

Architecture



The building, which houses 51 rental lofts, features copper panels, shaded differently, that look like shingles.

A model of good old-fashioned modernism

23 Sidney St. in Cambridge is an elegant reminder of an oft-forgotten style

By Robert Campbell

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It's a little bit like what the Brits call a "folly." That's a word they use to describe a beautiful but useless piece of architecture in a garden setting. Sometimes it's a fake ruin, sometimes a miniature Roman temple. Either way, it's there just to be looked at, and to provide a theatrical atmosphere.

Twenty-three Sidney St. in Cambridge is far from useless. This admirable new building houses a collection of 51 rental lofts. But it stands in a park like a jewel in a green setting. The park is surrounded by the buildings of the large University Park redevelopment, of which 23 Sidney is a part. Those other buildings are made of red brick. Twenty-three, by contrast, is made of crisp copper and glass. It stands out like a child star on a stage; it feels small, perfect, and theatrical.

As much as anything, 23 Sidney is a work of modernist sculpture. It's an elegant work of abstract art. Copper and glass are brought together — or rather, they are made to stand independently side by side, like a couple pausing in a dance — by means of details that are as crisply articulated as an architectural language can be.

But 23 is logical, too, as modernism is supposed to be. The north and south facades are glass, welcoming daylight into the interiors and offering views into parks in both directions. A visor protects the south facade from summer glare. The east and west facades, which stand much closer to other buildings, are more private, sheathed in copper with few windows. There's no retail at street level, which is too bad, but the architects have imitated it by designing the lobby to resemble a showroom of modern art and furniture.

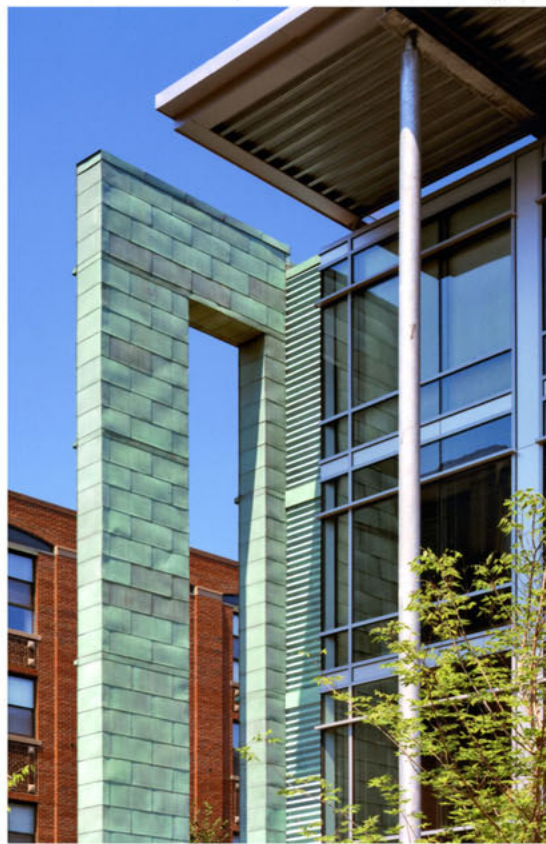
Indoors, the 51 lofts are handsome and airy. Like most lofts, they're high and deep — 12 feet floor to floor, and 45 feet front to back — and like most lofts, they don't feature a lot of fancy finishes. The motif is industrial: exposed pipes and ducts beneath a ceiling of metal decking, and floors of plain concrete (but there's a hidden virtue: the floor is a sandwich, two layers of concrete with insulation between, thus muffling sound). Kitchens are more elegantly finished, with granite countertops and wood cabinets stained a deep red.

From the outside, the copper is what you notice first. It's applied in panels that look like big shingles. It's pre-patinated, which means it's already the green color that normally takes years to develop. Panels are slightly different shades, giving them the richly varied look of natural leaves. The copper, incidentally, is 95 percent recycled. And the roof is green too, covered with planting not only to capture rain and insulate the building, but also to give people in the taller buildings around something to look down at.

What was saved on interior finishes, says the architect, was spent on things like the copper, and the generous ceiling heights. The ar-



The copper and glass stand out among the brick of University Park. A visor (below left) protects the south facade from summer glare, though glass still welcomes the sunlight.



chitect was Ed Hodges of the firm DiMella Shaffer of Boston. Rents range from \$2,600 to \$3,600 a month. Twenty-eight of the 51 units have been leased.

Twenty-three Sidney is one of the two final buildings in University Park. This large development was one of the most controversial in Cambridge history (Cambridge being Cambridge, that's saying a lot). MIT and its developer, Forest Cities, fought out every issue with hostile, highly politicized neighbors. Now that it's finished, it's fair to say that University Park, which replaces a failed industrial area, is among the best of its kind. It's tru-

ly urban, with plenty of street life and more to come, but it doesn't feel over-built, and it features fine landscapes, especially the common in front of 23 by landscape architect Craig Halvorson. And it's a rich mix of uses: 674 apartments overall, about one-fifth of which are subsidized for those with lower incomes, a hotel, plus office, retail, and research space. The partnership of Fred Koetter and Susie Kim were master-planners and also designed most of the buildings.

We live in a time of a zillion architectural fashions. They range from daring computer-generated free-form shapes, like those of the

Stata Center at MIT by Frank Gehry, to staid red-brick-and-white-trim imitations of the Colonial past, favored by conservative clients and supplied by architects like Yale's Robert A.M. Stern.

You can forget, in such a parade of competing pizzazz, just how satisfying a work of plain old-fashioned modernism can be. Twenty-three Sidney reminds us that modernism was and remains one of the great architectural styles.

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