

Lynn Wolff Plants a Legacy in the Urban Landscape

By **Helen Graves**/Feature
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Lynn Wolff, principal and president of Copley Wolff Design Group, is often asked, "What's the big idea here?" — the "here" being the newly open crevasse slicing through downtown Boston where the ugly monstrosity of a raised, metal central artery once stood.

"When the artery came down, you could see the sky, you could see the water, you could see the old statehouse from Long Wharf," Wolff describes. "I don't think anybody could anticipate how wonderful it was going to be."

Wolff has been involved with the surface restoration portion of Boston's Big Dig since 1996, when her firm first won the \$20 million contract for designing the replacement for the old artery — a mile-long streetscape with associated parks in the most visible part of the project in downtown Boston.

In 2004, Copley Wolff Design Group, in collaboration with EDAAW, went on to win the much celebrated design contract for the five-acre Wharf District Parks.

The "big idea" here, Wolff says, is capturing and connecting the architecture, the harbor and the flavor of the neighborhoods in landscape design for what she calls "this phenomenal open space in the heart of the city."

Under construction now and to be completed next year are the streetscape and the Wharf District Parks connecting the city with the water along the heart of the Rose Kennedy Greenway.

The downtown side of the Wharf parks plan is more formal, Wolff says, while the harbor side reflects a more natural look to accentuate the juxtaposition of skyline vs. seaport. The project took 133 public meetings over the course of a year and a lot of collaboration — all of which are Wolff's strong points and her roles in this large-scale urban renewal process.

In fact, accomplishing huge, complicated projects requiring complex coordination and collaboration is the strength upon which Wolff has built her career and her firm. The design elements and the orientation of her tasks also satisfy her early career considerations.

"To me, parks are the most democratic places in the world, where everybody can meet, and so their design has so much to do with psychology and sociology," she says.

Wolff pursued landscape architecture as an undergrad at Cornell to marry her potential majors of psychology, art and biology. Her first job out of school was in a large New York engineering firm's landscape architecture department. From there, she went to Harvard Graduate School of Design and then returned to New York to work in a boutique landscape firm.

There, Wolff helped on projects around the world, including Australia's parliament complex and the U.S. embassy in Damascus. Next, she returned to Boston to work at Carol Johnson and Associates for five years before switching to Benjamin Thompson and Associates.

Her goal was to diversify her resume as much as possible. "I didn't know it but, at the back of my mind, I was preparing myself for opening my own business," Wolff says. "I was getting that breadth of experience in different types of offices and an understanding of a multi-disciplinary type of approach."

Wolff had finished managing the \$50 million capital improvement portion of midtown Manhattan's revitalization, 50 blocks around Grand Central Station, when she struck out on her own as a sole proprietor in 1990.

"I thought I could create my own office atmosphere, be stimulated, do work I wanted to do and uphold my values," she says.

The recession at the time had reduced many firms to one or two people, Wolff notes, and so she could easily begin by collaborating with other small offices to go after projects.

"My skills have always been in putting together a team of multi-disciplinary skills to solve problems," she points out.

To build business, Wolff networked through industry associations, leaned on mentors and was civically involved — reviewing design on the Boston 2000 plan is an example.

"That gave me some visibility and some exposure and the understanding of the politics in Boston," she says. "I tell people it takes about five years to feel as if you have a business."

Wolff's collaboration with John Copley in pitching the central artery project — "we were both sole proprietors sharing one employee" — resulted in the formation of Copley Wolff.

"It was the largest streetscape project ever in Boston and the most ambitious highway project in



American history," Wolff says. "When they asked us during the interview how we would staff for the project, I remember saying that we'll hire like any other office would have to hire for a project this size."

The fact that Copley Wolff was the only landscape architect to bid as the prime on the project — the others were engineering firms with landscape architect subcontractors — helped win the contract, Wolff says. Their subcontractor was a 350-person engineering firm. "It was like the tail wagging the dog but it worked."

By hiring 15 people and implementing all the necessary technology, Copley Wolff completed the streetscape design in 18 months — on time and under budget. The work consumed all of the young firm's attention, but these days staffers can be working on any of the various stages of more than 50 projects.

Wolff's favorite work over the years includes the Frog Pond in the Boston Common, the Dudley Town Common in Roxbury and Science Park at the Montshire Museum in Norwich, Vt. The common denominator is working with interesting people on innovative design that results in bringing the public together.

"We take whatever information the neighborhood or constituency or client has and apply our professional expertise to it rather than just going in and saying, 'This is how it should be, this is good design,'" Wolff says.

Projects today spread from New England to Virginia to Texas, where Wolff is involved in a two-acre park on a roof deck in Dallas. Employees are encouraged to find their niche — "and then we'll back them up by getting the work," she says.

So, Wolff has the office atmosphere, the projects and the satisfaction of making her mark on city landscapes that she was seeking when she set out on her own. She doesn't see Copley Wolff growing much larger than its 15 on board — 18 is tops. "That allows two principals to have direct contact with all the projects and all the employees," she says.

Wolff is still involved civically. A member of the Boston Civic Design Commission, she reviews all projects under the city's consideration. And she's not quite finished with the artery project.

Copley Wolff Design Group is now overseeing the construction of the streetscape and the main north-south, tree-lined boulevard, as well as assisting EDAW with construction of the Wharf District Parks and providing schematic design services for the Massachusetts Horticultural Society's garden.

And Wolff sees plenty of opportunity to come, even in Boston. "You can actually see things taking shape," she says. "I think this is just the beginning of a whole rejuvenation of the city."

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