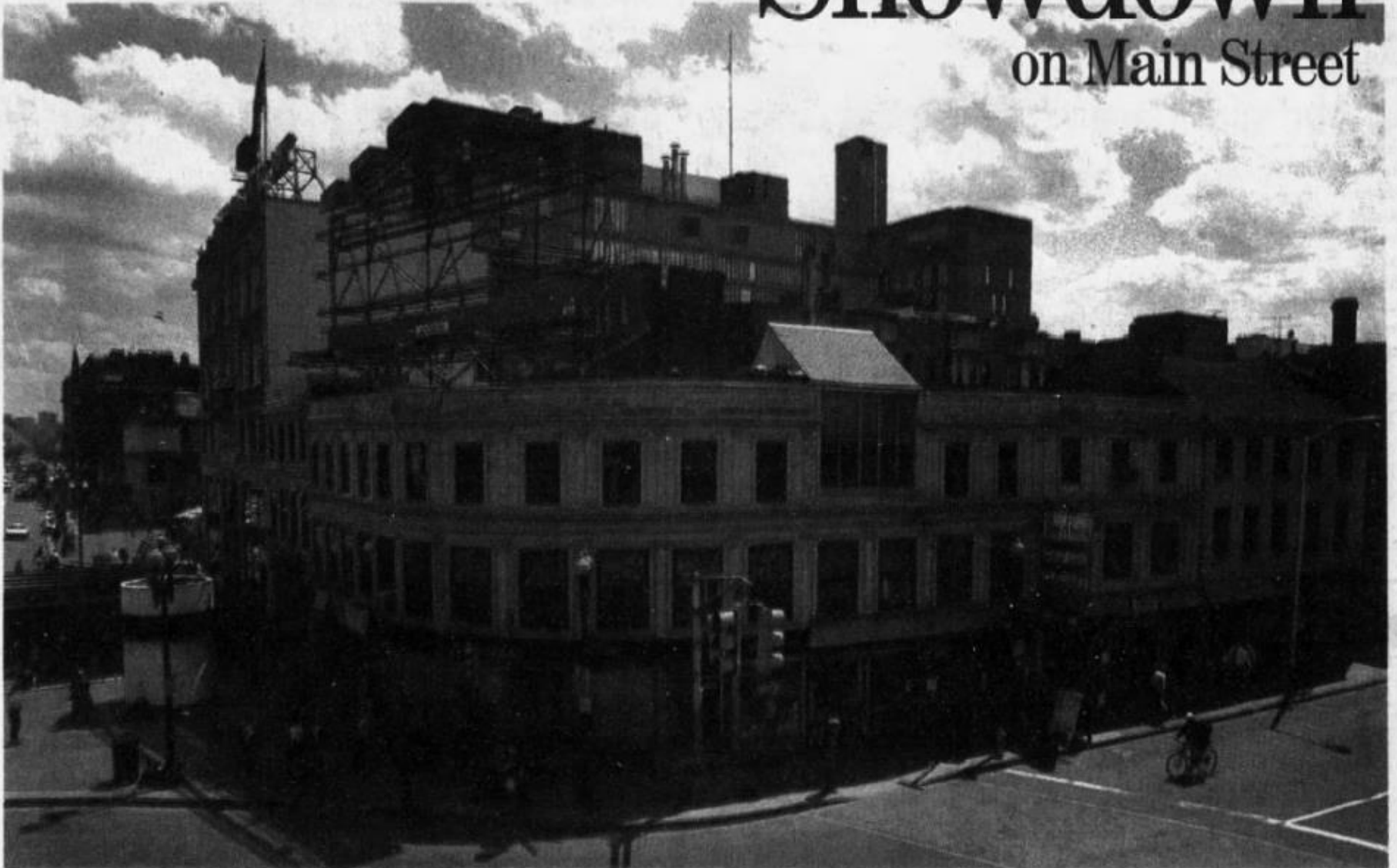


Architecture

Showdown

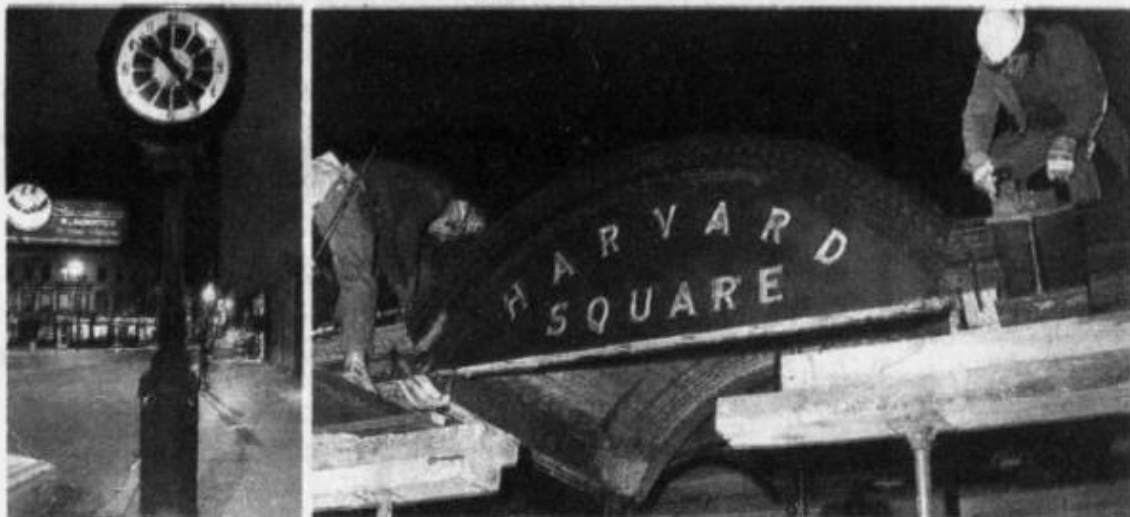
on Main Street



A debate is raging over a proposal to rebuild Harvard Square's flagship corner, the curve of three-story buildings at the juncture of Mass Ave. and JFK Street.

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At stake is more than just a corner of Harvard Square



GLOBE FILE PHOTOS

"It tells of the passage of time": The corner (left, 1973) and the Harvard Square kiosk (right, 1981) provide an old-fashioned Main Street full of architectural detail.

By Robert Campbell
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

A FASCINATING FACT: One of the most popular tourist destinations in Greater Boston is Harvard Square. It ranks right up there with Faneuil Hall Marketplace.

Interesting, because both sites are variations on the same theme. Both are busy Main Streets. If Main Streets are our tourist meccas - and don't forget, the Disney parks offer them, too - it must mean we're starved for public places. Places where everybody can get together and feel like a community.

Harvard Square, as it happens, is now the subject of a fierce debate. (This happens regularly.) The issue is a controversial proposal to rebuild the square's flagship corner. That's the curve of three-story buildings at the juncture of Mass Ave. and JFK Street, containing the just-closed Wursthause restaurant, the Tasty Sandwich Shop and a branch of the Bank of Boston. Since this chunk of real estate doesn't have a name, we're going to call it the Tasty Crescent.

The Crescent is Harvard Square in miniature. "All human pleasure," huffed Dr. Samuel Johnson, "consists in variety."

