

THE HUB'S HUB

What's black and white and highly Crimson?

A MARBLE SCULPTURE THAT LOOKS LIKE A cubist vision of Bullwinkle stands in the middle of Harvard Square. With typical Harvard Square hauteur, it is titled *Omphalos*, meaning "the center of the world." Pretentious? Yup. Ugly? You betcha. But the worst of it is that its name is wrong. Everybody knows that the true center of the world is located about ten feet to the south—at the bonnet-roofed kiosk that houses Out of Town News.

In a transient world, we're all out-of-towners, which makes Out of Town News the closest thing we have to home. In lieu of a letter from Mom, the homesick can turn to the kiosk for the comfort of their hometown paper—be it *The Tampa Tribune*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine* or *Izvestia*. Altogether, the stand carries more than 5,000 newspaper and magazine titles from around the world, making it one of the largest foreign newsstands in the country; the other is Hotaling's in New York.

The Out of Town News kiosk in Harvard Square boasts over 5,000 titles of newspapers and magazines—more than enough to see you through a rainy weekend in Boston.



And if we're measuring the stand's influence over the influential, then Out of Town News is even bigger. With its Harvard Square location, it attracts all the heavies—periodically. From their hotel suites, visiting oil sheikhs routinely send their limos by to pick up a copy of the latest *Al Hawadess*, the Saudi monthly. Visiting sports teams swing by to see how that game-winning hit played back in Kansas City or Seattle. John Kenneth Galbraith snaps up *The Economist* and *Le Monde*. Richard Pipes gets a variety of foreign papers. And the people who managed Michael Dukakis's presidential campaign last year took a variety of out-of-town

papers to see how the Duke's act was playing around the country. (Not well.)

As fate would have it, the kiosk was called a kiosk long before it really was one. Until the newsstand moved in from other quarters six years ago, it was, strictly speaking, a headhouse—a term that, despite Harvard Square's reputation, has nothing to do with drugs. A headhouse merely encloses the entrance to a subway stop. No one knows exactly why this one was called a kiosk. Possibly it bears a remote resemblance to a Turkish pavilion, which is the original meaning of "kiosk"—something only a Harvardian would know. But in truth, the kiosk doesn't look like much of anything, which is a major source of its charm.

Built in 1928, the structure owes its peculiar all-hat appearance to the shortcomings of the headhouse it replaced. That one resembled a miniature version of the Roman Colosseum, and it was a disaster. Located in the middle of a rotary, it didn't leave enough room for pedestrians to stand without getting flattened by the circling streetcars. And motorists couldn't see through it to the oncoming traffic.

The new and improved model was designed by a professor of architecture at MIT whose name is now unfortunately forgotten. Its overhanging roof established a safe space for pedestrians emerging from under-

ground; its nearly flat copper roof and glass windows made the building almost see-through. As an extra, the architect tried to make the building fit the architectural environment by patterning the walls after the alternating brick and limestone of Harvard's Georgian gates.

The result was certainly quirky, but through its very eccentricity, along with its central location and the fact that every other building seemed to change almost nightly in this (continued on page 104)

(continued from page 93) trendy neighborhood, the kiosk came to symbolize Harvard Square. In this respect, it exceeded Harvard Yard itself, for the Yard, after all, is private, while the kiosk was public, a kind of Holy Gates through which all could enter.

In 1980, the subway line was extended to the west, requiring the Harvard Square subway station to be rebuilt, and since the station's rickety wooden escalator wasn't up to modern standards, the kiosk was slated for demolition. Cantabrigians howled, as Cantabrigians will. "We said the kiosk represented people's image of Harvard Square," says Charles Sullivan, director of Cambridge's architectural-preservation commission and a leader in the fight to save the kiosk. The protesters succeeded in getting the building placed on the National Register of Historic Places, thus prohibiting its destruction. The city of Cambridge laid claim to the structure, and Sheldon Cohen, president of Out of Town News, which had since 1954 maintained a store next door to the kiosk, offered to lease the old headhouse for his newsstand. The transit authority not only relented, it caved in so completely that it agreed to take the kiosk down brick by brick and limestone block by limestone block, numbering each piece for reassembly; to store the whole business in a nearby bus-storage yard during the construction; and to resurrect the kiosk at the center of the square when the work was done.

