



CITY OF SOMERVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
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HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

DETERMINATION OF SIGNIFICANCE STAFF REPORT

Site:	181-191 Washington Street	
Case:	HPC 2012.092	
Applicant Name:	Somerville Community Corporation, Daniel LeBlanc, CEO	
Applicant Address:	337 Somerville Avenue, Somerville, MA 02143	
Date of Application:	August 15, 2012	HPC Received: August 20, 2012
Recommendation:	Significant	
Hearing Date:	October 16, 2012	

I. BUILDING DESCRIPTION

Architectural Description:

The Charles G. Pope School, constructed in 1956 at 181-191 Washington Street, is currently known as the Somerville Boys and Girls Club. The structure is located on a trapezoidal lot, with a significant grade change, at the corner of Washington and Boston streets. A moderately sized parking lot is located behind the building, accessible by a narrow driveway along Washington Street.



Top Left: Massing 1, located on Washington St

*Top Right: Massing 3, located on the corner of
Washington and Boston streets*

Next page, top: Massing 2, located on Boston Street





The split-level, Modern style building has an L-shape and a flat roof. This steel frame construction is primarily composed of reinforced concrete and the façades are a masonry veneer and aluminum curtain walls with fiberglass panels. Additionally, the Pope School was designed specifically for the 27 degree slope of this site.

The design of the structure notes three main components. The main massing, Massing 1, is located on Washington Street and is rectangular in shape and, presently, three stories in height. Massing 2, located on Boston Street, is two stories in height and, upon construction, consistent in height to Massing 1 on Washington Street. Massing 3, which is predominantly one story, is located at the corner of Washington and Beacon streets and unites massings 1 and 2.

Historical Description:

The original Charles G. Pope School, c. 1890, was named to honor the Mayor from 1889-1891 and was the first building constructed on this site. In 1951, three schools were condemned by the State due to the “survey of elementary school needs,” which was a Phase I recommendation from the long-term building program. “Structurally, the buildings have been fairly well maintained, considering their age. Educationally, however, these same school buildings are abject failures,” stated the survey. Soon after the Glines School on Jacques Street, the Bennett School on Poplar Street, and the original Pope School on Washington Street were demolished.

Plans for three new “storybook” elementary schools- the Healy School on Meacham Street, the Conwell School on Capen Street, and the new Pope School on Washington Street- were quickly undertaken. Designed as friendly environments to encourage education, these schools, known as storybook schools, offered the finest education tools of the day. The schools were not only modern in design and function, with “openness of planning,” but they were also composed of modern materials and building methods, such as prefabricated wall and ceiling sections, and translucent glass blocks and panels to allow for natural lighting.

Upon construction, the Charles G. Pope School contained six classrooms, a kindergarten room, a multipurpose auditorium for 250 people, a remedial reading room, a health room, and administrative offices. For student safety, main entries and exits were located at the rear of the building. Classrooms were located on one side of the corridor only, allowing the corridor itself to act as a noise barrier between Washington Street and the classrooms. Borrowed light panels, located between classrooms and corridors, were able to help properly distribute natural light into both areas. Additionally, administrative offices and public rooms were located on a half level between the two classroom floors so students would climb fewer stairs.

Materials were determined by their light characteristics and ease of maintenance. Floors were asphalt tile with a rubber tile base, while the stair treads, landings, and lobbies are still terrazzo tile. Ceilings were acoustical, fabricated from fireproof perforated asbestos-cement and installed over a glass wool acoustical blanket. The School was also equipped with a mechanical exhaust system, and an intercommunication and loudspeaker system. Color schemes of each classroom were determined by age level and classroom facilities were scaled to size according to grade level. Each classroom was equipped with a work alcove composed of stainless steel counters, sink, drinking fountains, and storage space for projects and teachers. All rooms had fluorescent lighting, designed for the needs of each individual classroom. The kindergarten room was designed to be intimate and friendly with warm colors and was located in a separate wing from the other classrooms with its own entrance, bathrooms, and play area. This separate wing is part of Massing 2 and has an entrance and play area along Beacon Street.

