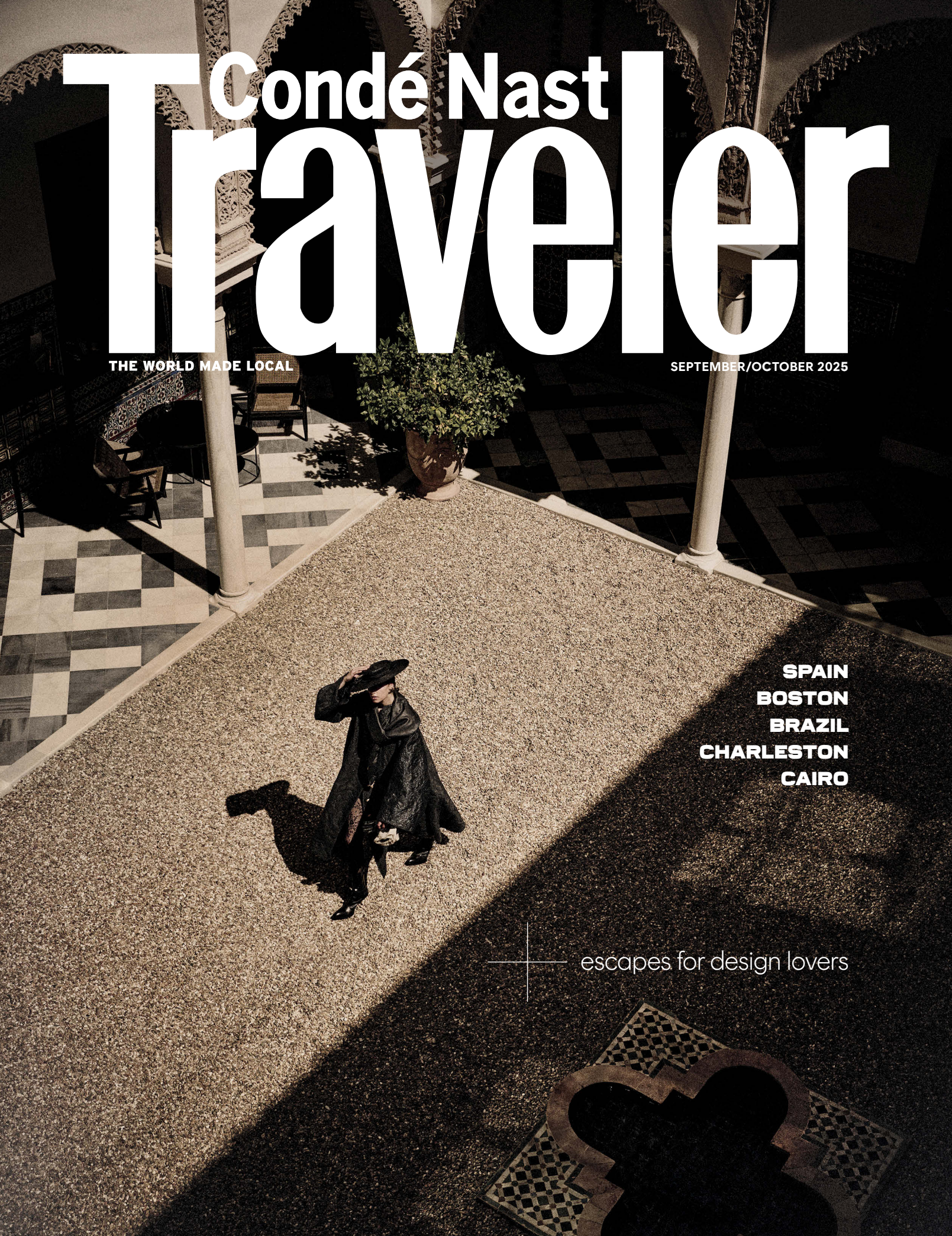

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