City United, Park Fragmented

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City United, Park Fragmented

Abstract
The Common Cry of Urban Development, "if you want to make an omelette, you’ve got to break some eggs," definitely applies to Boston’s Big Dig, which has been an eggbeater in the heart of Boston for the past 20 years. Today the benefits of the demolition are clearly apparent in the open spaces of the Rose Kennedy Greenway that now stands in place of the elevated Central Artery.

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Two design writers share their thoughts on the Rose Kennedy Greenway.

Editor's Note: In March 2008, Landscape Architecture reprinted a Boston Globe critique of the long-awaited park corridor atop Boston's Big Dig. This was obviously an important project to cover, given the number of landscape architects involved and the degree to which it would transform the city. Many readers felt, however, that bySimply publishing this reprinted article, we failed to properly address landscape architecture from the landscape architect's point of view. We agree with you. Last year, we asked two of our regular contributors to visit the greenway for themselves and provide us their honest assessments. In a somewhat unusual move for this magazine, we're giving you two articles in one. Let's reopen the discussion.

By Marty Carlock

Sixteen years in the making, the greenway atop Boston's infamous Big Dig (the mammoth project to put the Central (traffic) Artery underground) was officially dedicated in August 2008. Its plants have some growing to do, but the general plan is finished.

Last April I hiked its more than one-mile length and back, hoping to see how it looked, how well it worked, and whether anybody was using it. In Boston, April is too early for any but the most intrepid foliage, so I returned for another stroll in mid-July. The first impression is that the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway is misnamed—it is actually the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Pavedway. There is some grass; there are trees and plants, but because of its verdant name, I expected more.

I expected more cohesion, too. The greenway's master planners decided to treat it as four separate parks: Chinatown, Dewey Square, Wharf District, and North End. Those who know Boston can see that the four distinct parks reflect (Continued on Page 26)

By Heidi Hohmann, ASLA

The common cry of urban development, "If you want to make an omelette, you've got to break some eggs," definitely applies to Boston's Big Dig, which has been an eggbeater in the heart of Boston for the past 20 years. Today the benefits of that demolition are clearly apparent in the open spaces of the Rose Kennedy Greenway that now stands in place of the elevated Central Artery.

I visited the completed greenway on a bright June day and was impressed by the new perspective it provides of Boston. After walking down the narrow shaded canyons of State, Milk, and High streets, bursting onto the open sunlight of the new corridor feels like an awakening. Finally, there is a place from which to observe, on foot, Boston's full parade of architecture, from the excesses of the Zakim Bridge at the Charles River to the wharf buildings on the harbor to the layers of commercial buildings downtown. Many buildings gain new prominence in the skyline: The quirky Custom House Tower, for example, shines bright against the dark towers (Continued on Page 32)
The designers' goal—to make these parks an oasis in the urban grid—has been achieved.

Separated from the rest of the greenway and hard to find, the waterfall and cobbled stream at the north end of the Chinatown park provide a welcome respite from the city frenzy. This stretch is planted with Asian endemics.

The gap of the former artery, especially in facilitating connections from harbor edge to central downtown. Although such pedestrian traffic existed before, it is now made visible in the open space of the greenway and perceptibly energizes the city. On my visit, I watched well-suited lawyers hurry from South Station to their downtown offices, young professionals amble from Congress Street offices to Chinatown lunches, and flip-flop-shod tourists stroll from Quincy Market to Long Wharf and the North End.

Then again, the greenway was intended to do more than facilitate circulation; it was designed as a major addition to Boston's open space network. The four park areas within the corridor succeed reasonably well in providing a range of new outdoor spaces where urbanites can eat, exercise, and relax. Mostly, though, the parks counteract the corridor's potential for monorony, each one riffing on the greenway's standard details and materials. This is particularly true of the Chinatown Park, based as it is in one of Boston's distinct cultural microclimates. The park uses culturally significant plants (ginkgo, iris, and bamboo) and traditional forms
and materials (the granite blocks of the fountain recall the Tai Hu rocks common in Suzhou gardens) to project a distinct Asian flavor. The park is saved from being too cloying by the dramatic forms of the red metal gateway and cagelike structures that frame bamboo plantings. Unlike the rest of the greenway parks, the Chinatown Park benefits from its location on a widened sidewalk, immediately adjacent to buildings, rather than being surrounded by traffic. This gives the Chinatown Park an intimate feel that the others lack, particularly at its northern end, where raised planting beds and fountains mask the sight and sound of vehicles. The only odd note is the large Chinatown entry plaza at Beach Street. Though it was easy to envision the plaza used for special occasions such as the Chinatown Main Street Festival, on the sunny morning when I visited it felt abandoned. However, the conviviality of the flower-lined northern walkway, where a dozen people on the granite seat wall shared lunch and conversations, more than compensates for the plaza’s lack of user-friendliness.

In contrast to the cultural specificity of the Chinatown Park, the green spaces and plazas of the Dewey Square Parks to the north seem generic. The plaza at its southern end is more remarkable for the way thousands of commuters cross 10 lanes of traffic at the Summer Street intersection than for its futuristic, crystalline Red Line Stations or its op art checkerboard paving pattern. On its northern edge, this plaza unrolls into a grassy plinth terminated by the blank facade of a tunnel air intake building. From this angle the space neither celebrates nor hides this infrastructural evidence of the freeway flowing beneath the greenway. On the building’s far side, a composition of planting bed, benches, and street trees addresses the structure in a much more successful manner. Here, people stopped to catch some sun and check their Blackberries.

