A1

Order Designating Shell Oil Company "Spectacular" Sign As Historical Landmark

(187 Magazine Street, Cambridge, MA)

ORDERED:

That the Shell Oil Company "Spectacular" Sign ("the Sign") located at 187 Magazine Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts be designated as a protected landmark pursuant to Chapter 2.78 of the Code of the City of Cambridge, as recommended by vote of the Cambridge Historical Commission on October 8, 2009. The property upon which the sign is situated is Parcel 86 of Assessors' Map 100 (the "Property").

This designation is justified by the important associations of the structure with the broad architectural and social history of the City of Cambridge. Specifically, the Sign is architecturally significant as the only surviving so-called "spectacular" type of neon signs in Cambridge and one of the earliest surviving examples of such a sign in the United States. Constructed ten years after this technology was introduced in America, the Sign represents an early use of neon illumination in combination with the incandescent lighted displays typical of late 19th-century advertising art. In addition, the Sign is historically significant as an artifact reflecting the mixed industrial and commercial development that occurred on Memorial Drive in Cambridgeport from the early 20th century through the 1950s.

The terms and conditions of this designation are as follows:

1. Applicability of Designation. This landmark designation shall apply only to the Sign and all of its structural components. It shall not apply to the remaining Property and any structure thereon, including but not limited to, any gas pumps, filling stations, buildings, and other structures.

2. Alterations/Changes. In accordance with § 2.78.210 of the Code of the City of Cambridge, no alterations, construction, demolition or any other action to the Property that affects the outward appearance of the Sign as visible from a public way shall be taken without review by the Cambridge Historical Commission and the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness, Hardship or Non-Applicability, as the case may be. In making determinations, the Commission shall be guided by the terms of the landmark designation report, section VII, Standards for Design Review, and by the applicable sections of Chapter 2.78, and by the objective that the public view of the Sign from Memorial Drive shall not be significantly diminished.

3. Maintenance.

    a. The original configuration of neon and incandescent light display, including the existing 14 second display loop, should be reinstated if possible. Alterations that ensure proper weather and water protection of animator box and circuit junctions shall be allowed upon Commission staff review and approval. Existing architectural features such as raceways, lettering, structural system, location and orientation shall be maintained. Bollards or other devices protecting the sign from damage may be installed at the base of the steel structure to protect the framework from vehicular damage.

b. If after the sign is re-energized the cost for annual maintenance exceeds 150% of the average annual costs over the five years prior to December 31, 2002 as adjusted up or down by changes in the Greater Boston cost of living index subsequent to December 31, 2002, the owner of the Property may petition the Commission to initiate the rescission of this designation and, subject to City Council vote as provided in Chapter 2.78.180 F., this designation shall become null and void and of no further force and effect, other than as provided in paragraph 5, upon the Commission's determination, in the reasonable exercise of its discretion, that such annual maintenance costs are likely to continue to exceed amounts determined pursuant to such formula.

4. Sale of Property/Change Of Use. Upon the Property's conveyance to a third party who is unaffiliated with the Shell Oil Company or if the current use of the Property is legally changed to a use other than a "Shell" fuel service station, the new owner may apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness, Hardship or Nonapplicability, as the case may be, to seek the Commission's approval for any change in the sign's appearance or location, which the Commission shall not unreasonably deny in the absence of practical alternatives for the maintenance or operation of the sign or an alternative of the type contemplated in the last sentence of paragraph 5. No such application will be necessary if the sign is to remain unchanged and in place.

5. Preservation of Sign Upon Sale/Change of Use. In the event this designation becomes null and void in accordance with paragraph 3.b or of this designation, or upon the maintenance or operation of the sign no longer being a practical alternative, the owner and the Commission shall use their best efforts to preserve the Sign, including carefully dismantling and storing the sign. The Shell Oil Company and the new owner may determine that ownership of the sign will revert to the company. Donation of the Sign to the American Sign Museum or a similar museum willing to accept the same, relocation of the Sign to another "Shell" service station, or storage of the Sign pending future preservation is preferred.

Cambridge Historical Commission
October 8, 2009

B1

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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M. Wyllis Bibbins, Robert G. Crocker, Chandra Harrington, Frank Shirley, Jo M. Solet, *Members*
Shary Page Berg, *Alternate*

Date: March 27, 2009

To: Members and Alternates of the Historical Commission

From: Sarah L. Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: Updates on Case L-27: 187 Magazine Street (Shell Spectacular Sign)

The current landmark study period for the Shell spectacular sign will expire on May 1, 2009. I've provided here a little background on previous studies and attach the revised study report, in which the zoning description, planning issues, and proposed order have been updated.

Background:

The Historical Commission initiated a landmark study for the Shell sign as early as 1990. The Shell sign was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

The Cambridge Historical Commission initiated a new landmark designation study and voted in 1996 to recommend the designation of the sign as a Cambridge landmark. There was little public support for the designation at that time, due to objection to corporate practices overseas. The City Council never acted on the designation recommendation and the matter expired at the end of the Council's calendar.

In 2002, the study was re-initiated, but a designation recommendation was tabled and not sent to the City Council at that time. The Commission restarted the discussion in May of 2008, and the current study will expire May 1, 2009.

The terms of the study and the content of the earlier report remain as they were presented in 1996 and 2002 in that the component of the site which the Commission seeks to protect is the sign itself and not the remaining buildings on the property.

B2

SHELL OIL COMPANY "SPECTACULAR" SIGN
187 MAGAZINE STREET

LANDMARK DESIGNATION FINAL REPORT

Prepared by Susan Hollister, Arthur Krim and John Nanian
for the CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

CONTENTS:

I. LOCATION AND ECONOMIC STATUS
II. DESCRIPTION
III. HISTORY OF THE PROPERTY
IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPERTY
V. RELATIONSHIP TO CRITERIA
VI. RECOMMENDATIONS
VII. STANDARDS FOR DESIGN REVIEW
VIII. PROPOSED ORDER

SUMMARY:

The Shell Oil Company sign is architecturally significant as the only surviving "spectacular" neon sign in Cambridge and one of the earliest surviving examples of such signs in the Boston area. Constructed ten years after this technology was introduced in America, the Shell sign represents an early use of neon illumination in combination with the incandescent lighted displays typical of late 19th-century advertising art. The sign was manufactured by the Donnelly Electric Manufacturing Company of Boston, one of the foremost manufacturers of advertising signs in New England.

In addition, the Shell sign is historically significant as an artifact reflecting the mixed industrial and commercial development that occurred on Memorial Drive in Cambridgeport from the early 20th century through the 1980s. It is also an important relic of the Shell Oil Corporation's early history in the Boston area.

