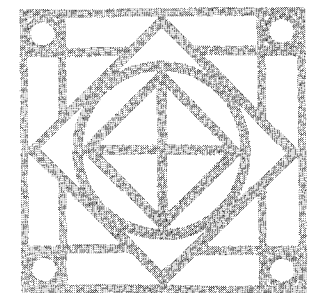
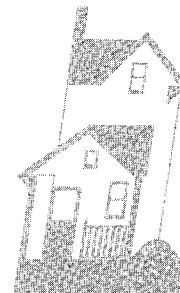
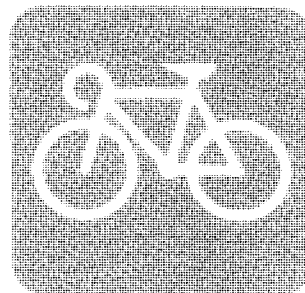
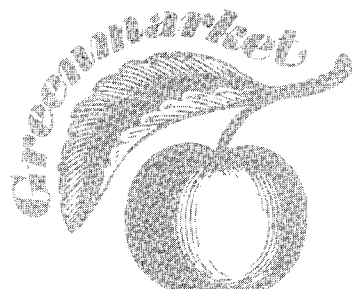
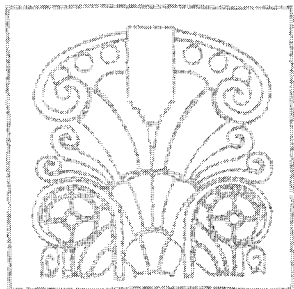


This is an excerpt from:

1991  
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# CONNECTIONS: CREATING URBAN EXCELLENCE

Jay Farbstein and Richard Wener



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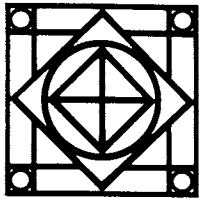
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## ROSLINDALE VILLAGE MAIN STREET Boston, Massachusetts

### INITIAL SELECTION COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

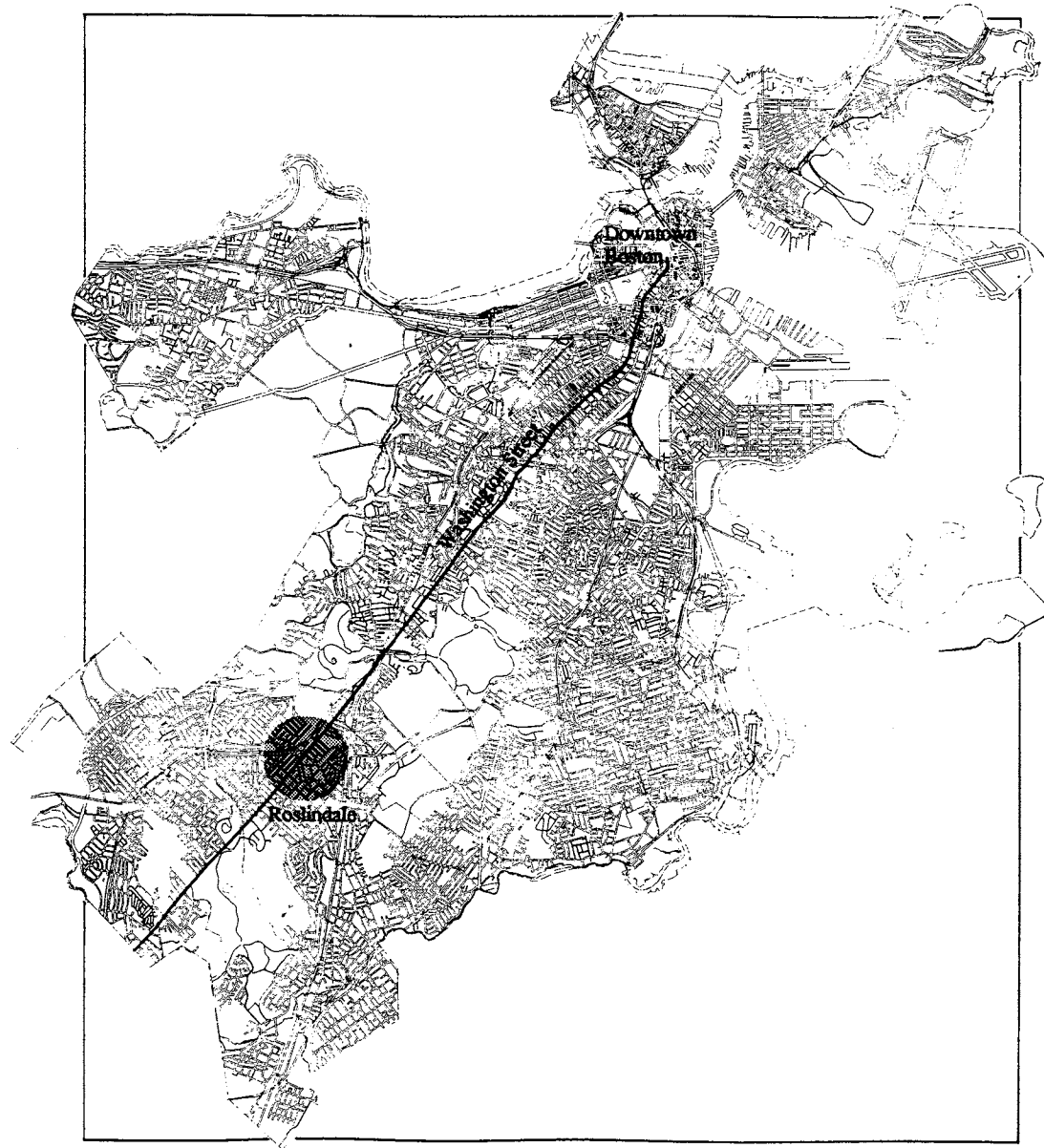
#### Initial Reasons For Including Roslindale as a Finalist