Architect:

The Charles G. Pope School was designed by Perley F. Gilbert Associates of Lowell, MA. Gilbert Associates, founded in 1872 by Otis A. Merrill, became Merrill & Cutler and then later became Merrill, Cutler & Gilbert. In the 1880s, Merrill & Cutler won a design competition for City Hall in Lowell and the firm continues to be well known for the Richardsonian Romanesque design of this building.

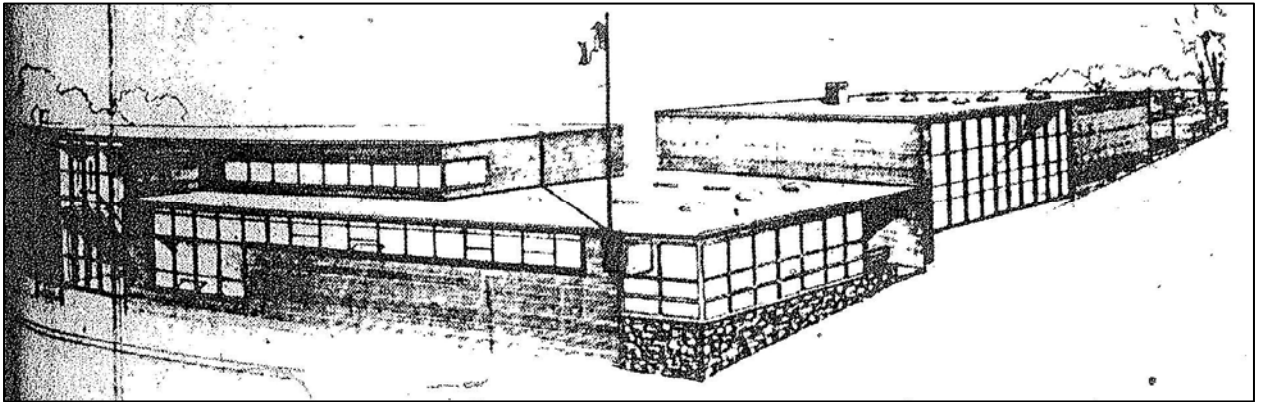
Perley Gilbert, an MIT graduate, invited Herbert Glassman and Edmund McMahon to join the firm in 1947 to design a modern school building. Glassman was “partner in charge” of the architectural division from 1949-1959 and Vice President from 1950-1959. Therefore, Glassman was likely involved with the modern design and programming of Somerville’s three new storybook schools. Glassman became President of Gilbert Associates by 1959 and under his tenure the firm won national recognition for the design of several schools throughout New England.

Glassman grew up in Dorchester and graduated from MIT in 1943 with a Bachelors degree in architecture. Enlisting in the Army Air Force as a Flight Cadet in 1943, Glassman was discharged in 1944 due to a glider crash during training that resulted in internal injuries. Post graduate work was later completed at George Washington University. Glassman and Edmund McMahon left H.P. Hood and Sons Dairy in Charlestown to establish their own firm in Lowell. Joining Gilbert Associates in 1947, Glassman was responsible for the design of approximately 112 school buildings throughout New England as well as 10 synagogues and 4 hospitals. Significant works include schools in East Jaffrey and Portsmouth NH; Springfield, VT; Attleboro, Ayer, Acton, and Maynard MA; and Sterling and Brockton High schools (MA) as well as educational parks and the Lowell Technical Institute student union. Glassman was selected for listing in 1971 “Who’s Who in America” for accomplishments in creating environments for learning and for the development of the Educational Parks concept. Glassman often donated his own time designing synagogues for congregations including Lexington, Lowell, Medford, Peabody and as far north as Portland, Maine.

