

Tomorrow:

Landlords are making concessions that were rare a few years ago, such as doing renovations, paying brokers' fees, and lowering the rent.

Real Estate

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THE BOSTON GLOBE SATURDAY, JULY 19, 2003

Emerson takes center stage in Midtown

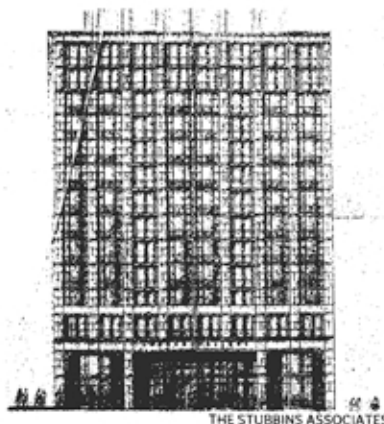
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For years, Emerson College inhabited hand-me-down real estate, residential and commercial buildings that had been built for others.

In recent decades, Emerson occupied about 700,000 square feet in 12 Victorian town houses in the Back Bay. In 1992, it started to relocate into office buildings it had bought in the Theater District — at the time a dismal neighborhood, despite its Boston Common location.

Now, the 3,200-student communications and performing arts college is at a watershed. Last week, Emerson won final city approval to build a \$75 million, 600-bed dormitory on the Piano Row section of Boylston Street in the Theater District. Construction is to start next winter. And by Labor Day, Emerson is scheduled to open its \$35 million Tufte Performance and Production Center. State-of-the-art broadcast studios, two small theaters, dressing rooms, and loading docks will be shared with the Cutler Majestic Theatre at Emerson College, a 1,200-seat Beaux Arts venue built in 1903 that reopened in May,



A rendering of the dorm Emerson plans to build, its first in 123 years.

after a \$14 million restoration.

The Tufte center, which was designed by Elkus/Manfredi Architects Ltd., and the dorm, by The Stubbins Associates, are the first new facilities Emerson has developed in its 123-year history. The projects also signal the final stage of Emerson's relocation from the residential Back Bay to

the commercial Midtown area.

All classrooms and offices are now in Midtown; only three dorms and the student union remain in the Back Bay. Once the dorm opens in 2005, the school will occupy about 850,000 square feet in six buildings and the Majestic.

For the city, this all highlights the transformation of a neighborhood from derelict to desirable. Emerson's front door, 120 Boylston St., is just steps from what used to be the Combat Zone.

Emerson's relocation, at a total cost of about \$225 million, has ushered in improvements that are among the most significant Midtown has seen in recent years.

"It's great for the city," said Paul L. McCann, deputy to the director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority. "The college couldn't have captured enough space in the Back Bay, but by selling that property it was able to establish a signature presence on the Boston Common."

"For the city, they brought in life that helped eliminate crime downtown, freed up Back Bay housing, put it back on the tax rolls, and gave Boston a new showcase: the Majestic Theatre."

In 1970, about 40 acres between Arlington and Washington streets were designated as a federal urban renewal area. That gave the city authority — and money — to acquire key parcels, which were then conveyed to private developers. By the late 1980s, the Four Seasons Hotel and The Heritage luxury condominiums had opened on Boylston Street, as well as the State Transportation Building.

In the past two years, the \$500 million, 1.8-million-square-foot Millennium Place opened nearby, between Tremont and Washington streets. Its luxury condominiums, hotel, health club, and cinema have given the area a new cachet.

"Emerson College was the first to see the potential of this neighborhood; after all, there's only one Boston Common," said the complex's developer, Anthony Pangaro, principal of Millennium Partners-Boston.

"In 1992, the neighborhood was vacant storefronts and littered sidewalks. But the presence of Emerson students brought it back in balance and put it on people's mental map of desirable places."

In the late 1980s, seeking more space,

Emerson had planned to relocate to Lawrence. But it dropped the idea in 1989, as cost estimates for the move rose, and as Boston's commercial property market started a six-year slide, said Robert A. Silverman, who became Emerson vice president for administration and finance in 1992. He and President Jacqueline Liebergott decided instead to buy property in the Theater District, gambling the neighborhood would turn around.

"We paid Depression-era prices," Silverman said: \$25 per square foot for both the 100,000-square-foot 180 Tremont St., now classrooms, offices and the college radio station, and for the 200,000-square-foot 80 Boylston St., a dormitory. Emerson purchased the buildings out of foreclosure in 1992 and 1993. As property prices rebounded, Silverman financed 45 percent of the move with the Back Bay sales, he said. Last month, he sold 126-130 Beacon St. for \$11.5 million, or \$250 per square foot.

Emerson is now considered among the city's savvy deal makers. "It drove up the value of buildings," said Marci Loeber, of Cushman & Wakefield of Massachusetts.