Now that the kiosk is in the news business, the transmission delays are only a little greater than those of the transit authority. The London *Sunday Times* arrives a day late, the Polish weekly *Kobieta I Zycie* comes three days after publication, *Pravda* takes a week, and some Argentine and Chilean papers simply never make it. "We've been having a problem with Latin American distributors," complains Fred Cohen, the newsstand's director and vice president of Out of Town News (and brother of Sheldon). "There's no stability."

On Mondays, when the bulk of the Sunday papers arrives, the mound of incoming

papers and magazines reaches the roof. The different languages create some confusion for monoglot newsboys, who have a hard time telling the difference between Arabic and Persian or between Russian and Greek. Consequently, similar-looking scripts are lumped together on the shelf for the patrons—who presumably do know the languages—to sort out for themselves.

If there were still any question that we are a nation of immigrants, it would be dispelled by the sight of the customers lining up at the newsstand's register with news from their home countries under their arms. The English come for the London *Sunday Times*, the Irish for *The Kerryman*, *Irish Echo* and *Connacht Tribune*. The Greeks for the *National Greek Herald*, which was especially popular during the Dukakis campaign—"it ran his picture every day," says Fred Cohen. And the Chinese for the daily Chinese-language *Centre Daily News*, published in New York City.

And the events of the world have repercussions in Harvard Square, if the newsstand is any seismometer. For the recent Chinese students' rebellion, sales of *The Centre Daily* erupted, despite concern that the paper was blindly following the party line. After the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, demand for *The Anchorage Times* surged. When disaster struck the Chernobyl power plant, *Pravda* lit up in the Square. And the day after the stock market crashed in October 1987, there was panic buying of *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*.

And then there are certain specialty items—such as the English monthly *Q*, or *Burda International* (for sewing enthusiasts), *Hemmings Motor News*, *Flex* (for bodybuilders) or *Three-Way-Lover*—that rarely leave the stand in clumps. It is amazing to see how well the stereotypes hold, for the patrons of these rarer items look as if they have been sent from central casting, dressing up—or down—for the part. The chic young woman with the fashionably oversized jacket does indeed buy *Vogue*, just as the wasted man with the faded blue jeans sliding off his rump goes for *High Times*, and the blonde with the gold necklace and preppy accent purchases *Equus*. Or their appurtenances evoke their characters: The yup with the wallet bulging with credit cards buys *Fine Woodworking*, and the serious woman with the Navaho earrings goes for *Archaeology*.

Finally, if their clothes don't give them away, their bodies do: The rough, thickset brute tucks a *Rugby World* under his arm,

while the emaciated fellow with the bouncy walk strides off with *Runner's World*, and the stylish, overweight woman springs for *Gourmet* and *Bon Appétit*.

In the world of Out of Town News, the population still observes the conventional gender roles: Boys will be boys, and girls will be women. Men's magazines are stacked to the right, with computers, science and politics; women's magazines are to the left, with health, beauty and home decoration. Like men everywhere, Harvard Johns have one overwhelming interest that makes *Penthouse* and *Playboy* number one and number two every month. One recent month, however, sex was outsold by fears about it. *Scientific American's* issue on AIDS did so well, the stand ordered more copies long after the cover date, something it hadn't done since the Madonna issue of *Playboy*. "It's a hot subject," says Fred Cohen, "and the magazine's got the credibility."

Harvard men aren't squeamish about buying skin magazines from a woman. "They just ignore me," says cashier Nicolle Durham. "At the beginning, I kept asking, 'Do you want a bag?'" But the Harvardians

do tend to place the magazines facedown on the counter, and they usually group their copies of *Nugget* or *Cheri* with publications such as *Harper's* or *Spy*. As the decades roll by at Out of Town News, the news sellers are in a good position to observe the broader global trends. Just as the store has seen individual Harvardians go from the *Charleston News* and *Courier* to *Der Spiegel* in four years, so has it watched the country grow up. Fred Cohen remembers when *True Confessions* and *True Romance* were as popular as now only *Soap Opera Digest* is. Similarly, the CB magazines gave way to the computer magazines, which are ready to yield to something else too. What? Cohen doesn't have the slightest idea. He doesn't forecast the news, after all, he just sells it.

—JOHN SEDGWICK

John Sedgwick's book on the Philadelphia zoo is the basis for the TV show *Peaceable Kingdom*, on CBS this month.

That we are a nation of immigrants is proved by the sight of customers lining up to buy news of their home countries.

Some specialty items, such as Hemmings Motor News or Three-Way-Lover, rarely leave the stand in clumps.