Context/Evolution of Structure or Parcel:

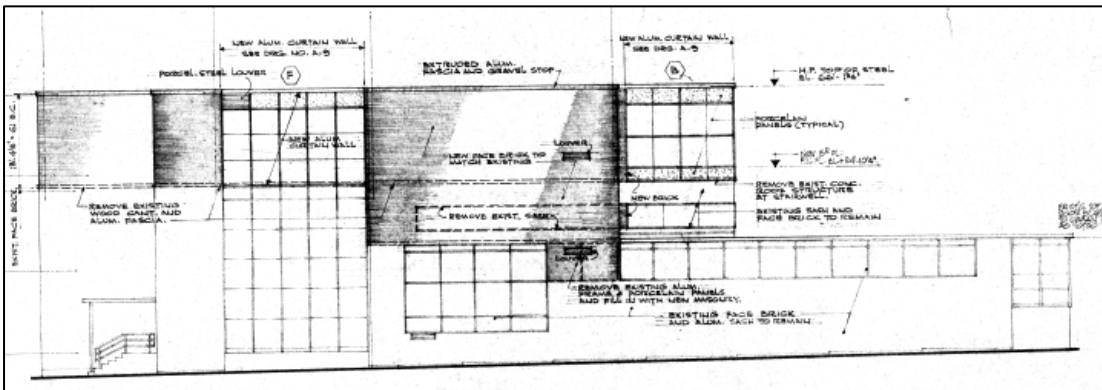
The building is currently located in a Commercial Corridor District with a height limit of 55 feet. The property is a 27,236 square foot lot. The gross floor area of the building is 22,264 square feet, which includes the basement. There is 10,000 square feet of asphalt located behind the building.

In 1971, due to severe overcrowding and in a manner consistent with the original design of the building, Somerville Engineering Inc. drew plans to add a third story to Massing 1 and a partial second and third story to Massing 3. This addition eliminated a majority of the second story setback above Massing 3. While a small portion of this setback above Massing 3 does remain, the overall massing and proportion of the individual building components was clearly altered. However, this addition was designed to retain the original Perley Associates design of the building with five new instructional areas, new lavatory facilities and special service rooms. In addition, as the School Department began a program in the “Open Area Concept” of education, beginning in 1972, the addition facilitated this new educational concept.

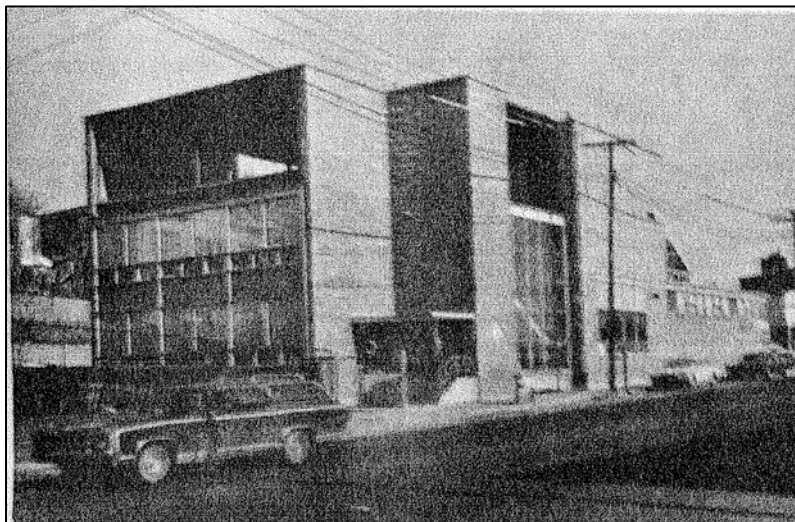


Above: Rendering of Pope School upon construction (Somerville Journal, 1956)

