

FILLING THE CUT

ROBERT A. BROWN

AFTER YEARS OF PLANNING, THE ROSE KENNEDY GREENWAY IS FINALLY TAKING SHAPE IN BOSTON.



BOSTON REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

BOSTON HAS LONG BEEN ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S most appealing cities, with its variety of livable neighborhoods, prestigious colleges and universities, well-known sports venues, Frederick Law Olmsted-designed parks, plus its rich history. However, the city's quality of life paid dearly for what in the mid-1950s was deemed improved transportation when an elevated expressway was cut through the central core, severing the Financial District from the waterfront and isolating the North End. The roadway exacerbated a perceived sense of social separation among the distinct neighborhoods of the downtown area and made navigation through the city difficult.

Now, after 20 years of planning and billions of dollars of construction in a project called the "Big Dig," the Central Artery has been replaced by a tunnel, and in what was once its shadow a 30-acre stretch of parkland known as the Rose Kennedy Greenway is taking form. (See "Green Renewal of Urban Life in Boston," page 58, July 2004.) For the past few years, discussions of the best approach to take with the newly reclaimed swath of

city have occupied many of the country's design professionals as they engaged or enraged politicians and citizens. The strong sentiments that surfaced after the expressway finally came down may seem surprising to some, given that serious work had been underway for nearly two decades by organizations that included the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), the Central Artery Environmental Oversight Committee, and the Artery Business Committee, to name a few.

"The project was a 15-year secret, with most of the actual work going on underground," notes Ted Oatis, principal of the Boston-based developer Chiofaro Company, whose International Place office tower abuts the greenway. "People couldn't begin to imagine what it would be like, when it was filled with infrastructure, backstreet printing operations, and third-tier office buildings," explains Barbara Faga, chair of EDAA's board of directors, who came to Boston from the planning and designing firm's Atlanta office to work on one of the new parks. "It is transforming

The Rose Kennedy Greenway, a 30-acre stretch of parkland that replaces the elevated expressway that used to slice through the central core of Boston, will add vital urban open space to the downtown area, as evidenced by these before and after conceptual renderings.

WHILE THERE IS NOT YET A SINGLE BLADE OF GRASS, THE EFFECTS OF THE NEW ROSE KENNEDY GREENWAY CAN ALREADY BE OBSERVED IN THE RISE OF REAL ESTATE VALUES NEAR THE PARK.



COPLEY WOLFF DESIGN GROUP/FEDAW INC./NEOSCAPE

Wharf District Park will supply outdoor green space to workers in the 10 million square feet of adjacent office space within 500 feet of the wharf.

the city in the same way that major waterfront projects have transformed other cities. Before it happens, people see only the blight, not the vision.”

Those with a vision of an expanded public realm and its benefits persevered through years of tough decisions aimed to balance relatively short-term difficulty against long-term gains. “In the 1980s, the BRA began to anticipate the changes we see today by requiring the designs that were submitted for properties adjoining the future park to have active faces to what was then the expressway,” says Richard Garver, deputy director of planning and zoning at the BRA. “It wasn’t easy.” Others grappled with how to translate the mandated allotments of 75 percent parkland and 25 percent buildings into an inviting mixed-use environment that would satisfy the needs of the city as a whole and the specialized desires of the diverse neighborhoods touching the greenway.

By late 2002, the debate about what should happen on the land moved into the public sphere through a design competition for the green spaces adjoining the neighborhoods. The exhibition and discussion of the short-listed designs, called “Realizing the Vision,” drew more than 700 participants to the Boston Public Library. There were op-ed pieces in the *Boston Globe*, programs on local television stations, and public forums titled “Beyond the Big Dig” that looked at national and international thinking about public open space.

From these discussions, the design community, led by the Boston Society of Architects and the Boston Society of Landscape Architects, in collaboration with other public and private entities, defined five urban design principles that could be used to evaluate the success of the community efforts to create vital urban parks. Those principles are:

- ▷ Build parks that are a common ground for all.
- ▷ Build parks that are uniquely Boston.
- ▷ Design the parks for the future.
- ▷ Connect the greenway parks to the larger park system and open-space system.
- ▷ Construct parks as a sustainable environment.

These are lofty goals for a site that by big-city park standards is small. Of the 27 acres, considerable space is dedicated to sidewalks, curbs, and other necessities. Still, what is left, especially in a city as compact and dense as Boston, will have an enormous impact for decades to come. This may help explain the lively, extended discussions in 2003 over the design character of the parks near Chinatown, the North End, and the Wharf District.

“This is valuable open space,” maintains John Copley, principal of Copley Wolff Design Group of Boston and a member of the design team for the Wharf District Park. “There are 10 million square feet of office space within 500 feet of the wharf; that’s a lot of office workers with no place to go. They are hungry for outdoor space.” Faga, part of the same team, adds, “The Wharf District became a neighborhood around the notion of a park. It brought people together, and their input created a better park. There were strong feelings about what a park should be, given the Bostonian experience of the Common and the Public Gardens.” So strong were the feelings that the team participated in 150 meetings over two years.

The other major components of the greenway plan are the cultural institutions that will be built on the parcels covering the ramps of the new Central Artery tunnel. Competition for these high-profile sites, strategically located at the major turns along the new parkway, attracted a number of interesting proposals. The winners include plans for a new YMCA, the Boston History Museum, and the New Center for Arts and Culture. Now the projects, with the exception of the arts and culture center, are struggling with the cost of construction over an active roadway, in addition to the normal pressures of nonprofit fundraising. A three-block segment of the

park that has been committed to the Massachusetts Horticultural Society for the city's first botanical garden has had trouble coming up with money as well. Boston insiders, however, are optimistic that the city's donors will rally for these important cultural additions to the new park and the city.