The Cambridge Historical Commission recommends that the entire property be designated as a landmark, but that only alterations to the sign be subject to review. New construction, alterations and demolition of other structures on the property should be exempted from review unless they affect the public visibility of the sign.

original report issued October 18, 1996
updated November 15, 2002 by Sally Zimmerman
updated April 14, 2009 by Sarah Burks

I. Location and Economic Status
A. Address, Parcel Number, and Zoning

The Shell Oil Company sign is located at the intersection of Magazine Street and Memorial Drive on the property of a Shell service station. The parcel is identified in the Assessor's Book as 187 Magazine Street, Block 100, Lot/Parcel 86, and contains 22,024 square feet. Fiscal Year 2009 valuations list the property with a value of $1,541,000. The parcel is zoned BA - business, neighborhood retail, and office use - with an FAR of 1.0 for commercial uses and 1.75 for housing. The maximum height restriction is 35 feet for commercial buildings and 45 feet for residential. The existing structures have an approximate FAR of 0.143. The 68-foot Shell sign exceeds the height limit, but is allowed as a pre-existing condition. The site is also subject to the provisions of the Memorial Drive Overlay District, which specifies site plan, parking, open space, and building design requirements.

B. Ownership and Occupancy

The Shell sign and service station are owned by the Shell Oil Company of Houston, Texas. The station falls within the jurisdiction of Motiva Enterprises LLC, which is located in Providence, Rhode Island. The present operator of the station is Mr. Tibor Hangyal.

C. Area Description

The Shell sign is located on the premises of a service station on the corner of Magazine Street and Memorial Drive at the southern extremity of the Cambridgeport neighborhood. The site is bounded on the east by Magazine Street, one of the primary north/south thoroughfares in Cambridgeport, and on the south by Memorial Drive, a four-lane parkway maintained by the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC). The Charles River Reservation through which the parkway passes is state park land and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The northern side of Memorial Drive as it passes the Cambridgeport neighborhood contains a mix of office, industrial, and commercial uses. On the west, the Shell station abuts a former Stop & Shop grocery store complex, 729-739 Memorial Drive, a one-story steel and concrete structure designed in 1946 and now leased to a computer retailer. Behind this commercial strip is a residential neighborhood characterized by densely settled two- and three-story houses dating mainly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The south side of Memorial Drive is devoted to recreational and open space use along the Charles River. Directly opposite the Shell sign is the MDC's Magazine Beach bath house and recreational area. East of the service station on the opposite side of Magazine Street is the one-story Morse Elementary School (1955) designed by Carl Koch and Associates.

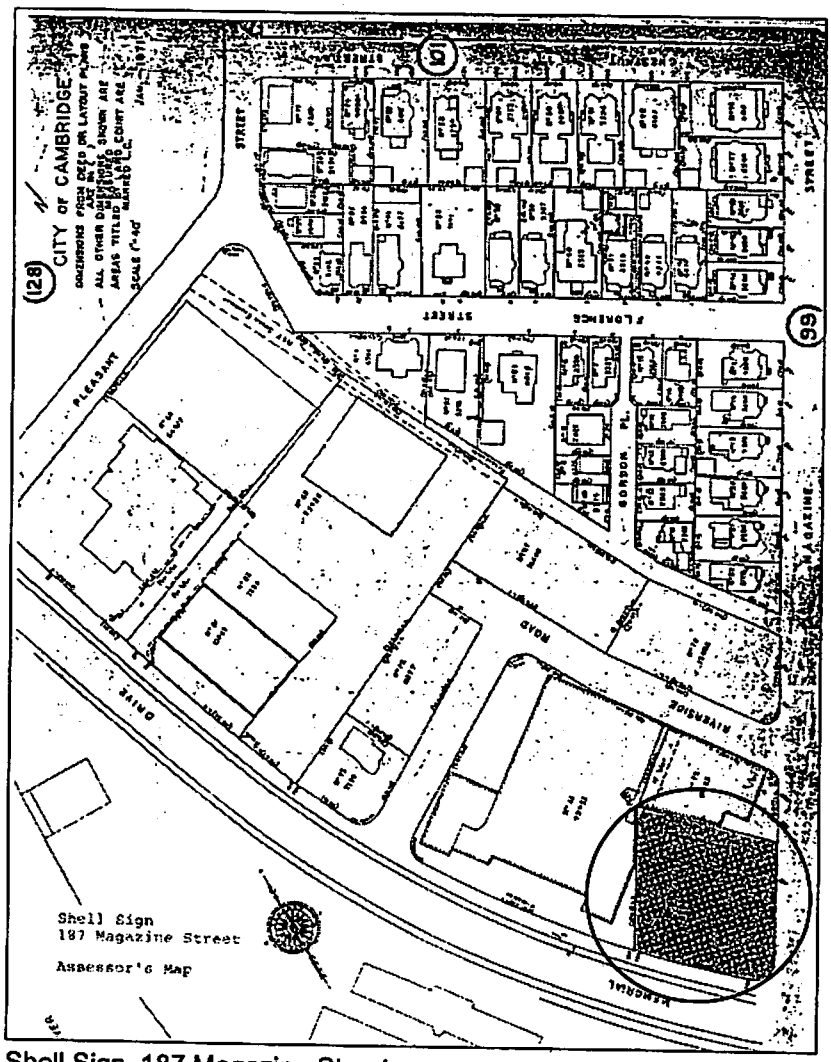
D. Planning Issues

The commercial area along Memorial Drive has been relatively stable with regard to development, although the attractiveness of the location and the availability of large, underutilized parcels carry the potential of additional large scale projects. Memorial Drive and the park land along the river are under MDC jurisdiction and are protected from commercial development; the entire Charles River Reservation, including the Drive, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The residents of Cambridgeport sustain several active neighborhood groups, including the Ward Five Committee and the Hastings Square Neighborhood Association, and the Cambridgeport Neighborhood Initiative, and have opposed

commercial and institutional incursions into the residential sections of the area. At the conclusion of the 1996 landmark study, many of the neighbors testified that they objected to preservation of the sign because it was not well maintained and often had one or more letters unlit.