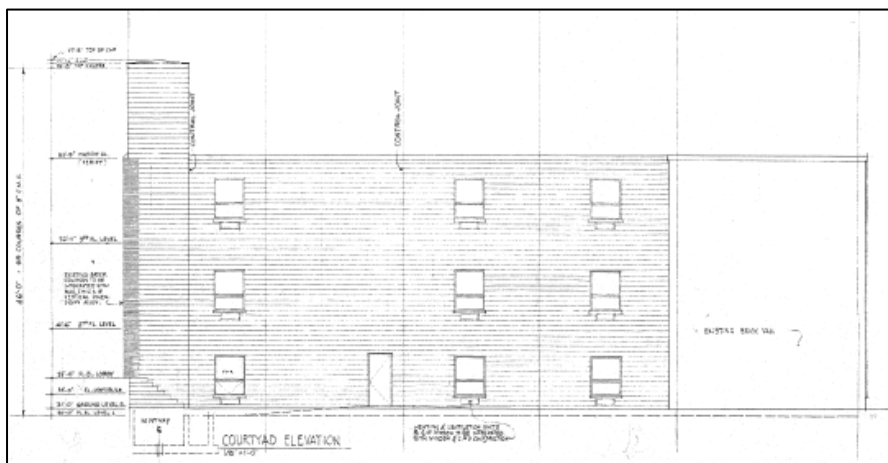
The new third floor of the Washington Street component (Massing 1) corresponded to the original second floor with the exception of the partial second and third story addition, which were added as solid brick, which differs from the aluminum frame windows and porcelain panels on the rest of the building. There is also a small section of the original façade of Massing 3 that was changed from an aluminum frame with windows and porcelain panels to brick. The setback above Massing 3 retained the original aluminum sash and added an aluminum curtain wall with two glass panels and two porcelain panels. The remainder of this setback façade, facing Boston Street, was composed of porcelain panels, above the original brick face.



Above: 1971 addition plans for Pope School, Sheet A1 illustrating Washington Street façade of Massing 1



Likely coinciding with the next documented set of plans to alter the building in 1983, the curtain wall on the western or driveway façade, which was composed of an aluminum frame with glass and porcelain panels, was entirely removed. A majority of the wall was reconstructed with an inconsistent color of brick and four new windows were installed on each floor. These plans also include the installation of an elevator in the northwestern corner of Massing 1 and the reconstruction of the rear façade. The entire aluminum curtain wall with glass and porcelain panels was removed. This wall was reconstructed with concrete block and also has four bays of windows. The installation of fiberglass panels in the remaining curtain walls of the other facades may or may not have been part of this 1983 alteration plan. However, the location of these curtain walls remains visible on multiple facades even though fiberglass panels have replaced the glass and porcelain panels.



Alteration plans from 1993 illustrate that the entry/exit doors were all replaced and in some cases slightly relocated to accommodate the new door(s), such as the handicap entrance at the north end of Boston Street. Other changes at this time include upgrading the retaining walls, fences, and building masonry.

An important component of the original design of this school was how the design informed the daily functionality of the building. Such components include an “openness of planning” which gave the interior plan flexibility in the use of space, as well as locating corridors between Washington Street and the classrooms, and the use of glass and porcelain panels to allow distribution of natural light.

Summary of Context/Evolution of Structure or Parcel:

The Charles G. Pope School was originally constructed in 1956 as an elementary school. It was one of three schools built during this time period by Perley F. Gilbert Associates, a firm that became known for implementing innovative functionality into the design of institutional structures. The School had a major addition in 1971 that added a third story to part of the building and alterations in 1983 included the addition of an elevator penthouse to the rooftop and the reconstruction of two facades. Doors, windows, and the original glass and porcelain panel curtain walls have also all been altered; however, the Washington and Boston street facades do retain the concept of their original design. The functionality of the interior space has also been significantly altered, but areas such as the main stairwell still demonstrate how the design informed the interior space.

II. FINDINGS ON CRITERIA FOR DEMOLITION

The structure must be either (A) listed on the National Register or (B) at least 50 years old.

A. The structure is NOT listed on or within an area listed on the National Register of Historic Places, nor is the structure the subject of a pending application for listing on the National Register.

B. The structure, circa 1956, is at least 50 years old.

The structure must be found either (A) importantly associated or (B) significant.

A. In accordance with the historic information obtained from *Section One - Building Description*, which utilizes building and site plans, annual City reports, and building permit research, and through an examination of resources that document the history of the City, such as the *Somerville Journal* and *Somerville Past and Present*, Staff find 181-191 Washington Street to be importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City or the Commonwealth.

