

Left: Eleanor Coppola, *Windows*, San Francisco, 1973;
 Right: Claes Oldenburg, *The Store*, New York City, 1961.

FACE VALUE

2024 Rotch Travelling Scholarship Preliminary Competition Brief

In her essay *Vitrinas* from 1951, Lina Bo Bardi describes the shop window as a unique spatial condition caught between private and public interests. As a thickened threshold that separates the sales floor from the sidewalk, ground floor storefronts serve as visual registers to the conflicting forces that shape our experience of the public realm, from volatile cycles of commercial real-estate speculation, to the more intimate rhythms of the pavement. As both index and interface, the storefront provides a provocative medium for negotiating questions of access and identity that underpin the spatial politics of the contemporary city.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, this once bustling typology has come under threat as commercial vacancy rates continue to rise in downtowns across America, fueled by unregulated rent inflation, and the persistence of e-commerce and remote work policies. In Boston's *Downtown Crossing*, a neighborhood spanning less than 1.5 square miles, there are currently over 50 vacant retail storefronts, totaling roughly 300,000 square feet. Some of these properties have been subjected to a rapid turnover of failed businesses, others have remained unoccupied for years, taking a toll on neighboring property values, and perceptions of public safety. Lined with sheets of plywood, brown butcher paper, or glossy vinyl advertisements, vacancy reduces the architecture of the storefront to a single, defensive surface—a universal symbol of the privatization of the public realm, and a loss of faith in the possibility of a return to collective life.

But what if we looked beyond this image of abandonment? What would we find in the empty spaces that are left behind? Could these gaps within an otherwise saturated real-estate market tell us something about the possibility of life after retail? Over the past several years, both city agencies and Downtown BIDs have started to ask themselves these questions through proposals for zoning code amendments, rent subsidies and flexible tenancy models that encourage the creative reuse of empty retail spaces. Examples of this include economic initiatives like the City of Boston’s SPACE Grant program that provide financial support for small-businesses and non-profits such as maintenance and repair services and childcare spaces. Others include organizations that partner with property owners to transform underutilized retail spaces into artist studios and temporary exhibition venues.

Beyond these initiatives, the storefront has also doubled as a site for social and institutional critique in a long lineage of projects by artists and filmmakers—from Claes Oldenburg’s store of plaster teotchkes in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, to Eleanor Coppola’s photographs of demolished storefronts in San Francisco—that make use of the condition of vacancy to interrogate larger patterns of consumption and redevelopment. Together, these projects point to the inherent civic agency of the storefront, and its potential to serve as both a form of care infrastructure with its surrounding neighborhoods, and a site for a broader reassessment of collective values.

BRIEF

The 2024 Rotch Preliminary Competition builds on the momentum of our current moment to call for radical reuse scenarios for the retail storefront that reposition this overlooked typology as a public good. Devoid of its original function, the vacant storefront serves as a provocative site for exploring alternative spatial practices, programmatic pairings, or forms of collective maintenance that reimagine how private resources could be redistributed for public use.

The brief calls for proposals that reframe the condition of vacancy on their own terms through spatial, material, and/or programmatic interventions within an existing site in Downtown Crossing. Proposals should consider all the individual elements of this ubiquitous architectural typology—the retail floor, the shop window, the sidewalk—as sites for reinvention, as well as the broader implications of their interventions within the urban environment. Designers are encouraged to consider expressions of “publicness” across scales: from the design of the entry sequence, to the choice of materials and architectural details, to considerations of the role of building systems and sidewalk infrastructure to foster notions of shelter and belonging.

Retail Floor:

Proposals should consider how the existing space of the retail floor can be reconfigured to accommodate a wider range of functions and interactions. Specifically, all proposals must cater to three different types of tenants or users: a public space or service that is free and accessible to the general public, a retail space for a small business, and a temporary project space for short-term programming that operates on a 3-6 month cycle. It is up to each designer to decide how much of the existing floor plate to allocate to each of the three uses, and the degree of sharing or overlap between programs. At least two of the tenants must have direct access to the sidewalk. The combined square footage for all three uses must not exceed 3,750 SF.

Designers should clearly identify the specific programs or tenants that their proposal serves, and describe how they might complement each other as good neighbors. Interventions should consider connections, adjacencies and overlaps between the different program areas, and well as issues such as internal circulation, sidewalk access and visibility to the street.