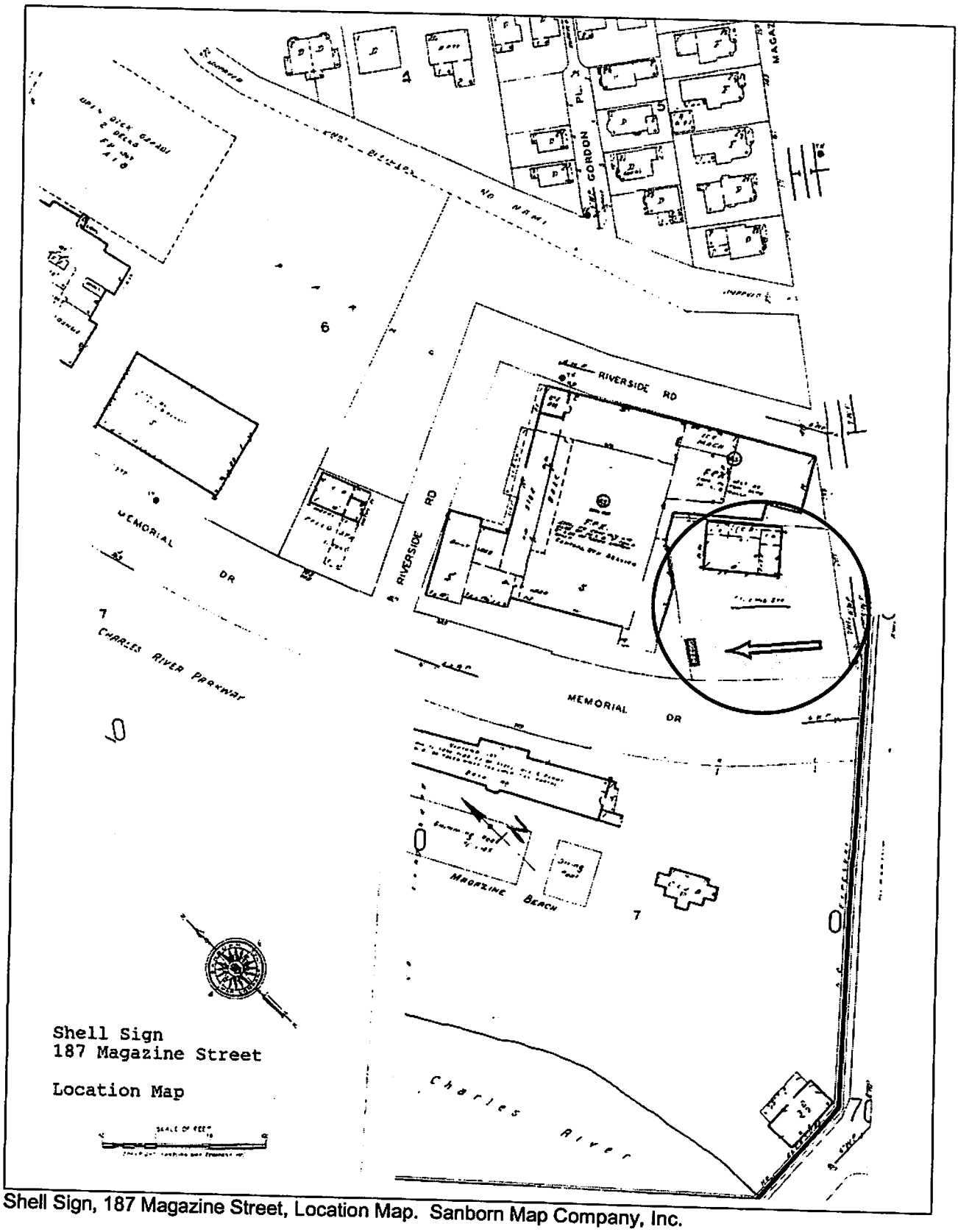
The neighborhood groups recently sponsored a re-zoning of the area, in response to the anticipated further development of the former Howard Johnson's Motor Inn at 768 Memorial Drive. The Shell sign is now located in the Memorial Drive Overlay District, which requires a minimum front setback of 25 feet along Memorial Drive, the front yard being devoted to Green Area Open Space. The overlay district allows retail store and restaurant uses by Special Permit. The overlay district requires at least 25-50 percent clear glass on the building's façade facing a public street, park, or landmark. Gross Floor Area bonuses can be awarded by Special Permit for residential uses in limited circumstances for lots along Memorial Drive.

E. Maps



Shell Sign, 187 Magazine Street

B5



Shell Sign, 187 Magazine Street, Location Map. Sanborn Map Company, Inc.

II. Description

A. Type and Use

The Shell sign is a 68-foot high illuminated advertising display constructed in 1933 by the Donnelly Electric Manufacturing Company (DEMCO). The sign is located on the western boundary of a Shell service station and faces east.

B. Physical Description

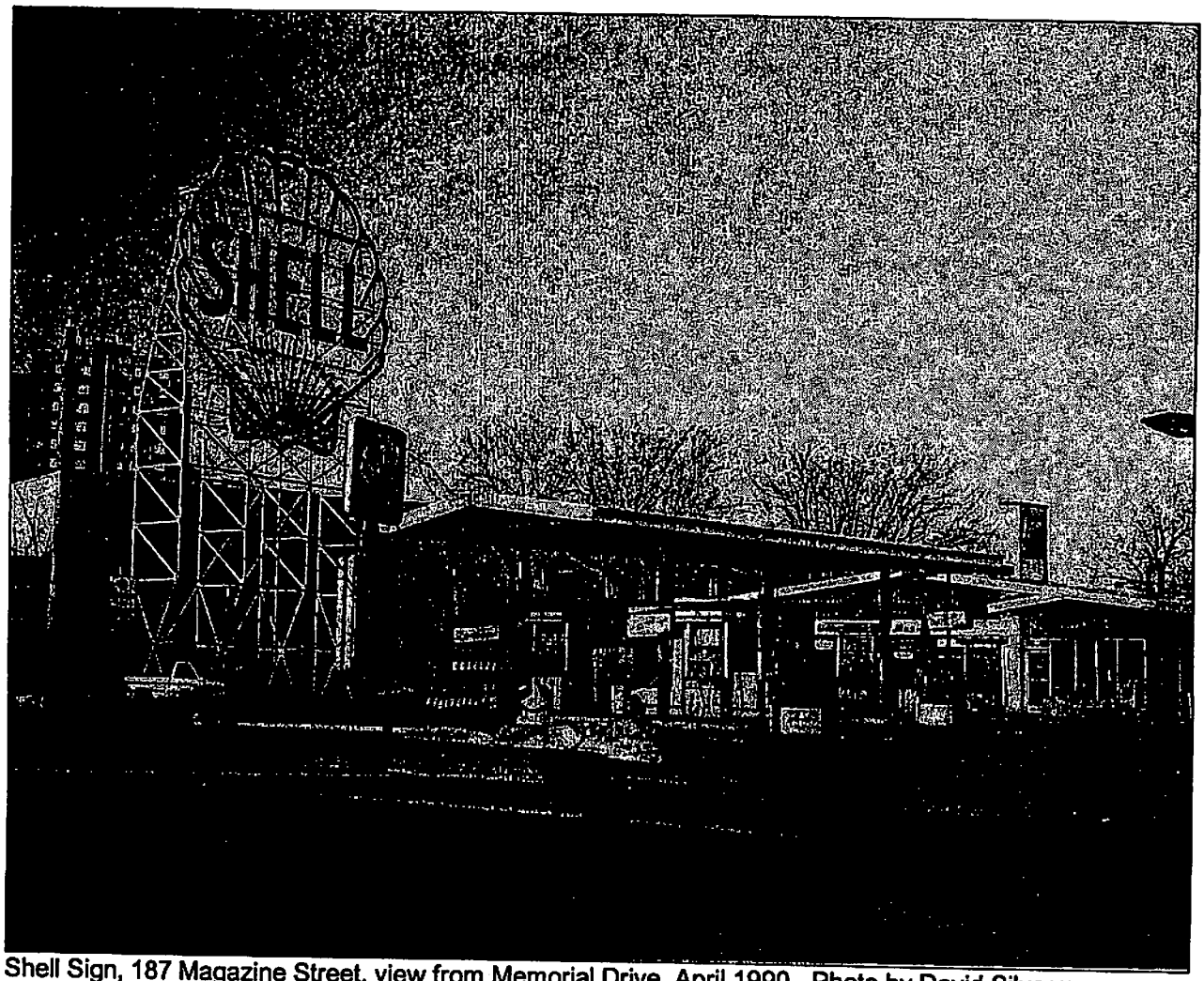
The Shell sign is a large illuminated advertising display in the shape of a giant scallop shell, the trademark of the Shell Oil Company. The sign consists of a lightweight steel-truss structural system and the illuminated advertising display. The structural system is composed of four vertical tapering trusses set 9'10½" and 10' apart on concrete footings. Each truss is constructed of 2"x2"x¼" steel channel with diagonal and vertical members secured to the top and bottom chords of the truss with a bolted steel gusset plate. The trusses are attached horizontally on both the top and bottom faces of the chords by a series of 29'9" long horizontal braces of 2"x2"x¼" channel.