- Storefront rehabilitation is an important issue for US cities.
- It's a comprehensive business district project — a complete revitalization program.
- The storefront rehabilitation is “real,” “not fussy”.
- It includes the economic dimension of redevelopment; they were conscious of economic issues (e.g., tracking occupancy levels).
- They had a large number of new signs and new businesses and a decline in 1st and 2nd floor vacancy rates.
- They included all six elements of successful revitalization:
  - organize merchants
  - involve surrounding residents
  - have events and promotions



*Storefront improvements.*

- improve public space to create amenities and space, bringing people into the retail area
- improve private appearance
- business development to change mix, capability and viability of businesses.



*Roslindale in relation to downtown Boston.*

### Selection Committee Concerns and Questions

- Not sure exactly what they did. How much beyond just façades?
- Are store improvements and the decline in vacancy rates really linked?
- Is it running counter to economic trends?
- Are they really doing all six of the “elements” cited above?
- What’s there physically?
- Is it seen as working and as a model within Boston — or is it unique?
- How does the community feel about it?
- Who is in charge?
- Is there an assessment district? How did they determine how to do this?
- Will it run down when the grant-funded staff person goes?
- Is there an advocacy group?

### THE PROJECT AT A GLANCE

#### What It Is

- Private non-profit community group revitalizing a neighborhood business district in Boston. An outgrowth of Nation Trust’s Main Street Center Urban Demonstration Project.

### Who Made Submission

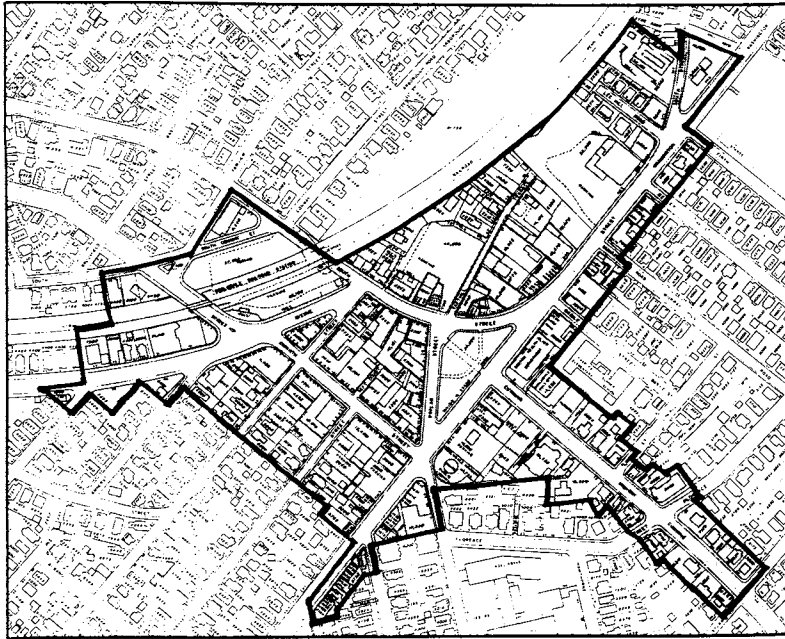
- Roslindale Village Main Street (community-based organization).

### Major Goals

- Provide organizational framework for merchants, residents and commercial property owners to work toward the betterment of their community.
- Improve physical environment through architectural and infrastructure improvements.
- Build a strong organization through community outreach that would provide support for local businesses and increased effectiveness in state and city political matters.
- Maintain a calendar of promotional activities that would reinforce civic pride, stimulate commercial activity, and promote cultural diversity.

### Accomplishments

- Longest lasting group of the National Trust Main Street Urban Demonstration Program.
- Improved signs and rehabilitated storefronts on a number of commercial buildings.
- New businesses have been attracted into the village, old ones have expanded.
- Physical improvement to local streets, walks, parks.
- Effective lobbyists to city agencies.
- Provides year-round calendar of events.



*The extent of the Roslindale Village master plan study area.*

- Has formed as a coalition of local community groups.
- Generated an estimated \$5 million in private improvements.

