

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

A Good Time for Cities

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5fx5d9dh>

### Journal

Places, 19(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Greenberg, Ken

### Publication Date

2007-08-15

Peer reviewed

# A Good Time for Cities

Ken Greenberg



*Editors Note: This article is adapted from a keynote presentation to the 2006 Mayors Institute on City Design West, held in Berkeley, California.*

The current state of play in terms of cities is, in many ways, auspicious. Great challenges remain—particularly fiscal imbalances—and certainly, these cannot be ignored. But it is important to recognize what an encouraging time this is, with considerable reinvestment occurring in city centers.

Several positive conditions underlie these circumstances. To begin, there is today a vast reservoir of strategically located obsolescent land in the hearts of our cities. This consists largely of disused former port, railway, waterfront and industrial properties. Significant strides in environmental cleanup are creating tremendous opportunities for growth and transformation using this land.

Demographic shifts are also underway. Urban households are diversifying, and immigration—from both surrounding areas and other countries—is bringing new life and energy to cities. The result is a partial reversal of the post-World War II urban exodus. It is also now widely

acknowledged that cities are generators of wealth, especially as the shift continues to a knowledge-based economy.

This renewed desire for city life has been coupled with something equally important—a better understanding of how cities actually work. In both professional and lay circles we have a better understanding of the role of different timeframes in the life of a city. And we have abandoned simplistic planning models based on the separation of uses, on mechanistic organization, and come to a more ecological understanding. That this view is now shared so broadly makes work on cities—city-building—inherently easier.

New resources and approaches to planning and urban design have emerged from these conditions. Design engagement is no longer seen as a cosmetic layer applied after the big decisions are made, but as fundamental problem-solving. At the intersection of economy, community and environment there is now a market for great integrating concepts about the city. This need goes beyond numbers and definitions to real appreciation for the city's physicality—for the qualities of space and place. This has in turn brought renewed public interest and confidence in the role of design.



One must add to this that planners and designers have gained a new appreciation for the strategic, action-oriented element of design decision-making. Plans can no longer be understood as static blueprints, as in previous decades; they must now be flexible, so that multiple parties can use them to make decisions over time.

Finally, it is widely acknowledged that quality of life is a key competitive asset. A new paradigm for urban economic development has replaced previous, exclusive concern for factor cost (land, labor, capital). The old emphasis produced a “beggar-thy-neighbor” spiral, which was a race to the bottom. Instead, many location decisions are today less about neighboring cities competing locally, as about cities competing worldwide. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that the most effective means of doing this is through the promise of a better quality of life.

In this new world, a key distinguishing factor among cities is the ability to put things together, to assemble elements in a timely, creative fashion. Value results from the ability of urban administrations to embrace, shape and manage change: to create viable places that address a range of objectives and needs.

Mayors can play a central role in this process. They can bring actors together, focus the issues, mobilize forces, decide the agenda, and articulate a vision. Given the timeframes involved, this must be a serial effort.

Success at city building inevitably requires a passing of the baton from one mayor to another, making great civic commitments in a sense nonpartisan. For this reason, the role of organizations outside electoral politics is also important. Such stewards of the public vision ensure that undertakings that really matter, typically measured in decades, can be sustained.

Numerous examples of outstanding partnerships illustrate these principles; however, the most effective occur when the public sector is able to clearly and forcefully

**Opposite:** Several decades ago people would have looked at this image of a street market uncomprehendingly. They would have seen this street space as somewhat shabby, needing to be “cleaned up.” They certainly would not have seen great value here. But through the work of such people as Jane Jacobs, William H. Whyte, and other great observers of cities and urban economies, we now understand how the mix, the overlap, the shared space, the flexibility, the organic growth that occurs in places like this are what cities are all about. This is where import replacement occurs. This is where incubation occurs. This, in fact, is the crucible of the urban economy. Photo of Baldwin Street in Kensington Market in Toronto by author.