The display portion of the sign consists of lightweight gauge steel channel raceways painted yellow and inlaid with incandescent yellow light bulbs, arranged to depict a fluted scallop shell. The center of the sign is dominated by similar steel channel painted red and outlined in red neon spelling out the word SHELL.

The sign is operated by an animator, which is a device that controls the timing of the phased illumination of the sign. When illuminated, there are three phases to the sign's operation. The first phase consists of the illumination of the red neon border around the word SHELL. This is followed by the illumination of the yellow lights outlining the scallop shell, which progress from the bottom of the shell (the hinge) to the top (total time: seven seconds). During the second phase, the yellow lights of the thirteen flutes of the shell are illuminated from the hinge to the top (total time: two seconds). In the final phase, the sign blinks off momentarily and then illuminates completely (total time: five seconds). The entire three-part series takes a total of fourteen seconds. The sign is operated by a photo-electric cell so that during the daylight hours the display is inactive.

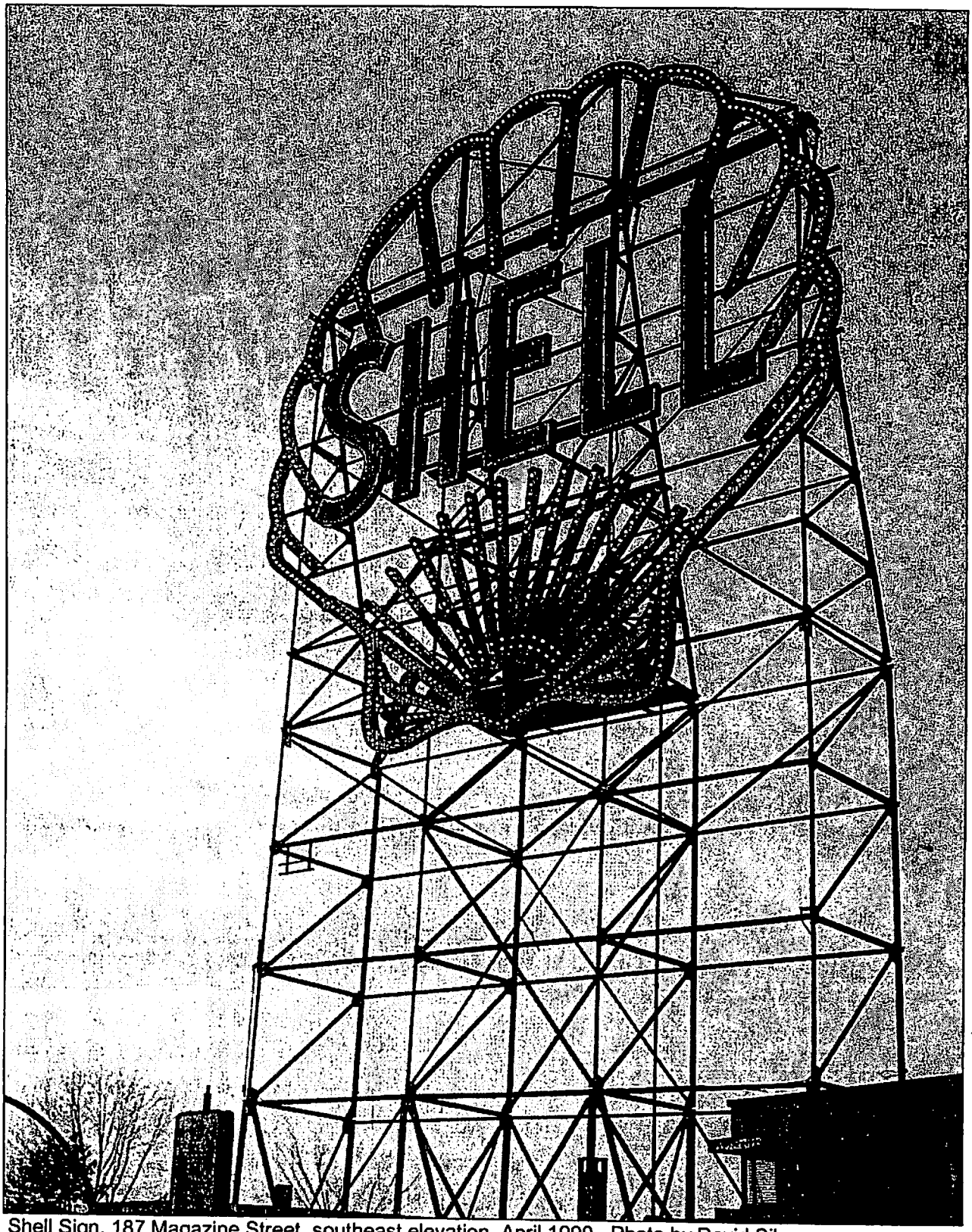
In 1986, the Shell Oil Company conducted a survey to assess the condition of the sign. The survey determined that the porcelain insulators, wiring, metal letters, animator, terminal box, and shell-shaped channels were original elements dating from 1933; the steel superstructure was found to date from 1944. Through systematic maintenance since its original construction, the amber light bulbs and red neon have been replaced. Since 1986, the sign has been under a regular maintenance contract and the animator and much of the old wiring and porcelain sockets have been replaced or updated. The electricity to the sign was disconnected a few years ago, due to safety concerns because of the frayed and damaged wiring. To our knowledge, no maintenance has been performed on the sign in the last several years. Exposure to the elements without proper maintenance of painted surfaces has led to corrosion and holes in the framework of the sign. According to the station owner, small pieces have already begun falling off the support structure and extensive rehabilitation of the sign would be required to get it back in working condition.