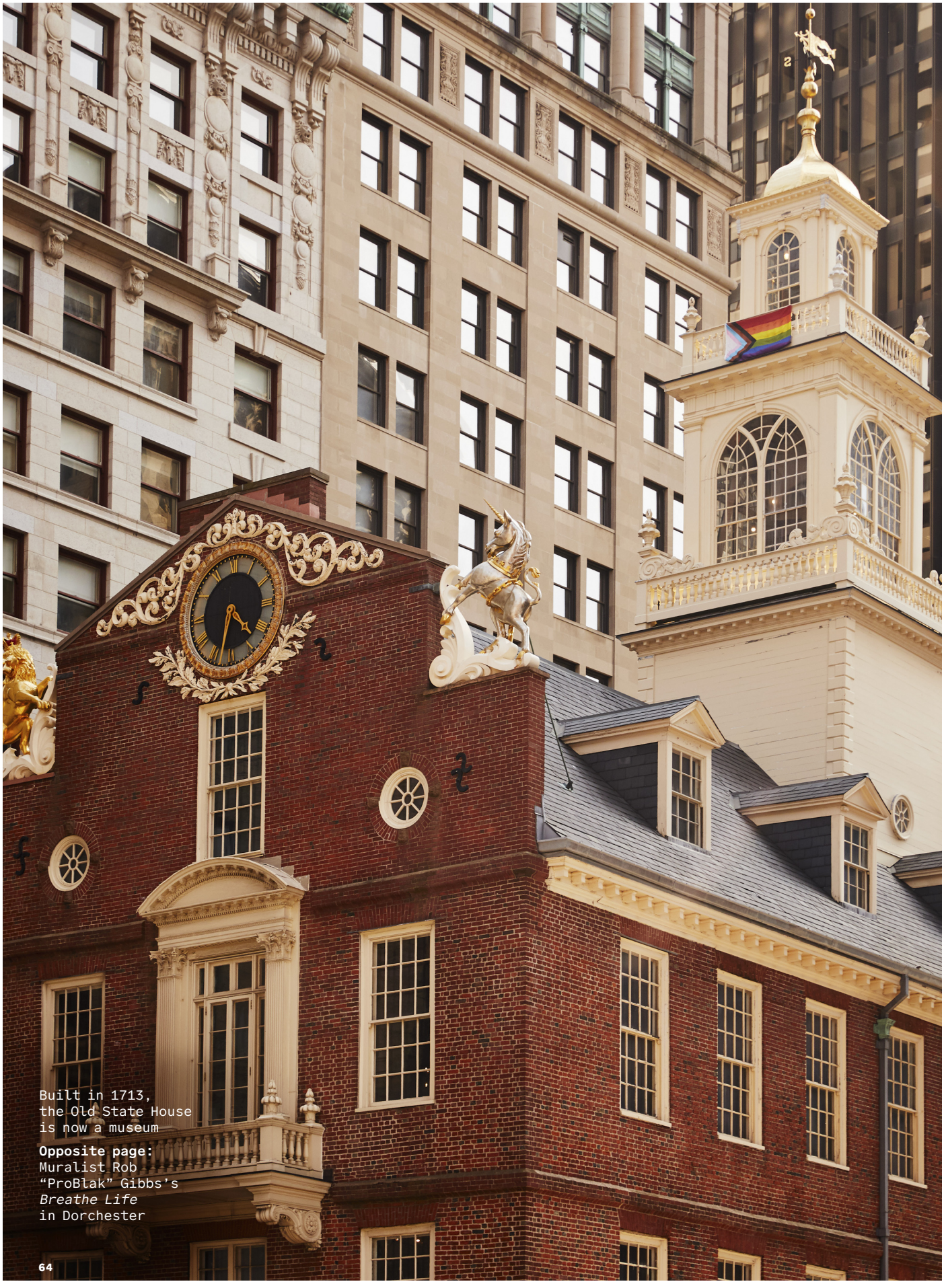
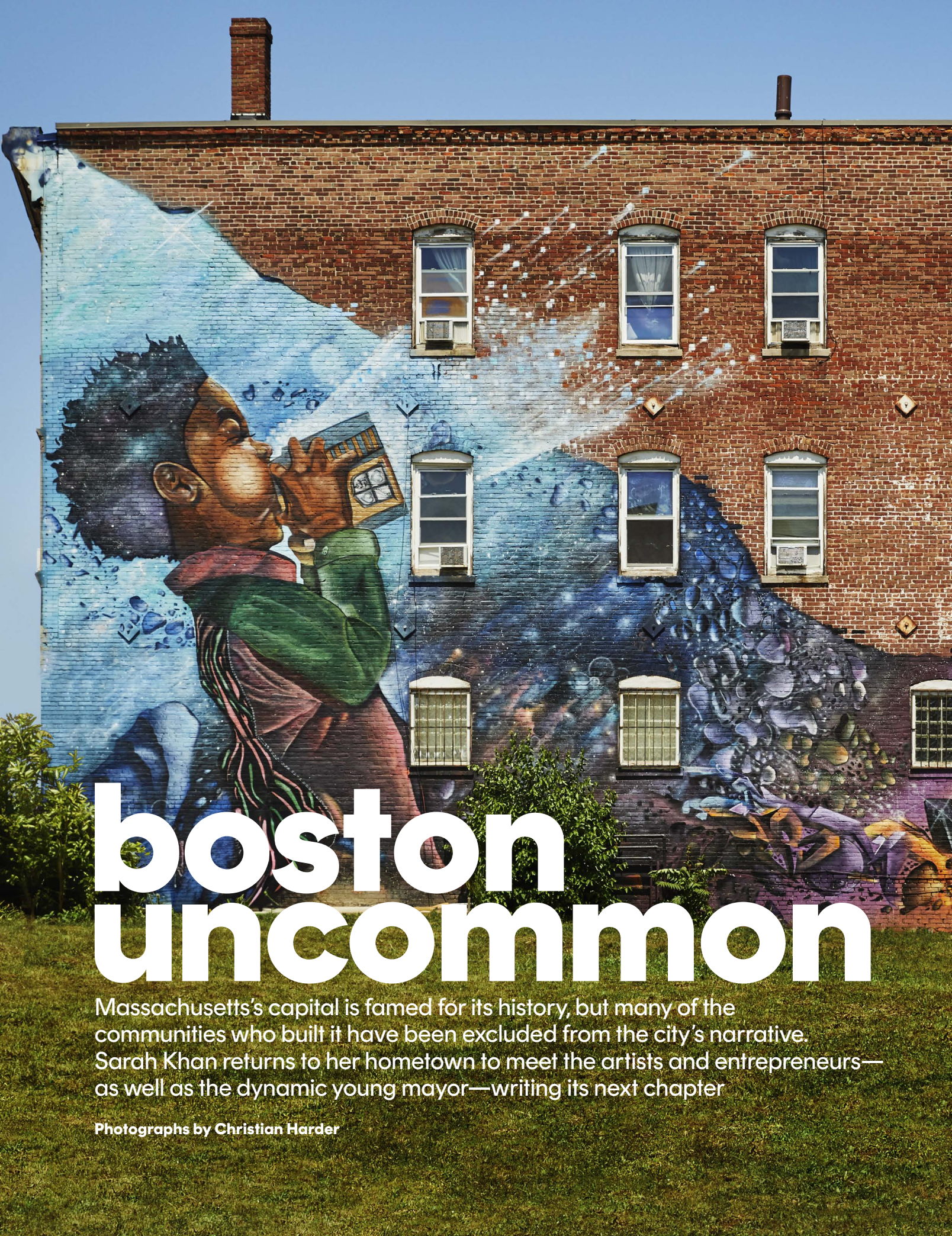
escapes for design lovers



