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Designs *on the* Wharf District

Architects navigate criticism and special interests to replace artery with new greenway

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It's been a while since John Copley and Lynn Wolff have had even the tiniest breather.

The two landscape architects, principals of Boston-based Copley Wolff Design Group, are in the vortex of a political whirlwind of special interests clamoring over the Wharf District Park — the largest of the three parks that will make up the Rose Kennedy Greenway, which should begin construction in 2005, after the elevated Central Artery is torn down next year.

Copley Wolff, a 12-person firm with yearly billings between \$750,000 and \$1 million, is working with lead architectural firm EDAW Inc., based in San Francisco, on the high-profile park, which will be built on more than 4.5 acres of land stretching from Christopher Columbus Park in the North End to the grand archway at the Boston Harbor Hotel.

Their preliminary design plans, presented in public meetings over the past several months, have been criticized by a variety of special-interest groups: residents of the Harbor Towers luxury apartments, Financial District denizens and tourist hot spots Faneuil Hall and the New England Aquarium.

"I fear their lack of design vision is too big a gap to fill," Rebecca Barnes, the city's chief planner, wrote in June to the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, which oversees development of the swath of parks destined to replace the above-ground Central Artery.

In July, officials from the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) and the Boston Society of Landscape Architects (BSLA) co-wrote a letter to the authority claiming the park plans lack "a coherent vision statement."

Others have raised the issue of stewardship: Although the Turnpike Authority is responsible for creating the parks, the city will most likely be responsible for maintaining them; therefore, an agreement between the two entities is needed to make the design process go more smoothly, some maintain.

Although Copley Wolff has been involved in many public and high-profile projects — most notably the renovation of the Frog Pond in Boston Common and the renovation of the fountain at the Christian Science Center — both partners agree that the greenway has been the most complex and difficult project of their careers thus far. Copley notes that he gets at least one e-mail each day from some-

one weighing in on the project.

Frustrations aside, though, both partners are keenly aware of the visibility such a project brings.

"The planning and the design has been going on for 15 years, and the expectations for the project are huge," says Wolff, who also says that much of the criticism is premature. Copley Wolff only began working on the design in June after being hired as the local design firm for the project.

"It's been frustrating, because we would like to see all the constituencies realize the opportunity at hand. We would hope that they would be able to reinforce the opportunity in a positive way with positive comments to elevate it above the special interests and politics," she says.

In July, at a series of public hearings, Copley Wolff unveiled three preliminary design proposals — Harbor Square, Harbor Promenade and Harbor Crescent. They included tree-lined walkways running north and south with varying combinations of architectural features including a fountain and wading pool, skating rink, cafes, a small maze, wind turbine sculptures, lawns and a 40-foot-high canopy of fiber-optic lights.

Copley says that sometimes it has been difficult to determine where some of the criticisms on their designs are coming from. "I think that sometimes people are taking their frustrations with the process out on the proposed designs," he says.

Wolff agrees: "Large, open meetings don't give everybody a chance to be heard, so they get frustrated and take that out on the designs."

To that end, more meetings have been scheduled with individual constituencies to supplement the large monthly meetings.

The planning process for both the North End and Chinatown parks is reportedly going much smoother, because the projects are smaller, have fewer neighbors and therefore are less demanding. The Wharf District Park, on the other hand, is more complicated, involving four parcels that need to connect a variety of social, cultural, business and historic elements. Of the \$31 million budgeted for



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John Copley and Lynn Wolff of Copley Wolff Design Group stand by the Public Garden's landmark Frog Pond, which their firm recently renovated. These days, Copley Wolff is at the center of the design process for the closely watched Wharf District section of the Rose Kennedy Greenway, which is replacing the elevated Central Artery.

the greenway, the Wharf District Park is expected to cost roughly \$14 million.

"The Wharf District is the most difficult to design. It has such a complicated cast of characters that are weighing in on what should happen there," says Cynthia Smith, past president of the Boston Society of Landscape Architects.

Turnpike Authority chairman Matthew J. Amorello agrees, noting that the Wharf District area comprises the waterfront, the Financial District, Faneuil Hall and the New England Aquarium.

Amorello says he is happy so far with the design work on the project and has confidence in both EDAW and Copley Wolff.

"EDAW is a world-class firm. ... And Copley Wolff has been engaged in some wonderful local projects," Amorello notes. "The selection process was very competitive, and we have a good team in place."

Copley Wolff and EDAW will present a final design concept for the Wharf District on Oct. 16.

Meanwhile, both Copley and Wolff say they hope this project takes their firm to a higher level and will enable them to bid on larger contracts in other cities. "It will show an experience level that will be good for marketing," Copley says.

However, they emphasize that the project also means much to them personally and emotionally.

"It's all-consuming," says Wolff. "We're thinking about it 24 hours a day."