**Above:** Ben Thompson’s 1992 watercolor “The Great River Park” set the stage for ongoing revitalization efforts in Saint Paul, Minnesota. These have included work by Bill Morrish and Catherine Brown of the University of Minnesota showing the hydrology of the river, and how the river actually touches every area of the city with its drainage patterns. Image courtesy of the Saint Paul Design Center.

articulate its goals. Currently, Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago has achieved well-deserved recognition for his efforts to promote green strategies. But every city has assets and the ability to achieve excellence in its own way.

I have been involved with several cities and their mayors over the years, and I'd like to use two examples to probe these issues more deeply.

### **Saint Paul: Rediscovering a River**

Saint Paul, Minnesota's capital, is located at the farthest navigable point on the Mississippi River. In the early 1990s it was hemorrhaging population and jobs and losing the sense of its own purpose in relation to its stronger twin, Minneapolis.

The effort to turn things around gathered momentum when Norm Coleman was elected mayor in 1993. Instead of seeing the city entirely in the present, he adopted a view of it as a dynamic, evolving organism. Looking to the past, this meant understanding how the city was founded on a dramatic setting defined by limestone bluffs above the Mississippi. It meant understanding the emergence of the barge fleets and industrial growth. But it also meant understanding how, in ecological terms, industrial St. Paul had climaxed in the 1950s.

As a result of this trajectory, virtually all traces of nature had been removed from the city, and its river edge had been thoroughly hardened. Closer to the present, other threats had also emerged, as the city's near neighborhoods fell victim to the highway network that surrounded it, and its office functions weakened and began to fail.

The turning point for Saint Paul came when Ben Thompson, a native son and well-known Boston architect, was called back to conduct an urban design study.

**Above:** Our study produced a series of diagrams to show how the center of the city could be reinhabited, with neighborhoods connected to each other, connected to an increasingly green river valley. The consolidation of these ideas and concepts became the broadly endorsed "St. Paul on the Mississippi Development Framework."

**Opposite left:** This bird's-eye image, produced in the 1990s, was evocative but deliberately vague in its details. As the transformation it anticipated is to a very large extent happening, it is being turned into something much more specific and real.

**Opposite right:** First Bank owned a drive-in branch on a critical triangular site in the heart of the city. They agreed to participate in developing it into a park (part of a green link to the river), and a competition was held for its design. The competition was won by the Olin Partnership, and today the site, known as Landmark Plaza, includes a street market in summer and a skating surface in winter.

Images courtesy of Saint Paul Design Center.



However, instead of producing a standard product, he made a single watercolor image, "The Great River Park." This took enormous liberties in imagining a verdant river valley running through the heart of the city.

Mayor Coleman took Thompson's foretelling of a radically different future as his inspiration. It was at this point that I became involved, working under the aegis of the Saint Paul Riverfront Corporation, a well-respected private nonprofit governed by a board of directors representing all sectors of city's diverse community, including business and government leaders.<sup>1</sup> One of our first steps was to begin a broad community outreach effort to define a set of core principles for renewal, which would underpin a vision of a city once again connected to its river.<sup>2</sup> These principles, with their specific local meanings, led to the "Saint Paul on the Mississippi Development Framework," the product of a three-year process involving thousands of people. The principles were as follows:

1. *Evoke a sense of place.*
2. *Restore and establish Saint Paul's urban ecology.*
3. *Invest in the public realm.*
4. *Broaden the mix of uses.*
5. *Improve connectivity.*
6. *Ensure that buildings support broader city building goals.*
7. *Build on existing strengths.*
8. *Preserve and enhance heritage resources.*
9. *Provide a balanced network for movement.*
10. *Foster public safety.*



Creating cities always involves building on what has come before—adding something, and then handing off to the next set of people to carry on. It is never a complete single operation; nor should it be. However, in our work in Saint Paul certain moments stand out.

One of the most significant initiatives related to the Framework emerged directly from Ben Thompson’s drawing. It involved a community effort to plant 35,000 new trees in the Mississippi River Valley. School kids participated, and companies gave employees time off, provided saplings, and helped people get into the valley to plant them. The sense of ownership produced by this initiative was extremely important.

