Franklin Park, Boston’s “Central” Park

Richard Heath

The embodiment of Frederick Law Olmsted’s agrarian ideal, Franklin Park vies with the Arnold Arboretum as the centerpiece of the Boston park system.

Since the 1890s, Franklin Park has been Boston’s central park, the hub of an enormous system of parks stretching from the Back Bay to the newly annexed towns of Dorchester, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain. Frederick Law Olmsted, advising the Boston Park Commissioners, recognized that Boston’s growth would require large open spaces in which citizens could relax and engage in recreation. In his Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park (1886), Olmsted described Franklin Park as having a square mile of relaxing scenery that would ease the harried city dweller.

Because it was intended to be an ample country park, it was placed, not in the middle of the city, but southwest of City Hall, approximately four miles from Boston Common, in what was then an undeveloped part of the city. Indeed, all of the sites considered for the Park lay four to five miles from the central-business, government, and residential core of Boston, which had long been built up. Placing the new park outside of the center city would perfect Olmsted’s theory that the “agrarian ideal” should be brought to the city.

The new park was to be—or appear to be—as little built-up as possible, with many convenient footpaths meandering through it. (Of Olmsted’s parks, only the Arnold Arboretum and Mont Royal Park, in Montreal, have fewer structures than Franklin Park.) A circuit drive for carriages would lead into the parkway, which would connect the other parks in the Olmsted system and, by a meandering parkway, lead to the inner city.

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Thus, even while driving to the park, one would never have to leave parkland.

The 500 acres of Franklin Park (originally there were 527 acres) were purchased between 1881 and 1883, and construction began early in the summer of 1885. Streetcar lines were just beginning to move out to the edge of the park, and subdivisions were begun in adjacent blocks even as the park was being constructed. The principal reason for annexing whole towns, such as Dorchester, Roxbury, and West Roxbury, had been to provide living space for the center city.

Franklin Park’s boundaries were drawn so as to lie along main thoroughfares, near existing transportation lines; its entrances, carefully planned to open the park to as many people as possible, as conveniently as possible, were built to coincide with transportation. Two thoroughfares today are major routes into the city, and the transportation lines are important trunk lines for the metropolitan Boston public-transit system.

Franklin Park was designed for many uses, with five distinct landscaping features: a 100-acre woodland, a 200-acre meadow, a 7-acre artificial pond, a formal entranceway, and a 30-acre playing field, all interconnected by walks and drives, with three overlooks. Although primarily designed for passive relaxation—in keeping with the times—it had a carefully landscaped playing field in recognition that active sports were becoming more important in Americans’ leisure life. The playing field was segregated from the passive parks by landscaping techniques so that the two groups of people—those engaged in sports and those engaged in less vigorous activities—would not interfere with one another. To shut out the city completely, a thick screen of trees, some on earthen berms, framed the entire square-mile park.

Structures were limited to one wood and three stone shelters, three stone bridges, a stone arch that carried foot traffic under Circuit Drive, and several flights of stone-slab steps. This left the park completely open to the imagination of the visitors. There were no restrictions on the spaces within the park except for the playing field and the acre or two set aside for lawn tennis in Ellicott Dale (which today is a baseball diamond). In no other park had Olmsted been able to create a truly country effect. Fortunately, Franklin Park remains to this day uncluttered, especially the lovely broad meadow.

Learning from Central Park—where from almost the first day people had begun putting up statues—Olmsted planned a space for just this type of commemorative sculpture in the Greeting, the formal entranceway. The Mall in Central Park and the Concert Grove in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park were Olmsted’s
earliest responses to this impulse, but Franklin Park had far more space for statuary, concerts, and large group activities than either of them, and that was exactly the original purpose of the Greeting. A long, broad berm to the south was thickly planted with oaks and beeches to separate the Greeting from the rest of the more passive parkland. Even while Franklin Park was under construction, public pressure had caused the landscape architects to revise their design by adding a pond, which they placed at the southwestern corner of the Park.

Franklin Park was the last urban park that Frederick Law Olmsted designed (he retired in 1895, when the park was nearly finished). It completes the theories of landscape design first put into practice in Central Park in 1858 and in some ways perfects them, particularly in the careful use of the site for the enjoyment of thousands of people, at the same time providing solitude for two or three.

Richard Heath is the former director of the Franklin Park Coalition.