

TRAVEL

# The challenge of designing a glass high-rise that both fits in and stands out in the Back Bay

With Raffles hotel, a Boston architect faced the epic challenge of designing a tower in a neighborhood full of brownstones and iconic architecture.

By [Christopher Muther](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 4, 2023, 6:00 a.m.

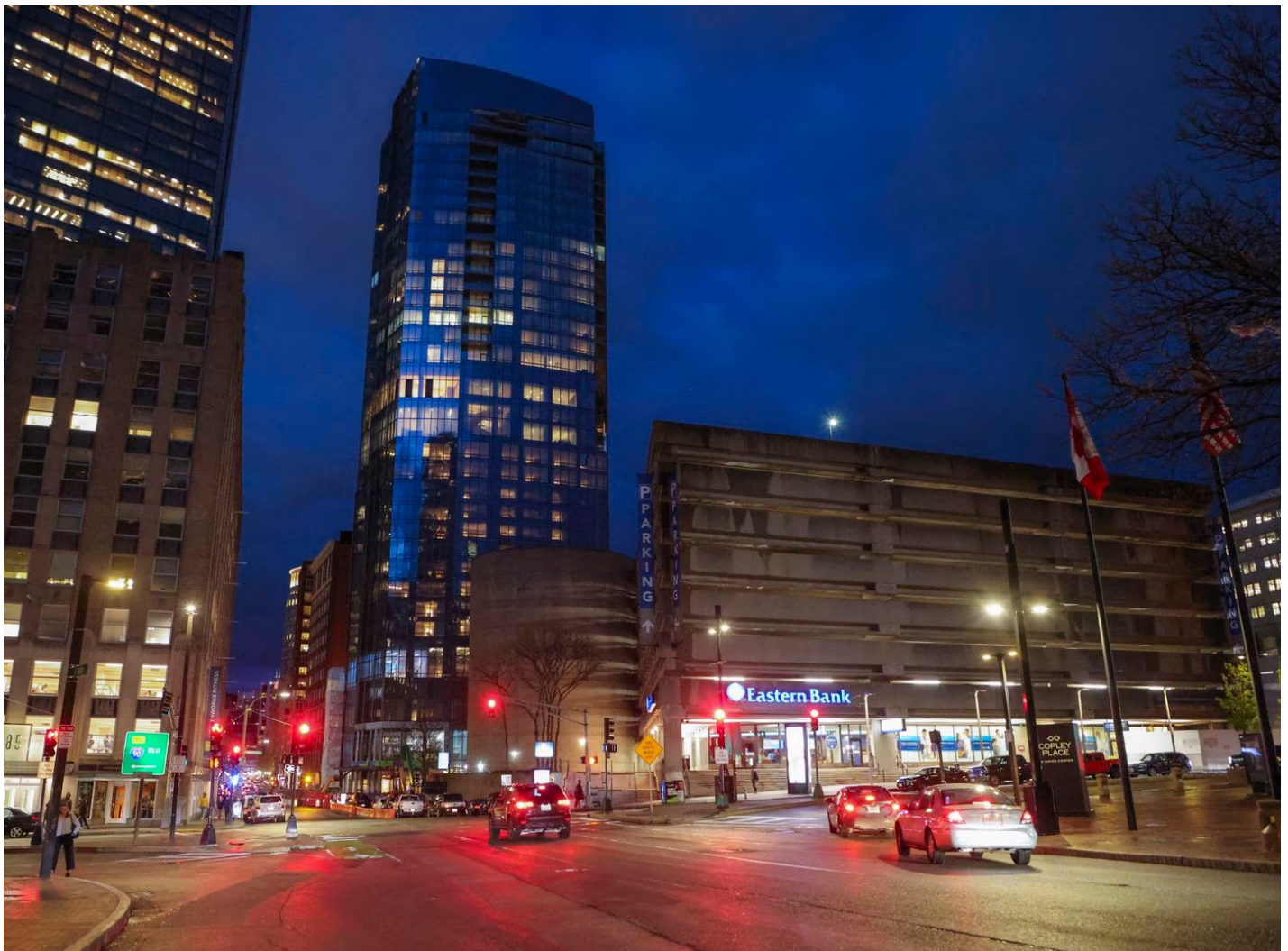


Raffles Boston Back Bay Hotel & Residences to the left of the John Hancock Tower (center) and the Clarendon (at right). This photo was taken from Columbus Avenue. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

When developers approached architect Michael Liu to design what would eventually become the 35-story [Raffles Boston Hotel & Residences](#) on Trinity Place in Boston, the pressure was immediately on.