Built in 1713, the Old State House is now a museum

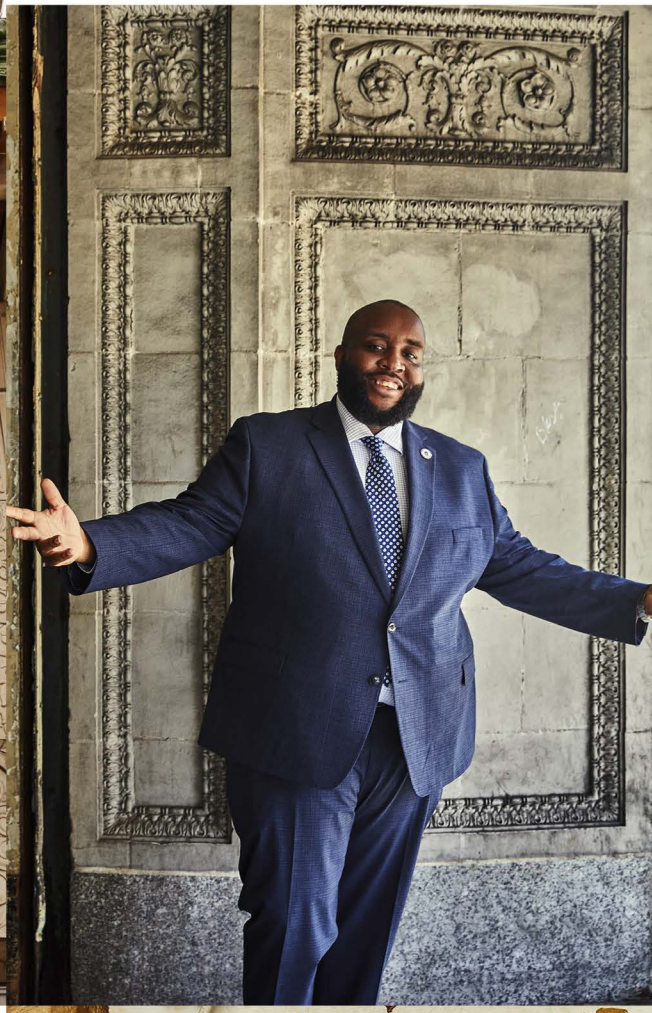
Opposite page: Muralist Rob "ProBlak" Gibbs's *Breathe Life* in Dorchester



boston uncommon

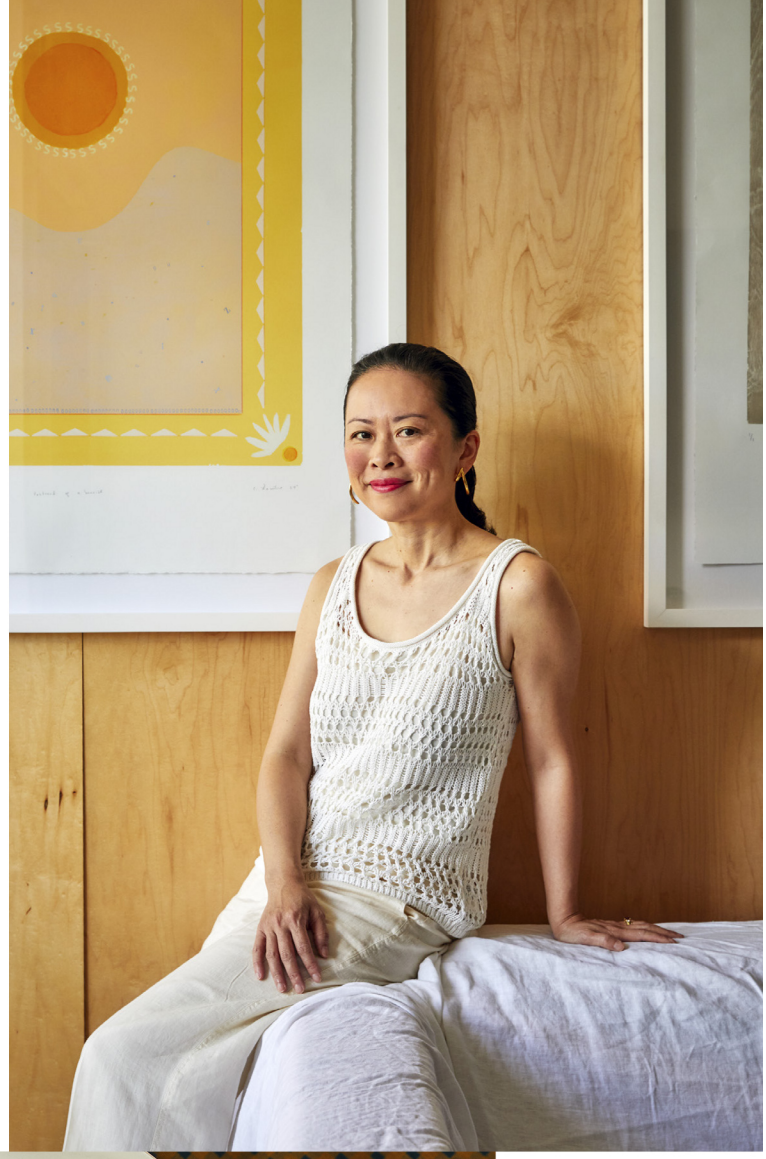
Massachusetts's capital is famed for its history, but many of the communities who built it have been excluded from the city's narrative. Sarah Khan returns to her hometown to meet the artists and entrepreneurs—as well as the dynamic young mayor—writing its next chapter

