Introduction

Suspended above the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway in 2015, Janet Echelman’s aerial sculpture entitled *As If It Were Already Here* celebrated the establishment of the park—using over 100 miles of twine to “knit together the fabric of the city with art.”¹ Jesse Brackenbury, the executive director of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, celebrated the public art piece as “an abstraction of the landscape’s transition from freeway to greenway,” alluding to the space’s treacherous journey to become the public realm that it is today.² Six bands of colored rope referenced the six lanes of I-93 which were buried during the massive Big Dig project to reduce congestion, reconnect the downtown with the harbor, and create a green space in the heart of Boston. Echelman’s work tangibly represented interconnectedness by linking skyscrapers with knotted twine in a fluid design that reflected the relationship between the city and its environment.³

Urban parks, such as the Greenway, capitalize on such interconnectedness—bringing people closer to nature and to each other by fostering social interaction. Landscape architects incorporated community needs into their plans for the Greenway and, today, the park’s eponymous non-profit organization ensures that the space remains an engaging part of the city.

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¹ Janet Echelman, “As If It Were Already Here, Boston, MA,” 2015; see Image A in Appendix.
³ Echelman, “As If It Were Already Here.”
While natural spaces are of immeasurable emotional importance, the Greenway has also enhanced the monetary value of neighboring properties and has attracted millions of visitors, including myself, to enjoy one of Boston’s newest treasures. The welcoming nature of the Greenway makes the park one of my favorite places to visit. During lunch hour, professionals flock to food trucks on the Greenway to enjoy their break in the calm, green oasis. On clear evenings, I have conversed with strangers while taking in the illuminated skyline from the North End swings, feeling as if I was sharing a patio with the city. The Rose Kennedy Greenway has transformed Boston’s natural and built environment to create a new public realm, connecting the physical geography of the city and, even more importantly, fostering the unification of its community.

**Urban Parks and the Public Realm**

The public realm, especially in the form of well-designed urban parks, is essential for enhancing a sense of community. Activist Jane Jacobs recognized the importance of civic spaces in her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs argued that parks and cities enjoy a reciprocal relationship; just as parks enhance the wellbeing of “deprived” residents, the parks themselves are “deprived places that need the boon of life...conferred on them.”\(^4\) By providing residents with a location in which they can deliberately and coincidentally interact with others, cities give residents an opportunity to populate open spaces—allowing parks to “give back grace and delight to their neighborhoods instead of vacuity.”\(^5\)

Architecture critic, Sarah Williams Goldhagen, built upon Jacobs’ support for intentional public realms in her opinion piece “Park Here—” celebrating the “great urban park” as the

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\(^5\) *Ibid*, 111.
hallmark of a successful democracy. By eliminating socioeconomic barriers to entry and encouraging social interaction, Goldhagen argued that open spaces are “the public realms of our future,” so long as they are properly designed to suit the needs of their communities. Parks must have a greater purpose than simple beautification; green spaces that have successfully achieved a balance between built and natural environments provide visitors with a “transformative personal experience” which differs based on the user’s needs and interests.

Boston’s historic dedication to public spaces makes the city a fascinating case study in which to analyze the influence of urban parks. Landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, pioneered the concept of “urban wilderness” in which he built artificial, yet seemingly natural landscapes to make nature accessible to those who could not afford to visit the national parks of the West. Olmsted bridged the gap between city and country by constructing the Emerald Necklace to connect the Public Garden to Franklin Park in the 19th century—creating “lungs for the city.” In order to understand the reciprocal relationship between natural spaces and cities that Jacobs highlights, Professor Anne Whiston Spirn focused on “demystifying the construction of these extraordinary places” and reflecting on how we promote our own values by intervening in natural spaces. Olmsted’s parks exemplify our desire to “improve” nature by manipulating it to fit our needs. Spirn argued that the Emerald Necklace was constructed not only to beautify the city but also to improve accessibility to nature and provide a space for social interaction.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
11 Spirn, 112.
“Fueling the Boom:” The Construction of the Elevated Central Artery

Boston, however, has often prioritized investment in infrastructure over establishing natural spaces. In 1958, automobiles transported 57% of the 500,000 people who travelled through the city each day—congesting highways and jeopardizing the future of public transportation.12 A growing dependence on cars was not limited to Boston; the comfort, convenience, and freedom associated with owning a personal method of transportation sparked a nationwide automobile craze. In 1958, nearly 60 million automobiles were privately owned in the United States, a 166% increase from just 30 years earlier, in 1928.13 Christopher Wells examined the trend in his article, “Fueling the Boom,” arguing that federal policies aimed at collecting gas-taxes as well as innovative urban planning tactics “reconfigured the American environment by funding the growth of a vast automotive infrastructure.”14 The reconfiguration of highways in the 1950s, especially in cities, addressed the need for more efficient roadways.

