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Who Owns the Rose Kennedy Greenway?

Boston's attempt to find "common ground."

By **Alex Ulam**

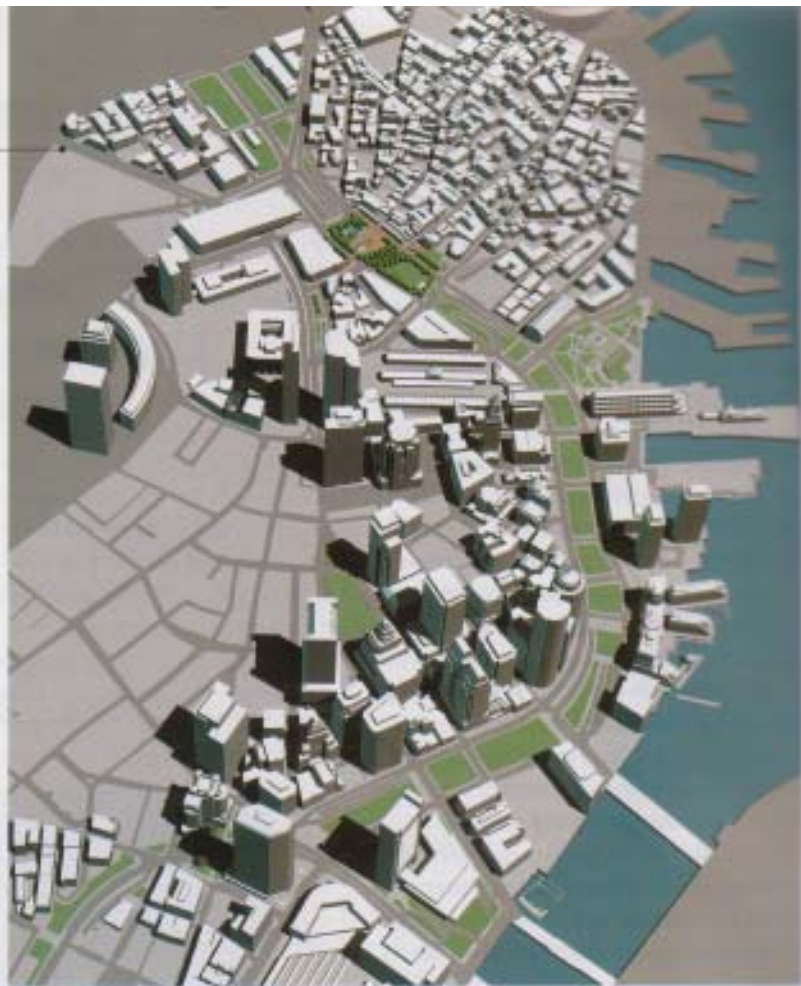
ON THE COVER Catherine Widgery's tree sculptures grace a Denver plaza designed by landscape architects at Civitas, Inc. Photograph by Eric Stephenson.

Critic at large

Designers getting ready to design the Rose Kennedy Greenway above Boston's Big Dig face a daunting challenge. It is among the nation's most emotionally scarred properties. In the 1950s, the "Green Snake," an immense elevated section of I-93, was forced through downtown Boston, swallowing a huge chunk of real estate. More than 20,000 people lost their homes, and much of the city was cut off from its waterfront.

Thanks to the Big Dig, which has ballooned into the country's largest public works project, the Green Snake will finally be torn down sometime in 2005, and I-93 will be buried in a high-tech tunnel. But the Big Dig itself has become a controversial project. Since the early 1990s, it has transformed much of downtown Boston into a construction zone; it is seven years behind schedule and about \$9 billion over budget.

The soon-to-be built greenway should be Boston's reward for enduring the disruptive effects of both the Big Dig and the Green Snake. Politicians and planners have described the greenway as a place of "heal-



Who Owns the Rose Kennedy Greenway?

Boston's attempt to find "common ground." BY ALEX ULAM

ing" and "reconnecting." And the site is supposed to accomplish everything from memorializing lost ethnic neighborhoods to revitalizing downtown and providing public parks.