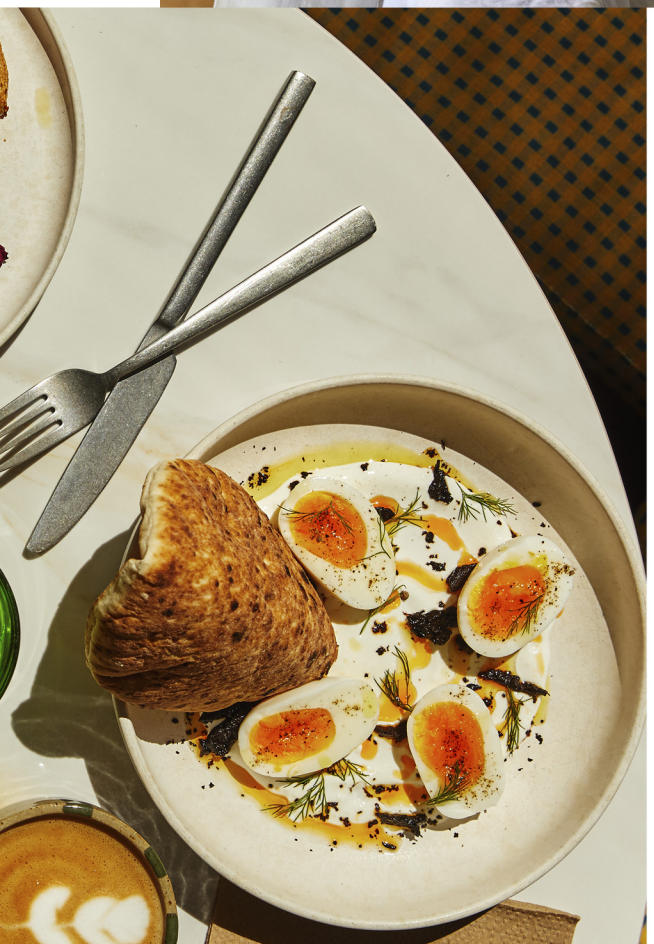
Photographs by Christian Harder



Where the past ends and the present begins can be hard to decipher in Boston. That park bench, that lamppost, that row house—it's safe to assume that each played a role in some pivotal moment in American history. But there are no plaques and statues on Marlon Solomon's itinerary. "You're about to go on a tour of places that don't exist anymore," he tells me on a late-spring morning as we set off from Nubian Square in Roxbury, a historically Black neighborhood just south of downtown Boston. I've been on plenty of walking tours, trolley tours, and duck tours in the city. But Solomon, the founder of the Afrimerican Academy, a local nonprofit supporting underserved multicultural communities, has taken a different approach. Drawing on oral histories and archival images, he has created an experience that asks guests to imagine bygone Black cultural landmarks that were erased in the 1960s mania for urban renewal that transformed so many American cities.

Instead of the familiar stops of Boston's Freedom Trail, we go to an athletic field





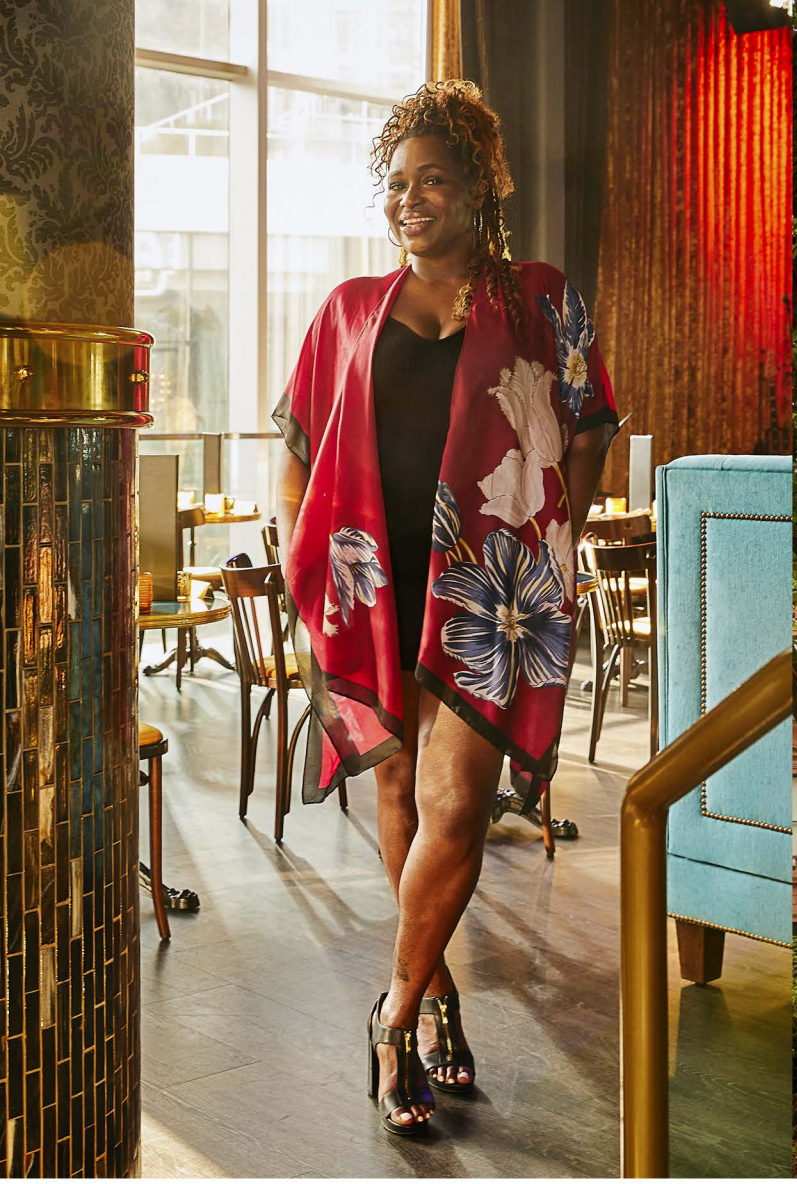
Clockwise from top left: Chinatown Gate, a decorative entrance to Chinatown; State Representative Christopher Worrell outside Dorchester's Strand Theatre; Yng-Ru Chen at Praise Shadows, her art gallery in Brookline; pistachio-butter toast and Turkish-style eggs at Jadu in Jamaica Plain