C. Photographs

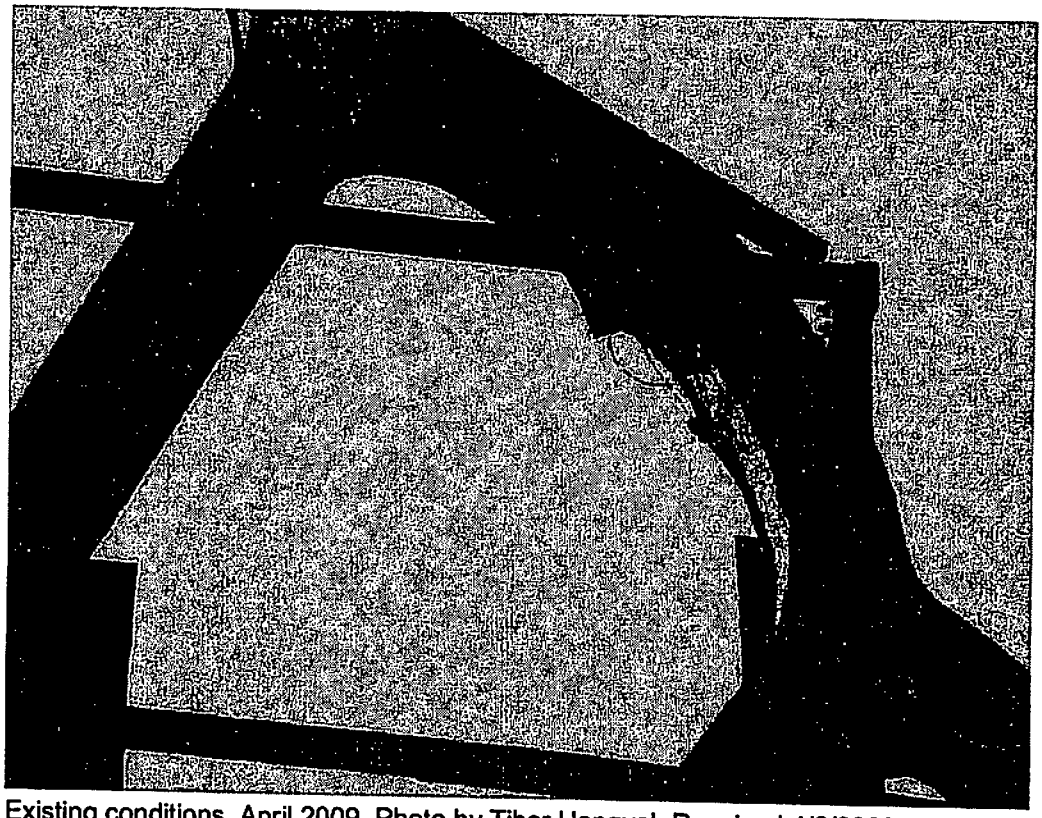


Shell Sign, 187 Magazine Street, view from Memorial Drive, April 1990. Photo by David Silverman.

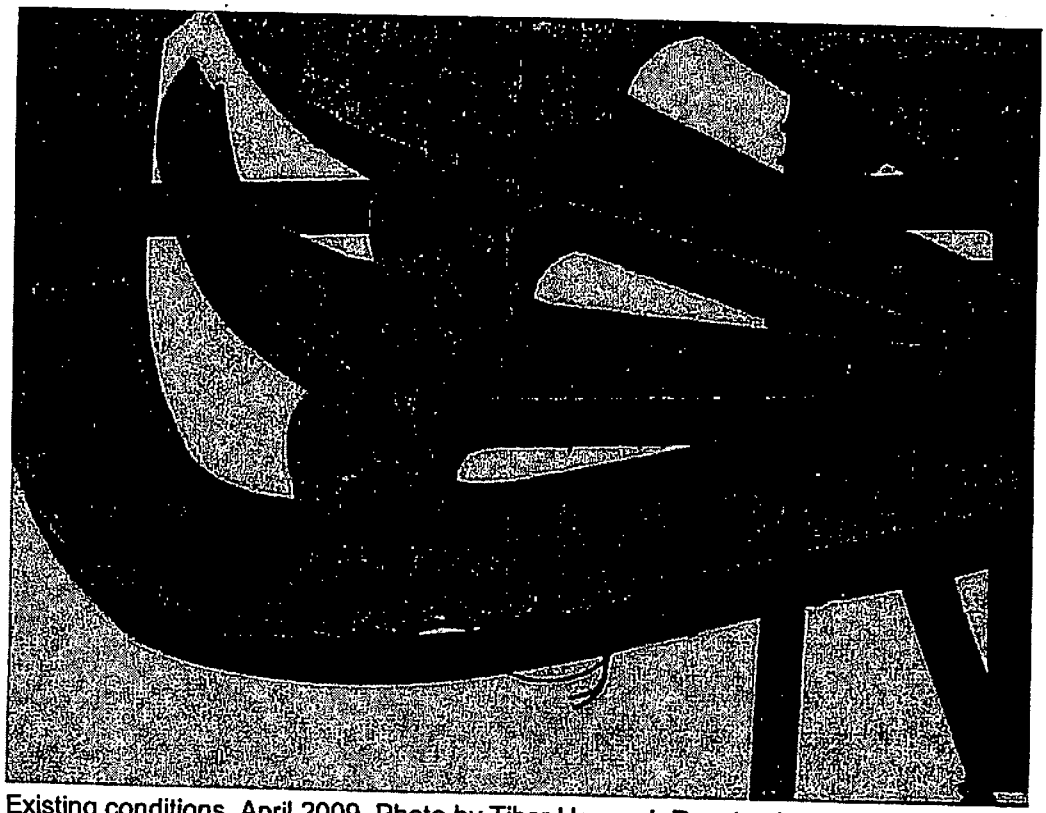
B8



Shell Sign, 187 Magazine Street, southeast elevation, April 1990. Photo by David Silverman.