Increased congestion prompted the Boston City Planning Board to develop plans for a state-of-the-art elevated highway in the early 1920s that would redirect traffic by soaring through downtown.15 Heralded as “Boston’s $110,000,000 Highway in the Skies,” the Central Artery allowed 75,000 vehicles to travel along I-93 each day.16 On opening day in 1959, writers for the *Boston Globe* reported saving 10-35 minutes on their commutes, encountering empty lanes

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where there once was bottleneck traffic.\textsuperscript{17} The reporters, and many other drivers, celebrated the expressway as “a big, new, main street” that would usher Boston into “an era of communal growth and prosperity” by streamlining travel through the city.\textsuperscript{18}

Communities that were disproportionately affected by construction, however, did not share the same enthusiasm for the elevated Central Artery. The roadway carved an ugly, concrete swath through one of the United States’ most historic cities, severing the downtown from the waterfront and demolishing thousands of businesses and homes along the way.\textsuperscript{19} The project that promised to transport Boston into the modern age destroyed centuries of history and displaced 20,000 residents.\textsuperscript{20} Former Secretary of Transportation Fred Salvucci later lamented the construction of the elevated highway as a defeatist decision that sacrificed historic treasures for the sake of shorter commutes.\textsuperscript{21} Salvucci’s own Italian grandmother was displaced during construction of the Massachusetts Turnpike, receiving $1 and one month in which to “move seven decades of possessions and memories.”\textsuperscript{22} Her story was just one of thousands who were forced out of their homes for the sake of urban renewal. Salvucci found that immigrants who could not speak English were particularly defenseless “against this giant bureaucracy that came in and basically ripped through the neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{23} Upon hearing that over 100 homes and 900 businesses in their neighborhood were to be demolished, Italian North End residents mobilized in the “Committee to Save the North End of Boston” in 1950 to protest the destruction of their

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Lewis, 295; Leslie Jones, “Central Artery,” c.a. 1956, Boston Public Library; see Image D in Appendix.
\textsuperscript{22} Lewis, 297.
\textsuperscript{23} Salvucci, 4
community. Historian Thomas O’Connor explained in his 1993 book, *Building a New Boston*, that community opposition was “too little and too late” and that by November 1950, 54 plots of land in the North End were cleared to make way for the highway. The failure of residents to stop the “highway in the skies” indicates that government officials and designers prioritized efficiency over integrity, excluding affected communities from the decision-making process.

The Big Dig: The Depression of the Central Artery

Dissatisfaction with the elevated Central Artery only grew with time. By the 1990s, over 200,000 vehicles travelled on the highway daily, causing 10-hour traffic delays and quadrupling the national accident rate, costing drivers $500 million a year. City planners, residents, and politicians, including Governor Michael Dukakis, agreed that the Central Artery had to go—but what to replace it with? Highway engineer Bill Reynolds and Fred Salvucci together proposed burying I-93 in an expanded tunnel network as early as 1982, an endeavor that became the most expensive highway project ever conducted in the United States.

Since the elevated Central Artery did not benefit from federal funding for interstate highways (as it was constructed before the program began in 1956), Salvucci pushed for the federal government to cover 90% of construction costs for the Big Dig. House Majority Leader Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill ultimately secured funding for the project by attaching it to the last

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27 Salvucci, 9; Anthony Flint, “10 Years Later, Did the Big Dig Deliver?” *Boston Globe*, December 29, 2015; Albee, 53; see Image F in Appendix.
28 Lewis, 300.
authorization for interstate highways in 1987. Costs for the project were shared by federal and state governments, with $4.1 billion in federal funds and $650 million in state funds committed until the termination of the Interstate Construction Program in 1996.

Once funding was secured, the equally complex process of completing the project began. After his grandmother’s eviction, Salvucci vowed to protect every home from demolition and respected that residents knew their environment better than a detached politician or engineer ever could. Bechtel/Parsons Brinckerhoff was hired as a management consultant in 1986, monitoring the Massachusetts Highway Department and the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority’s contracts with 38 design consultants and 142 construction firms to ensure that the project remained true to Salvucci’s promise for an efficient transportation system that would not disrupt the fabric of the city. The Big Dig depressed 1.5 miles of I-93 from Kneeland Street to Causeway Street, reconnecting the downtown and waterfront while reducing congestion in the Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill Jr. tunnel. The elevated highway was demolished after the depressed section of I-93 North opened in March, 2003 and before I-93 South opened in December, 2003.