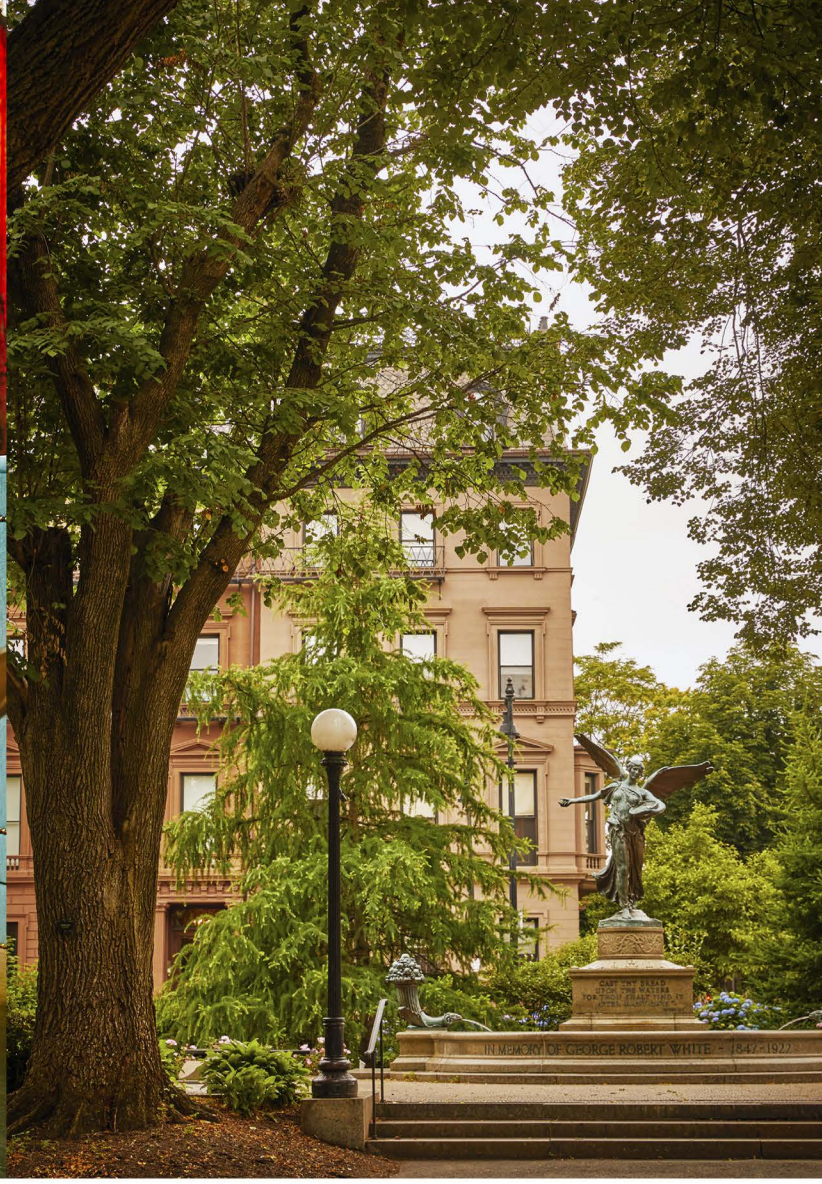
at Northeastern University that was once a vibrant community playground; a vacant grassy plot where an elite Black school once stood; and a dull apartment complex on the site of the church where Martin Luther King Jr. ministered when he met Coretta Scott. Their union is commemorated in a nearby mural by the street artist Rob "ProBlak" Gibbs. "We sell history in Boston," Solomon says. "That's what we do." But in redlined Black areas like Roxbury, "there are no historical sites for us to show. We have to find ways to convert this history into revenue."

Lydia Lowe, executive director of the Chinatown Community Land Trust, which works to preserve and grow the neighborhood, is on a similar mission. Her new Immigrant History Trail of the Chinatown neighborhood displays a series of interactive placards focusing not only on the area's Chinese community, but also on the vibrant Little Syria that thrived here a century ago. "To only talk about the Chinese would not be doing justice to the rich history of the neighborhood," she says as I study a black-and-white portrait of a Syrian family on a stoop with a hookah. With Boston gearing up to celebrate the country's semiquincentennial in 2026, Lowe is part of the Commemoration Commission, assembled by the city council to spotlight layers of Boston's history beyond its Revolutionary War credentials.

Just as Boston's history is deeply intertwined with America's, my own past is everywhere here. Even two decades since I moved away, the opening bars of the Dropkick Murphys' Celtic-punk anthem "I'm Shipping Up to Boston" are still a Proustian trigger, lurching me back to my days riding the T from my apartment near Fenway Park to work in the Back Bay. At that age I couldn't wait to get out: Boston felt too small, too clean, too dull, too homogeneous. A place where the invisible boundaries that partition communities felt difficult to transcend. I've spent the past few decades continent-hopping, from New York City to Cape Town, Mumbai to Dubai, all cities I found more cosmopolitan and exciting than Boston. But my Hyderabadi parents still live in the suburbs and so I've kept finding my way back, wondering when Boston will catch up with the world.

I'm starting to think the moment has come. From Fort Point to Southie, Dorchester to the South End, weathered-brick buildings are being revitalized with new restaurants and galleries, shifting the city's center of gravity away from well-trammeled districts like Back Bay and the North End. Changing demographics (Boston has





for years been a majority-minority city) have played a role in this metamorphosis, but there are other forces at play. "I really give Mayor Wu credit," says Lowe. Since 2021, when she became the first woman and first person of color elected mayor of Boston, Michelle Wu has often enacted policies to support minority communities. "Her vision," Lowe adds, "is to say, 'When we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, we want to celebrate all the voices that are here and that haven't been heard yet.'"

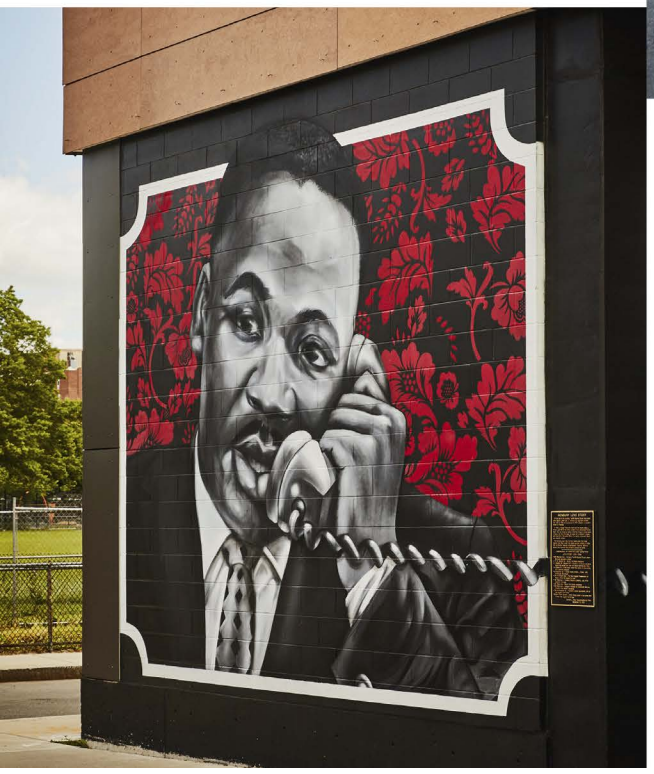
Boston has had a long line of liberal mayors whose legacies have shaped the city: Thomas Menino went big on urban development, with infrastructure projects like the Big Dig and the Seaport; Marty Walsh leaned on his union beginnings to champion the working class. Wu, the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, presides over the most diverse city council the city has ever seen, and equity and inclusion have been at the top of her agenda.

