

HMFH ARCHITECTS

News

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City of Cambridge and HMFH Architects Complete Emergency Housing Residence

Historic Restoration Honored with a 2018 Cambridge Preservation Award

Cambridge, MA – Addressing the critical shortage for emergency housing for families, the Cambridge Health and Human Services Department and Cambridge-based HMFH Architects recently completed a new ten-unit emergency shelter residence within a now historically-preserved and sustainably-designed 19th Century building. The Cambridge Historical Commission honored the project and the City with a 2018 Cambridge Preservation Award.

The 1885 period home once stood among a row of stately residences lining Massachusetts Avenue. During recent decades, 859 Mass Ave was adapted to office use and over time fell into a state of neglect and disrepair. Faded aluminum siding, a gerrymandered front entranceway, rusting fire escapes, and paved-over gardens illustrated its long decline.

“When the City purchased the property, we were fascinated with the opportunity to discover its past and develop a holistic design to restore the house and revive its original distinction in this neighborhood,” said Lori Cowles, Project Director and Principal with HMFH Architects.

The building’s interior was demolished down to the studs and structural beams, allowing the team to design ten family-sized shelter units. Designed to accommodate an adult and one or two children in need of temporary, supportive housing, the new spaces include private baths and shared kitchens with dining areas on each floor. The YWCA manages the residence under contract with the City of Cambridge.



The newly-restored residence at 859 Mass Ave integrates energy-saving technology and produces its own electricity using rooftop solar panels.



859 Massachusetts Ave prior to restoration

The design team worked with the Cambridge Historical Commission to document the building's original features such as exterior siding, windows, and roof materials. Every exterior detail including trim, paint colors, and front stairway design was considered in making design and materials decisions to achieve a restoration true to the original appearance and neighborhood presence.

"Anytime a residence, especially one as distinctive as this, is converted to office or commercial use there is a loss of original features and character," Cowles observed. "Fortunately, the house was solidly built, and we were able to restore it for another century of use."

Sustainable design was an equally-important aspiration for the City and HMFH. This project is designed to meet the requirements of the City's net-zero energy standards with the goal of reducing energy use to as close to zero as possible and producing enough renewable energy on site to meet its own annual consumption.

The newly-restored residence features three different kinds of solar panels, high-efficiency mechanical systems to lower heating and cooling utilization, and LED lighting with sensor technology. The thermally-resilient design was achieved by doubling the thickness of the exterior walls and insulation and specifying ultra-high efficiency windows and doors to significantly reduce energy use.

"The new residence at 859 Mass Avenue provides a welcoming, comfortable environment for families and children in need," said Ellen Semonoff, Cambridge's Assistant City Manager for Human Services. "The beauty and functionality of the building let families know that they are valued members of our community. Achieving such a high level of sustainable design and returning the building to its true historic character are additional community benefits that the City, HMFH, and all our team participants can be proud of," she said.

About HMFH: Since 1969, HMFH Architects has built opportunities for learning on a local, regional, and national level. With its distinguished range of award-winning work from renovated urban buildings to new rural campuses, HMFH is recognized as a leader in the design of innovative learning and living environments. HMFH's work, noted for its user-centered design and energetic use of color, has been recognized, exhibited, and published nationally. For more information, please visit www.hmfh.com.

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