But now, as the Big Dig nears completion, Bostonians cannot even agree on words to describe what is supposed to be taking place on the greenway, an oversized median strip more than a mile long, which will be sliced by city streets into 23 separate lots. "Calling it the Rose Kennedy Greenway is an abomination," says Christopher Fincham, vice president of the *Boston Informer*, a newsletter devoted to Boston's infrastructure. "It's going to be a shock when it comes through," Fincham says. "People are looking for big parks, but these are small patches of green."

Under state law, 75 percent of the 30 acres was supposed to be preserved as "open space." A January 2001 *Landscape Architecture* article explored the burgeoning debate over what was actually meant by the term "open space." Since then, the conflict over how the greenway should be designed and who should ultimately control it has ignited a political firestorm that has implications for several prominent landscape architecture firms.

This past fall, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, the state agency charged with developing the greenway's 30 acres, hosted



Many maps of the soon-to-be-built Rose Kennedy Greenway emphasize the color green. But plans call for only eight to nine acres to be developed as parks. Sidewalks, mixed-use developments, building frontages, and three extremely large greenhouses will comprise the rest of the 30 acres, top. The "Green Snake," a physical and visual barrier that currently cuts off downtown Boston from much of its waterfront, is shown above.

two separate qualifying competitions for different segments of the park parcels, which, as it turns out, will constitute only eight to nine acres of the greenway. The rest of the open space is being counted as sidewalks and, on several parcels, greenhouses operated by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society. The winners of the parks' competitions, EDAW for the (Continued on Page 114)

(Continued from Page 116) segment in Boston's Wharf District, and the Wallace Floyd Design Group for the North End parks, were announced late last year. The winning firms actually could begin designing sometime early this year—that is, if the whole design process doesn't derail.

While there are plenty of grand ideas for the parks, as well as a \$31-million design and construction budget, no agency has been identified and no money has been found to maintain them once they are built. Many say that these critical questions have to be answered before the design process can begin. "What hasn't been addressed is who maintains the parks," says Hubert Murray, an architect who is a consultant to the Artery Business Committee, a prominent association of neighboring businesses. "It has been proven in parks all over the world that you need a high level of maintenance to keep a public space from deteriorating into delinquency and desolation," Murray says. Further, he maintains that without more of an inclusive discussion involving the city's different communities and neighborhoods, it is unclear what kinds of parks Boston really wants.

Adding to the confusion is an effort by city officials and state legislators to strip the Turnpike Authority of its role overseeing the greenway's development. "If the process were different and we could be involved in it more intimately now—it would be less painful later," says Mark Maloney, director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA). Maloney lambasts the Turnpike Authority for being secretive and says that his agency (BRA) does not have an adequate role in the design process. Late last year, he was in the process of developing legislation that would create a special trust to both oversee the parks' design and take charge of their management once they are built. "It's preferable and it's possible" that the Turnpike Authority will be relieved of its role in the design process, says Maloney.

Fred Yalouris, manager of Architecture and Urban Design for the Turnpike Authority, defends his agency against a chorus of criticism that it hasn't conducted a thorough enough public discussion about the parks. Yalouris says that with the impending completion of the Big Dig, the Au-

thority had to take action. "There isn't any time to sit around fiddling with the design process," he says, adding that a management structure and a maintenance budget for the parks can be worked out at a later date. Further, Yalouris says that because of the many stakeholders involved, including the state, the city, the business community, the environmental community, and neighbors, he doesn't think "that any single group will get what they want."

But many say that Yalouris's agency has neither adequate money nor the expertise to properly build the high-quality activity-packed parks that Boston has been promised. "Would you have the Turnpike Authority as the responsible agency for revitalizing the Boston Common?" says Jerold Kayden, associate professor of urban planning at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. "They are not parks

"They are not parks people; you shouldn't have a highway agency responsible for design."

people; you shouldn't have a highway agency responsible for design."

The Turnpike Authority's \$31-million parks budget isn't enough to build amenities such as the civic and cultural facilities that were envisioned in a 2001 master plan for the greenway, says Richard Dimino, president of the Artery Business Committee. "Initial efforts to do an estimate coming out of the master plan—we were looking at numbers closer to \$45–\$50 million just to construct," says Dimino, who was a member of the 2001 master plan committee. He maintains that the Turnpike Authority's current budget will only allow a "slightly better than modest landscape approach to the open spaces."