While there is not yet a single blade of grass, the effects of the new Rose Kennedy Greenway can already be observed in the rise of real estate values near the park. The *Boston Globe* reported in 2004 that a review of Boston tax assessment records showed "in the 15 years since the Central Artery tunnel began, the value of commercial properties along the mile-long strip . . . increased to \$2.3 billion, up 79 percent. That's almost double the citywide 41 percent increase in assessed commercial property values in the same period."

In the 18 months since that report, the property market along and near the greenway has continued to boom, and what Garver calls a "20-year mental investment" has turned out to be good business for those owners who put money into their properties along the potential park. Oatis cites his firm's obligation to design an expressway ramp next to International Place, which has now been torn down to reveal, at last, first-floor space with greenway frontage and long views. "In the long run, a view of the greenway is in many ways more valuable than one of the harbor," he says.

The view of and access to the park are literally and metaphorically turning around the buildings that line the greenway, with reverberations reaching into the surrounding districts. The national trend that has residents returning to downtown in significant numbers is driving a number of new developments along and near the greenway, where 4,000 housing units reportedly are being planned. Condominium conversions are leading the way, including projects such as the Othello on Beach Street near South Station in the Leather District, where local developer Jim Robertson reports that all eight of the 2,700-square-foot units have been sold for \$1.25 million to \$1.625 million. The Cresset Group is developing Lincoln Plaza at Lincoln and Essex streets, with 80 percent of the 85 studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom units already sold at prices ranging from \$260,000 to \$720,000.

New construction includes the Folio at 80 Broad Street in the Financial District, where new architecture frames a historic brick warehouse designed by architect Charles Bulfinch. The project, being developed by a part-

nership between an affiliate of the Suffolk Companies of Boston and Recap Capital Partners of New York City, has sold two-thirds of the 96 condominiums, which include studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom units priced at \$470,000 to \$1.3 million. Rose Associates of New York City is developing the Leighton, 162 condominiums located at South and Essex streets on a site originally planned for offices. Many more projects are near completion, while others are still being planned.

With the diverse mix of construction activity—from major cultural institutions designed by internationally recognized architects, to small condominium conversions, to even smaller public projects like expansion of a parcel of park to connect the greenway to the New England Aquarium—the city is repairing the rift created by the expressway 60 years ago. "The wonderful legacy



CHILD'S BERTMAN TSECKARES INC.

Other major components of the greenway plan are the cultural institutions that will be built on the parcels covering the ramps of the new Central Artery tunnel. Included among those chosen for the high-profile sites are a new YMCA (left) and the New Center for Arts and Culture (below).



CHILD'S BERTMAN TSECKARES INC.

THE VIEW OF AND ACCESS TO THE PARK ARE LITERALLY AND metaphorically TURNING AROUND THE BUILDINGS THAT LINE THE GREENWAY, WITH reverberations REACHING INTO THE SURROUNDING DISTRICTS.



Changes near the greenway are being aided in part by the significant number of residents returning to live downtown. Several new residential buildings are in the works, including Folio at 80 Broad Street, a 172,000-square-foot structure that frames a historic brick warehouse.

of the whole project is that it is changing the landscape of the city,” says Robert L. Beal, president of the Beal Companies, a Boston-based developer.

No small part of the healing of the cityscape comes from the newfound visual connections between neighborhoods and Boston Harbor. Not only are the views to the waterfront restored, but also the harbor itself, which benefited from a major cleanup begun in the late 1980s. The revitalized waterfront, with its inviting public walkway HarborWalk, is now an attractive destination whose proximity to the greenway extends the public realm.

The fostering of a sense of connection among the distinct enclaves that form the city, as well as with the harbor, is seen as a critical next step in the redevelopment of Boston as the greenway becomes a reality. The Crossroads Initiative, sponsored by the city, focuses on

renovating and enlivening 12 downtown streets to reconnect the neighborhoods long divided by the elevated freeway. The program also aims to establish new relationships among the downtown districts.

Ken Greenberg, principal of Toronto-based Greenberg Consultants, who played a leading role in development of the Crossroads Initiative, sees enormous civic power in the reweaving of the urban fabric. “It is very dramatic to walk out now and see how places touch each other—something you could never see before,” he says. “Promoting connectivity among these places will release a new energy in the city. There is a positive multiplier that happens with the juxtaposition of people and in surprise encounters of city living. We want to encourage that with great streets.” Construction over the next seven to ten years of the Crossroads streets, which will form ribs along the green spine of the greenway, is expected to result in improved pedestrian environments, enhanced elements for wayfinding, increased activity along sidewalks, better traffic flow, and new opportunities for performances and placement of public art.

As the enormous physical effort of the Big Dig ends, the new challenge for the city is to maximize its return on this outsized investment. In the past few years, the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, a nonprofit organization, was formed to serve as the steward for the greenway, and last year, conservancy chair Peter Meade named Nancy Brennan executive director. The conservancy is not only to maintain the park—it has a fundraising goal of \$20 million over the next three years—but also to program it.

While the debates about the design, the programs, and myriad other issues will undoubtedly continue, the arrival of the Rose Kennedy Greenway is, by any measure, a landmark event. The city is ready, observes Rob Tuchmann, a partner in the Boston office of Wilmer Hale and a veteran of the Central Artery battles, having served both as chair of the Central Artery Environmental Oversight Committee and cochair of the Mayor’s Central Artery Completion Task Force. “We have a limited budget, good bones in the design, and 100 years to get it right. Let’s start.” **U**

ROBERT A. BROWN is a partner the Boston-based architectural firm of CBT/Childs Bertman Tseckares Inc. He served on the Mayor’s Central Artery Completion Task Force.