Existing conditions, April 2009. Photo by Tibor Hangyal. Received 4/2/2009



Existing conditions, April 2009. Photo by Tibor Hangyal. Received 4/2/2009

III. History of the Property

A. Historic Development Patterns

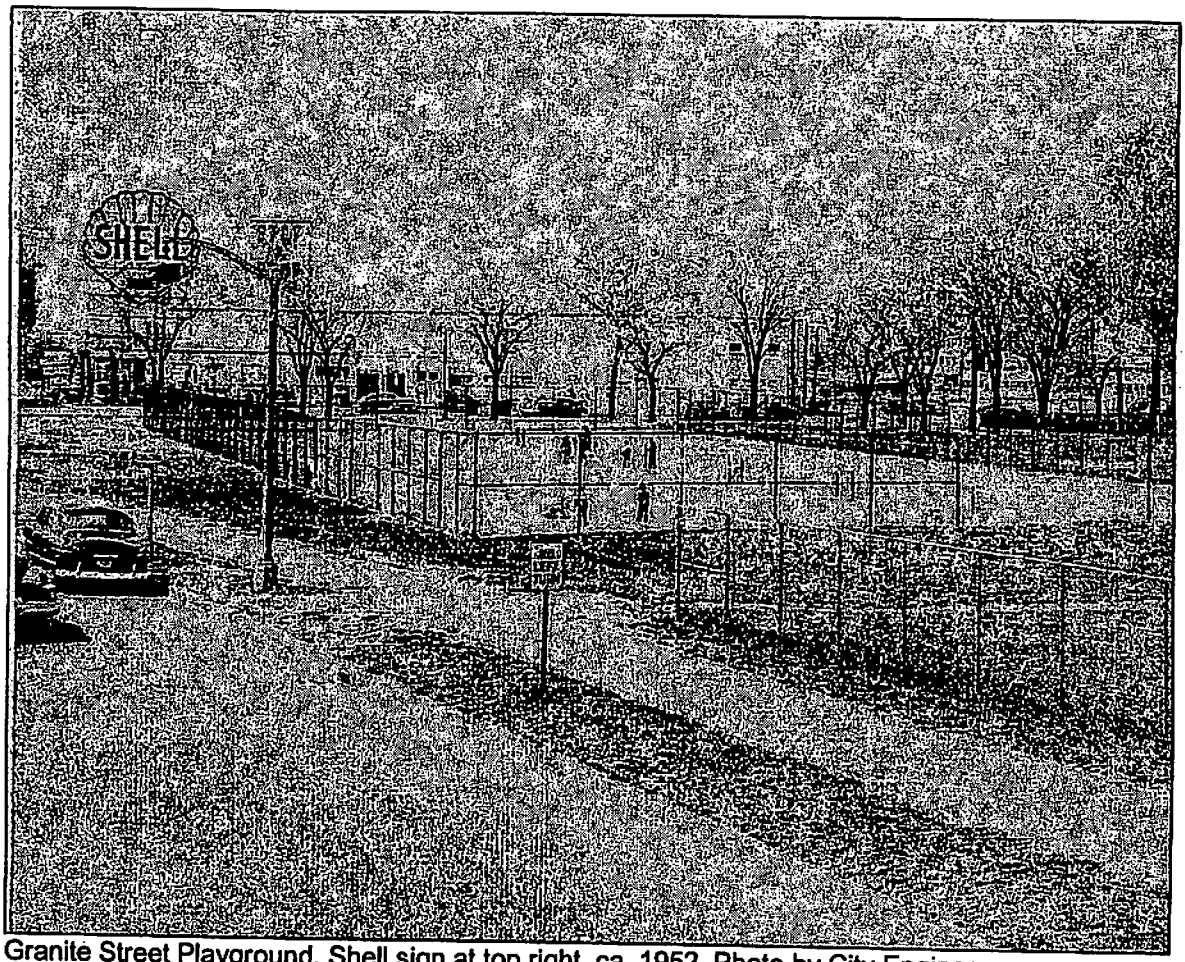
Until the mid-19th century, the southern section of Cambridgeport was a marshy, uninhabited peninsula. Captain's Island, surrounded by tidal flats, was sold to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1817 for use as a powder magazine; hence, the names of Magazine Beach and Magazine Street.

The southernmost extremity of Cambridgeport remained unsettled even after the construction of the Cottage Farm (Boston University) Bridge in 1850. In 1894, the entire riverfront from the Craigie Bridge to Gerry's Landing was taken by the City of Cambridge for park purposes. The city's landscape architect, Charles Eliot, of the firm of Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot, developed plans for a parkway from the Longfellow Bridge to Ash Street with a recreational area at Captain's Island. The facilities at Magazine Beach were constructed almost immediately, and attracted residential construction closer to the river. The parkway, however, was not completed until 1914.

The development along this section of Memorial Drive began in 1913 with the construction of the Ford Motor Company assembly plant. This was followed by other manufacturing and warehouse facilities east of Brookline Street. Between Brookline and River streets, however, development was on a smaller scale, consisting of such uses as filling stations, a dance pavilion, and drive-in restaurants until the B-B Chemical Company built their landmark manufacturing facility at 780 Memorial Drive in 1937.

The site of the Shell station remained undeveloped through the 1920s, although a filling station was located on Magazine Street just off of Memorial Drive by 1929. The current filling station was built in 1930, coinciding with the completion of Cambridge Parkway, which linked Memorial Drive with the Northern Artery in East Cambridge. The original station structure was an L-shaped concrete-block building with a four-car greasing bay; it was remodeled in 1944, 1952, 1953, and 1959. The present service station is the result of renovations in 1969 as well as the addition of self-service islands in 1985.

B. Historic Photograph



Granite Street Playground, Shell sign at top right, ca. 1952. Photo by City Engineer.

IV. Significance of the Property

A. Architectural Significance

The Shell sign is a prominent visual landmark along Memorial Drive and is also seen from the Boston University Bridge. The sign is associated with two important developments: the adaptation of neon and electricity to commercial applications, and the growth of the automobile and recreational highways at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Shell sign's primary significance is architectural, as the earliest known surviving example in the Boston area of the type of advertising signage known as a "spectacular" display. It is also significant as an intact example of a transitional type of advertising sign that combined both incandescent and neon lighting, a type representative of the initial commercial application of neon technology. In continuous use since 1933, the Shell sign is of further significance as one of the few functioning examples of advertising art employing sequenced illumination that still exist in the Boston area and as the only such example in Cambridge.

Thomas Edison invented the first economically feasible light bulb in 1879, and shortly thereafter incandescent lighting was employed to produce "spectacular" displays promoting the new invention. Spectacular displays required vast numbers of lights and a large visible area in order to be seen from a distance. The first such display was erected in 1882 at an exposition at the Crystal Palace in London, and in 1892 the first display on a building was erected on the side of the Flatiron Building in Times Square in New York City.

Incandescent lighting effects were especially popular in the theater and movie industry. Alternating blinking lights on theater marquees simulated movement and attracted audiences while specialized lighting made the interiors of theaters and movie houses seem more exotic. As automobile traffic increased, more incandescent signs were constructed at a scale to be seen by the motorist as well as the pedestrian.

Successful commercial applications of electricity required a new lamp that would not rely on the easily-broken, white-hot filament of the incandescent bulb. In experimental applications, scientists had been able for many years to induce gases within a vacuum tube to glow by bombarding them with electricity. In 1910, a Parisian scientist, Dr. George Claude, demonstrated a non-corroding electrode with a virtually limitless life. The electrode eliminated the need for a filament since neon illumination is produced by the gas itself. The discovery was patented, and the first neon commercial sign was installed at a barber shop in Paris in 1912. Until the early 1930s, the Claude Neon Company controlled the production of neon tubing and operated franchises internationally, including a franchise in Boston.

