

The Special Character of The Moore Square Historic District

East of Fayetteville Street and south of the Capitol, Moore Square Historic District, designated 1992, contains a concentration of early twentieth century commercial architecture. Moore Square itself is one of only two surviving four-acre public parks from the original 1792 town plat; the other two have been built upon, and the fifth public square, the six-acre Union Square, was always reserved for the State Capitol.

William Christmas's original city plan provides the form for the district's rectilinear grid of streets. Residing on a ridge of land between Crabtree and Walnut creeks, the topography of the district is largely level, evenly and gently sloping toward the south and east. The approximate center of the district is defined by the intersection of South Blount and East Hargett streets. In the southeast corner of the district, the grid of original streets from the 1792 town plat is supplemented by three smaller, narrower streets that were created to serve the 1914 City Market complex. The effect of this system of smaller streets is to create within the district a sub-area of greater intimacy, a finer scale especially suited to pedestrian amenity.

Additionally, Moore Square Station, a mid-1980s city project to provide a parking deck and centralized bus transit transfer facility, has an internal circulation system that accommodates buses, auto parking, and pedestrian traffic. The entire complex is carefully integrated within the historic building fabric, nestled into the center of the block behind the earlier structures that front onto Hargett, Blount, Martin and Wilmington streets.

Asphalt streets throughout the district intersect at right angles in a regular rectangular pattern; however, portions of the streets at City Market have been stripped of asphalt to display their original cobblestone surface. Original granite curbstones remain in much of the district, with a few concrete curbs introduced, as well as some sections of new granite curbing installed in association with city streetscape improvement programs.

Special period streetlighting fixtures, reminiscent of the fixtures that lined the streets at the turn of the century, have been installed within the district. Sidewalk materials vary; almost all sidewalk areas in the district have been reconstructed through city streetscape improvement programs. Concrete is the dominant material, scored into two-foot squares, accented by red concrete unit paver strips. Street trees with cast iron tree grates establish a regular pattern and rhythm along the district's sidewalks.

In addition to the landscape defined by the urban street setting, Moore Square provides a tree-shaded activity center. It serves the downtown community in many ways. The square is often used as a focal point for many downtown festivals and events; the park's mature trees and lawn also provide an inviting setting for casual strolling and relaxation.

The square is largely open and unimpeded in order to accommodate crowds of people; there are, however, several raised planters that provide seasonal color. Additional urban landscape amenities, associated with Moore Square Station, are found east of Moore Square across Blount Street. A series of cascading fountains, constructed of brick and overlooked by pedestrian walkways and bridges, flank a lawn-covered sunken courtyard behind the Montague Building.

The architectural scale of the district is pleasingly suited to the pedestrian. The vast majority of buildings in the district are simple, vernacular brick "shoe-boxes," two to three stories in height, narrow and deep.

Past attempts to modernize the pedestrian level of the shops with aluminum panels and flat aluminum awnings contribute to a discontinuity that contrasts with the frequently related repetitive elements and details of the second and third floors of these buildings.

Above the "new" facades, one finds well-defined string courses and the large single light, double hung sash windows characteristic of late 19th and early 20th century architecture of this scale. Frequently jack or rounded arches of projecting bricks define window heads above deep sills and jambs. A flat parapet with occasional corbelling, decorative panels or raised block for name and date make up the skyline. The appearance of a projecting cornice with brackets alludes to a continuing Italianate influence in the usually plain commercial forms of the district.

Wilmington Street presents the most intact example of this commercial rhythm of small shop fronts. Hargett Street, Raleigh's "Black Main Street" during the first five decades of the 20th century, has suffered the most, with several buildings lost to fire and urban decay, leaving gaps in the streetscape filled with unscreened, unlandscaped surface parking. Yet these gaps, while intrusive, are not frequent enough to disrupt the overall pedestrian quality of the district.

A few architectural landmarks punctuate the dominant pattern of vernacular commercial facades. Most notable are the Mission-style City Market (1914), Italianate-style Early Store Building (ca. 1875, Heilig-Levine Furniture), Neoclassical/Commercial-style Montague Building (1912), and Gothic Revival-style Tabernacle Baptist Church (1881-1909). The two recent parking decks constructed in the centers of blocks, the previously mentioned Moore Square Station, and the Wilmington Street Station (1992, one block north of Moore Square Station) are of a much larger scale than other structures in the district, but their mid-block locations and setback from the street help mitigate the scale, while careful detailing architecturally integrates them into the district. On the south side of Moore Square, adjacent to City Market, is the Norwood House. Relocated in 1997 from nearby Person Street, the ca. 1880 Italianate dwelling rests on the site of another house demolished in 1989, and speaks to the era prior to the commercialization of the Moore Square area when the square was surrounded by homes and the focus of a residential neighborhood.

In spite of its commercial focus, the symbolic heart of the district is the green space of Moore Square. It has remained a permanent feature of the area from its beginnings in the 18th century. The grove of trees, grass, and flowers emphasizes what is still a pedestrian scale, a scale created by the buildings and felt in spite of the widened streets and gap sites.