Another important step was the establishment of the Saint Paul Design Center. With the full support of the mayor, this nonprofit agency created by the Riverfront Corporation became a place where city staff—landscape architects and architects in the Parks Department, Building Department officials, traffic engineers—could become directly involved in shaping the city. When not engaged in their full-time jobs, they could wear another hat as part-time employees of the Design Center, with staff support from outside city government. This was a place where design issues could be discussed outside formal channels, and where a lot of very crucial lateral thinking took place.<sup>3</sup>

If it is done well, urban design is a kind of flycatcher. As Jane Jacobs often said, “Great plans are plans that liberate other people’s plans.” They create an open-ended framework and an inspiration—not a complete end-state

vision. In St. Paul this overall vision has been based on establishing a new connection to the river. But over the years many other initiatives have also emerged: new downtown housing is being built; parks are being created; new public spaces are being designed—all by different people. There are also an increasing number of special seasonal events and opportunities to celebrate the city’s reuniting with its river.

I have now worked in Saint Paul with three successive mayors—Norm Coleman, Randy Kelly, and Chris Coleman—but this program has continued nonstop. As it has succeeded, new ambitions have emerged, but always pushing toward a city that is more urban and more green.

As the city has progressed financially, it has also been possible to raise the bar on design quality and promote new standards of sustainability. As a result, the city is now dedicating itself to an ambitious new effort: to go back to the original 1992 vision and literally remake the whole seventeen miles of its Mississippi riverfront, right to the border with Minneapolis, as a 3,500-acre Great River Park. This will combine city, federal, state and private land to create a centerpiece for the city. Mayor Chris Coleman, elected in November 2005, has taken up this challenge.