The first neon signs appeared in the United States in 1923, after Earl C. Anthony went to Paris and bought two signs from the Claude Neon Company to be installed in his Packard automobile dealership in Los Angeles. The neon and argon gas-filled tube emanated a highly visible glow which attracted people for miles. When they were turned on for the first time the signs caused serious traffic problems.

With the advent of neon technology, advertising signs became animated, multi-colored, and vibrant with displays of liquids pouring, people moving, eagles flying, and horses trotting. Neon's capacity to animate and enhance company logos and trademarks made it ideal for advertising purposes.

The Shell sign was manufactured by John Donnelly & Sons Company, which was founded in Boston in 1850. The company's early work consisted of painted exterior signs. In the late 1920s, the firm created a new division, the Donnelly Electric Manufacturing Company (DEMCO), to promote electrified outdoor advertising displays. DEMCO designed, engineered, and maintained all the signs they constructed, including numerous theater marquees and displays in the New England area and as far south as Miami. The company designed and produced an array of signs in the Boston area, many of which have been dismantled, such as a Budweiser sign in Charlestown, the General Electric display in Lynn, the White Fuel sign in Kenmore Square, and the Coca-Cola sign in Allston. DEMCO-produced signs in Cambridge included the Electronics Corporation of America display (demolished) and the Stop & Shop sign (demolished) on the building adjacent to the Shell sign site.

DEMCO built the Shell sign in 1933, ten years after the introduction of neon signage to the United States. The sign combines incandescent and neon illumination, demonstrating how Donnelly & Sons' long experience in lighted displays was enhanced by the new neon technology. The red neon letters spelling "SHELL" in simple block style remain static and provide a background for the incandescent yellow light display that fills the giant shell. Combined neon and incandescent displays represent an adaptation of the new material to the spectacular displays of the late 19th century. The Shell sign is one of the early large-scale examples of this innovation.

B. Historical Significance

The Shell sign is associated with the history of the Shell Oil Corporation in the Boston area, with the development of Memorial Drive in the early 20th century, and, to a lesser degree, with the application of neon in advertising art, particularly as it relates to the automobile.

The Shell Oil Company was started in the late 19th century by a British entrepreneur in the Far East. The company's founder, Sir Marcus Samuel, inherited a small fortune from his family, traders in shells from the orient. With those assets, Samuel established a coal-export business in Japan but soon turned his attention to shipping Russian oil. The new company adopted the fluted scallop shell as its trademark. There have been as many as 300 different versions of the scallop shell logo registered with the U.S. Patent office, all variations on a yellow shell in a field of red.

The history of the Shell Oil Company in Boston began in 1929, when the company purchased the assets of the New England Oil Company and opened its first service station on the corner of Church and Stuart Streets in Boston. In 1932, G. M. Ramsey of the Shell home office Engineering Division designed a two-story office and service station complex of cast stone construction at 875 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston to serve as the company's northeast regional headquarters. The company trademark is represented in the frieze of the building, which contains relief depictions of undersea life.

The section of Commonwealth Avenue west of Kenmore Square in which Shell built its building was adjacent to two major pleasure roads and became the location of a number of automobile dealerships and showrooms. The Shell complex was one of the earliest automobile and petroleum-related companies to

locate in this area. Within a year of the opening of the headquarters, the company erected two "spectacular" illuminated displays on the roof of the building. The incandescent and neon display remained in place from 1933 through 1944, when the company decided to remove the signs, possibly in response to wartime restrictions. One of the pair was re-erected in Cambridge while the other was dismantled. In 1951, the Northeast Regional Headquarters moved to the site of the company's first filling station on Stuart Street and the former headquarters was sold to Boston University. The building still stands and has been used for various academic purposes.

One sign from the Commonwealth Avenue location was relocated at the existing Shell filling station on Memorial Drive. The company was granted a building permit (BP# 32584) on April 5, 1930 to construct a "filling station, stores, and garage" at the intersection of Magazine Street and Memorial Drive. This first station was made of whitewashed concrete cinder block construction with an attached garage. It was built upon the site of an earlier station, the Metropolitan Filling Station (date of construction unknown). (Sanborn Map 1900, updated 1929).

The undeveloped area along the riverfront was an ideal location for a filling station. Prior to the 1920s, most gasoline had been sold through retailers who installed a pump at the curb in front of their store. Curbside pumps were safety hazards, and by the mid-1920s, city officials around the country were encouraging the development of free-standing filling stations. The new stations needed a substantial amount of room for cars to pull in and out of the pump stands.

In 1930, when the Shell station was built, there were at least three other service stations along Memorial Drive: a Standard Oil station (now Mobil), built in 1928, and a Beacon Oil station (now Exxon) and a Jenny station (demolished) built by 1929. By the time the Shell sign was moved to Cambridge in 1944, there were five service stations between Magazine Street and River Street. The huge lighted display was a beacon for motorists and may have been intended to give the station an edge over its competition.

The Shell sign was relocated to Cambridge shortly before the opening of Storrow Drive in 1948. The Drive enlarged the captive audience of the industrial and commercial concerns on the Cambridge side and the number of large-scale illuminated display signs opposite the route increased. The river provided an open foreground against which the rooftop signs of Cambridge businesses were displayed to advantage. At least a half dozen such signs were arrayed along the Cambridge riverfront between the Boston University and Longfellow bridges. In later years, these signs were joined by the spectacular displays of the Coca-Cola and Citgo signs on the Boston side and the river was lit nightly with the colorful reflections of industrial and commercial advertising. With the exception of the Citgo sign in Kenmore Square, the Shell sign is the only such sign to survive.

As a piece of advertising art, the Shell sign is an illuminated display of a familiar commercial trademark. The use of giant commercial symbols was a common feature of 19th-century advertising art, however, and large-scale illuminated displays intended to be seen over long distances were an innovation of the automobile era. Neon in particular gave a highly visible glow which enabled signs to be read easily by motorists driving by. The Shell sign is an important example of the innovative neon displays that were used from the 1930s to the 1950s to attract the automotive public.

C. Bibliography

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Permits:

City of Boston: building permit no. 1158, May 31, 1933. Construction of Sign.

City of Cambridge: building permit no. 32584, April 5, 1930. Construction of filling station, store, and garage.

City of Cambridge: building permit no. 36501, August 6, 1935. Alteration.

B16

MDC Permit: curb cut, May 5, 1930

V. Relationship to Criteria

A. Article III, Section 2.78.180

Section 2.78.180 states the criteria for landmark designation. It states that the Commission:

> may recommend for designation as a landmark any . . . structure . . . either (1) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the City . . . or (2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction, or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures.

