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## Waterworks: When public buildings were beautiful

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Once upon a time Boston and other American cities built public buildings, even those for utilitarian purposes, as architectural monuments, cathedrals of the workaday world. Train terminals like South Station in Boston and Grand Central Station in New York reflected this spirit, but so did buildings where the public never set foot. One local example is the newly restored complex now known as the Metropolitan Waterworks Museum, opposite the Chestnut Hill Reservoir in Boston. A visit to the museum is a reminder of how pride of place has fallen victim to a lack of imagination, and to the tyranny of the bottom line — so much so that a welcome exception like the Zakim Bridge takes us by surprise.

Built in 1888 to house the engines and pumps that brought clean water to a fast-growing city, the main building of the waterworks was designed by Arthur Vinal in the Romanesque style of H.H. Richardson's Trinity Church in Copley Square. Vinal included a tower, with no clear practical purpose, that helps stamp his building as a cousin of Richardson's, which was built 11 years earlier. The waterworks ceiling is clad in elaborate tongue-and-groove beadboard.

The building's sheer grandeur — and the tireless advocacy of the Friends of the Waterworks — has saved it from the wrecking ball. Much of the cost of the museum was covered by a developer, who has built 112 condos on the property, including four right in the museum building. The restoration shows not just how massive machinery once pumped water throughout a hilly city, but also what the public loses when it no longer demands beauty in its buildings. ■

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