**Impacts of the Big Dig**

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29 *Ibid*, 301.
31 Lewis, 299.
Today, the Central Artery efficiently carries 536,000 vehicles each day.\(^{35}\) The *Boston Globe* found that it takes only three minutes to drive under downtown as opposed to 15 minutes in 1994, before the “Big Dig.”\(^ {36}\) The project cost over $14.86 billion yet Robert Albee, the Big Dig’s director of construction services, believed that the expense was reasonable since life in the city was barely impeded during 15 years of construction.\(^ {37}\) Despite debate over the price tag, the project had practical benefits for the city. With a 62% reduction in total vehicle hours, drivers save about $168 million each year due to reduced time and resource waste.\(^ {38}\) The Big Dig also had significant environmental benefits: depressing I-93 reduced volatile organic compound (VOC) emissions by 14% and carbon monoxide levels by 12%.\(^ {39}\)

While the physical transformation of Boston was a monumental feat, the unification of Boston’s vibrant neighborhoods—no longer separated by concrete and steel but joined by a new public space—may be the most rewarding result of the Big Dig. Anthony Flint, a fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, argued in an article in the *Boston Globe* that the project “was nothing short of transformational, opening up views...to the harbor, knitting the urban fabric back together..., and ushering in new cityscapes.”\(^ {40}\) Images from the Institute for Quality Communities support Flint’s claim by contrasting Boston’s landscape in 1938 versus 2013. While the elevated Central Artery does not appear in either picture, the swath of land that it once soared above

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\(^ {35}\) Flint, “10 Years Later, Did the Big Dig Deliver?”


\(^ {37}\) Albee, 40.


\(^ {40}\) Flint, “10 Years Later, Did the Big Dig Deliver?”
winds through downtown in 2013. The pictures tell a story of urban renewal that devastated historic neighborhoods but also of remediation through the unification of divided communities.

27 Acres of Potential: Community Input in the Designing of the Greenway

Once the highway was buried underground, the 27 acres of open space that remained were left vacant. The Central Artery Special District was established by Article 49 of the Boston Zoning Code in 1991 and was partitioned into eight park parcels under the purview of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, three parcels maintained by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, and 13 parcels modestly developed as real estate property.

The space under consideration was only a 1.5 mile strip of land, yet it held the potential to unite the city after nearly 50 years of separation. Public officials vowed to not repeat the mistakes of their predecessors who, in the words of former governor, Francis Sargent, “place[d] people below concrete” by ignoring community needs during the construction of the elevated Central Artery. This time, the government was ready to listen to the community, even if it ultimately had the authority to decide whose interests were most important.

After “years of headaches,” landscape architect Mark Hough argued that “people expected immediate gratification” and became invested in discussion regarding the future of those 27 acres. The Mayor’s Central Artery Completion Task Force, under co-chair Robert Tuchmann, was established to listen to residents’ opinions in biweekly meetings, giving locals an

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41 Shane Hampton, “60 Years of Urban Change: Northeast,” The Institute for Quality Communities, January 21, 2015; see Image G in Appendix.
43 Lewis, 298.
44 Hough, “The Big Sprig.”
opportunity to test their thoughts “in a sympathetic marketplace.” The Task Force also established neighborhood divisions to “ensure consistency of the parks.” Funded financial translation services helped those who spoke limited English, in the North End and Chinatown, to convey their opinions to the planners, thus making the design process more accessible. Officeholders and designers saw the future park as a way to unite community interests, and their efforts could only be successful if those community interests were respected and incorporated.

An interview with North End residents conducted in 1987 provided insight into the community’s vision for the space. Anticipating 10 years of construction (which, ultimately, became 20) one middle-aged woman believed that the “State should give something back to the North End” and suggested building affordable housing units to “keep some of the people my age here.” Preserving the cultural integrity of individual neighborhoods was a priority among some residents; others expressed a desire for more community parks, following the example of the South End which established “all the ingredients for one great big block party.” While the interview did not capture the opinions of all who would be affected by the decision to build a park, the general consensus seemed to favor a new green space as early as the 1980s.

Constructing a New Public Realm: The Building of the Greenway

The designers of certain parts of the Greenway successfully honored community needs while others succumbed to a top-down vision conveyed by public officials for the space. The

46 Ibid, 363.
47 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
park was divided into three sections located in Chinatown, the Wharf District, and the North End to be designed by three teams of designers which were hired in January 2003. Architecture critic Robert Campbell argued in a *Boston Globe* article that the Greenway should not be criticized for its disjointed composition but, rather, appreciated as “an instructive little anthology of three different design goals and three different attitudes toward public space in the City.” Hough agreed, remarking that the park “works best as a series of urban rooms” that reflect the characteristics of individual neighborhoods within the park’s collective theme of “home.” The Greenway’s final design maximized the potential of the small space by honoring the differences between distinct communities.