+ The subject property is found importantly associated with the broad architectural, cultural and social history of the City of Somerville due to the need for more elementary schools within the City at this time, which resulted in the modern design, function, and simultaneous construction of the Pope, Conwell, and Healy schools.

B. Upon the following outlined evaluation of both the historic and architectural significance, which is an assessment of period, style, method of construction, association with a reputed architect or builder (alone or in the context of a group of buildings), integrity, degree of alteration, and scarcity or frequency, Staff find 181-191 Washington Street to be significant.

+ The subject property is found historically significant through an association with a reputed architectural firm in the context of a group of buildings (the Pope, Conwell, and Healy

schools) due to the architectural design of these buildings by the award winning and innovative firm, Perley Associates. The architectural design articulates a modern style that also informs how the interior plan is proposed to function through the use of modern materials and modern building methods.

Evaluation Criteria to Determine Architectural Significance

1. Period of Significance: *The integrity of a building or structure is evaluated as it relates to the period of significance; therefore, the period of significance must first be determined.*

The period of significance for 181-191 Washington Street begins in 1956 at the time of construction and extends through the late 1970s, ending when the structure is no longer used as an educational facility. The School was sold to the Somerville Boys and Girls Club in 1983, but prior to the sale the building was used by the School Department as office space.

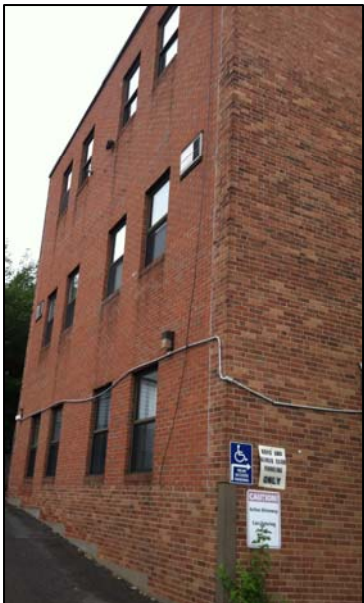
2. Integrity: *The subject property must possess sufficient integrity to convey, represent or contain the values and qualities for which it is judged significant. "Sufficient" integrity is determined by examining the degree of overall change in appearance, based on the number of "detrimental" or "critical" (irreversible) changes.*

- Detrimental changes include:



Above: New rear façade of Massing 1

Below: New driveway side façade of Massing 1



- a) New, relocated or removed chimney: Not Applicable
- b) Rebuilt foundation or walls: There is no evidence that the foundation has ever been rebuilt; however, the rear façade of Massing 1 has been entirely reconstructed (see photo) and the aluminum frame on the façade facing the driveway has been removed (see photo) and replaced with mismatched brick and replacement windows.
- c) Modern porch: Not Applicable
- d) Original windows changed at a later but still historical date; modern windows in original frames; original windows intact but extra windows added; change in shape or size of openings: There are not any original windows left, nor are any of the later window additions of historical importance. All the remaining curtain walls have replaced the glass and porcelain panels with opaque fiberglass panels and replacement windows. Multiple new window openings have been added throughout the building and most of these new openings are within the remaining curtain walls. However, some small windows have been installed within the brick portion of the Washington Street façade. All new windows are a different size than the original.
- e) Original doors changed at a later but still historical date; modern doors in original frames; original doors intact but extra doors added; change in shape or size of openings: According to the various plans, all original doors and frames have been replaced. In some locations the door has also been slightly relocated to accommodate the new door(s). The doors are not of historical importance as they were most recently upgraded in 1993.
- f) Synthetic siding: Although the building is not sheathed in a synthetic material, multiple façades are no longer original. The curtain walls, once

composed of glass and porcelain panels, are currently composed of fiberglass panels with intermittent replacement windows.