**Issues That Could Affect Selection as Winner**

- Aesthetic quality of changes is modest. There are still many un-renovated storefronts.
- Relatively low initial involvement of poor and black residents; now beginning outreach program.
- Is it transferable or dependent on individual personalities?
- Some gains may be at risk from Massachusetts' economic hard times.

- Village still needs to expand its variety of stores (especially with a supermarket).
- Some merchants do not feel involved with the Main Street group.

**PROCESS**

**Planning/Implementation Process/Chronology**

- 1984: Tom Menino (then running for City Council) organized a group of Roslindale residents and merchants to begin dealing with problems in the retail district. A broad coalition of groups consisting of the Board of Trade, the Roslindale Coalition (community activists), and Boston's Neighborhood Development and Employment Agency put together an application to the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Urban Demonstration Program.
- 1985: Roslindale Village was selected as one of the original group of eight neighborhoods in the Main Street Urban Demonstration program.
- 1985 - 1988: The National Main Street Center provided organizational consulting and training and program-related matching grants. A number of Roslindale Village Main Street members went to Washington for training sessions.
- 1988: Support from the National Main Street Center ended. Roslindale Village Main Street chose to continue as an independent, community-based organization.
- 1989: Roslindale Village Main Street published a Masterplan of Streetscape and Sidewalk Improvements (study funded by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts) guiding \$3 million of infrastructure improvements

- 1989: Adams Park (at core of area) restoration completed.
- 1990: Original executive director leaves. Board of directors expands to carry the burden of work.
- 1991: Roslindale Village Main Street continues to operate as the only one of the eight original communities in the Urban Demonstration program to survive as an independent entity (several ceased to exist while others became parts of larger, on-going organizations).

#### Key Participants

- Roslindale Village Main Street (RVMS).
- National Trust Main Street Center — Urban Demonstration Project.
- City officials and departments (Councilman Tom Menino, Public Facilities, Arts and Humanities).



*Kiddieland before renovations.*

- Design firms (Pat Loheed — landscape architect for park; Chan, Krieger, Levi — urban designer for streetscape improvements).
- Community groups.

#### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

##### Social and Economic History of Roslindale Village Main Street

By Boston standards this is not a very old community, dating to the late 19th Century. It was a solid blue collar, ethnic neighborhood. Many respondents recalled the Roslindale Village shopping district (along Washington Street) through the 1950s as being a pleasant and popular place to shop.

Its more recent decline is attributed to the development of large suburban shopping malls in the 1960s. The weakening



*Kiddieland after renovations.*

of the retail area was exacerbated by busing and related racial problems of the early 1970s. While most people say that racial problems were not intense in Roslindale Village, there was anxiety over busing into and out of the area and some “white flight” occurred. An influx of Greek immigrants into the neighborhood stopped property values from plummeting and kept the community stable.

Through the 1970s and into the early 1980s the retail area weakened. Some businesses left and arson fires took a significant toll (9 arsons at commercial sites in 1981). Foot traffic in the retail district declined significantly.

In the past (Kevin White) city administration, Roslindale Village was the target of some spending for capital improvements, but these efforts left a decidedly bad taste in the locals’ mouths. Without consultation, the city, spent over \$2 million to turn a back alley into an open market area. Local citizens say they felt it was a mistake from the start. The area was not used as a market until recently.

Ethnically, the neighborhood remains largely a lower middle class, blue collar area with a considerable number of people of Italian, Eastern European, or Mediterranean origin. There is, however, some diversity. There are two large public housing projects within the community with a largely poor and black population. There is also a growing community of young professionals, largely white, who have been attracted by its relatively affordable housing stock and convenient location (close to downtown on public transportation routes).

### **Organizational History of Roslindale Village Main Street**

Roslindale Village Main Street has clearly benefited from the presence of strong individuals. “Tommy” Menino, the local city council representative, is widely credited with getting the process off the ground and continuing to act as their champion in City Hall. Kathy McCabe, the original executive

