



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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November 3, 2021

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Eric Hill, Survey Director

Re: D-1595: George Solberg house, 49 Bay State Road (1948)

An application to demolish the George Solberg house and associated buildings at 47-53 Bay State Road was submitted on October 12, 2021. The applicant, the American Association of Variable Star Observers, was notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for November 10, 2021.



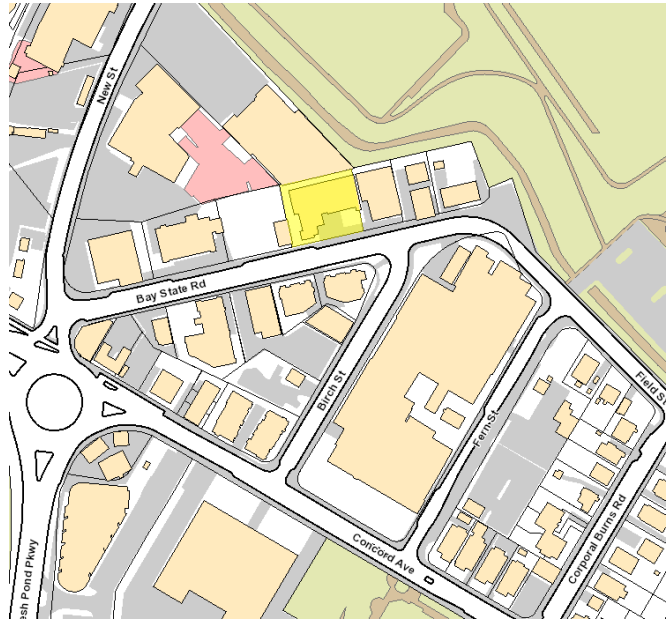
49 Bay State Road, ca. 1975.

CHC staff photo by Richard Cheek

Site

The buildings at 47-53 Bay State Road are located on the north side of the street, between the Fresh Pond Traffic Circle and Birch Street. The surrounding neighborhood is a mix of multi-family residential, retail, and light industrial uses.

The parcel upon which the building stands directly abuts the back of a deep lot off New Street. The 12,000 square foot lot at 47-53 Bay State Road is in a C-1A zoning district, which permits multi-family dwellings, including townhomes. The property is within the Mixed-Use Residential Overlay District (MXR), which “is intended to facilitate a mixed use environment supportive of housing construction within the district in the future while permitting existing non-residential activities to operate and adjust to changing circumstances through limited expansion in built area in ways that will not negatively impact residential activities.”



Cambridge Assessors Map showing 47-53 Bay State Road and surrounding neighborhood.



Aerial view of 47-53 Bay State Road (circled) and surrounding conditions.

Description

The George Solberg house at 49 Bay State Road is a two-story structure with an attached garage constructed in 1948. The main block of the house is slightly set back from the street with a fenced-in front yard. The house form consists of stacked boxes with flat roofs. The first floor of the house and the garage are constructed of cinderblock and covered in stucco finish. The second floor of the house is clapboard or shiplap covered with vinyl siding.



49 Bay State Road, staff photos 2019-21.

The main entrance of the Solberg house is accessed off a recessed corner porch. The doorway and landing are set into the mass of the building and are sheltered by a flat canopy which extends two-thirds the width of the front façade, terminating just past the first-floor window. Three basement windows and a large, three-part picture window are at the façade. At the second floor, all the original steel casement windows have been replaced; a six-part casement ribbon window with single lights wraps the building but is bisected at the corner board. Paired casement windows complete the façade. A brick chimney on the east façade is nearly in the plane of the wall.