"This is a city that's been a tourism hub for a very, very long time," says Wu, who was raised in Chicago and first moved to Boston to attend Harvard, "but for much of that history, our story was told in a narrower way than matched the reality of our communities here today." I see the impact of her efforts to broaden the city's narrative everywhere I go: grants for inclusive projects like Lowe's Immigrant History Trail; cultural initiatives such as the inaugural Boston Public Art Triennial, with 20 installations nudging visitors toward lesser-visited East Boston and Charlestown; and tangible support for BIPOC-owned businesses to drive patrons to places they may not have gone previously.

I head to multicultural Dorchester to witness this firsthand. "People are getting opportunities they never thought they would get," says Christopher Worrell, a dynamic young state rep for the neighborhood. "When you see the government working for you, when a place like Just Book-ish, a Black-owned bookstore, opens up in Dorchester and is doing well with a liquor license for sip and read—it's incredible."

Worrell is referencing the first bill he passed after he took office in 2023. Liquor licenses had been notoriously inaccessible in disinvested Black and Brown areas; the result, according to Worrell, is restaurants in Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury have tended to be take-out joints and not places for people who want a night out. "I want my neighborhood to look like the Seaport, like South End: thriving restaurant businesses where people are just having fun," he says.

At Comfort Kitchen, where half the restaurant already know Worrell and the other half will by the time we leave, I can see his vision. I can't say I expected to have an extraordinary meal in a former public restroom next to a cemetery, but here I am,



From left: Nia Grace inside her Seaport soul food spot Grace by Nia; the George Robert White Memorial in Boston Public Garden; *Roxbury Love Story*, a mural by ProBlak and Genaro "GoFive" Ortego in the neighborhood where Martin Luther King Jr. met Coretta Scott; locals play xiangqi, or Chinese chess, in Mary Soo Hoo Park near Chinatown

slicing into tender hunks of suya beef flecked with pickled mustard seeds that burst on my tongue.

Nepali-born chef Biplaw Rai and his wife, Nyacko Pearl Perry, who has Gambian Louisianan heritage and was raised in Cambridge, opened Comfort Kitchen in 2023 with the goal of using ingredients found along historic spice- and slave-trade routes from across the Global South. Plantain crumbles add a satisfying crunch to okra slathered in garam masala yogurt; cocktails like One in a Million are heady with rum, honey, coriander, and ginger. "This restaurant is multiple things," says Perry. "We don't represent one identity or one particular group. I think as a whole Boston is seeing more of that."

This is news to me. For all the world-class hospitals and universities and tech companies convening international talent on either side of the Charles, Boston somehow hasn't been able to shake its reputation as the exclusive enclave of Mark Wahlbergs, "paahked caahs," and obnoxious sports fans. But perception, it turns out, isn't reality: "Boston is very diverse and highly segregated—everyone stays in their bubble," Worrell says. "But I think there's more mixing and mingling now; it's a whole different generation. The people who used to be in power used to only look out for their people, and the people that were in power did not look like you and I."

I witness the mixing and mingling in full effect at Jadu, an Indian-accented café and wine bar that opened last year in the upscale bohemian area of Jamaica Plain with help from one of Mayor Wu's grants. On a busy Monday afternoon, I see mothers with strollers, green-haired college students, and diverse groups of friends rotating through for matchas and Maggi noodles. It's not the same city that owner Maya Mukhopadhaya arrived in as a grad student in 2013. "I joke that Boston is the only place I've ever experienced culture shock," says Mukhopadhaya, whose past homes include Beirut, New York, Delhi, Damascus, Kabul, and Jakarta. "Boston perplexed me. It's so liberal on paper, but it can be kind of puritanical. You still feel connected to the reality of people from England coming over. They set up a caste system; the elite of Boston called themselves the Brahmins. I think all that still percolates in terms of who got to be the privileged class and who didn't."

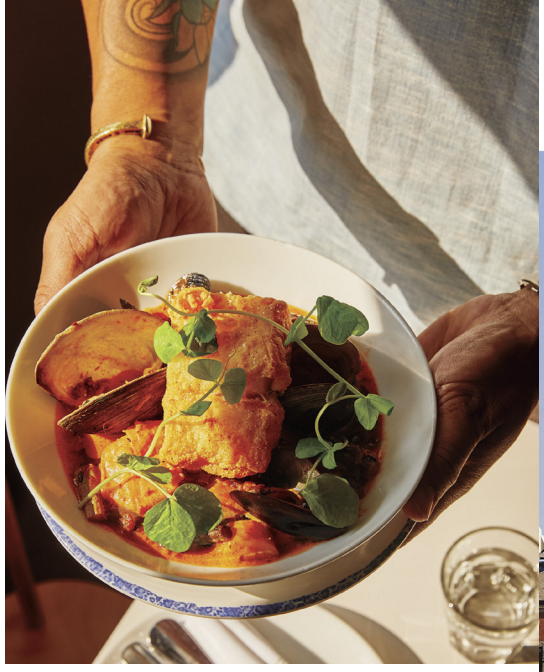
Yet newcomers like Mukhopadhaya are flipping the script and transforming perceptions of the city's food scene. When I'm in town, news breaks that Michelin inspectors have begun combing the city for

↘ do

Afrimerican Academy offers Black-history tours like visits to Roxbury's Nubian Square and the North End's 19th-century New Guinea settlement. The **Boston Little Syria Project** guides visitors through the bygone early-20th-century enclave. The **Immigrant History Trail** is a self-guided loop through Chinatown with markers that relate to the stories of the area's multicultural communities. The city's gallery scene is also gaining momentum: Last year the pioneering **BLKChip Gallery** for Black and Brown local artists opened in the Seaport, and in October the edgy **Street Theory Collective,** a 6,000-square-foot cultural hub, will open in Cambridge's Central Square. After a career in the arts in New York City, Yng-Ru Chen moved back to Brookline in 2019 to open **Praise Shadows Art Gallery** for emerging and midcareer contemporary artists. And across the city, installations have appeared in public spaces as part of the inaugural **Boston Public Art Triennial,** on through October.