B. Relationship of Property to Criteria

The Shell sign is importantly associated with the broad architectural and social history of the City and is historically and architecturally significant in terms of its construction and materials.

Under criterion (1), the Shell sign is associated with the City's historic development patterns, specifically the development of the Memorial Drive corridor in the early to mid-20th century and the land use patterns which characterized the roadway through the early 1980s.

The sign's primary significance is architectural. Under criterion (2), the Shell sign is one of the earliest functioning examples of a large-scale neon sign remaining in the Boston area and the only such sign still standing in the city. Significantly, the Shell sign employs both incandescent and neon technology, reflecting a transitional use of the new material in combination with the established techniques of the 19th-century "spectacular" display. Despite having been moved from its original location, all of the sign's raceways, metal letters, insulators, and structure are intact, and it retains its original design and lighting sequence.

The Shell sign was designed and constructed by a long-established Boston sign manufacturing company, John Donnelly & Sons. None of the company's other Cambridge signs have survived and the Shell sign is one of the few signs that remain from DEMCO's first period of operation. The Shell sign is believed to be the oldest illuminated outdoor advertising display still in operation in the Boston area.

VI. Recommendations

A. Article III, Section 2.78.140

The purpose of landmark designation is stated in Section 2.78.140 of Article III:

> to preserve, conserve, and protect the beauty and heritage of the City . . . and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation, and maintenance of . . . structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the City; [and] to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose.

B. Preservation Options

The Shell sign was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on June 3, 1994. The National Register listing automatically triggers listing on the parallel State Register of Historic Places meaning that the sign is protected from the adverse effects of federal- or state-licensed, permitted, or funded projects through review by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. However, the Massachusetts Historical Commission's powers do not allow for review of privately-funded activities.

The best option for the long-term preservation of the Shell sign is designation as a Landmark under the provisions of Article III, Section 2.78 of the City Code. Donation of a Preservation Easement on the property under the provisions of M.G.L. Chapter 184 seems unlikely. The property is owned by the Shell Oil Corporation and it is unlikely that a preservation easement would yield any significant benefit for this multi-national corporation.

Landmark designation is complicated by the fact that the sign is the only structure on this property that is considered worthy of designation. Typically, the designated area of a landmark is the lot on which it stands. Since in this instance there are other structures on the lot, including the filling station and pump islands, which are not considered significant, designation of the lot would require identifying these structures as non-contributing to the landmark status of the sign, thus directing future changes to the station to be reviewed under applications for a Certificate of Non-Applicability.

Alternatively, only the sign and a limited area around it could be designated. In this event it would be critical to protect the sign by restricting development that might obstruct the view of it from Memorial Drive. Designation of the sign only and its footings would not protect it from visual intrusions.

Neither of the two other possible protective designations, establishment of a Neighborhood Conservation or Local Historic District, are applicable to this property since it is significant as an individual resource.

Designation of the whole lot and identifying the filling station as non-applicable is the simplest and clearest method of preserving the sign while allowing the owner flexibility to alter the rest of the site to meet changing business conditions.

C. Recommendations

The staff finds that the Shell sign meets the criteria for landmark designation and advises the Historical Commission to recommend the City Council to designate the property at 187 Magazine Street (map 100, parcel 86) as a protected landmark under Article III, Section 2.78.140-270 of the City Code, identifying the Shell sign as the landmark structure and substantially exempting the filling station on the property from Historical Commission review.

VII. Standards for Design Review

A. Introduction

The Commission's primary charge under Article III is to review "all construction, demolition, or alteration that affects the exterior architectural features, other than color, or any landmark." This report describes exterior architectural features that are among the characteristics which led to consideration of the property as a landmark. Except as the order designating or amending the landmark may otherwise provide, those features should be preserved and/or enhanced in any construction, demolition, or alteration of a landmark.

Section 2.78.220 of Article III sets general guidelines to be considered by the Historical Commission in reviewing changes to landmarks. Among other things, the Commission is directed to consider:

the historic and architectural value and significance of the site or structure, the general design, arrangement, texture, and material of the features involved, and the relation of such features to similar features or structures in the surrounding area.

In all cases, a Certificate of Appropriateness, Hardship, or Non-Applicability must be issued by the Historical Commission prior to making any changes to a landmark. The Commission does not have authority to regulate changes to exterior architectural features not subject to public view. Nonetheless, Certificates of Non-Applicability must be issued for those changes. All applications are carefully reviewed by the Commission at a public hearing, in accordance with Article III of the Code.

B. General Standards

1. Historic and architectural features of the landmark shall be preserved.

2. Changes and additions to the landmark which have taken place over time are evidence of the history of the property. These changes may have acquired significance in their own right and that significance should be recognized and respected.

3. Deteriorated architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced when practicable.

4. When replacement of architectural features is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence.

5. New materials should, whenever possible, match the material being replaced in physical properties, design, color, texture, and appearance. The use of imitation replacement materials is discouraged.

6. The surface cleaning of a landmark should be done in by the gentlest possible means. Sandblasting and other cleaning methods that damage exterior architectural features shall not be used.

7. New additions must not destroy significant exterior architectural features and shall not be incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance, or distinctive character of the landmark, neighborhood, and environment.

8. Additions and alterations should be done in such a way that if they were to be removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the landmark would be unimpaired.

C. Statement of Standards

In the case of this designation, the landmark structure on the property is the Shell sign. The following standards apply to that structure.

1. General

a. The visibility of the sign from Memorial Drive shall be maintained.

b. The existing configuration of neon and incandescent light display shall be maintained. This includes maintenance of the animated features of the sign, allowing it to be illuminated in the existing 14 second display loop. Alterations that ensure proper weather and water protection of animator box and circuit junctions shall be allowed with staff review.

c. Existing architectural features such as raceways, lettering, structural system, location and orientation shall be maintained.

d. Substantial bollards or other protective devices may be installed at the base of the steel structure to protect the framework from vehicular damage.

Shell C

Peters, Penny

From: Olivia Fiske [Livy@speakeasy.net]
Sent: Tuesday, November 10, 2009 8:50 AM
To: henridavis@aol.com; Davis, Henrietta
Subject: The magnificent Shell sign

Henrietta, first of all, congratulations are in order for your election victory, but yawn, I didn't doubt for a minute that you'd be returned to office! I'm personally so very glad you like this sort of work!

Next, I want to lend my voice in support of designating the Shell sign as landmark - whatever it takes to pay for its upkeep. It's a wonderful landmark, cheerful and elegant, an icon at Cambridgeport's river front. I remember the distress I felt when that wonderful Coca Cola sign disappeared years ago from the other side of the river. Let's not repeat that mistake.

While I have you (so to speak), I am sorry that the African church on Allston St is not restored. The photo on the historical commission's website shows it in its glory. Too bad that can't be restored too. Who owns it now?

Now, if we can just get quieter busses . . . :)

Olivia Fiske
131 Magazine St, #2