The previously one-story garage with deck above was given a one-story, vertical addition by the 1970s, increasing the bulk of the building. Two large, concrete block additions constructed in the 1960s and 70s fill up nearly the entire rear yard of the site. The first was a two-story concrete block structure connected to the by a 12'-0" connector and covered entry. The second, a one-story concrete block addition, is connected to the two-story addition and runs nearly to the east side lot line. The one-story addition includes a garage door, two pedestrian doors, and a glass block window at the façade. A surface parking





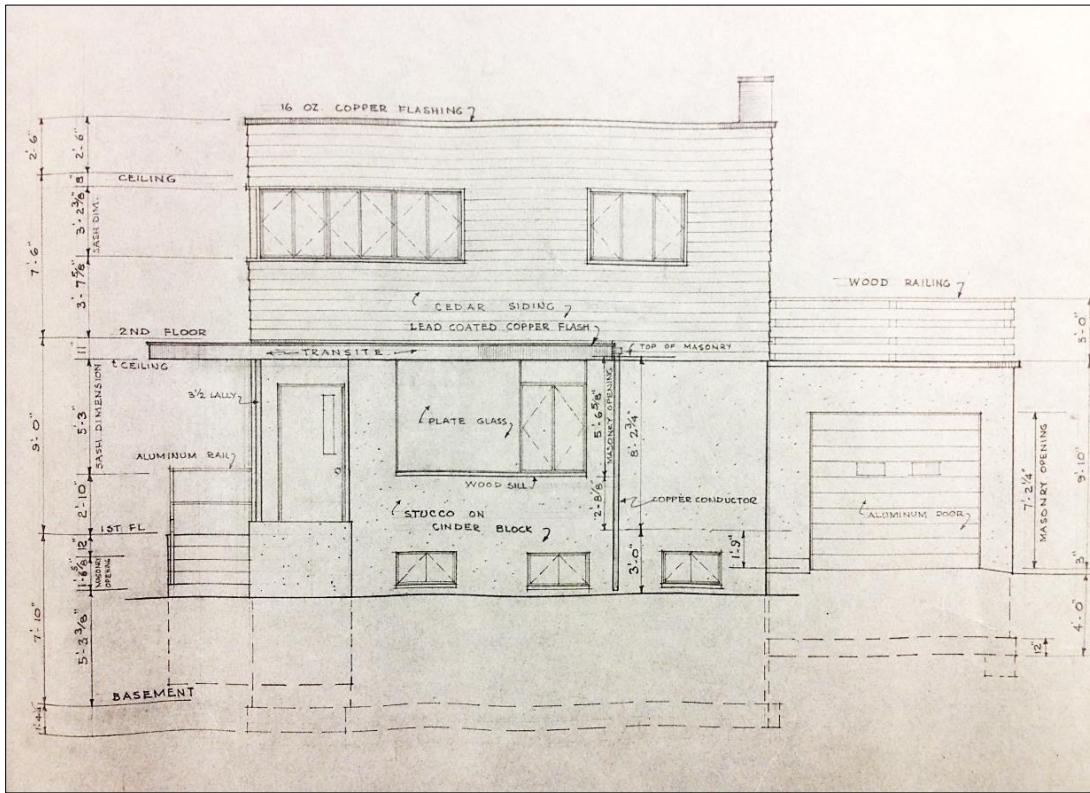
47-53 Bay State Road. Construction of one-story annex building, 1956, with Solberg house at rear. Photo courtesy of Sky & Telescope Magazine.

lot is located in front of the one-story addition. These additions are not considered significant for the purposes of demolition permit review.

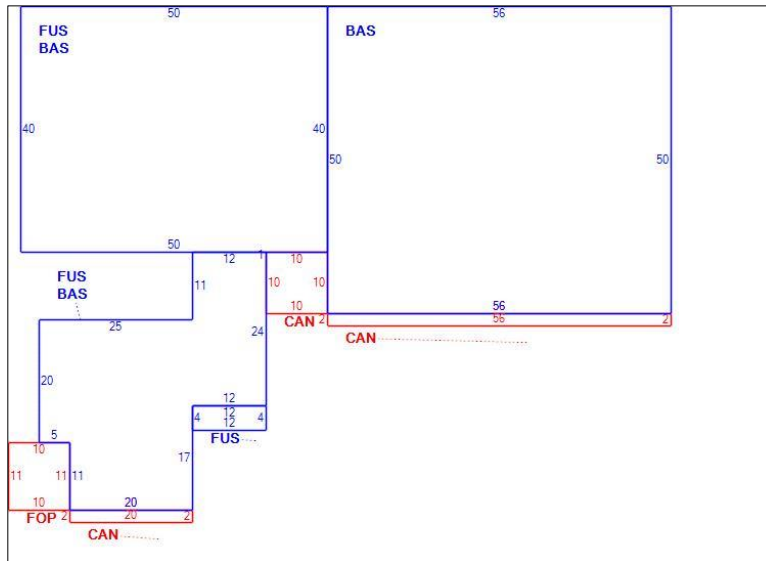
The Solberg house at 49 Bay State Road can be classified as an example of the International Style of architecture in Cambridge. The house features a flat roof without an overhang; windows that are set flush with the outer walls; smooth, unadorned wall surfaces with no decorative detailing at the doors or windows; linear window groupings; and an asymmetrical façade with corner entrance.