- g) Removals and/or additions, including outbuildings: The 1971 addition to this structure added a third story to Massing 1, a partial second and third story to Massing 3, and reduced the setback of Massing 1 above Massing 3. In addition, two facades of Massing 1 have been reconstructed and are no longer consistent with the remaining building. The curtain walls are still visible on several façades; however, the removal of the original glass and porcelain panels significantly reduces the remaining integrity of the design.
 - h) Recent change of location: The building has not changed location and this structure was designed specifically for this site.
 - i) Isolation from its original context (loss of historical setting): The original context of the building has changed minimally since the date of construction.
- *Critical changes are irreversible, greatly alter the structure, and/or destroy more significant features.*

Irreversible changes include the 1971 addition, which is not quite 50 years of age, but the addition was designed to emulate the existing floors, in both design and plan. Therefore, while this addition is an irreversible change that greatly alters the massing and proportions of the structure, this addition is considered a later important feature. Other irreversible changes are the reconstruction of the rear and left side façades of Massing 1, which abuts Washington Street, and the elevator shaft and penthouse, installed in the northwestern corner of Massing 1.

Changes that greatly alter the structure include the removal of all glass and porcelain panels from the curtain wall, which are integral to the design and use of the interior space, as well as the elevator penthouse, which is highly visible and appears dissociated from the rest of the building. This penthouse also modifies the overall proportions of the building.

Additional changes that destroy significant features are the removal of all original doors and alterations to the openings for the new door(s).

- *Summary of Integrity:*

Whether a change is in fact critical to the integrity and further negates the historical value depends on:

- a) *The degree of architectural significance* – The architectural significance of the building is currently held by the Washington and Boston street façades. To a degree, these façades are able to convey the intent of the original design of the school. The program of the building, which was partially informed by the design, is no longer understood clearly without floor plans. The level of architectural significance remaining is minimal due to the removal and inappropriate reconstruction of entire facades, the loss of the glass and porcelain panels which are crucial design components, and the inappropriate alterations to

massing and proportion that are not sensitive to the original design of the building.

b) *The proportion of significant features remaining* – The remaining significant features of the building are the three original massings. While the locations of the curtain walls on Washington and Boston streets are evident, these features are no longer in existence.

c) *If the significance is primarily dependent on the architecture* – The current significance of the building is primarily dependent upon an association with the broad architectural, cultural, and social history of the City, within the context of these three storybook schools, as well as an association with Perley Associates. Within the City of Somerville, the Pope School, along with the Healy and Conwell schools, illustrates a new era of building construction for institutional buildings and demonstrate how this new style of building and design, in turn, helped to inform a new style of educational programming.

d) *Appropriateness of changes* – The only appropriate change to the subject building is the 1971 addition to Massing 1 and Massing 3. All other exterior changes are unsympathetic to the original design of the building and minimize the remaining architectural integrity.

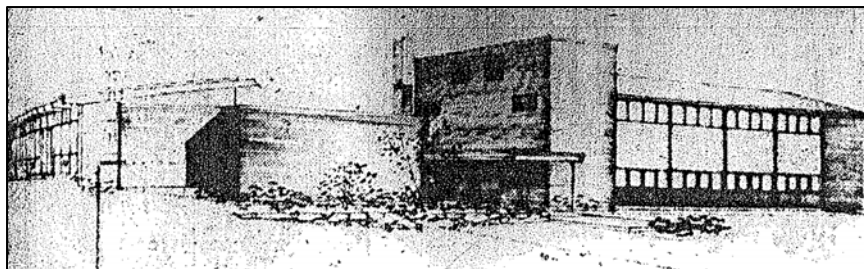
3. Degree of Alteration: *Building evaluations shall discuss the degree of detrimental or critical change to the building, and their effect on the architectural significance. A building should not be classified as historic if distinguishing features are removed or concealed, rendering the building less exemplary of a given style or period of architecture.*

The number and extent of critical change to this building is detrimental to the architectural significance. The building no longer represents the original modern design well, nor is it exemplary of the period of architecture from which it was constructed.

