

HARVARD SQUARE THEATRE  
CAMBRIDGE, MA, USA  
2018

Located on Church Street, in the heart of Harvard Square and next to the university's famous courtyard, the plot occupies what remains today of the former Harvard Square Theatre. Opened in 1926 with a single 1,900-seat film auditorium with a 40-ft screen, it was subsequently partitioned into various small screens, gradually declining until it was closed in 2012. During its many decades of use, the theatre hosted all kinds of notable events, from Jean Luc Godard and Woody Allen movie premieres to Sonic Youth and Grateful Dead concerts, leaving its mark on the collective cultural memory of the city's community and the many generations of students that visited the building.

The existing plot is currently occupied by the deep and windowless redbrick monolith of the former theatre, which, having reached a state irreversible dereliction, and in the absence of any elements of historical worth, is to be demolished. The context of Church Street, and this building in particular, is nonetheless delicate and sensitive. Across the street, its north façade faces the parish house of the First Unitarian Church, built in 1902 in limestone, with the adjacent church building from 1833 in painted wood. Both were designed in New England's traditional Gothic-Revival style. In addition to Church Street, the building partially looks onto Palmer Street, with most of its south façade facing an extremely narrow alley shared with the Harvard Coop and its loading bay. The corner of Palmer Street with Church Street is occupied by 30 Church Street, best known for hosting the venerable American folk music venue Club Passim in its basement. Overall, the design concept derives from these various given circumstances. Thus, considering its context, and despite mostly containing offices and street-level retail, the programme for the new Harvard Square Theatre building also includes a multipurpose cinema in the basement with two screens and a total of 255 seats. Although respectful of the context, it is strongly contemporary in the sense that it critically engages with the present, aiming to reassert the building's legacy as an urban icon. Avoiding the inimical disruptiveness that a glazed office building façade would entail, instead, a raised circular courtyard is envisioned so as to feed natural light deep into the building, without unsettling the streetscape. As a sort of small palazzo, the façade is evocative of the building's civic nature, with its formal public frontage in customised off-white ceramic porcelain framed by steel mullions, set in contrast to the anthracite brickwork that forms the rest of the building. In terms of colour and texture, these tiles visually resonate with the limestone of the parish building, while the remaining brickwork evokes the industrial character so often associated with functional façades. Similarly, on Church Street this contextual discourse is emphasised by echoing the rhythm of the pilasters of the First Unitarian Church with the building's vertical composition of slot windows. In addition to creating an identity for the theatre entrance, the adjacent lower volume to the east of Church Street mediates the difference of scale between the four-storey office building and the two-storey adjacent store.

In a certain sense, the façade concept is both historically archaic and technologically innovative. While design-wise the ceramic façade concept does not rely on technology, it contains a concealed, sophisticated built-in technology system of indirect low-emission light sources that provide a rich potential for light-based visual art projects. During daytime, it constitutes a discreet urban façade of ceramic porcelain; in the evening, when lit as wanted, it generates images that engage the community.

Location: 10 Church Street, Cambridge, MA, USA

Client: Kirche LLC (Dr. Gerald H. Chan)

Associate architects: Merge Architects, Boston, MA

Façade lighting design: Iart AG, Basel, Switzerland

Façade engineering: Front, Inc (Marc Simmons), Brooklyn, NY

Scope of services: Architecture and landscape architecture

Project brief: Commercial (offices with street retail and theatre)

Plot area: 1,750 sq. m (18,836 sq. ft)

Gross floor area: 4,700 sq. m (50,600 sq. ft), including theatre basement

Project status: 2018 (concept design) – 2022 (on hold)

Rendering: 4+Arquitectos