The district’s two green blocks to the north, however, are clearly meant to be the focal point of the Dewey Square section of the greenway. These miniature rolling greenswards are bisected by curvilinear, crushed stone paths and enclosed by fluid landforms. If the spaces feel unfinished, it’s likely because youthful tree plantings don’t yet relate to the larger spatial container of the surrounding buildings. The sight of a young banker napping on a sunny slope, as only the homeless generally do downtown, is proof that the designers’ goal—to make these parks an oasis in the urban grid—has been achieved. Yet the small scale of the spaces diminishes this achievement. Like a Faberge egg, the spaces feel too small, too precious. Their coy, self-conscious quality is enhanced by the drifts of flowering perennials, neatly labeled with Latin and common names.

For me, this recalls the didactic paternalism of Loudon’s Derby Arbour eum, and I wonder about the relevance of 19th-century park vocabulary in the 21st-century city. But I also suspect the bright colors and great diversity of cultivars make these plantings popular with the gardening public.

The Wharf District, the next portion of the greenway to the north, is probably equally popular with the public, filled as it is with most of the greenway’s “interactive” elements. Although they fit the giant scale of these largest open spaces of the greenway, the participatory Rings Fountain and the theatrical Light Blades seem more de rigueur urban attractions than site-specific public art like Millennium Park’s Crown Fountain in Chicago or Hart Plaza’s Noguchi-designed Dodge Fountain in Detroit. More appropriately related to Boston are the Harbor Fog installation and the Mothers’ Walk, though the paver purchase program of the latter seems hopelessly outdated and incongruously small town. Still, the placement of all these interactive experiences in the heart of the tourist district makes a great deal of programmatic sense. Cost-free, fun, and physical, they nicely complement two nearby tourist draws: Quincy Market with its relentless commercialism and the educationally focused Freedom Trail. But my favorite aspect of the Wharf
District Parks is the way their presence reinvigorates Long Wharf and Christopher Columbus Park, thereby reconnecting city to harbor.

The neighboring North End Parks also reconnect the city to its heritage, but unlike the Chinatown Park the North End Parks are less a cultural representation of Boston’s Italian neighborhood than a physical threshold to it. Where visitors once ducked through a stinky underpass to emerge into the North End’s tunnel-like streets, they now move up generous terraces and through a curtain of fountains and pergolas to confront the district’s new urban edge. The oft-used “front porch” metaphor is thus an apt one, though the space is not nearly as folksy as the term implies. In fact, the North End Parks contain the most modern and least predictable design vocabulary of the greenway. The play of geometries is all diagonal lines, parallelograms, and arcs, rather than the romantic curves of the Dewey Square parks or the rectangles and circles of the Wharf District parks. The detailing similarly eschews any ornamentation of a 19th-century urban past, despite the surrounding historic architecture, and is instead consistently smooth and streamlined. Certainly the design’s historical references are so deeply embedded in the design to be irrelevant to the uninformed visitor—the park’s water features are more significant in modifying the sound, temperature, and feeling of the environment than in expressing the presence of a long-lost 18th-century millstream. Carried perhaps by the slightly brooding presence of the large-scaled and dark-colored pergola, the overall mood of the space is more subdued than the rest of the greenway, too, a mood not inappropriate given that the landscape might be read as a long-healed scar formed after the violence done by the original Central Artery. Despite all this, the park fits its context surprisingly well, in part due to the designers’ sensitivity to the way the city and its citizens interact with the greenway. Examples include the reconfigured sidewalk allowing an expanded outdoor café at Joe Tesco’s Italian restaurant and the busy, brick-paved, bollarded parking area at the grocery and pastry stores between Hanover and New Sudbury streets. Both of these areas perpetuate the old-world, market atmosphere of the North End. If I have a complaint with the North End parks, it may be with their overall scale; they seem too expansive and extravagant for the quaint neighborhood tucked behind them. And like the Chinatown plaza, on this average summer day, the North End terraces were basically empty, the few coffee drinkers and vagrants sleeping on the benches seemingly dwarfed by the space.

Indeed, a feeling of vacancy haunts many of the greenway’s open plazas and large grassy lawns, as if they await an event to fill the city and spill over into the greenway. With any luck the corridor’s lack of bustle—as disturbing to city officials as it is to visitors—will soon be banished by promised commercial and residential development within and around the corridor. Boston certainly doesn’t need another public space as windswept, unused, and reviled as City Hall Plaza.

Yet I believe the greenway will spare City Hall Plaza’s dismal fate. Overall, the Rose Kennedy Greenway is a lot less like City Hall Plaza and a lot more like its namesake: well mannered and well manicured, ambitious yet hard to dislike. And like Rose Kennedy, the greenway is so deeply traditional that it is unlikely to challenge or offend. The calculated result of decades of design, thousands of public meetings, and billions of dollars, the greenway truly atones for the worst sins of urban renewal. It proves that bold acts of destruction can be tempered with creative design sympathetic to human needs. But the project’s traditional nature also means that the greenway remains a rather predictable solution to a 20th-century urban planning debacle rather than an innovative vision of 21st-century urban landscape. Regardless of what inventive engineering may lie beneath it, the greenway’s thin veneer of parks and plazas offers little that’s either aesthetically or functionally new. In the final analysis, the greenway is no less—but also no more—than landscape architecture at its most conventional best.

The greenway truly atones for the worst sins of urban renewal.

Once grimy and noisy, edges of the greenway are now promoted to prime real estate. Decrying building proposals that would deprive the park of sunlight, advocates hope to restrict development alongside it to low-rise structures.

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