Chinatown Park most closely reflects the culture of the surrounding neighborhood, honoring the vibrant history of the Chinese community. Bill Taylor, a landscape architect for Carol R. Johnson Associates, consulted local residents as well as Turenscape, a firm in Beijing, to tangibly represent Chinese identity and share a narrative through his design. Taylor incorporated bamboo, red gates, and a serpentine fountain to add “authenticity” and reinforce a sense of identity that has been threatened by gentrification and urban renewal projects.

The North End Parks similarly benefited from near consensus among its Italian-American community in the design process as well as its prime geographic location near the Freedom Trail and other tourist attractions. Gustafson Guthrie Nichol and Crosby | Schlessinger | Smallridge

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52 Hough, “The Big Sprig.”
53 Ibid.
55 Hough, “The Big Sprig.”
firms designed the park as a “front porch” at the intersection between “home” and “city” to honor the residential nature of the North End through welcoming elements, most notably graceful swings.\textsuperscript{56} Plantings further created a welcoming and connected environment for visitors; red maple and honey locust trees mimicked the existing landscapes of the North End to organically blend the new and prior built environments through nature.\textsuperscript{57}

While the Chinatown and North End Parks reflect the values of their communities, the Wharf District section suffered from dissension during the planning stages which is evident in its inconsistent design. City officials envisioned a paved space—similar to City Hall—that could be used for concerts or other large events.\textsuperscript{58} The city’s vision contrasted with that of designers who believed that natural elements, such as trees and grass, were necessary to attract visitors to a welcoming public realm.\textsuperscript{59} Residents were further divided over their hopes for the park. After receiving $12.5 million to design the space in 2003, Copley Wolff Design Group held 133 public forums to gauge community needs.\textsuperscript{60} Designer Dennis Carmichael remarked that “it was the hardest consensus-building process” that he had participated in; neighborhood disagreement forced the designers to abandon elements, including many trees, that they believed would create an immersive natural experience.\textsuperscript{61} The resulting design reflects a lack of consensus: unassuming patches of grass and imposing “Light Blades” deprive the section of focus and direction. The Wharf District Parks lack the sense of harmony found in Chinatown and the North End but the

\textsuperscript{58} Hough, “The Big Sprig.”
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Graves, 3.
\textsuperscript{61} Hough, “The Big Sprig.”
space is still populated due to its proximity to office buildings and South Station. The geographic and cultural environments into which the Greenway was introduced influenced the design process, fostering frustration but also individuality among the different sections.

**Keeping the Park Alive: Management and Funding**

Upon completion of the three sections, the Greenway—named for philanthropist and North End-resident Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy—opened in October 2008 with the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, Inc. designated as its steward. The Conservancy is funded by public and private donors, receiving $750,000 from the Greenway Business Improvement District (BID) and $1,800,000 from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and earning $1,400,000 million from programming and $1,400,000 in donations in 2018.

The BID was established in 2018 as a stable funding plan to maintain the park amid tight state and city budgets, harnessing the wealth of nearby properties to ensure continuous funding for the park. Sixty-one owners of 50 properties that neighbor the Greenway and have an assessed value over $10 million—excluding non-profits and other exempt entities—must pay $.37 for each $1,000 of assessed value up to $200 million. Armando Carbonell, a fellow at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, supported the creation of the Greenway BID: “They’re capturing value from real estate and reinvesting it in something that’s good for the public.” The BID

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62 Shadley, “Rose F. Kennedy Greenway Overview;” see Image K in Appendix.
encourages collaboration between businesses, governments, and residents to invest in a public treasure.

**A Worthwhile Investment: The Financial Impact of the Greenway**

Boston’s parks are worth investing in: green spaces, including the Greenway, offer annual financial benefits in addition to beautification and community unification. About half of Boston’s parkland is occupied by trees which capture air pollution and stormwater runoff, saving the city an estimated $9 million.67 Free recreational activities held in parks save residents approximately $436 million by promoting physical and mental well-being.68 Parks also generate revenue by attracting tourists and raising the value of nearby properties. In Boston, residents gain $7 million from tourist sales in parks, while the value of properties within 500 feet of a green space has increased by $725 million.69 The Greenway alone has attracted $3 billion in development with the construction of condominiums, hotels, and office buildings along its edges.70 The economic benefits of the Greenway—and urban parks in Boston, more generally—are only additional ways in which green spaces contribute to their communities.