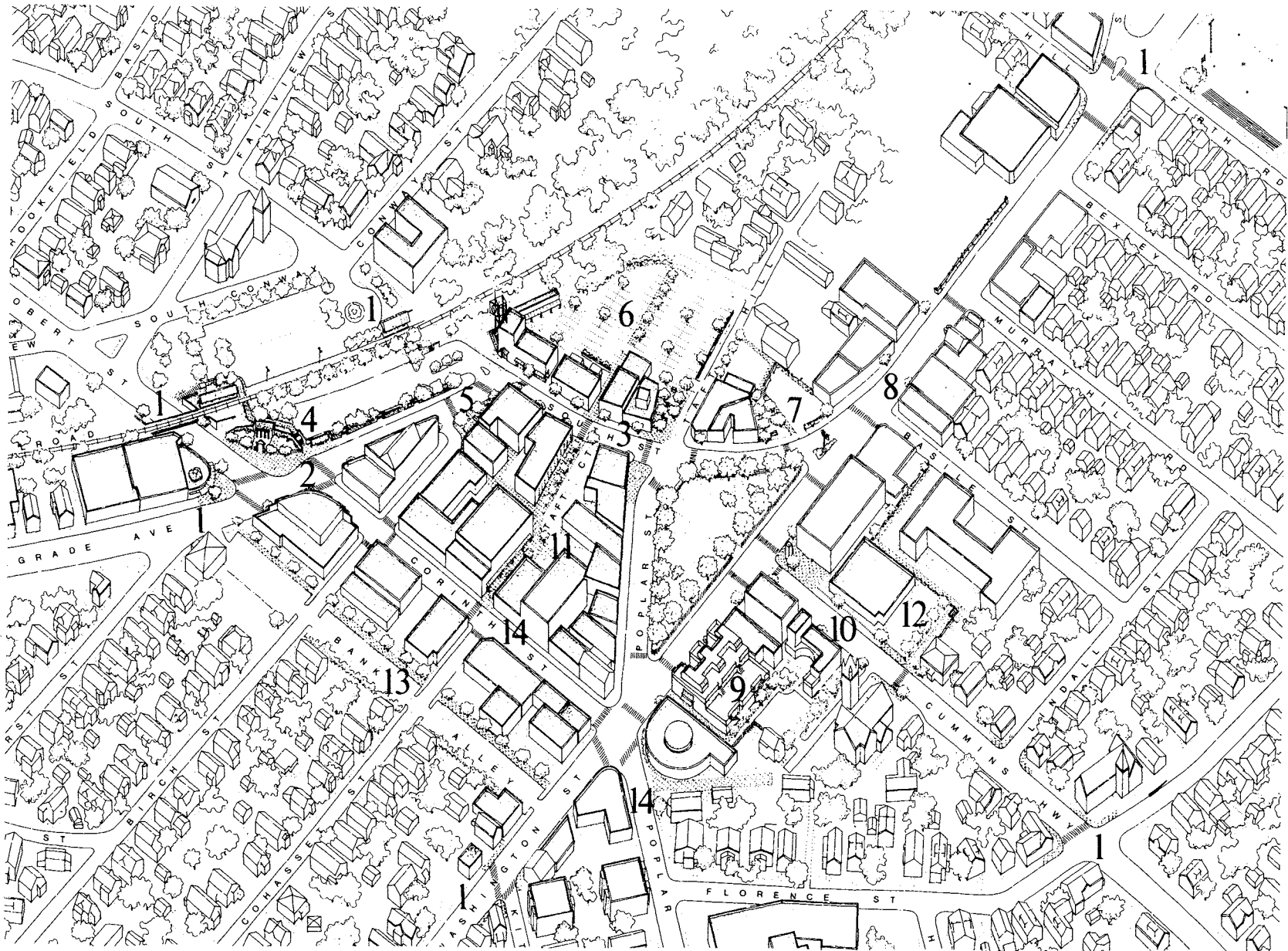
director, was a driving force in organizing the community and lobbying City Hall. It is also clear, however, that this was never a one person operation. There has been a highly involved group of merchants and residents who have had considerable staying power. Many of some individuals are still active after seven years and new people are getting involved at this time.

Roslindale Village Main Street as an organization has also demonstrated the ability to grow and adapt to change. Its most important test came when McCabe left the organization in mid-1990. Many people, in City Hall and Roslindale Village, were worried about the survival of the program without a single strong leader. Several people described the situation as common to small organizations — they are built by a strong, entrepreneurial leader and have to learn to survive when that leader leaves (so-called “founder’s disease”). Many don’t make it. However, in response to McCabe’s departure, the Board of Directors expanded its size and responsibilities. Individual merchants and residents took over the duties of the director and met more frequently for decision making. Roslindale Village Main Street is widely perceived as being as effective as ever. The search is on now for a new executive director who will probably be less powerful, with the board maintaining a larger role in operations. They are looking to expand membership, to reach out to residential areas and to poorer citizens, and to offer such benefits as group health insurance for members.

### **The National Trust Main Street Program**

The National Trust Main Street Center saw the Urban Demonstration Program as an opportunity to apply the lessons it had learned from years of supporting small town main streets to urban needs. They did not feel that every urban situation was appropriate for the Main Street program. Rather, they looked for sites with a longstanding sense of community identity and place. This was a competitive





Roslindale Village master plan.

process, so each applicant needed to be well organized and highly motivated. Roslindale Village fit those criteria. The Main Street program as presented by the National Trust consisted of four parts according to its "DOPE" slogan (design, organization, promotion, and economic restructuring):

1. **Design.** Improve the physical appearance of the site.
2. **Organization.** Build a strong, broad based, participatory Main Street organization.
3. **Promotion.** Develop a cultural calendar to bring people to the Main Street area.
4. **Economic Restructuring.** Develop a strategy for strengthening local businesses.

