



Boston High-Rise Soars as Post-Recession Success Story

Kensington and National Development's 381-unit Kensington in Boston is the fruition of a collaboration born out of insight, patience, and a finger on the pulse of market demand.

By Barbara Ballinger



The Kensington, Boston. Photo: Peter Vanderwarker, Courtesy The Architectural Team

A prominent downtown Boston site, formerly occupied by a theater, has been given a second life as a new luxury high-rise. The property sprung from a collaboration between developers Kensington Investment Co. and National Development and architecture firm The Architectural Team. The key to their success? Waiting patiently for the right time to build, and understanding the market's demand for a sleek, glass, and green structure that would stand out—and fit in.

Patience, please. Despite being known as “the combat zone” in the 1980s, the area at the intersection of Boston's financial and theater districts and Chinatown offered proximity to the Boston Common and public transit. Kensington Investment Co. recognized the potential of the site, occupied by the shuttered Gaiety Theater and adjoining buildings, so the firm purchased the property in 1986 and waited for signs of renewal.

By 2005–06, renovation of a historic theater and the Boston Opera House, and construction of a luxury rental, provided incentive for the Kensington team to move forward with the project. The city's development attitude had also become more receptive to a contemporary high-rise, says Boston architect Michael E. Liu of The Architectural Team. The Gaiety was razed, but plans stalled when construction costs rose and the economy sank. Once the financial climate revived and interest in living downtown increased, work began anew on The Kensington tower.



Photo: Peter Vanderwarker,
Courtesy The Architectural Team

Sidewalk appeal. To make its 27-story building stand out visually in its prominent location at 655 Washington Street, Liu chose eye-catching materials that would also make a high-efficiency envelope: metal panels, precast concrete, and large windows. “We wanted an airier, lighter feeling than many area buildings had,” says Liu. He and colleagues also wanted a look of seamlessness between the lobby and street to welcome in passersby—hence, a two-story glass curtain wall. The exterior of the building also fits its neighborhood, with a lower portion in scale with the historic Hayden building on the south side and a higher portion on the northern face to complement the taller China Trade Center. Retail space was set aside, and the developers are working to fill it.

Meeting the mind-set. The tight urban setting meant that the building's 488,000 square feet had to be carefully divided between public and private quarters. Because the developers expected the majority of renters to be young professionals, they provided a high ratio of common to unit area, since this demographic is more interested in a variety of public spaces than it is in the size of apartments. The design—striking and playful—also didn't bury amenities, but made them visible on the ground level and sixth level, where there are areas to work out, relax, study, and congregate by an outdoor pool with fireplace and TV. “I don't know how much swimming goes on, but social activity takes place around the pool,” says Tom Alperin, president of National Development. Concierge services include dog walking; a strong community component features wine evenings and other events.



The lounge at The Kensington.

Photo: Peter Vanderwarker, Courtesy The Architectural Team

Downtown green. Sustainability has been a key goal of the developers. Their choices for The Kensington resulted in LEED Gold certification, with points garnered for the transit-oriented site; use of locally sourced materials and components, such as precast concrete and the kitchen cabinets; proportion of windows to solid surfaces to avoid excessive energy loss yet permit views; individual apartment temperature controls; smoke-free quarters; and reduced on-site parking from the original plan to encourage walking and bicycling. Because of the tight lot lines, Boston-based Copley Wolff Design Group focused on adding attractive hardscaping and pedestrian-level street lighting; it also landscaped the ipé-paved upper deck.



A unit interior at The Kensington.
Photo: Peter Vanderwarker, Courtesy The Architectural Team

Properly modern. A too-hip modern décor seemed severe for Boston's conservative traditions, but being historic and proper wasn't the look designer Rebecca Jones of RD Jones & Associates in Washington, D.C., was after, either. Her solution: Meld contemporary touches that appeal to the young with a sophisticated, luxurious edge as an ode to Boston's past. Seating arranged in intimate groupings was upholstered in a warm palette to offset the city's cold climate. Local artists' work totaling \$200,000 was installed.

The apartments range from 553 square feet for an open one-bedroom, at \$2,875 a month, to 1,558 square feet for a two-bedroom with den, which leases for \$10,000 on the penthouse level. Opened last August, the building is 56 percent leased.

The developers commemorated the area's roots with a 50-foot-long exhibit of Gaiety artifacts visible along the exterior; they also pledged funds to a local affordable assisted-living facility and a park.