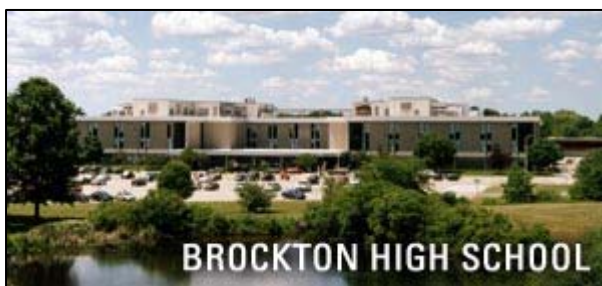
4. Scarcity or Frequency: *Scarcity shall be determined by knowledge of similar remaining structures, whether in type or style. If the subject structure is the only example, or of a few remaining examples of its kind, determinations regarding significance and integrity would be less severe than for resources that occur frequently.*

The Conwell and Healy schools, also constructed as part of the same long term elementary education building program, are no longer in existence. The Healy School, once located on Meacham Street was demolished in 1995 and reconstructed as the new Healy School. The Conwell School, once located on Capen Street, was reviewed by the HPC for a Determination of Significance in February 2004. The HPC unanimously determined (4-0) that the Conwell School was not significant and shortly after the building was demolished. According to the rendering drawn upon completion of construction (below) and the 2004 photograph (next page), the original massing and various details of the Conwell School are still visible. Although alterations have occurred, such as enclosing the front entry and modifying windows, the Conwell School appears to have retained a moderate amount of architectural integrity.

Right: Rendering of Conwell School upon completion
Below: Conwell School prior to demolition



Perley Gilbert Associates has a number of nationally recognized educational buildings located throughout the New England region. Educational Parks located in Acton-Boxborough, Ayer and Maynard, and Brockton High School received particular attention regarding their design. Brockton High School, c. 1970, is a small nine building urban campus that is 1/3 mile long. Upon opening, the school featured a green house, planetarium, modern public address system, and a TV studio.



Left: Brockton High School

Additionally, the Massachusetts Historical Commission database, MACRIS, identifies a number of buildings constructed by Perley Gilbert Associates. Educational buildings constructed during the same time period are the Upton Elementary School (1951), Oak Bluffs Elementary School (1964), and Medfield Memorial Elementary School (1951).

The Upton Elementary School (67-71 Main Street) is the first completely modern school constructed in New England; several modern materials had been tried individually, but never to compose an entire school building nor in this particular combination. The Oak Bluffs Elementary School (56 School Street), built using a

portion of the foundation of the razed school building, is a four room, split-level classroom building with large glass windows. Medfield Memorial Elementary School (59 Adams Street) is notable for contrasting wall treatments of red brick and a metal window sash, and a complex plan of alternating flat and gable roof massings. Commonalities between these schools and the Pope School include split-level classrooms, contrasting wall treatments, a low central section flanked by taller end sections, and the use of windows as an entire façade.

Perley Associates is still well known in Lowell for the design of multiple iconic buildings, such as the Masonic Temple on Dutton Street. The Henry J. Robinson Intermediate School (1967) on Bridge Street is also attributed to Perley Associates.



Left: Robinson School, Lowell, MA

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are based upon a historic and architectural analysis by Historic Preservation Staff of the application based upon the required findings of the Somerville Demolition Ordinance, and is based only upon archival and historical research, and a historical and architectural evaluation of significance conducted prior to the public meeting for a Determination of Significance. This report may be revised or updated with new recommendations or findings based upon additional information provided to the Historic Preservation Staff or through more in depth research.

The structure must be either listed on the National Register or at least 50 years old.

- The structure is NOT listed on or within an area listed on the National Register of Historic Places, nor is the structure the subject of a pending application for listing on the National Register.
- + The structure, circa 1956, is at least 50 years old.

The structure must be found either importantly associated or significant.

- + In accordance with historic map, directory, and voting list research, and through an examination of resources that explore the history of the City, such as *Somerville Past and Present* and *Somerville Beyond the Neck*, **Staff recommend that the Historic Preservation Commission find 181-191 Washington Street importantly associated with the broad architectural, cultural, and social history of the City.**

- 181-191 Washington Street*

