

Another Shade of Green

Clever metaphors aim at providing instant glimpses of the absurd and tragic ways in which we live ordinary life. We say the "color of money" and we think big and green, or we say "green with envy" and we remember defeat and how our complexions faded to a sickly hue. City and state planners may have been influenced by similar visions when, in 1909, they proposed what seemed like a cutting-edge idea: a green elevated highway that would resolve the traffic congestion that clogged the heart of Boston. The overhead roadway, the Central Artery, was conceived together with the Inner Belt. The 1.5-mile-long Artery would carry traffic through the city, collecting and depositing cars at 27 different on- and off-ramps throughout downtown. The Inner Belt would wrap around downtown, cross the Charles River, and loop back to Charlestown. Traffic congestion would become a thing of the past.

In 1948, a master plan by the Massachusetts Department of Public Works (MDPW) and later the Massachusetts Highway Department finalized the design

for the two roadways, and construction ensued. Although the central superstructure would slash through neighborhoods and urban districts, this dissection was not properly considered until after the project's partial completion in 1954, when Boston was left sorely fractured. Bulfinch's nineteenth-century street layout and commercial district, the perfect Bulfinch Triangle, was broken off from its apex at Haymarket Square. The new elevated highway imposed itself at the Italian North End's front door and slammed it shut, isolating the neighborhood from its contextual city. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Faneuil Hall, Quincy Market, and Custom House were severed from the historic neighborhoods over which they had once presided. The Wharf was no longer perceptible despite Boston's shoreline, and the Financial Center's nucleus had been exploded. It was only at this time that the ingenious "in-the-sky super-highway" was deemed responsible for the irreparable destruction that was taking place. Plans for the Inner Belt were abandoned soon after.

What had begun as a dream for a transit and urban-design plan for Boston had turned into a nightmare. By 1959, regional traffic, which was supposed to travel around Boston via the unrealized Inner Belt, instead passed over the new Central Artery. The traffic flow had not been resolved. Instead it was compounded with high car volumes. As many as 75,000 vehicles passed through the downtown daily on an elevated highway that was originally designed to inner-city standards.

By 1982, the traffic load had grown from 75,000 to 190,000 vehicles a day, and the Artery had grown physically and culturally more oppressive than ever before. Just imagine, the greatest "green monster" in Boston, 30 feet up in the sky, emitting toxins and obstructing everything in reach or in view. Below it, nothing but dark shade, an inert swath where pedestrians stumbled through their exhausted and ruptured city. Thank heavens the City of Boston set the wheels in motion again and began planning for another new and improved transit plan! The idea to sink the Central Artery below ground surfaced along with a third Harbor tunnel from South Boston to Logan Airport and two new connector bridges. The new highway problem became known as the Central Artery/Tunnel Project.

The Massachusetts and federal environmental agencies, in conjunction with MDPW and the City of Boston, agreed to a land ratio of 75 percent open space, 25 percent developable space along the corridor and incorporated this into the project's legal environmental

commitments. The proportions of open to buildable areas were derived from preliminary tunnel load analyses that avoided highly engineered or costly strengthening solutions and from clean-air-rights standards set for the City as a whole. Boston zoning codes were also drafted, specifying allowable densities, heights, and uses for the resulting surface parcels, 27 acres in total. In 1987, after several years of environmental impact reports and viable solutions, Congress finally approved the Central Artery/Tunnel Project's \$5-billion funding for a project that would take eight years to complete. Boston must have heaved a great sigh of relief.

The Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), the Boston Society of Architects (BSA), and renowned urban designers and landscape architects offered conceptual ideas and design guidelines for the Central Artery/Tunnel's surface plan. Consistently, the plans considered the Artery as a coherent site, while addressing the distinct character and needs of the various neighborhoods and districts it touched. Scale, public amenities and open spaces, reconnections to historical street patterns and architecture, and a reencounter with the waterfront came to the fore. Plans ranged from a "green boulevard" aligned by an intentional urban and civic experience to denser schemes that exceeded the 75 percent/25 percent agreement and proposed alternating city squares with commercial and retail spaces or public housing and public amenities. At this point, the base recommendations for tunnel loads initially provided by

For decades the Central Artery separated downtown Boston from the North End.



the City's engineers and MDPW were challenged in order to provide sounder urban-design solutions and a more livable city.