1979 image of 47-53 Bay State Road, showing recently completed two-story addition over original garage. Image courtesy of Sky & Telescope Magazine.



Architect's drawing of proposed "Residence for Mr. George Solberg". William L. Galvin Collection, CHC.



Building footprint of 47-53 Bay State Road. Assessing Department.



49 Bay State Road with office entrance (center) and addition at right, staff photo 2019.

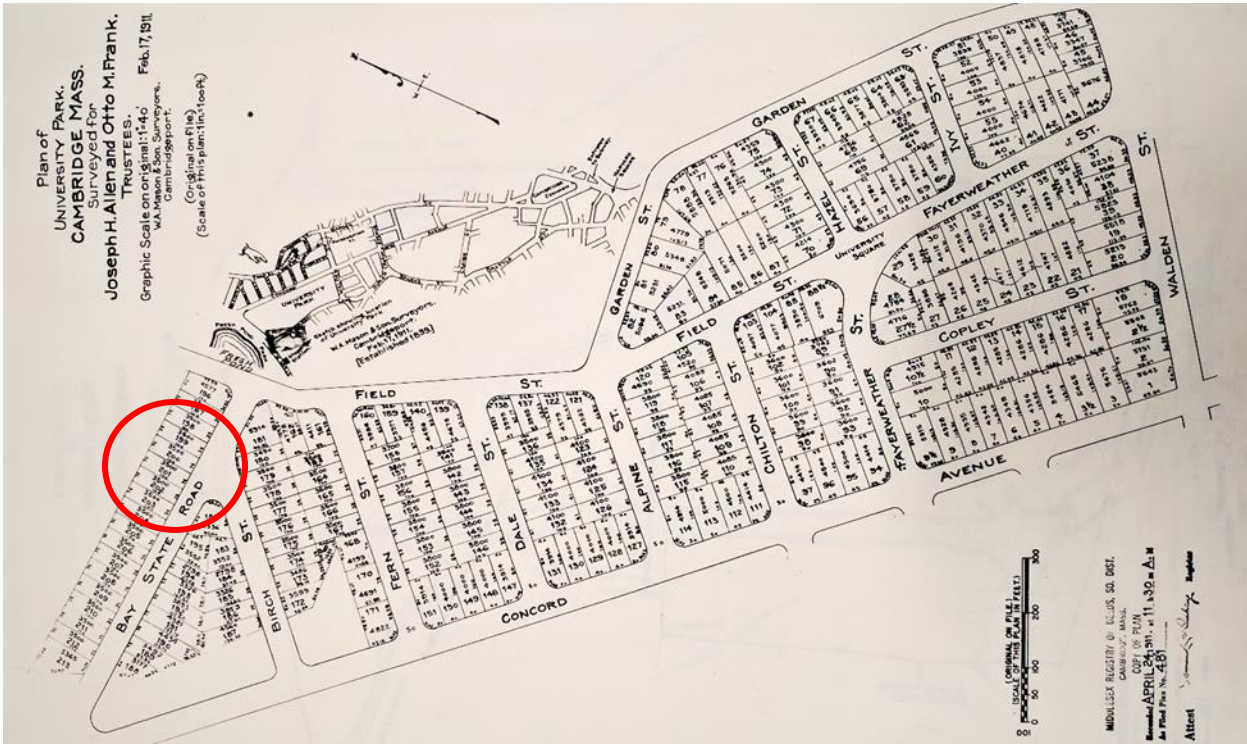
History

In Colonial times, only two roads led west from the village at Harvard Square. Both Vassal Lane and Garden Street ended in the desolate marshes around Fresh Pond. The construction of Concord Avenue in 1807 opened the area to through traffic, but the area remained empty even after a community of Irish brickyard workers began around St. Peter's Church in the 1840s and '50s. Hundreds of acres west of Walden Street were strip-mined for clay that was fired into bricks or pottery. The depleted clay beds became mosquito breeding grounds, and the resulting malaria epidemics led the city to take action to see them filled and subdivided for development.