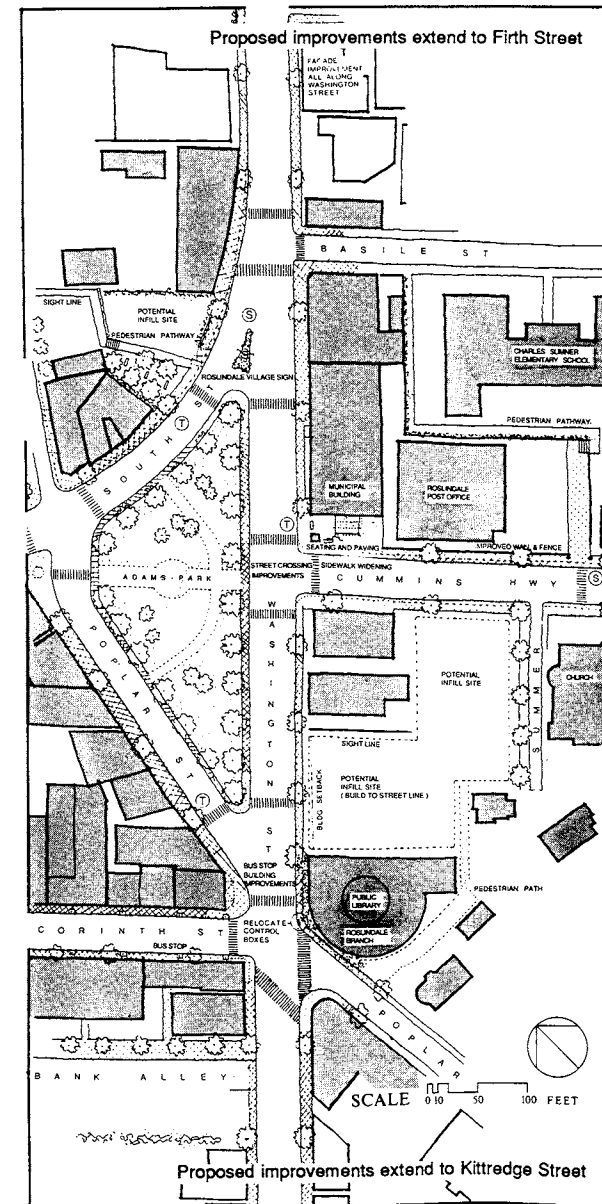
The Main Street program did not provide funds, only expertise. The local sites, in fact, had to spend money they raised for the training sessions provided by the National Trust. Part of the task of a local site was to develop funding to maintain the organization and pay for the program.

**The Main Street Program in Roslindale Village**

Roslindale Village responded to the Main Street training incrementally, but on all fronts.

**Activities.** Local activities were quickly organized. The first International Festival, in Adams Park, was organized in three weeks. Now, in its seventh year, the festival is a large, well attended, and ethnically diverse folk and food fair.

They also organized a spring clean-up day to get volunteers to pick up litter and plant flowers. This has grown into the annual "Roslindale Blooming" spring planting celebration. RVMS successfully lobbied to become one of four regional



Site plan of Washington Street with recommended improvements.

recycling centers in Boston. There is a list of over 150 volunteers who help with this once-a-month operation.

**Physical Improvements.** The drive to improve the appearance of Roslindale Village centered on upgrading local store fronts and signs, and influencing city plans for infrastructure capital projects. Local architects and designers served as consultants to work with merchants on their signs. RVMS acted as liaison and consultant to help local merchants obtain Neighborhood Development Bank loans to pay for signs and other improvements. They also helped obtain needed approvals and permits from the city. A consultant in store window display design was hired to give workshops to local merchants.

For the larger infrastructure changes, RVMS worked closely with (i.e., heavily pressured) the city. Improvements to Adams Park — the central feature of the Village — was a collaborative effort. Funds for the design and landscaping came from the Browne Fund (a city governed trust fund, which also commits to replacing items as and if needed). The city Public Facilities Department and the landscape architect consulted extensively with RVMS on the park's design, resulting in a plan which seems satisfactory to all. A grant from the Bank of Boston provides for park maintenance (presumably in perpetuity). The design of the park is sensitive to its historic roots (in its planting and use light standards and fencing), but also to present uses. For example, its layout supports concerts and the International Festival by providing for location of a portable a stage and power outlets for amplifiers. A work of public art is a ground level mosaic in the center of the park, with was built with money from the city Arts and Humanities Department. It is considered successful by all who were involved.

When the new commuter train line opened its station at the edge of the Roslindale Village Main Street area, RVMS was successful in several battles. First, they convinced the Transit Authority to rename the stop "Roslindale Village", solidifying

the image they were trying to forge for the area. Second, they succeeded in getting a parcel of land owned by the rail line converted from a gas station to a small park (with supposedly Greek design features, in honor of that segment of the population).

Improvements to Washington Street have included installing new sidewalks and light fixtures. Officials report that RVMS members showed up at meetings in force and armed with plans ("they really did their homework. For example, they were able to say exactly what kind of brick they wanted") and thus were effective in getting the city to respond to their requests.

To a significant extent, the story of aesthetic changes is one of many small victories. The RVMS Design Review Committee has no statutory power over local design, but seeks cooperation through persuasion. A frequently cited example was the construction of a new building by the Ace Quick Oil Change. The Committee was able to get the company to change its façade from concrete block and corrugated siding to wood clapboard siding, much more appropriate to the neighborhood. They also influenced its color scheme and graphics. The Committee also claims responsibility for designing many of the replacement signs which have been erected in the Village.

