Mary Nastasi, “You Can’t Fight City Hall: Recontextualizing and Reinterpreting Boston’s Modern Concrete Heritage.” Advisor: Theo Prudon.

Boston’s architectural landscape is traditionally perceived as one dominated by brick. Charles Bulfinch’s State House, the winding streets of Beacon Hill, and the stately town houses of the Back Bay are all amongst the iconic images of the city. Yet Boston is also home to a remarkable collection of highly significant mid-twentieth century buildings in another material: concrete. Frequently (and often incorrectly) described as Brutalist, these buildings seem to exist at odds with the brick landscape in material, form, and ideology. To the contrary, these modern concrete structures represent a different but equally significant and legitimate period in the architectural landscape of Boston. Yet despite their importance within the city, the current inclination among the general public is at best to dismiss these buildings as non-historic and at worst to seek their demolition.

As awareness of the buildings grows, the need to address their place in Boston’s history becomes both more apparent and more urgent. The issue of context plagues the buildings, as they are dismissed as being anathema to the seemingly prevailing general architectural tradition of the city. Yet this is not the case; the modern concrete movement in Boston carries a particular social and philosophical weight that is crucial to the history of the city, representing a period of architectural and intellectual vitality, it could be argued, rivaling even that of the celebrated colonial period. Despite its status as the economic capitol of the colonial period, Boston lost its foothold during the early twentieth century and fell into a decades- long depression. It was only the postwar expansion of the academic and intellectual community that allowed the city to regain its place as a major capitol, and the architecture of the period reflects its re-emergence. In order to properly preserve and protect these highly significant- and highly threatened- buildings, we must address the nature of their role within the city. At the crux of the issue is the question of the transition of perception. How did the culture of brick develop within the city and what does it represent? What were the factors that led to the shift to a culture of concrete, and what made the culture of brick return? What is the relationship of the tradition of granite buildings to the rise and fall of the modern concrete movement in Boston, and how is the city’s visual relationship with color manifested in its treatment of the different materials? If it is the color gray and surface texture that is so difficult to accept within the city, why are granite buildings celebrated and concrete buildings completely rejected? How can we make modernism a part of Boston’s invaluable tradition? By examining these questions and using them to craft a revisionist historical narrative, the paper will re-contextualize the modern concrete movement within Boston’s architectural continuum and re-interpret it as a valid, vital current within the city’s history.