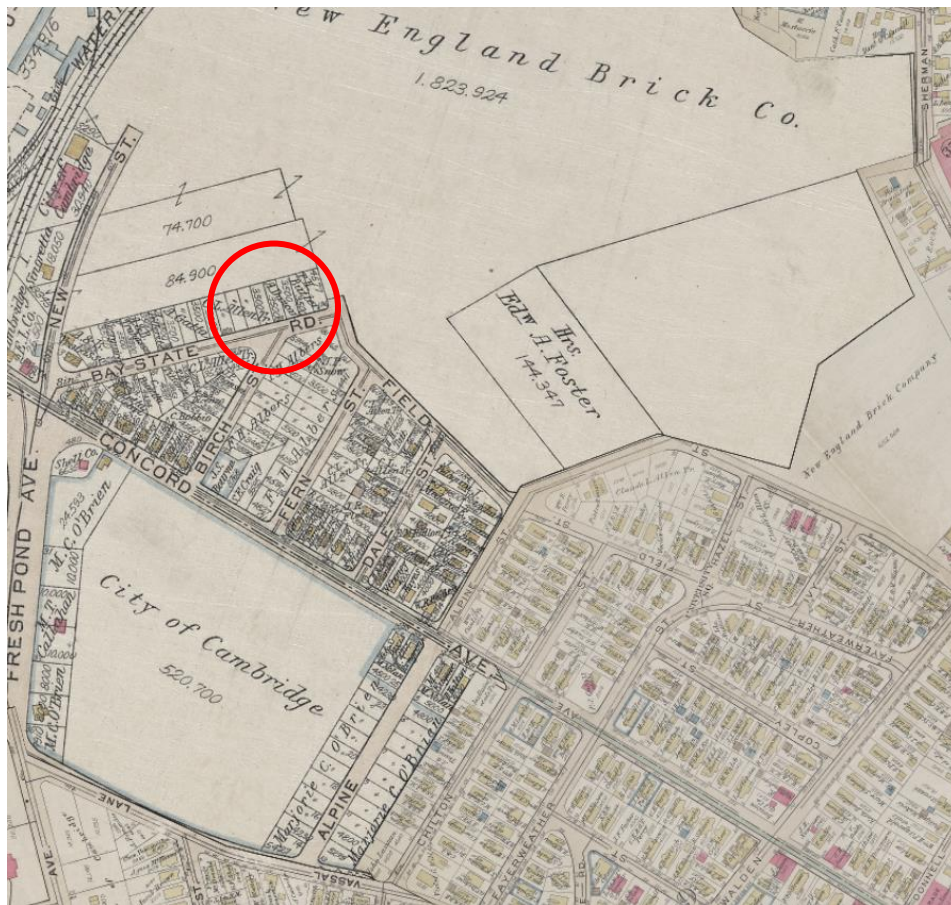
In the late nineteenth century, the Bay State Brick Company purchased many smaller independent brickyards and consolidated their manufacturing operation in two plants, one off Rindge Avenue and one in this vicinity, between Walden Street and Fresh Pond Parkway. Unproductive clay pits - some of which had been in operation since the 1840s - were closed, filled, and sold for real estate development.

A low, wet pit between Concord Avenue and Garden Street was subdivided for residential development in 1896 in an effort encouraged by the Board of Health to control mosquitoes and reduce the spread of malaria. Though the Bay State Brick Co. subdivided the area in 1896, filling the pits and construction of streets and sewers required capital that was hard to come by after the Panic of 1893.

Joseph H. Allen and Otto M. Frank partnered to buy the Bay State land north of Concord Avenue and in 1911 hired W. A. Mason & Son to make a new survey of the subdivision. They embarked on a marketing plan for what they called University Park, emphasizing the convenience to Harvard University and the new Harvard Square subway station. Lot prices started at \$280. Allen and Frank advertised a very optimistic claim that residents could board the streetcar to Harvard Square and arrive at Park Street station via the subway within thirteen minutes. Despite their efforts, sales and house construction remained slow until after World War I.