Mayoral appointees charged with studying the greenway's development also envision the parks as regional destinations loaded with attractions, but they say that they too are concerned about funding. "It is going to cost a lot of money to maintain the eight acres of open space, because to make it really work you have to program it," says Robert Tuchman, cochair of the mayor's Central Artery Completion Task Force. "That means having a skateboard competition, an organized model sailing boat competition,

and bringing children to the site to understand the history that went on there."

Given the questions about the adequacy of the Turnpike Authority's parks budget, there has been much discussion about private-sector investment in construction, park programming, and maintenance. The Artery Business Committee has hired its own group of designers, and it is ready to help rescue cash-strapped state and city agencies with ideas about financing and maintenance. "The private sector has to be involved to make this viable," says Dimino, who wants to see the parks developed with cultural and civic activities to enliven them after dark and during inclement weather. If the parks are just left with landscaping, Dimino says, "the possibility exists that the space will become unpopulated and underutilized, and we will have lost the opportunity to create a common ground, a destination, and the opportunity to stitch the city back together again."

Many have mixed feelings about private-sector involvement. "I hope that there are some really creative people and smart people with deep pockets," says Cynthia Smith, former president of the Boston Society of Landscape Architects, who also participated in the 2001 master plan process. But Smith cautions about making compromises. "I think that we [landscape architects] have to be sophisticated and engage in a dialogue with city builders and architects and business people to find out what the trade-offs are," she says, adding that it is important that there are safeguards to protect the public interest.

Efforts to establish an independent governing body for the greenway have not been reassuring to community activists, who are concerned that the parks' public aspect could be compromised by "pay-to-play" activities. Last summer, state legislators attempted to put a special trust in control of the design process. The proposed legislation quickly wilted amid charges that it would create a politically unaccountable patronage mill.

The legislation would have in effect privatized the parks, says Shirley Kressel, vice president of the Alliance of Boston Neighborhoods, noting that it would have given the trust the authority to control access, as well as disallowing the right of public assembly. Kressel, who is a professional landscape architect, is suspicious of new attempts to establish a trust. "If the trust

did this, it would be a gated community," she says. "We want to be sure that there's a public character.... It's not about a place where everyone wants to go, but a place where anyone can go—because it's public."

Another controversial aspect of that proposed legislation was that the trust would have been in charge of a special tax assessment district that would have included both the greenway's development parcels and the parks.

But some say that the private sector can play a pivotal role without ceding public control. "We cannot have a place controlled by a private security firm—that is inherently undemocratic—but this doesn't preclude working within the current structure for a betterment district," says Murnay.

Still, for the Rose Kennedy Greenway to be a successful civic space, landscape architects are going to have to look beyond the design requirements of whatever particular agency or trust they end up working for, Murnay says. "Public design is a political process, and the profession has distanced itself from politics of any description except the pragmatics of political wheeling and dealing," he says, noting that frequently the profession is too focused on simply doing the job in the most expedient manner. "The result is that we frequently have a public space that is either dominated by arrogance or by a public architecture that is dumbed down," he says.

Civic engagement aside, at least until a political process more inclusive of Boston's powerbrokers is worked out, designers for the Rose Kennedy Greenway could be making frequent trips back to their drawing tables. "At some point they are going to need to get a permit from this agency—they are going to have to pass design review," says Maloney of the BRA. "I don't like to be in the position where I only critique a design. I'd rather be part of the process to have it designed right. But if push comes to shove and all that we have to say about this is what we think of the end result before we permit it, we will do that. And we will hold the designers and Turnpike Authority to a very high standard, as I think everyone would expect us to." LA

Alex Ulam is a freelance journalist who writes frequently on architecture and design for publications such as Metropolis magazine, Wired magazine, The National Post of Canada, and The New York Observer.

Looking forward to the March issue of *Landscape Architecture*... which features:

Icons Revisited

In the first in a series of "Icons Revisited," we take a look at the Mill Creek Earthworks project in Kent, Washington, which was designed by Herbert Bayer in the 1980s.

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Milwaukee
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We welcome your ideas and thoughts for future issues.

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