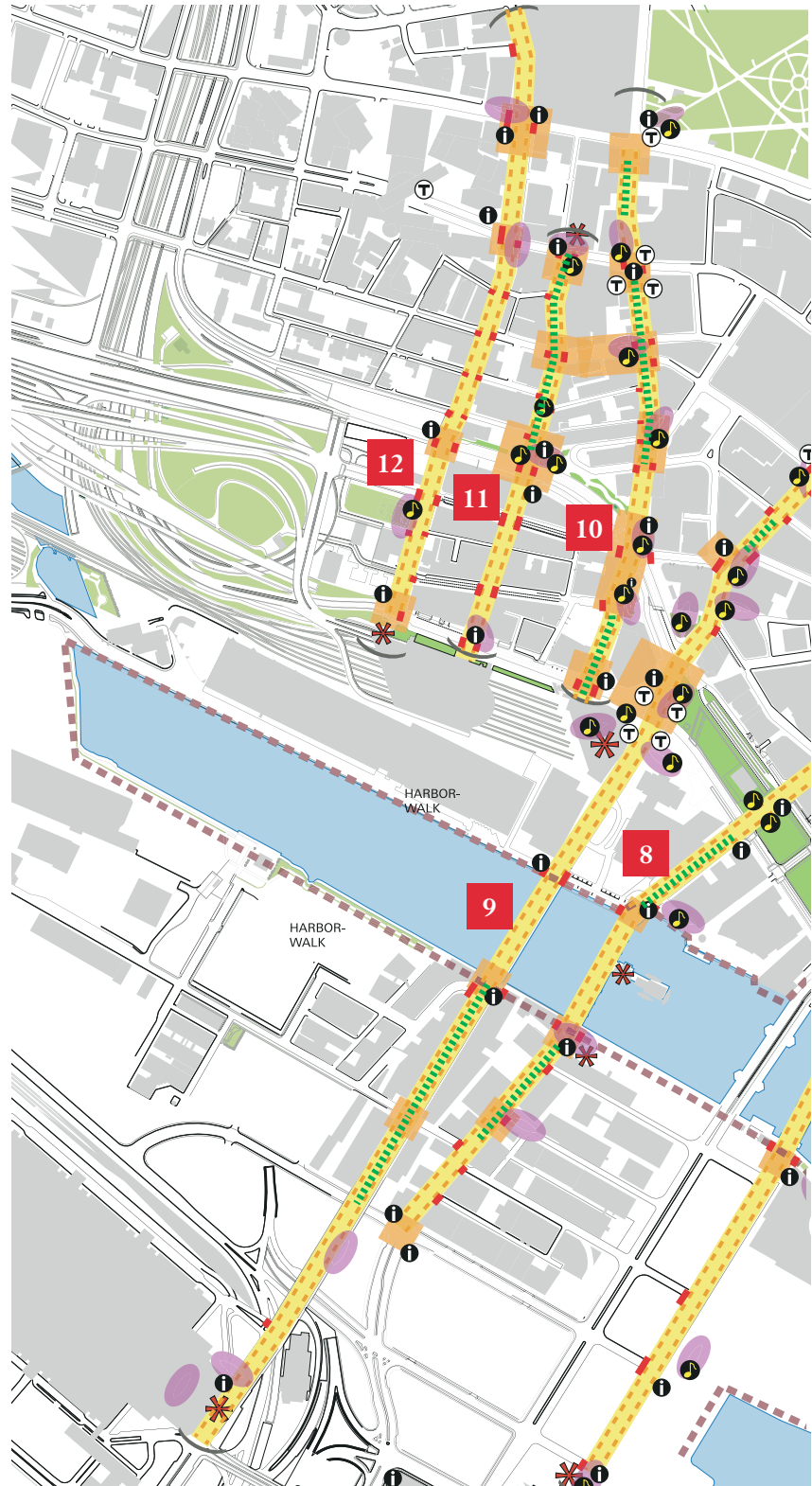
### **Boston: Expanding Common Ground**

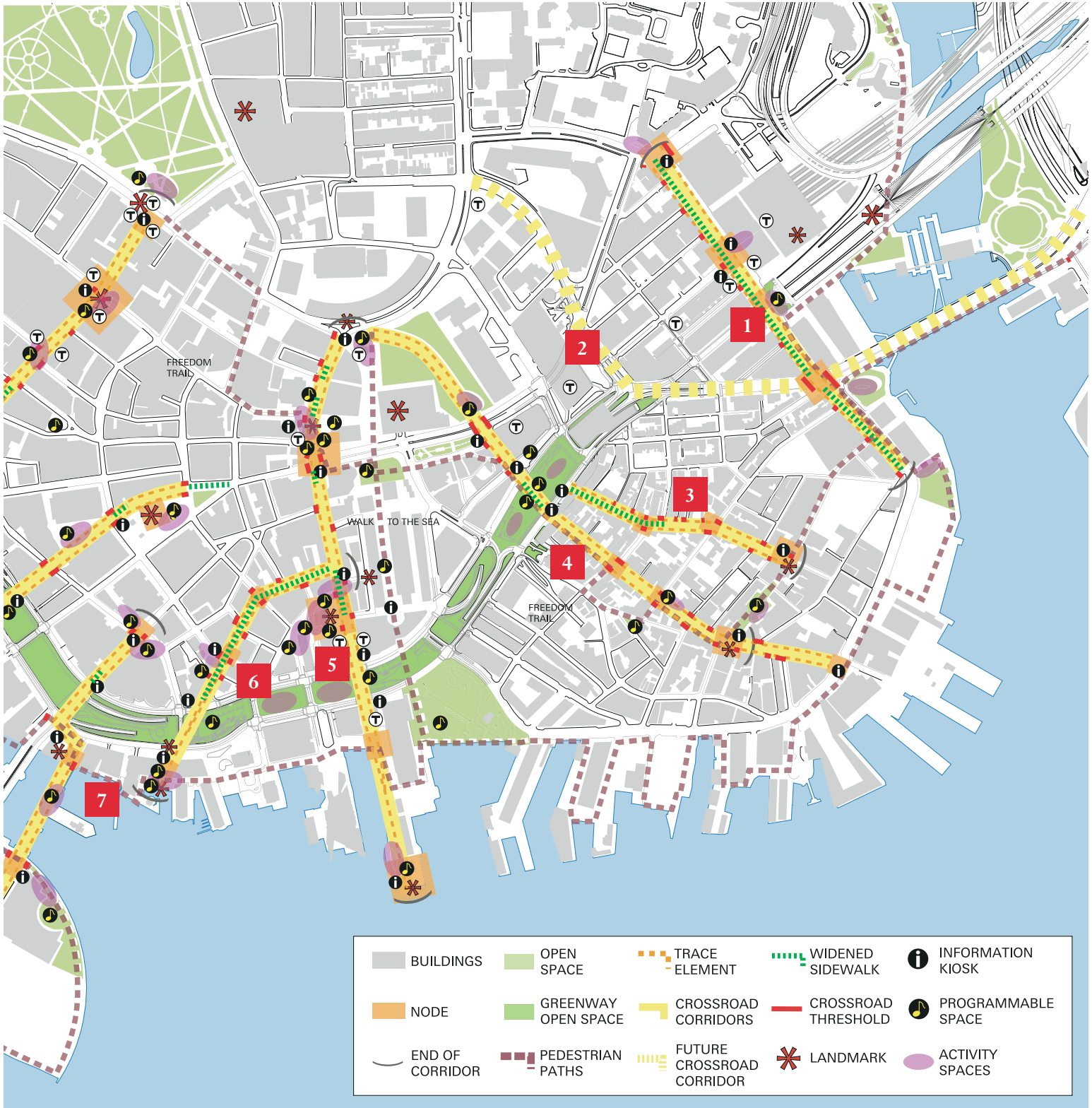
My second example involves work I have been involved in for several years with Boston’s mayor, Tom Menino. In an all-too-familiar scenario, an elevated highway, the Central Artery, was cut through the heart of Boston in 1950, devas-