Not only was Raffles the tallest building the architect had ever worked on, but it was also located in a neighborhood full of historic brownstones and some of Boston's most recognizable modern towers.

"The trick of it was to really make the building part of the landscape and also an entity that's striking on its own," said Liu, a senior partner and design principal at [The Architectural Team, Inc.](#) "[The John] Hancock Tower is an architectural icon. It was important to develop a design that would not blur the reading and the legibility of the Hancock in the skyline. I think we were pretty successful."



Liu said his building has a glass skin, just as the Hancock does, so he focused on the shape and color of the structure to help distinguish the two. The 60-story Hancock is not only the tallest building in Boston, it's also the tallest in New England. The Henry N. Cobb-designed Hancock is a rectangular parallelogram. Liu approached Raffles by designing a 35-story fan-shaped tower, a necessity brought about by both the footprint of the lot and a way to help it stand out from its taller neighbor.

Liu was also designing near another well-regarded building, the Clarendon, a 32-story brick building by Robert A.M. Stern, which sits catty-corner to the Hancock.

The process began 12 years ago when hotelier Gary Saunders and developer Jordan Warshaw approached Liu to develop a hotel at the site of the former Boston Common Hotel and Conference Center at 40 Trinity Place in the Back Bay. The hotel had 64 modest, two-star rooms that Warshaw and Saunders initially intended to refurbish but encountered difficulties making the building compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. So they turned to Liu to create the Back Bay's first high-rise since the Four Seasons opened its One Dalton location in 2018.

According to Liu, the shape of the Raffles tower allows unique views from every part of the building, adding, "There's a kind of theater to it."

"The view is never the same as you move through either the common spaces or different rooms," he said. "Moving through the common spaces in the hotel is not a static experience. It's choreographed."

The theater and choreography begin when hotel guests and residents walk into the relatively modest first floor of the building. From there, an elevator takes them to the 17th floor, known as the Sky Lobby. It has tall ceilings and panoramic views.





The new Raffles hotel (center). DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

“If you look at the plan, you come from the street into the first floor,” he said. “It’s not a small lobby, but it’s not a huge lobby. You get into an express elevator to the 17th floor. The doors open up, and you have an explosion of space. There’s a circular three-floor staircase that sits like a giant sculpture. It’s one surprise that leads you to another.”

The Sky Lobby is the first of its kind in Boston.

It wasn’t just the aesthetics that presented challenges. Liu compared building Raffles to a Swiss watch, with delicate, intricate details filling a limited amount of land. That meant figuring out how to assemble the pre-fabricated, dramatic stairway on the 17th floor.





The new Raffles hotel (left) in Back Bay, at 40 Trinity Place in Boston. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

One of the biggest of those challenges came with accommodating its neighbor, the University Club. The building received air rights from the club to build over it. That means Raffles is cantilevered over the club, rising 28 stories over it. The University Club and the former Boston Common Hotel and Conference Center shared a wall, which meant carefully creating a new wall for the club to build the hotel.

When Raffles signed on as the hotel operator, planning was well underway. Raffles, based in Singapore, is a luxury brand on par with the Four Seasons and has an 800-page brand-standard manual. But Liu said the most nerve-racking part of the project was when he had to choose \$14 million worth of glass for the windows.

“You choose a product years before it’s installed on the building,” he said. “You’re looking at a mock-up, which is maybe eight feet tall and 16 feet wide. You just don’t know until there’s enough of it on the actual building to determine if it works. When it was up on the building and I knew the glass worked was when I thought, ‘OK, I can breathe now.’”

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