1911 Subdivision plan of University Park, W. A. Mason Co., surveyor.



1930 Bromley Atlas map, showing slow development in University Park, west of Alpine Street (center).

University Park, east of Alpine Street was largely developed by 1930, while the western half was much slower to see investment. It can be assumed that the proximity to Cofran's Pit (now the Tobin School site) as an unofficial dumping site and the still-active New England Brick Company clay pit (later a town dump) to the north may have limited house construction neighborhood.

George Stolberg (1910-1973) was a lifelong Cantabrigian who was listed in city directories as an iron-worker before he formed his own construction company and pursued an interest in development. In 1940, Solberg purchased at least four lots on Bay State Road and in 1941 hired local architect William L. Galvin to design two Modern houses on the south side of the street at #44 and #50 Bay State Road, constructed by his new firm, Solberg Construction Company. He and his family lived in #44 Bay State Road and # 50 was rented out. His construction company was headquartered across Bay State Road at #39.

After WWII, Solberg hired Galvin to design 49 Bay State Road (then #43) as a 9-room single-family house, for \$9,500. Solberg is listed as residing there in 1954. One year later, Solberg built a fourth house on the street, a spec home at 67 Bay State Road in the traditional Cape Cod style. He advertised the new house just once in the Cambridge Chronicle, noting a preference for veteran homebuyers. 67 Bay State Road was demolished in 2004.

In 1956, 47-53 Bay State Road was sold out of the Solberg family, and then was sold twice within two years until it was purchased by the Sky Publishing Corporation. George Solberg died in 1973, and Solberg Construction appears to have stayed active under the ownership of one of his sons at least through the early 2000s.

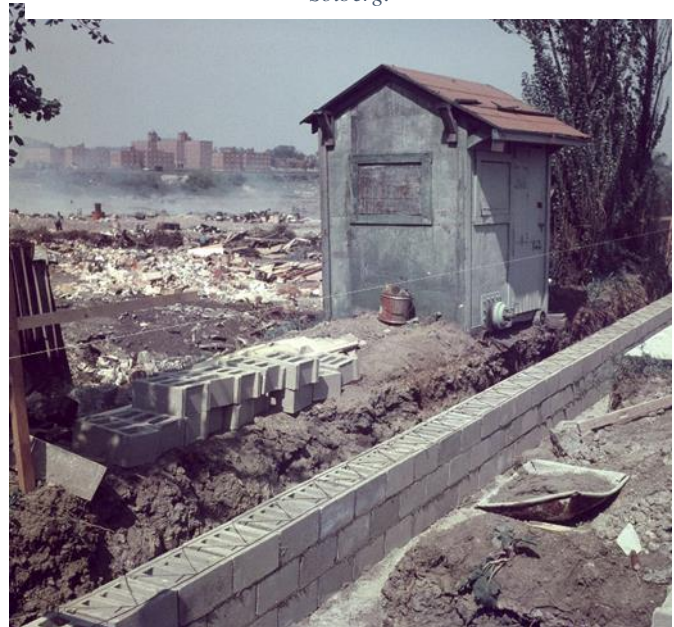
Sky Publishing Corporation

Sky Publishing was created from the founding of *Sky & Telescope* magazine in 1941 by Charles A. Federer Jr. and Helen Spence Federer. Its earliest

known ancestor was a four-page bulletin called *The Amateur Astronomer*, which was begun in 1929 by the Amateur Astronomers Association in New York City. Then, in 1935, the American Museum of Natural History in New York opened its Hayden Planetarium and began to issue a monthly bulletin that became a full-size magazine called *The Sky* within a year. By 1939, the planetarium found itself unable to financial support of *The Sky*. Charles A. Federer, who would become the dominant force behind *Sky & Telescope*, was then working as a lecturer at the planetarium, and was asked to take over publishing the magazine. Federer agreed and started an independent publishing corporation in New York. Within a year, Federer was serving as *The Sky's* editor, and his wife, Helen, served as managing editor.



Advertisement for new house at 67 Bay State Road, constructed by Solberg.