↘ eat

Since the pandemic, a wave of restaurants has been bringing diverse flavors to the city's neighborhoods—from **Grace by Nia,** a soul food spot in the Seaport, to **Jadu,** a globally inspired café in Jamaica Plain that added a wine bar this summer with bottles from lesser-known regions like Slovenia, Croatia, and Uruguay. In early 2026 the husband-and-wife team behind **Comfort Kitchen,** a Dorchester joint showcasing flavors of the Global South, will open a sibling restaurant, **Ama,** as well as a rooftop bar at **Atlas,** a new hotel in hip Allston. Across the river, among the momo joints and crystal shops of Cambridge and Somerville, there's been a surge of cool cafés with varied influences, including the family-owned Rwandan place **Yego Coffee,** the Palestinian-style **Yafa Bakery & Café,** the Saigon-inspired **Cicada Coffee Bar,** the Portuguese-inflected **Bōm Dough,** and the Indian American diner **Rosebud Bar & Kitchen,** a reborn classic serving twists on familiar favorites.

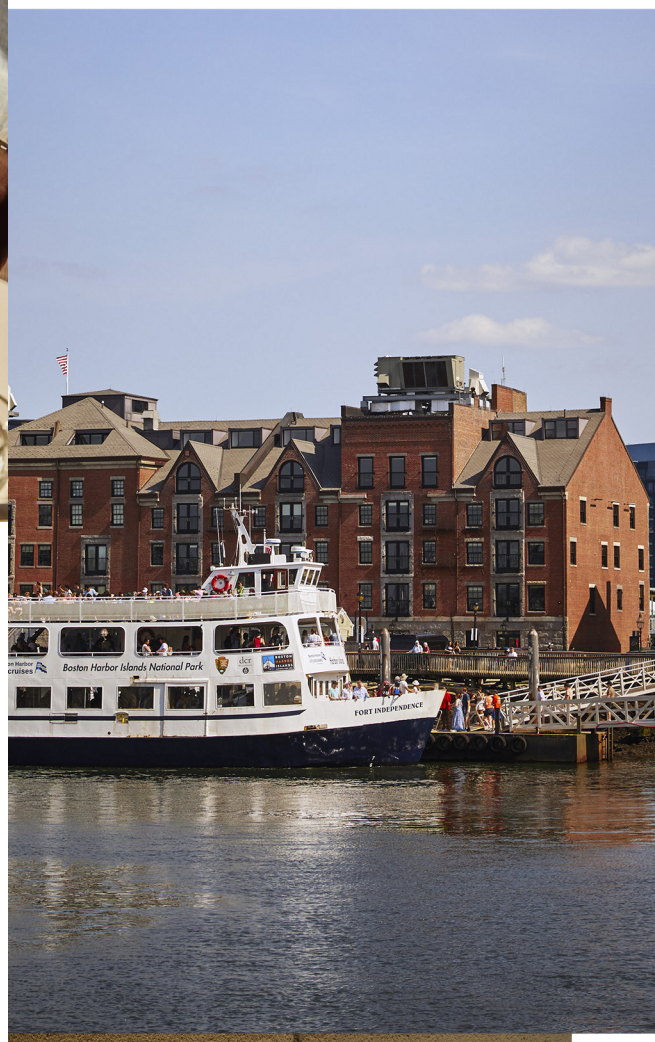


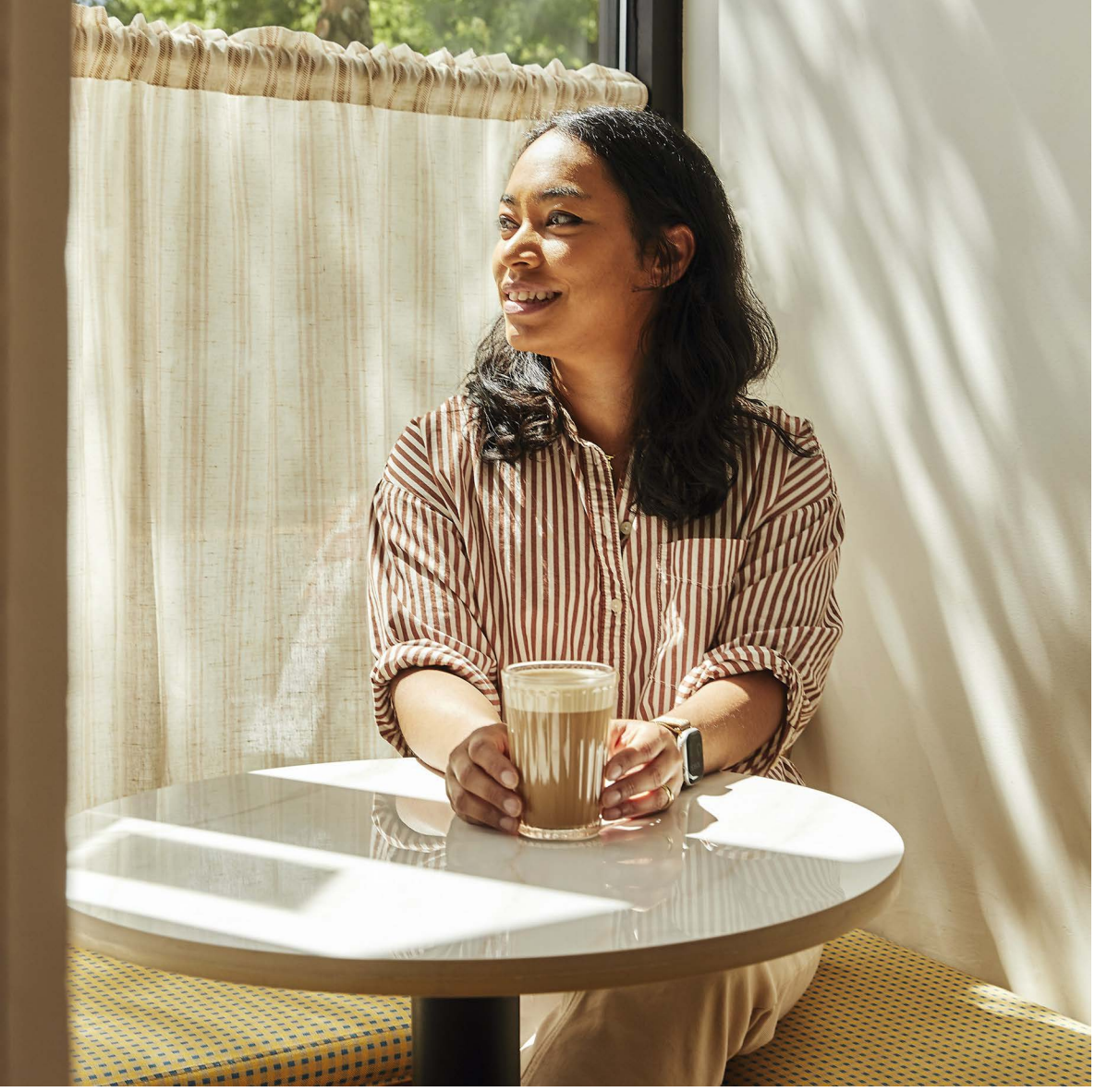
its first-ever Boston guide. That same week I learn George Mendes, the celebrated chef who had been lured from New York to Raffles Boston in 2023, has left the hotel. Cynically I assume it's to return to NYC, but it turns out Mendes and his wife, Suzanne, a marketing executive, have fallen in love with Boston. He plans to open a restaurant and market in their South End neighborhood early next year. "It has all the elements of a city where you have lots to do, great places to eat, and art and culture, yet the familiarity and the intimacy of a town," Suzanne told me.

Across the river in Cambridge's Central Square, I drop by Street Theory Collective, a sprawling new gallery that is preparing for its official opening in the fall. There I find ProBlak, whose murals I'd admired in Roxbury, working on a piece that takes up an entire wall. When he was starting out, he remembers, "I couldn't get into galleries, so I made the city my gallery." Today he's Boston's most acclaimed street artist, but he's grateful for the way the city's galleries have evolved. Along with other recent spaces like BLKChip in the Seaport and Praise Shadows in Brookline, the Collective seeks to champion more conceptual contemporary art and allow for greater representation. "I see people taking more ownership of space, making things their own," ProBlak says. "What makes our city 'our city' is us telling a different version of the same story."

I'm running late to meet a friend at the chic supper club Grace by Nia in the Seaport district when she starts sending me rapid-fire texts: "I can't believe I am at a restaurant in Boston where there are more POC than white people!!! I LOVE THIS PLACE!"

Until recently the Seaport was an empty expanse of parking lots and the location of the Boston Children's Museum; now it's a taste of the future in this city anchored in nostalgia, a gleaming harborside