A recent urban design study, prepared by Chan, Kreiger, Levi, will lead to significant further improvements in streets and sidewalks (see illustrations). It carefully considers these aspects of the public infrastructure, and will lead to strengthening of the visual environment.

Esthetically, Roslindale Village is not striking except when viewed through an historical lens. The cumulative changes are significant when directly compared to the deteriorated and burned out facades of 1985, although there are still many signs and storefronts which have not been renovated.

**Outreach To And Support Of Local Businesses.** RVMS has encouraged local businesses to stay and remodel, and has sought out new businesses. Surveys were done of local residents and businesses to see what improvements were most desired and what kinds of businesses most needed. A market study was also prepared.

The major current deficiency is the lack of a supermarket (the local market went through a long slow decline before finally expiring several years ago). The effort to obtain a new market includes pushing the city to provide improved store parking and lobbying a Boston food cooperative to consider Roslindale. The co-op president says that Roslindale would not have been considered without the Main Street effort because of its demographics, but is currently a strong contender for the site of their new store due to the enthusiasm and support of RVMS.

Their effectiveness has been, in part, by acting as a “one-stop shop” for merchants needing to deal with city agencies. RVMS helps merchants find out about loan and aid programs and fill out forms. They act as the merchant’s advocate in dealing with agencies and officials.

For many in and out of Roslindale Village, its most laudable trait is its effectiveness as a lobbyist in City Hall. They are known as a group that goes to agencies and meetings often, in force, and loudly. They have been referred to, with grudging admiration, as “feisty” and “a pain in the neck,” but all agree they are effective.

### **Roslindale Village Main Street as a Model**

According to officials at City Hall, Roslindale Village Main Street has been a model for the new “Enterprising Neighborhoods” program. The city concluded that it was a wasteful mistake to impose city programs on neighborhoods. Rather, the new plan considers city agencies as resources

which neighborhoods can take advantage of. Communities must apply in a competitive process to become an Enterprising Neighborhood, and must demonstrate local organization and commitment. The lesson they have taken from RVMS is that the drive and goals must come from the community and not be imposed from above.

RVMS members agree with these lessons and feel their experience can be a guide for others. They emphasize the need for a community to have a core of highly motivated individuals who are willing to put in the long hours required to make a program work. The city’s cooperation is crucial, they note, but its control is deadly.

### **Financing**

The National Main Street Center did not provide support funds for Roslindale Village. The recent annual operating budget of about \$150,000 (less this year) depends entirely on fund-raising events, members’ contributions and grants from financial institutions and the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Specific projects have had their own funding. The Adams Park renovation, for example, was completed with support from the Browne Fund, a privately donated trust administered by the city. The park is maintained through a yearly \$20,000 grant from the Bank of Boston.

RVMS attributes its staying power, in part, to this funding scheme. It forced them to seek diversified funding sources from the start. If they had been dependent on National Trust or city funding, they said, they could have foundered long ago.

Main Street improvements to signs and store fronts were largely accomplished by private funds, supported in many cases by grants and low-interest loans (3/4 prime) from the Neighborhood Development Bank. An estimated \$5 million of private funds has gone into these projects since 1985. The

program has recently been withdrawn by the city, on the theory that there is a sufficient level of momentum in the area to carry improvements forward by private investment alone.

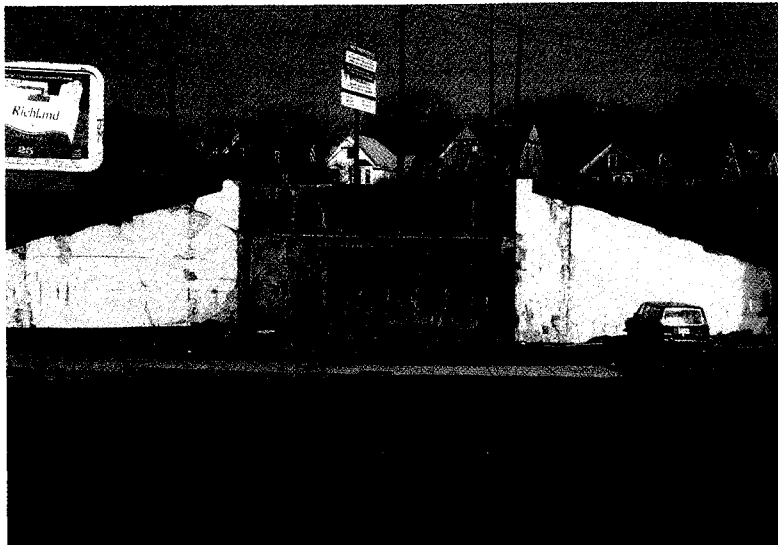
Infrastructure improvements along Washington Street are part of the capital budget of Boston's Public Facilities Department.