Storefront:

Proposals must include a complete re-design of the existing storefront as a thickened threshold that functions both as a vertical display surface and a transitional space between the retail floor and the sidewalk. Specifically, all submission must include a 600 SF covered patio that acts as an extension of the sidewalk. The patio can occupy any part of the site, but must be accessible from Winter Street, and provide a means of entry into the building. No part of the proposal can extend into the sidewalk at any point, meaning that the covered patio must make use of the existing retail space within the project boundaries.

Program Requirements:

TBD by contestant*	Public Program
TBD by contestant*	Retail Space for a Small Business
TBD by contestant*	Flexible Project Space
500 SF	Back of House (storage, offices, more restrooms, etc.)
600 SF	Covered Patio
250 SF	Public Restrooms (Two gender neutral stalls, 24h access)
480 SF	Residential Lobby (incl. existing stair/elevator, 24h access)

5, 580 sf

Total

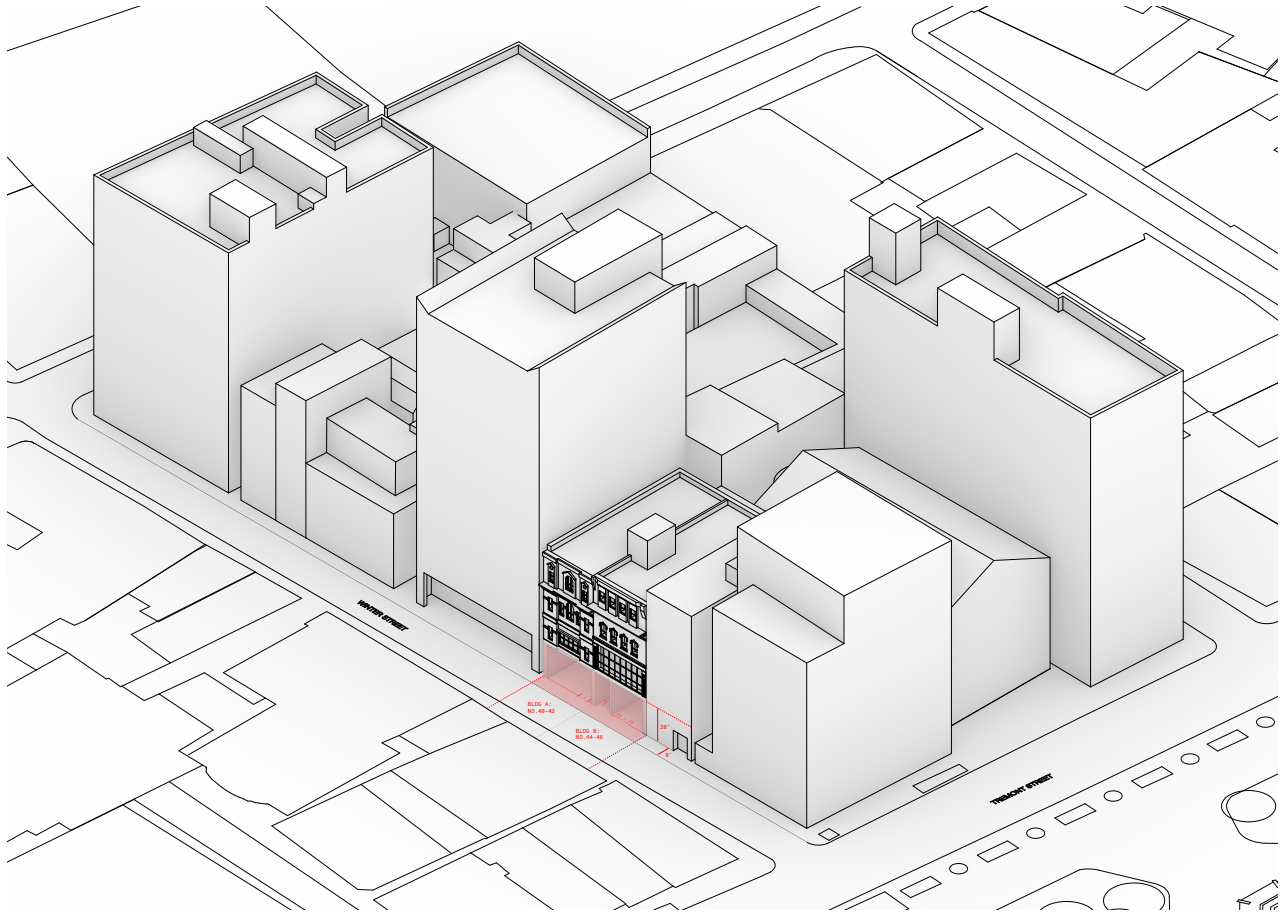
2, 700 sf

Building A: 40-42 Winter St

2, 880 sf

Building B: 44-46 Winter St.

* The public program, retail space and flexible project space should add up to a combined area of roughly 3, 750 SF.



SITE : 40 - 46 Winter Street

The site for the project takes the form of two vacant retail storefronts—Building A (No. 40-42) and Building B (No. 44-46)—located next to each other on Winter Street in Downtown Crossing. Both properties were previously occupied by commercial tenants and vacated during the past year.

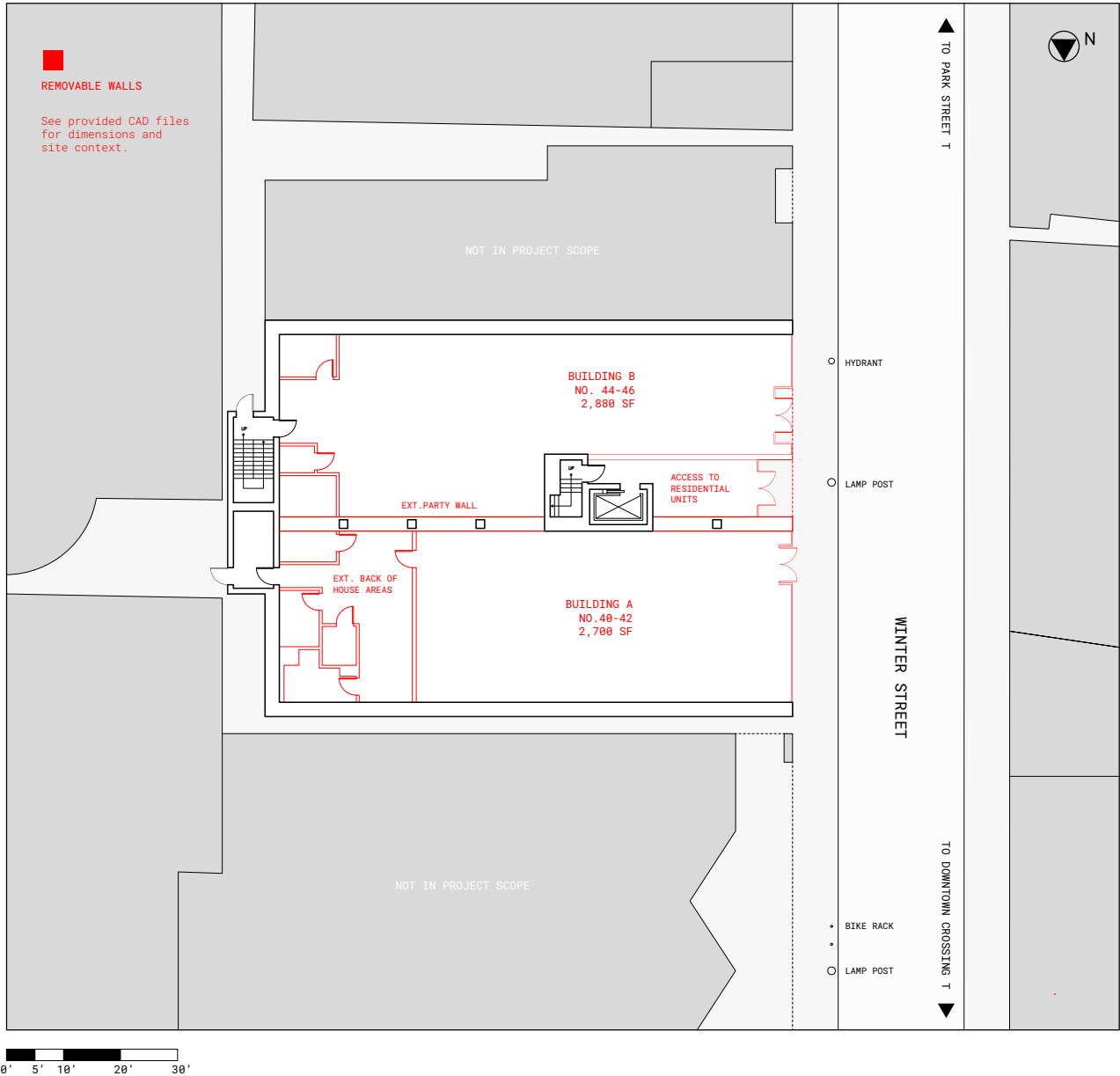
The retail floors of the two units occupy a combined 5,200 SF on the ground level of two four-story brick and stone buildings from the 1890s. In the 1980s, the upper levels were converted into 14 residential units that share a single circulation lobby located in building B, with an entrance on Winter Street.