## The New Boston Crossroads

1. Causeway Street transforms into a great pedestrian-oriented boulevard. It lives up to its Bulfinch Triangle heritage to become the anchor for a business and entertainment district linking two of Boston's great neighborhoods—the West End and the North End.
2. As new development emerges on former Central Artery lands, New Chardon and North Washington Streets form a vibrant connector between Charlestown, the Bulfinch Triangle, Government Center, and Beacon Hill. Activity and buildings which once shunned the Artery turn back toward the street: new housing and a grocery store re-create an edge along Washington Street, while buildings along New Chardon Street adapt ground-floor uses to attract passers-by.
- 3 and 4. As wayfinding and traffic improvements make it easier to access North End shops and restaurants, two principal streets there offer strong links across the Greenway between Government Center and the waterfront. Enhanced signage and improved conditions for pedestrians and vehicles along the narrower, winding Salem Street (3), a powerful reminder of Boston's beginnings and evolution, allow it to become a classic neighborhood street. Hanover Street (4) draws people from the "front porch" of the Greenway's North End Park to a newly activated and landscaped City Hall Plaza, where it continues as a major civic gathering place and pleasant walking route to a new Government Center MBTA station.
5. State Street is Boston's most frequently traveled downtown street, a place where the paths of workers, residents and tourists cross day and night, year round. As a Crossroads, it celebrates Boston's connection to the harbor and central position in the city over the centuries.
6. Broad Street becomes an active contemporary place at the center of the historic financial district, strengthening connections between State Street and harborside destinations.
7. The Oliver/Northern Avenue Crossroads serves as a corridor for significant new development. The historic Northern Avenue Bridge facilitates new connections across the Fort Point Channel between the Moakley Courthouse and the developing South Boston Waterfront, past the New Center for Arts and Culture, into the heart of the Financial District.
8. Congress Street becomes an inviting, pedestrian-friendly path linking South Boston to the Financial District, improving connections between important city destinations.
9. The Summer Street Crossroads makes the trip from Boston Common and Downtown Crossing to the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center (BCEC) a friendly and inviting experience for people traveling on foot, by transit, or by bicycle.
- 10, 11 and 12. The Crossroads Initiative improves the main streets of three neighborhoods: Chinatown, a revitalized Leather District, and the future South Bay mixed-use development. Renovations to Essex Street (10), Beach Street (11), and Kneeland Street (12) create a lively network of connections and activity, forming an exciting cultural gateway to downtown Boston.

Adapted from <http://www.cityofboston.gov/bra/crossroads/theStreetsFlash.htm>.







tating its inner neighborhoods. The complex and controversial undertaking to replace it, known as the Big Dig, has taken an enormous amount of time and effort, but it is hard to exaggerate how it has already changed the city.