1956 photo of rear wall construction of 47-53 Bay State Road annex structure. Note city dump behind. Courtesy of Sky & Telescope.

“Meanwhile, another astronomy magazine, *The Telescope* first appeared as a quarterly magazine in March 1931 under the editorship of Harlan Stetson, director of the Perkins Observatory in Ohio. It featured popular articles about contemporary research written by professional astronomers. In 1934, Stetson moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and brought the magazine with him. In 1936 he joined the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and directed the MIT Cosmic Terrestrial Research Laboratory from 1940 until 1950. Publishing duties of *The Telescope* were assumed by the Harvard College Observatory.” (About Sky and Telescope).

In 1939, Charles Federer met into some members of the Harvard Observatory staff, and it was suggested that Federer might move to Cambridge and take over the publication. By October 1941, the Federers were in Cambridge, planning to merge *The Sky* and *The Telescope*. The first issue of the merged *Sky & Telescope* came out in November 1941, to great success. As *Sky & Telescope* grew, it required more and more space that could not be found within the Harvard Observatory. In 1956, Sky Publishing renovated 47-53 Bay State Road and officially changed their address there by 1959. Over the subsequent decades, the company built several additions on the property to house its growing editorial and production staff. In 2007, the offices moved less than a mile away to 90 Sherman Street in Cambridge, and then in 2020 to One Alewife Center. The building at 47-53 Bay State Road has since been occupied by the American Association of Variable Star Observers, which is in the process of moving out.



47-53 Bay State Road, 1974. Photograph taken prior to 1979 two-story addition. Image courtesy of *Sky & Telescope Magazine*.

William Lawrence Galvin (1902-1983)

William Lawrence Galvin was a native of Roxbury whose mother moved the family to Cambridge so William could prepare for Harvard. After attending several local schools, including the Rindge Technical School, the Huntington School, and the Cambridge High & Latin School, Galvin was admitted to Harvard College in 1920. His undergraduate academic career involved several instances of academic probation and changes in concentrations. During a leave of absence, Galvin worked for R. Curry Grovestein (1866-1941), a carpenter from Nova Scotia who became a self-trained architect, builder, and property developer. After this experience Galvin decided to become a "promoting architect" and opened a real estate office in Harvard Square while still an undergraduate. After a final session at summer

school in 1925 Galvin graduated from Harvard College with a concentration in Fine Arts, focused on Architecture. He returned to Harvard in 1928 and obtained a master's degree from the School of Architecture in 1931.

Galvin's entrepreneurial nature drove his professional career. Beginning his own architectural office in Harvard Square, Galvin aggressively sought commissions for projects big and small throughout the greater Cambridge area. In addition to his architectural work, Galvin sponsored and designed several commercial and residential real estate projects throughout the city and also served as an appraiser. As a member of the Cambridge Board of Zoning Appeals, Cambridge Citizen Committee, Municipal Affairs Committee (chairman in 1935), and American Institute of Architects, he proved himself to be an invested member of the Cambridge community. Galvin and Sheila A. Moe. The Galvin family resided at 10 Brattle Circle, in a cul-de-sac development he designed in 1940.

Over a 50-year career, 1927-1979, Galvin made a significant impact on Cambridge through his numerous projects and constant support for progressive land use to fit a modernizing community. Although some of his most prominent works are no longer standing, his work played an integral role in the growth and development of Cambridge. Many of Galvin's early projects in the 1930s and 1940s (built and unbuilt) were in the Art Moderne architectural style. As tastes evolved, so did his style, which shifted more toward the International and Mid-Century modern, blocky buildings.

International Style

The house at 49 Bay State Road is a rare example of the International Style of architecture in Cambridge. The International Style was a stark departure from the historical revivals of Colonial and other English-inspired styles that followed traditional designs and building practices. In 1932, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York (with co-sponsorship by Harvard's School of Architecture and the Fogg Museum) mounted "Modern Architecture: An International Exhibition." Historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock and architect Philip Johnson brought the International Style to America, a decade after the style began to appear in Europe. Hitchcock and Johnson identified three principles that all International buildings must express: architecture as volume; regularity; and avoidance of applied ornament. Modernism was almost exclusively an interest of younger, affluent members of the academic community until the World Fairs in Chicago in 1933 and New York in 1939 helped introduce the ideas of European Modernism to the typical American.

