

TWENTY YEARS AFTER: THE REVIVAL OF BOSTON'S PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

Boston is in the midst of the greatest round of parkmaking and landscape restoration since the Emerald Necklace was created a century ago. After decades of neglect, bad planning and design, and a lack of capital and operating funds, both the Boston parks managed by the City of Boston and the regional parks managed by the Metropolitan District Commission are being revitalized, from Boston Common to the Blue Hills. Though we did not take many of the opportunities to create new parkland and conserve natural areas that Edward Weeks prayed for in these pages in 1967, fears about the rapid development of Boston in the last few years and the coming together of a strong open-space constituency are finally creating movement. Major new public green spaces are coming on line, under construction, or in the final stages of planning; other emerald visions are in the air. Boston in the year 2000 will be greener and even more livable than it is today.

We are emerging from an era when parks were seen as peripheral to the life of Boston; when park agencies were seen as patronage dumping grounds; when the grass went unmowed and the barrels unemptied; when fires, illegal dumping and land giveaways ravaged the forest reservations; and when there appeared to be no political constituency for our parklands. Today we are experiencing an extraordinary revival of attention to our parklands. This revival is the result of community initiative, strong leadership from groups like Boston Urban Gardeners and the Boston Natural Areas Fund, as well as from public officials, a growing number of public-private partnerships, and the realization that public parks are of great—if often unconscious—importance to urban people, residents and commuters, tourists and immigrants, young and old, rich and poor.

In 1886, Charles Eliot, landscape architect, apprentice of Frederick Law Olmsted, and instigator of both the Trustees of Reservations (the oldest land trust in the world) and the Metropolitan Park system, wrote, "For crowded populations to live in health and happiness, they must have space for air, for light, for exercise, for rest, and for the enjoyment of that peaceful beauty of nature which, because it is the opposite of the noisy ugliness of the city is so refreshing to the tired souls of townspeople." Now, a century later, some sixty-eight percent of the city's population lives in public or subsidized housing. Thirty-one percent of the city's children live at or below the poverty line. We have again come to the realization that for the many city residents who cannot afford a vacation home or a rental on Cape Cod or in the mountains of New Hampshire, the public parks are a primary resource for respite, relaxation, physical release, and contact with the natural world.

As well, the environmental movement, which gained such force in the 1960s, has finally turned its attention to the quality of city living. This trend has been reinforced by such sports as jogging, bicycling, and gardening, and by an expanding circle of birders and students of nature. Even businesses have come to see that quality open space is an attraction for customers and workers. In sum, as the recent report, *The Greening of Boston*, declared, "Parks and open spaces are fundamental to the

physical, social, and economic health of the city.”

All the pieces are falling into place to translate this renewed comprehension of the meaning of urban open spaces into a real renaissance of Boston’s existing open spaces and a second great decade of parkmaking a century after the first. Governor Dukakis and his administration have developed programs to restore and enlarge the urban open space inventory—with passage of a \$600 million open-space bond issue last December by the legislature, the funds should be available to implement these programs. Mayor Flynn has exerted strong leadership on the park issue, allocating over \$75 million for capital improvement of existing parklands, doubling the budget for the Parks and Recreation Department and placing a high priority on effective management of the city’s parks. The Boston Parks and the MDC commissioners are dynamic leaders with vision and political savvy. In neighborhoods across Boston, residents have become stewards of the public realm, cleaning and programming the parks and demanding that public agencies fulfill their responsibilities.

At the Boston Redevelopment Authority, new open spaces are being negotiated from developers. The Mayor’s Office of Capital Planning has completed the most comprehensive Open Space Plan in more than fifty years. After a lapse of decades, the Massachusetts Audubon and Horticultural societies have once again become active in Boston. And in the last three years, over one hundred community, civic, and environmental groups and public agencies have come together in the Boston GreenSpace Alliance to speak with one voice for all of Boston’s parks and open spaces, existing and potential.

Though years of sustained public advocacy and support will be required, a brief review of the green-space projects, plans, and visions on our collective table shows that Boston can be known as the “City of Parks” in the year 2000.

Belle Isle Marsh Reservation

After years of citizen effort, this largest remaining saltmarsh in Boston was opened as an MDC reservation in 1986. With walking trails, boardwalk, viewing tower, and extensive educational programming, Belle Isle Marsh has become a key place for teaching city schoolchildren and adults about the ecology and value of saltmarshes. A favorite of birders, the Marsh is host to great blue herons, marsh hawks, and snowy owls.