Today the Rose Kennedy Greenway, the reclaimed artery footprint, is restoring east-west links that were disturbed by the elevated highway. But it is also creating north-south links that were never there before—from the Bullfinch Triangle down through Chinatown, and from the Leather District up through the North End. As a phenomenon, the result of tearing down the Artery has been similar to the removal of medieval city walls, which allowed new social and economic connections to form within the cities of Renaissance Europe.

When I started working with the staff at the BRA (Boston Redevelopment Authority), Mayor Menino asked a fundamental question: “As wonderful as it is, are we spending too much attention on the 1.3 miles of the Greenway itself? How can we make this enormous investment do more for the city?”

This was the genesis for what became known as the Crossroads Initiative. In essence, it was about building on the concentrated effort to restore twenty-seven acres of artery footprint to create a larger, interconnected web of perpendicular links: to the water, to adjoining neighborhoods, to other destinations. In a remarkably short time the mayor was asking me to accompany him on visits with civic and business groups to explain this notion. The idea was to forge a new common ground, to make new links between key places in the heart of the city.

Seeing how the needs and values of the city were changing, the mayor wanted to make a powerful statement about how the Big Dig could benefit surrounding neighborhoods. And to capture this commitment, we began to use the term “twenty-first-century streets” to describe the Crossroads.

The real estate industry immediately saw the potential of the various sites opened up by the removal of the Central Artery. Through the mayor’s office we realized we could help provide the glue to hold the pieces together.





Our notion emphasized pedestrian comfort and an invitation to take part in the city. This meant designing streets that would be flexible and lend themselves to different kinds of uses: streets that could turn into markets; that could convey information in both low-tech and high-tech ways; where buildings might open up seamlessly onto wide sidewalks; and where sustainability would be integral to all aspects of design.

Surprisingly, since its initial proposal, Crossroads has also become about portraying a contemporary image for Boston. A previous generation of urban designs had emphasized the city's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century past. Here was an opportunity to use street design and landscape architecture to add a fresh dimension to that image and create a public place for performing and visual art.

The potential to make a real difference through creative infrastructure design has also been immense—rebalancing the priority given to pedestrians, and enhancing the quality of the environment with innovative approaches to paving,

planting, lighting, improved crossings, cycle lanes, street furniture, and wayfinding.

The Crossroads program is now entering its implementation stage. Design work on an initial set of street segments has been initiated, and contracts are being let for the first phases of construction, scheduled to start in 2008. It is estimated that this effort will require seven to ten years to complete, and that roughly \$60 million will be needed to complete the redesign of the initial set of streets. But the program is also intended to be the springboard for another generation of streets to follow.<sup>4</sup>

The effort has so far engaged a number of key city departments and agencies, who are being encouraged to work together as part of an implementation team led by a project manager. The complexities of such an initiative are challenging. But the key so far has been a broad involvement by private- and public-sector partners. Mayor Menino's leadership has also proved invaluable.

Today it is clear there are many comparable opportunities in other cities. The challenge is to find catalytic projects that shift the focus to the whole and that produce unifying elements and integrated city-building.

#### Notes

1. For more on these and other activities by the foundation, see <http://www.riverfrontcorporation.com>.
2. The initial work in Saint Paul was done when I was a partner in Urban Strategies, Inc.
3. I served as the first interim director of this center. Other interim directors included the head of the city public works department and an official in the parks department. Under Riverfront Corporation CEO Patrick Seeb and its current director Tim Griffin, the Design Center continues to play a critical role in the city's evolution.
4. For more on the Crossroads Initiative, see <http://www.cityofboston.gov/bra/crossroads/indexFlash.htm>.

**Opposite:** A colossal feat of engineering, the Big Dig involves not only the well-publicized tunnel to replace the Central Artery, but also cleanup of the Charles River and Boston Harbor, a new subway line, and many connecting components. To find something of comparable scope and ambition one would have to look to the Space Shuttle program, the Tennessee Valley Authority, or Haussmann's nineteenth-century alterations of Paris. Photo courtesy of Boston Redevelopment Authority.

**Above:** We made a collage of all the development plans, public and private, by different groups, and discovered there wasn't one square inch of the territory we began to call the Greenway District that somebody hadn't laid claim to with a plan. Drawing courtesy of Boston Redevelopment Authority.