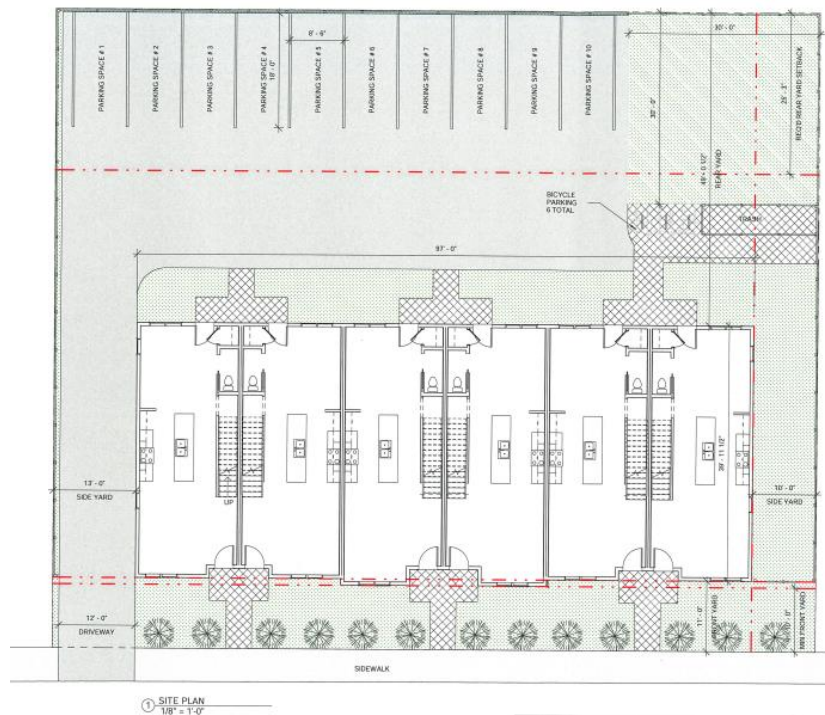
The first International Style houses appeared in Cambridge in 1935, about the same time that Dean Joseph Hudnut began the Modernist revolution at Harvard's School of Architecture. The movement took off in Cambridge thanks to German architect Walter Gropius, who brought Modernism to Harvard. Dozens of young, impressionable architects studied under Gropius and other influential minds and shifted American architecture forward. Notable early examples of the style in Cambridge include Eleanor Raymond's Horace Frost house at 16 Longfellow Park (1935), the Forbes Bowers House at 197 Coolidge Hill (also 1935, demolished in 2006), the 1937 Koch House at 4 Buckingham Place, and the 1941 Philip Johnson Thesis House at 9 Ash Street. The Solberg house is a late example of the style, which eventually waned in popularity by the 1950s with limited examples constructed post-WWII

Current Proposal

The applicant is proposing to raze all existing structures on the site at 47-53 Bay State Road, and construct six new townhomes with parking at the rear. The proposal would not require a variance and would be as-of-right given the zoning requirements for the site.



Rendering of proposed townhouse development at 47-53 Bay State Road. Submitted by applicant.



Site plan of proposed townhouse development at 47-53 Bay State Road

Significance and Recommendation

The Solberg house at 49 Bay State Road should be found significant for its architecture as an example of the International Style in Cambridge, for its associations with William L. Galvin, a locally significant architect, and as the long-time headquarters of Sky Publishing Corporation and Sky & Telescope magazine. The building appears to be restorable and should be preserved in the redevelopment of the site.

cc: Sarah Rhatigan, Trilogy Law
Ranjit Singanayagam, Inspectional Services

Sources

CHC Survey Files for Bay State Road

“About Sky & Telescope.” Sky & Telescope, 18 Aug. 2020, <https://skyandtelescope.org/about/>.

Demolition Memo for 67 Bay State Road, Cambridge.

Maycock, Susan, and Charles Sullivan. *Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development*. The MIT Press, 2016.

Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge: *Northwest Cambridge*. 1977. Cambridge Historical Commission.

William Lawrence Galvin Collection, Cambridge Historical Commission Library & Archives