Southwest Corridor Park

The greatest addition to Boston’s park inventory since the Esplanade was created in the 1920s, this fifty-two-acre, linear parkland connect downtown Boston to the Arnold Arboretum and Franklin Park along the Orange Line transportation corridor. Completed this spring, the Southwest Corridor Park was planned and developed by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) with much community involvement. It is managed by the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC). A dual-circulation system invites and separates bikers and joggers from slower-moving strollers. Planted with an extensive variety of trees, shrubs, vines, and flowers, the park includes twenty children’s play areas,

community gardens, and numerous ball courts.

Boston Common Renewal

Boston Common, oldest public greenspace in the United States, is being restored to the people after years of decline and deferred maintenance. In the last year, the Parks and Recreation Department has pruned every tree, laid new turf, installed knee-high fencing, and removed dead elms. To prevent



View of Belle Isle Marsh in East Boston, with Boston in the background. Recently, one thousand acres of marsh in the Belle Isle area were granted special protection by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Photograph by Richard Howard. Courtesy of the Boston Foundation and the Boston GreenSpace Alliance.

criminal activity on the Common, a complete lighting system, made possible by a grant from the Department of Environmental Management, now illuminates the Common's walkways. Improved maintenance procedures have given the Common a new luster. More improvements are planned.

Restoration of Neighborhood Parks

Work is well underway on the City's five-year plan to renew over one hundred neighborhood parks and playgrounds. Play and recreation equipment is being restored or replaced; new turf, benches, and signs installed; fencing and lighting repaired or replaced; and trees and shrubs pruned or planted. Over eighteen "tot-lots," so important to young children in the neighborhoods, are being rehabilitated this year alone.

Restoration of the Emerald Necklace

With \$11.25 million in grants from the Department of Environmental Management's (DEM's) Olmsted Historic Landscape Preservation Program, the City is restoring five Olmsted-designed parks: Back Bay Fens, the Muddy River, Olmsted Park, Jamaica Pond, and Franklin Park. Long-term Master Plans are nearing completion for each park, and early-action moneys have already been spent on pruning and other desperately needed work. Among the proposed priorities for construction in these parks over the next year or two are: repair of historic bridges, steps, and park furniture; removal of invasive vegetation; re-creation of a dual-circulation with a bike path instead of a bridle trail; improved water quality and water edges; and extensive landscaping. There are hopes that the Arnold Arboretum will receive funding from a second round of grants and that the Sears department store parking lot will be returned to parkland. This program is a major step in restoring the Emerald Necklace to its rightful place as one of the foremost park designs in the world.

Re-creation of Copley Square

Work is underway to rebuild completely Copley Square, a keystone park that had been poorly designed and did not work. The Copley Square Centennial Committee, an alliance of corporate abutters, Back Bay activists, and park professionals operating in conjunction with the Boston Rede-



An artist's drawing of the new Copley Square (now under construction), viewed from the corner of Boylston and Clarendon streets. The square will have a new granite fountain, expanses of grass opposite the Boston Public Library and near the new fountain, allées of London plane trees along Saint James Avenue and Boylston Street, brick paving, and seasonal flower beds. Trinity Church appears at the left of the drawing, the Copley Plaza Hotel in the left background, and the Boston Public Library at the top right. Construction is scheduled to be completed by the end of the year. Courtesy of the Copley Square Committee.

velopment Authority (BRA), has raised corporate, foundation, and public funds for this major initiative. Guided by an entirely new design commissioned by the Committee, Copley Square is being raised to street level, planted with many more trees, providing performance, concession, and farmer's market spaces, and having its circulation improved. Top-quality materials are being used, and a maintenance endowment and management plan are under development. Work will be completed on construction by this fall and on landscaping by next spring.

New Post Office Square Park

Post Office Square, in the heart of the financial district, is about to receive a new park on the site of an old parking garage. Entirely financed by corporate abutters through the Friends of Post Office Square, the project calls for demolition of the garage and construction of another, underground garage decked over with a park. The design approach has been creative, calling for fountains, sculpture, much turf, extensive horticultural materials, intimate spaces, and even a small restaurant. The landscape architect for the project, the Halvorson Company, was chosen after a comprehensive competition. Work on this exciting new park, which probably will be the most intensely used park in the city, should begin by this coming October. A portion of the proceeds from the underground garage will be allotted to neighborhood parks.

Harbor Access

The BRA and Boston Environment Department are completing an extensive plan for public access to Boston's waterfront. Negotiating amenities from waterfront developers, Harborwalk will follow walkways and open-space nodes from South Boston, through the downtown waterfront, to Charlestown and East Boston. Plans are nearing completion for 3.3 miles of public walkways and park frontage in Charlestown alone.