The buildings are positioned within short walking distance to two MBTA stations: Park Street to the west and Downtown Crossing to the East. The storefronts face onto a pedestrian street, with 8' sidewalks on either side. The sidewalk along this stretch of Winter Street is covered with brick and concrete paving and is at the same level as the rest of the street. Commercial vehicles are permitted to park along the street between 6pm and 11am. There are no provisions for street parking for the remainder of the day.

Constraints / Opportunities:

- The ground floor retail spaces currently function as two distinct properties separated by a party wall. Proposals can choose to keep this wall intact, cut into it in areas, or remove it entirely to combine the two properties into one. All existing columns (shown in plan) must remain in place in the final design.
- The floor plan illustrates the original interior layout of the retail units for reference only. All removable partitions are marked in red, and can be reconfigured and removed as needed.
- The upper residential levels do not need to be considered within the scope of this brief, but proposals must retain the existing elevator and stair cores leading up to the units (located in Building B), and include the design of a new residential lobby with access on Winter Street. The residential lobby can be treated as its own distinct space, or be integrated into the rest of the ground program (i.e. it does not need to be a separate entity).
- Site documentation is provided in .dwg and .3dm formats. Please note that the site information has been simplified for the purposes of this competition brief and may not match other publicly available information for this site. Contestants may consult found materials, but should plan to use to the provided set of plans and 3d model as the basis for their submissions. If you have not received this information, please contact Ben Peterson (bpeterson@architects.org).





Deliverables:

- Project Statement (250 words max.)
- One (1) Plan
- One (1) Section or Sectional Axonometric
- One (1) Interior Perspective or Sectional Perspective
- One (1) Exterior Perspective or Elevation

Evaluation Criteria:

The jury will evaluate submissions according to the following criteria:

- Clarity and intellectual premise of the overall project, as articulated in the project statement and graphic representation.
- Overall project design and scope—demonstrated by ambition and/or constraint.
- Capacity to analyze, transform, and utilize an existing architectural typology to meet the criteria described in the project brief.

Submission Requirements:

All entries will be submitted digitally in a single, multi-page PDF in a 16:9 ratio (landscape format). A convened jury will review submitted work digitally. The submission file may be no larger than 15MB. PDFs may be no more than four (4) pages.

- This submission must remain anonymous. Do not include your name anywhere on the submission documents. If your name is visible, the entry will be disqualified.
- Competition entries must be submitted electronically to: Ben Peterson (bpeterson@architects.org). You are welcome to use an FTP service such as 'dropbox.com' or 'wetransfer.com' if necessary.
- Files must be named as follows: Your first initial, your last name, underscore, '2024RotchPrelim' (for example RKoolhaas_2024RotchPrelim.pdf). Once submitted, a third party will rename each entry a random number to ensure anonymity before the jury views them. You will receive a reply email confirming receipt of your entry.
- By submitting your entry, you hereby assure the Rotch Scholarship Committee that you are the sole author of your submission for the 2024 Rotch Competition and have not received criticism, suggestions, or help of any sort other than through the use of books and other published literature.
- The Rotch Scholarship reserves the right to use any submitted material in print publications and/or on websites.
- **Electronic submissions must be received by Monday, February 26, 2024, 12:00PM.**