To follow up, Mayor Flynn's Boston 2000 Plan for the Central Artery was issued in 1991. As the outcome of a community and consensus process, the plan stipulated the new vision for Boston's surface once the Artery has been pounded below the ground. The wishes of the people who lived and played here were considered paramount. The concerns of community, culture, commerce, family life, and society as a whole were finally presented as part of the core agenda. The economic vitality of downtown; the quality and character of open spaces, streets, and buildings; and the notion that this renewal is for all who have lived here to equally share "socially, politically and culturally" became the new founding principles by which planners, architects, landscape architects, and artists would propose new urban-design ideas for Boston's future.

In keeping with the environmental acts, zoning codes, and the Boston 2000 Plan, the City has gone through yet another public planning exercise. In 2000, the Boston Central Artery Corridor Master Plan was completed with the expert advice of designers and constituency groups such as the BRA, the Artery Business Committee (ABC), the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority (MTA), the project's local sponsor, and Mayor Menino's Central Artery Completion Task Force. The master plan retains the 75 percent/ 25 percent ratio and establishes further design guidelines along

the corridor. Such elements as "passive or active uses, circulation, planting, paving, water, lighting, and art," to mention a few, are specified per individual parcel. Three major neighborhoods and districts along the Corridor have been addressed: the North End, the Wharf, and the Chinatown and Leather districts. Yet how these new sites and program uses will coincide with the routine lifestyles of people living here is still not clearly felt. Simplistic park solutions cannot take the place of entire communities that have been displaced over and over again.

Today the North End is riddled with tunnel entry and exit points and ventilation buildings. Residents object to being surrounded by either tunnel-ramp wastelands or mediocre retail and development solutions and are petitioning for affordable housing and a community center instead. Realistically, no developer will fund capping the ramps for a public project in place of high-end condos or a hotel. As appeasement for the poor planning, the community is being allotted three acres of open space for a new neighborhood park—a pretty place to call its own, to lessen the pain and ease the blow. In the Wharf District, white-collar residents have advocated for an urban arboretum on their ramp parcel, but in exchange for this benefit they are being bombarded with a plan for a full-blown tourist attraction complete with water works and carousels. In Chinatown, the land being returned to the residents is a mere sliver; more open space and housing are desperately needed. A large portion of the community does not speak Eng-

lish and cannot be heard. As with any public process, the bureaucracies involved set the tone for the problem within given political and economic constraints while doing their best to listen to the pleas of the public. The process has been arduous for everyone.

Eleven years after the project's groundbreaking—after 13-million cubic yards of soil have been moved and \$14.6 billion spent—Boston is begging to feel change. The Ted Williams Tunnel and the Leverett Circle Bridge have been constructed, and now the world's widest cable-stayed bridge—Boston's new northern gateway, the Zakim Bunker Hill Bridge—is nearing completion. The new sunken expressway will be finished by 2004 and the elevated Central Artery will finally be put down to rest. By 2006, pedestrians will stroll freely along the new open-space corridor.

While we may never know to what degree the inspirations for Boston's physical and social transformations over the years have been metaphorical, ideological, and political in origin, we are faced with outcomes that are real. The City's planning hardships

continue, and the issues among the project's leaders, designers, and the community remain incongruent. A great amount of money, time, and energy has been expended on the debate over Boston's new face. And although this process might send our minds into thinking the grass is always greener elsewhere, ultimately our human nature longs for the grass to be green right here, at home. As part of an urban-design and social problem that is likely to present itself only once in our lifetime, the Central Artery project confronts us with the responsibility to wisely sow the seeds of change as well as a tremendous opportunity to create a "living green" right in our own frontyard. ■

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CORRECTION: Two photo credits were omitted in Issue 11. The photograph of Ann Mullins and Mark Johnson on Page 42 is by Paul Abdoo of Denver, and Michael Shopenn of Denver is responsible for all of the photographs of Commons Park.

Construction begins.