Dorchester Shores

Plans are moving rapidly forward at the MDC to extend the chain of linear shorefront parkland—which now runs from Castle Island to Carson Beach—along the entire Dorchester shorefront and up the Neponset River. Work should be completed within the year on two major links: Harborpoint, along the former Columbia Point Development, and Victory Road Park, the former Troy landfill beside the Boston Gas storage tanks. The old Neponset Drive-in Theater site and the adjacent dump have already been acquired, as have several other parcels and rights-of-way. The Department of Public Works has plans for a bikeway below the Southeast Expressway, linking Victory Road Park and Tenean Beach, and the MDC is negotiating an access with Boston Gas to extend the trail behind the storage tanks.

Brook Farm

The MDC is in the process of acquiring the 179-acre Brook Farm property in West Roxbury, site of the famous Transcendentalist utopian experiment of the 1840s. The site, which includes rich historic



Post Office Square, soon to be much enlarged. Photograph by Richard Howard. Courtesy of the Boston Foundation and the Boston GreenSpace Alliance.

and archaeological resources, abuts the Saw Mill Marsh and Charles River, with rolling hills, Boston puddingstone outcrops, and an old orchard with an abundance of birdlife. The property is slated to become a natural and cultural park.

Boston Harbor Islands State Park Master Plan

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management, in conjunction with the MDC, has recently completed a master plan for the Boston Harbor Islands that calls for preservation of the unique natural and historic character on most of the islands and for improved visitor services and public safety on more-intensively used islands. Fifteen million dollars have been allocated in the new State Open Space Bond issue to accomplish these improvements, as well as to increase access to the islands and rehabilitate components of the infrastructure. Funds will also be used to increase public access to Thompson Island, currently in private hands, and to begin development of Long Island as an addition to the island park.



The Arlington Street Church, still a Boston landmark after more than a century, and the two John Hancock towers, are framed by trees in the Boston Public Garden. In the foreground is the "Lagoon," on which the Garden's famous swanboats sail each summer. Photograph copyright © 1988 by Doug Mindell.

Central Artery

Increasingly, park advocates and public officials, including the MDC Commissioner and BRA Director, are discussing the open-space potential of the Central Artery once it is depressed and decked over. Ideas range from turning nearly the entire deck into open space, with a grand boulevard like the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, to having a mix of open space and new development that weaves separate neighborhoods back together.

Neighborhood Visions

If the grander visions of open space tend to the outskirts of the city and to the downtown, the real key to the environmental health of Boston lies in a vision of smaller neighborhood green spaces, for it is in the neighborhoods that Boston's people live and play. In neighborhoods around the city, people are concerned about the loss of open space and about the need for decent play spaces close to home. Several neighborhoods are actively participating in BRA neighborhood rezoning initiatives utilizing the City's new Open Space Zoning. In the South End, neighborhood activists want to preserve community gardens at the same time as affordable housing is created; in Brighton, the focus is on the neighborhoods extensive institutional lands; in Dorchester and Mattapan, residents want new tot-lots. In a number of communities, residents want to preserve urban wilds, sites of natural significance, as conservation lands. At public housing developments people want decent grounds and places for their children to play and grow. In Hyde Park, citizens want to add to the Stony Brook Reservation. As we pursue our big visions, we must acknowledge the needs and visions of these neighborhood people, for without their active support our dreams will fail or soon decay.

In conclusion, to quote from *The Greening of Boston* report:

A century ago citizens and professionals began planning for Boston's future. They dreamed of a system of connected parks, the first such system in the country, and created the Emerald Necklace. They had a vision of forest reserves and public beaches, at the edge of the city and beyond, and created the Metropolitan Park system. They heard the need for recreation articulated in every neighborhood and responded by creating dozens of playgrounds. They had visions of the Charles River dammed and lined with recreational facilities; they created the Charles River Basin and the Esplanade.

Though our dreams today reflect real community needs and the best of planning intentions, their full implementation is far from assured. Creation of grand new open spaces; revitalization of the Emerald Necklace, community parks, and Boston Common; preservation of community gardens and urban wilds; and the provision of new green links throughout the city and region: our visions will require sustained advocacy, political will, institutional mission, interagency cooperation, community support and involvement, and the participation from business, foundation, and non-profit sectors. Most of all, these visions will require bold leadership from our elected officials, from agency heads, and professional staffs, and from the citizens of the region. The concerted effort of all is the only guarantee that we will have as proud a legacy to leave our children as the nineteenth century left to us.

—MARK PRIMACK, *Executive Director*
Boston GreenSpace Alliance