**An Emerging Public Realm**

While monetary gains are important for the economic vitality of the city, the experiences of those who have interacted with the park—and the public realm that it has established—reveal the most meaningful benefits of the Greenway. Amalie Kass, a Wellesley College alumna who

70 Hough, “The Big Sprig.”
funded the Greenway Carousel, declared that sharing the treasure with the children of Boston was “about the most fun I’ve had doing anything.”

The park is praised on TripAdvisor; one reviewer encouraged others to “Swing the day away!” while another recommended the park as the “perfect place for a picnic or coffee & a great book!” The Conservancy held 450 free events in 2018, attracting over 4,000 attendants to fitness classes, farmers’ markets, concerts, and galas, encouraging residents and tourists to engage with the public realm.

The Greenway has organically grown into both its physical and social environment. While programs held by the Conservancy are well-attended, the majority of visitors to the park encounter it while going about their daily lives. Each time that I visit the Greenway, I see the diverse range of visitors that Jacobs believed was essential for the development of a dynamic public realm: dog walkers strolling through the winding paths, college students chatting on their way to class, children running to the swings. Mary Soo Hoo Park—a simple collection of tables and chairs alongside the Chinatown Gate—exemplifies the impact that even a small gathering space of .082 acres can have on a community. Dozens of elderly men congregate to play Xiangqi, or “Chinese chess,” filling the air with the clicking of game pieces on the tabletops. This physical space in which a tradition can be incorporated in a new environment is a testament to the Greenway’s ability to integrate cultural identity into a green space.

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The Greenway functions less as a destination and more as a community space, weaving nature and culture into the city and the daily lives of its residents. However, its nearly seamless integration into Boston’s built environment reduces the recognition of the Greenway as a public realm by visitors or even locals. In my own experience, I have struggled to determine where the park begins and ends, and which piece of grass is part of the Greenway and which is attached to a neighboring property. Signs identify the park’s boundaries and educate visitors about public art projects, landscape design, and cultural elements yet the haphazard arrangement of the parks disorients visitors who search for a clearly-identifiable park. Other visitors share my confusion: Boston Globe reporter Noah Bierman, argued in 2008 that the new Greenway “has yet to establish an identity in Bostonians’ mental map” since it was just evolving as a new part of the city’s built and cultural environment. Bierman interviewed a tourist who asked where the Greenway was, only to find that “she was standing on it.”76

Due to financial and geographic constraints placed on the Greenway project, designers could not create a destination on par with Central or Millennium Parks. In fact, Anne Whiston Spirn argued in her 1984 book, The Granite Garden, that “incremental” alterations of an urban environment are “more adaptable to local needs and values” by respecting the unique identity of the existing environments.77 While the construction of the Greenway can hardly be considered to be a minor project, the placement of simple amenities, such as tables in Mary Soo Hoo Park or swings in the North End, reflect the needs of the community. The Greenway functions as a

welcoming and accessible public realm to the best of its ability, drawing members of the community to engage with nature in their daily lives.

**Conclusion: The Future of the Greenway**

After years of frustration, financial woes, and community dissension, Boston’s Rose Kennedy Greenway shines as the crown jewel of the Big Dig. The Greenway provides residents and tourists with an accessible open space that fosters a sense of community and belonging, uniting the city for the first time in decades. While the park has suffered its share of criticism, its evolution as a versatile and vibrant space becomes more and more apparent with each year as it grows to adapt to the needs of its users. Children playing in the fountains, couples sitting on the swings, professionals networking at galas—these stories all shape the narrative of the space that has shaped Boston’s social and physical environment. The Greenway has transformed the community’s perception of their city—replacing the elevated Central Artery in the minds of locals who experienced the Big Dig and giving young generations who do not remember the elevated highway a positive view of their environment. The Greenway celebrates the city’s triumph over division and unites the community in a welcoming public space.
Appendix

Image A: “As If It Were Already Here” Public Art Installation, 2015
Echelman, Janet. “As If It Were Already Here, Boston, MA.” 2015.

Image B: Plans for the Elevated Central Artery, early 1920s
Image C: Reduced Congestion Due to Elevated Central Artery, 1959
Image D: Devastation Caused by Elevated Central Artery
Image E: Congestion Before the Big Dig

Image F: Tunnel Network Built by the Big Dig
Image G: Boston in 1938 vs. 2013
Image H: The Greenway
Image I: Chinatown Park

Image J: The North End Parks
Image K: The Wharf District Parks

Image L: Mary Soo Hoo Park
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