

# Steps from Boston Common, abandoned site of ‘America’s Oldest Gym’ gets a new life

BOSTON

NEW DEVELOPMENTS



Boston Young Men's Christian Union building (Union Gym) on Boylston street in 1993.

*Jonathan Wiggs / Globe Staff*

By Megan Turchi [@meganturchi](#)

Boston.com Staff

December 14, 2015 2:40 PM

Since taking office Mayor Marty Walsh has been [pushing for more affordable housing](#) to come into Boston, and the latest round of construction approvals from the Boston Redevelopment Authority shows that focus in action.

The BRA recently announced six new developments after its last meeting of the year, which include [new condos in Roslindale](#), an affordable housing project creating [47 units in Jamaica Plain](#), and the restoration of an [abandoned building steps from the Common](#) that is on the National Register of Historic Places at 48 Boylston Street.

The St. Francis House, the largest day homeless shelter in the state, and the Planning Office for Urban Affairs are rehabilitating 48 Boylston Street, transforming it into 46 units of affordable housing, close to 11,000 square feet of office space for St. Francis House, at 3,800 square feet of commercial space.

According to the BRA, 20 of the units will be specifically targeted to homeless people and families, six units will be for low-income families earning 30 percent of the area median income or less, and the rest will be for those earning 60 percent or below of the median income.



48 Boylston Street today.

BRA

Though listed on the National Register of Historic Places and distinguished as a Boston Landmark, the building has been abandoned for a few years. It was once the Boston Young Men's Christian Union building and then until recently was called the Union Gym.

Harvard students formed the BYMCU in 1851, when the first location was on School Street. “The organization’s activities were directed toward ‘the Young Man, who, upon the threshold of an active business life, needs Christian fellowship, and the friendly counsel of the experienced,’” the [City of Boston explains](#), quoting from the BYMCU’s first annual report in 1852.

The organization became so popular that members decided to build their own building on Boylston Street in 1873.

The space for “self-improvement and healthful recreation” called itself “America’s Oldest Gym,” as that was one of the original services offered to members, [The Boston Globe noted in January 2013](#) in the midst of financial problems for what was then called Union Gym.

[Boston Business Journal had reported](#) the building was for sale the year before in January 2012, though no deal had been made as of January 2013.

Union Gym eventually closed and has been vacant for a few years, the BRA noted in its [October 2015 project proposal](#), much to the members’ dismay, as evidenced by the [Facebook group called Union Gym Troubles](#).

The BRA also mentioned that this structure is “the most accomplished building in the High Victorian Gothic idiom remaining in the Central Business District of Boston” and the developers will restore the exterior masonry to keep with its historic standards.

**Related:** [These condos used to be churches](#)