### ASSESSING PROJECT SUCCESS...

#### ...By Original Goals

**Provide organizational framework for merchants, residents and commercial property owners to better their community.**

- RVMS provides a strong organizational umbrella for these groups. Originally, it was geared almost entirely toward merchants; more recently, it is actively reaching out to other sectors.



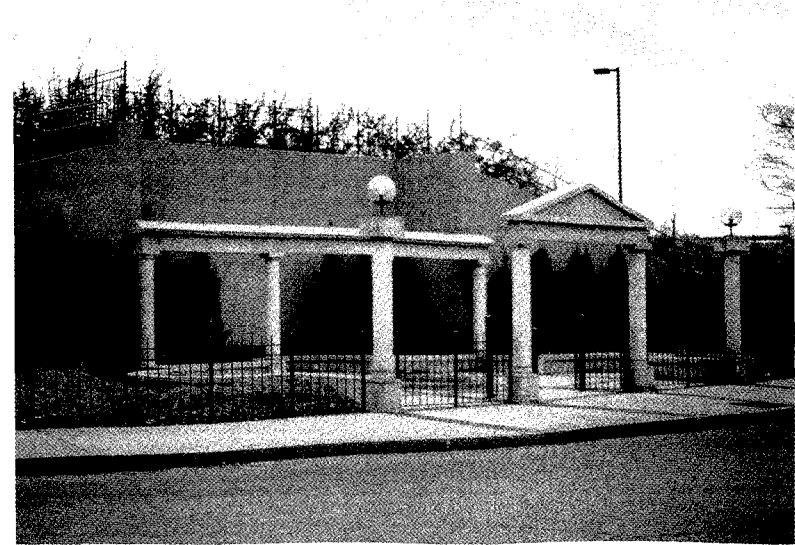
*Greek Park before renovation.*

**Improve physical environment through architectural and infrastructure improvements.**

- Significant physical improvements have been made and more are planned. Improvements include street and sidewalk improvements, a sensitive renovation of the park, and the rehabilitation of a fairly large number of store fronts and signs. While not physically striking, the area is clearly greatly improved compared to how it looked in recent years.

**To build a strong organization through community outreach that would provide support for local businesses and increased effectiveness in state and city political matters.**

- RVMS actively supports local businesses (with the city and through its promotional activities) and is a very effective lobbyist.



*Greek Park after renovation.*

**Maintain a calendar of promotional activities that would reinforce civic pride, stimulate commercial activity, and promote cultural diversity.**

- RVMS promotes a full and diverse calendar of events which seem to be well attended and help to both draw people to the area and bring different cultures and ethnic groups together.

**...By Selection Committee Concerns**

**Not sure exactly what they did. How much beyond just façades?**

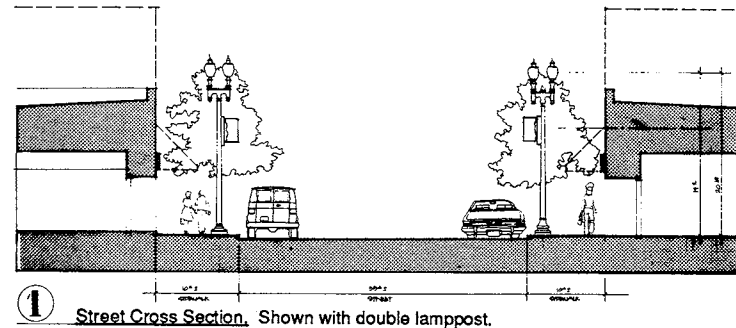
- Successfully organized merchants, residents and community groups; promoted improved signs and storefronts; attracted new businesses; promoted calendar of events; lobby group to the city; obtained major park and street improvements.

**Are store improvements and the decline in vacancy rates really linked?**

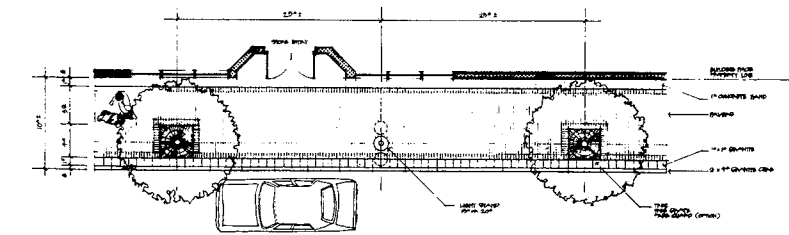
- Probably, yes. Clearly, several large businesses would have left if not for RVMS intervention, and some new businesses would not have moved in. While the economic improvements can not be tied solely to the store improvements, they are clearly linked to the overall program of revitalization of the commercial area.