ARCHITECTURE, Page E9

Waging a battle over the heart of Harvard Square

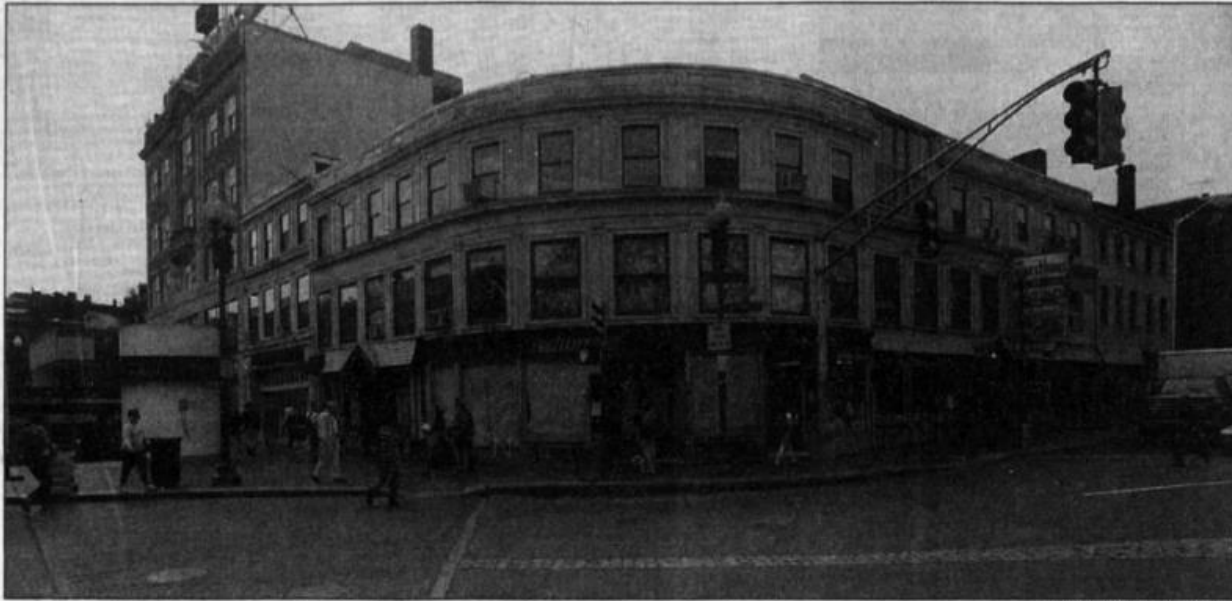
■ ARCHITECTURE

Continued from Page E1

That's the square. You have endless choices, all in one small place. In the square you can live, work, eat, shop, worship, play, perform and promenade. You can schmooze with tweeded professors, green-haired teens, Armani-clad sophisticates and moms from Schenectady. You can compare the architecture of today with that of the 18th century. Everything is present at once.

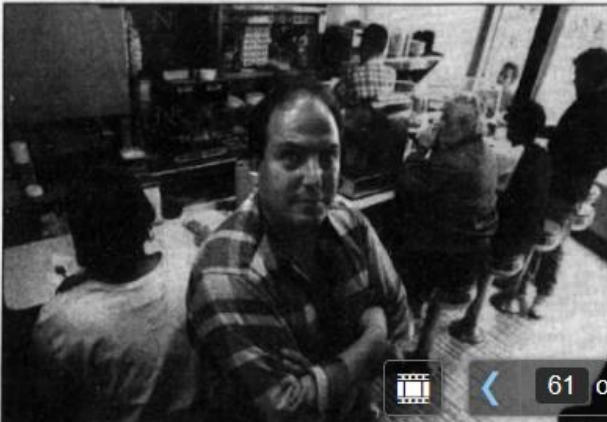
It's a far cry from strip-mall America, where every new experience requires another isolating car trip. That's why the residents of that other America troll daily through Harvard Square in tourist buses. The square is perceived as exotic, like the wildlife on an African safari. Sad, because every town used to have its own busy version of Main Street. You didn't have to make an expedition.

Almost everything you can do in the square, you can do in the tiny Tasty Crescent. In that sense, the debate about the Tasty Crescent is a tiny version of the battle for the American city, and for the preservation of a public life. The arena for the debate at the moment is the Cambridge Historical Commission, the agency that watches over the city's heritage. The commission potentially has the power to "landmark" the crescent, an official action that significantly limits the owner's freedom to alter the building. The commission is employing that power to urge the Cambridge Savings Bank, the crescent's owner, to improve its redevelopment proposal. The debate is going to continue, at the commission and elsewhere, for a few more



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DAVID L. RYAN

The Crescent Block is a salad of several buildings of different eras, the oldest of which was built, as a house, before 1800.



erations.

But there's another side to the Tasty issue. The Tasty Crescent of today is the product of 200 years of change. You're not preserving it if you don't preserve its quality of changeability. If it weren't reinventing itself all the time, it certainly wouldn't feel like Harvard Square. So there's a paradox: The Tasty must change, and it must remain the same. Preserve the Tasty - or the square - too zealously, and it becomes Squareland, a self-conscious tourist diorama. Preserve it too timidly, and it loses its soul to thoughtless redevelopment.

Jane Thompson is a planner who

they know they've lost.