Clockwise from top left: Comfort Kitchen's spin on traditional fish chowder; passengers board the Boston Harbor Islands National & State Park ferry at Long Wharf; Jadu owner Maya Mukhopadhaya at her restaurant; husband-and-wife team Nyacko Pearl Perry and Biplaw Rai outside their restaurant Comfort Kitchen in Dorchester

cluster of high-rises and destination restaurants. In the early 2000s Nia Grace was one of two Black servers working aboard the *Spirit of Boston*, a dinner cruise that docks in the Seaport; she used to park her car where her Grace by Nia currently stands. Today a turquoise door gives way to a cavernous room, and a menu of Southern classics includes Maryland crab dip and jambalaya. "People of color have learned to adapt and fit into spaces that were not created with us in mind," says Grace, who also owns Darryl's Corner Bar & Kitchen, a beloved live-music venue in Roxbury. "Years of being intimidated by spaces like that probably made people feel like, 'I'll just stay here in Dorchester or Roxbury.' But when you see a Grace by Nia or BLKChip Gallery, you think, 'Oh, you do want me here.' I'm glad I can be a part of this new wave."

On my last evening I join a friend at Somerville's retro diner Rosebud Bar & Grill. The beloved railcar façade has been a fixture in Davis Square since 1941, and the glossy red chesterfield booths and chrome-ringed tables look like they haven't been touched since. But the restaurant is under new Indian American ownership, and its classic diner menu now comes with unexpected twists: grilled cheese with a spicy tomato rasam soup, masala chai French toast. I've had plenty of memorable meals this week, but in some ways this one tells me the most about the Boston I've returned to: aesthetically familiar, some would even say antiquated, but reimagined with bold flavors. History may always be Boston's most valuable commodity, but there's complexity surfacing amid the sepia-tinted nostalgia. For the first time it feels like a city I can see shades of myself in.

↘ stay

Most of the city's finest hotels remain clustered around historic Back Bay, whose central location makes it a good base for venturing out. When the **Four Seasons Hotel Boston** (*from $800*) opened across from the Public Garden 40 years ago, it was a trailblazer; now, thanks to a 2023 transformation by the celebrated designer Ken Fulk, its lobby and public spaces have been redone in jewel tones that match the lushness of the park. Newer is the 147-room **Raffles Boston** (*from $675*), which became the brand's first foray into America in 2023; its 35-story tower brings Asian-style hospitality, including Raffles' signature butler service, while out-of-towners and locals flock to its restaurants, like the Italian-inspired La Padrona and the 17th-floor Long Bar & Terrace, whose views make it popular at sunset. In tony Beacon Hill a historic Beaux Arts building is home to **XV Beacon** (*from $495*), an elegant hideaway where all 60 rooms come with fireplaces; the rooftop offers sweeping views over the golden dome of the Massachusetts State House.