**Is it running counter to economic trends?**

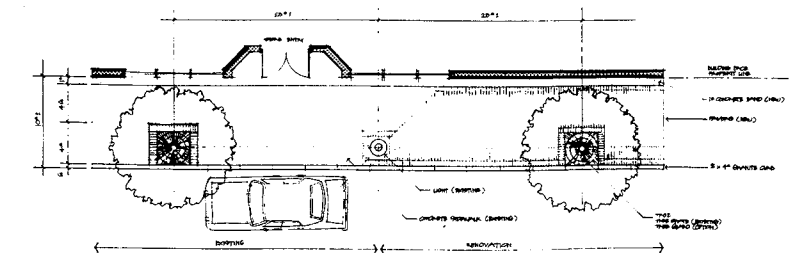
- In some ways. While Boston's severe recession is hurting local businesses, commercial and residential property values have not been dropping in the last



**1** Street Cross Section. Shown with double lamppost.



**A** Proposed Sidewalk Treatment.  
Brick sidewalk with 1'-0"x1'-0" granite pavers and granite curb.  
Used at Cummins Highway, Belgrade Avenue, and South, Birch, and Washington Streets.



*Details of the proposed sidewalk treatment along improved streets.*

few years. The recession's reversal of the area's improvement appears to have been slight, where it would perhaps have been expected to be much greater.

**Are they really doing all six of the "elements" cited above?**

- Yes, and doing most of them very effectively. The biggest needs now are to bring other ethnic groups (poor, black) into the fold and to attract several key businesses (especially a supermarket).

**Physically, what's there?**

- A busy local shopping area with few vacancies and pleasant central park. Many storefronts have been improved, but many more are yet to be done.

**Is it seen as working and as a model within Boston — or is it unique?**

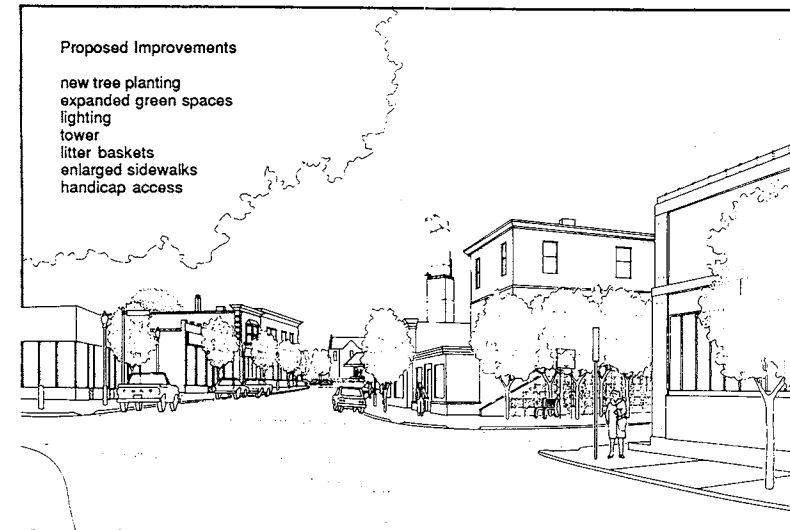
- It is viewed as a model by residents and by City Hall, which has to a significant extent patterned its overall commercial revitalization program after Roslindale.

**How does the community feel about it?**

- In general, the community is very positive about the changes RVMS has brought. A large segment of residents are more aware of specific activities (e.g., recycling and the International Festival) than of RVMS. Some small store owners feel left out of RVMS; they are, apparently, welcome to join).

**Who is in charge?**

- At this point, the board of directors (merchants, residents, local professionals) is clearly in charge.



*Perspective looking up South Street showing proposed street improvements and tower.*

**Is there an assessment district? How did they determine how to do this?**

- No. They have opted to rely on dues from voluntary memberships and the revenues generated by promotional events. Past grants paid for their staff; now, with much reduced grant support, they have expanded their board and membership (see next item).

**Will it run down when the grant-funded staff person goes?**

- No. They have been through two major changes (ending the Main Street program and the executive director leaving) and have survived. They do not now rely on grant funded positions.

**Is there an advocacy group?**

- They serve as a very effective advocacy group for members and for the neighborhood as a whole.

**...By Other Concerns**

**Making it on a shoestring in poor economic times.**

- RVMS is well aware of its limitations and challenges for the future. It is a dedicated group of hard working local merchants and residents who are devoting a great deal of energy toward developing and maintaining the quality of their village center.

**SELECTION COMMITTEE COMMENTS**

The Selection Committee was particularly impressed with the overall community impact of the Roslindale Village project, an example of effective participatory grass roots planning. Many of its design elements were seen as quite successful. In particular, the Selection Committee cited the new Greek style park at Roslindale Station and the renovated Adams Park as both functional and esthetically pleasing. Some building facades and signs were also very successful, while others were viewed as "amateurish" from a design perspective. Still, while not visually impressive on its own, the neighborhood has clearly been transformed by the Roslindale Village projects.

The Selection Committee felt that Roslindale Village's impacts should be viewed within the context of local response to broader, regional issues. In particular, Roslindale demonstrates an important community-based response to economic and social dislocations which have often been brought by "the insidiousness of regional shopping malls" and super stores. Roslindale Village represents an attempt to

restore the economic vitality and social fabric of a viable neighborhood. It is the "successful conclusion to a thoughtful process" and shows the power of a broad-based participatory process working hand-in-hand with the local and national government programs.

The Selection Committee did note that Roslindale could benefit from expanding its focus to include potential connections to the Boston park system and deal with housing issues.

**For More Information...**

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