It's too soon to know how this is all going to turn out. The owners, their architects (Stubbins Associates of Cambridge), the Historical Commission and other groups are engaged in a process of negotiation. Much of it takes place in public meetings, in which the square's many fans and constituents do indeed "overhear and chime in." After a slow start, Cambridge Savings has accepted the fact that it isn't going to be allowed simply to demolish. Some of what is old will be preserved, for new uses in a new millennium. New construction will be permitted too, helping the owner earn a profit and respecting the square's historic ability to reinvent itself. As of now, the prospects look pretty good.

What's going on in Cambridge is pretty much an ideal example of a democratic planning process. This is the way we should build. We should consider what really makes places work, think about how we want to live our lives, and then work through public forums to make sure we get an environment that will support our needs. As a side benefit, we get to know one another through the process, and thus bond - owners, architects, government and citizens - as a community.

Doing things right costs money. Cambridge Savings will end up paying more than it expected for its building. But as bankers are always the first to remind us, you get what you pay for. The public deserves a voice in the shaping of the world it must inhabit.

ing of time and the evolving story of this place at the heart of the city."

And Thompson on the need for frequent doors along the sidewalk: "Each doorway is a point of movement, of coming and going, creating encounters and sociability."

...

What we've lost

Insights like those are the essence of city-making. We've forgotten too many of them.

Or have we? All those tourist trolleys say maybe we haven't. Our visitors are looking for something



and elsewhere, for a few more months. As of now, it's still at the stage of deciding how much of the old buildings to preserve.

...

Layers of history

A little background:

The Cambridge Savings Bank acquired the crescent a couple of years ago from the previous owner, who'd held it for nearly a century. At the time, the bank assumed it would just knock down the old buildings and build something new. In almost any other American city that would have been allowed, even encouraged. Ditto for any previous era in the history of Harvard Square. Nobody would have said "boo."

But now the square is perceived as something to be preserved. It has become a rarity. What's interesting is that by conventional standards, there's nothing to preserve in the Tasty Crescent. This collection of structures has no architectural importance, no historic significance.

So what is it, exactly, that's so important to save?

Just about everything that matters, all the virtues of any good human habitat. Things much more important than individual buildings. Start with the layering of time and memory. The Crescent Block is a salad of several buildings of different eras, the oldest of which was built, as a house, before 1800. That house — the Read House — added a bay window in the 19th century, with a view



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DAVID L. RYAN

Peter Haddad, owner of the Tasty restaurant, inside his shop.

record of 200 years? Build something all new? Forget it.

In a case like this, preservation serves more than one purpose. First, it preserves the richness and depth of time in a place. You feel you're in a place with a past. You sense an ongoing narrative. Every building

gains the fascination of a detective novel. Who did what to it, and when? Second, preservation becomes a tool for avoiding monotony. Anything built all at once, no matter how good, is likely to be less interesting than a place that's been built up by many people with many tastes, over gen-

ness redevelopment.

Jane Thompson is a planner who works in the square and lives nearby. She sums up some key issues in an eloquent memo to the Historical Commission.

Thompson on the Tasty shop itself: "A place to go eye to eye with other people, to overhear and chime in." (Surely the perfect definition of intimacy in a public place.)

Thompson on the Tasty Crescent facade: "In its simple vernacular style, in its old fabric and patina, worn and dented surfaces and irregular quirky scale, it tells of the pass-

The Boston Globe

Book Festival 1996

Saturday, October 19

BOOK & AUTHOR LUNCHEON

Mary Higgins Clark, "My Gal Sunday: Henry and Sunday Stories"

Jeffrey Toobin, "The Run of His Life: The People vs. O.J. Simpson"

Suzanne E. Berger, "Horizontal Woman: The Story of a Body in Exile"

John H. Davis, "Jacqueline Bouvier: An Intimate Memoir"



You don't see the oldest architecture from the street. That's because in 1896, someone wrapped this little village of buildings with a continuous curved wooden facade, the front we see today. Later, in 1928, someone else literally sawed a vertical cut in the wood wall, so as to be able to jack up the building on one side (the side that was the 18th-century house) to allow the insertion of a Waldorf Cafeteria on the ground floor. This is the space now occupied by the Bank of Boston.

Wipe that out? All that accumulated change over time? All the funny angles and bumps and kinks, the
