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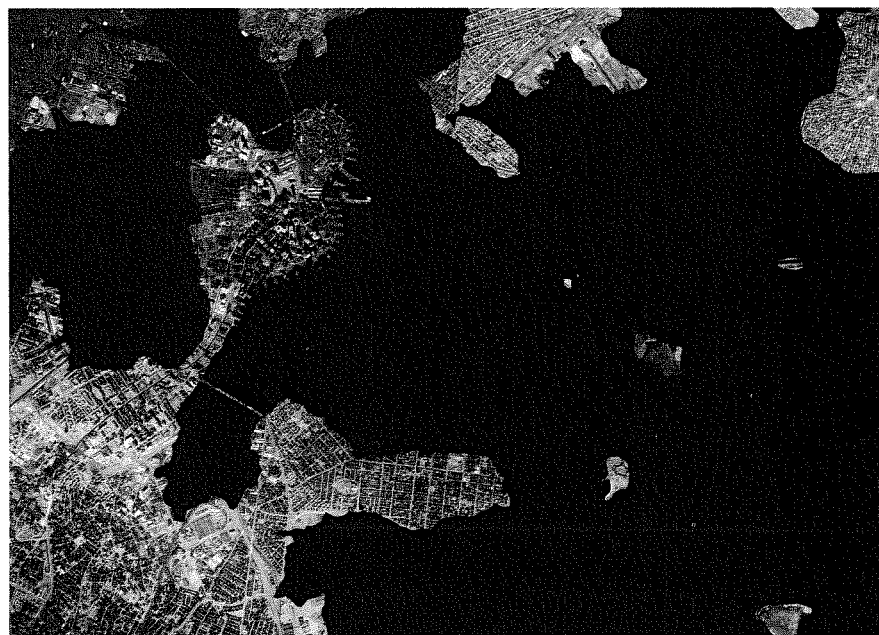
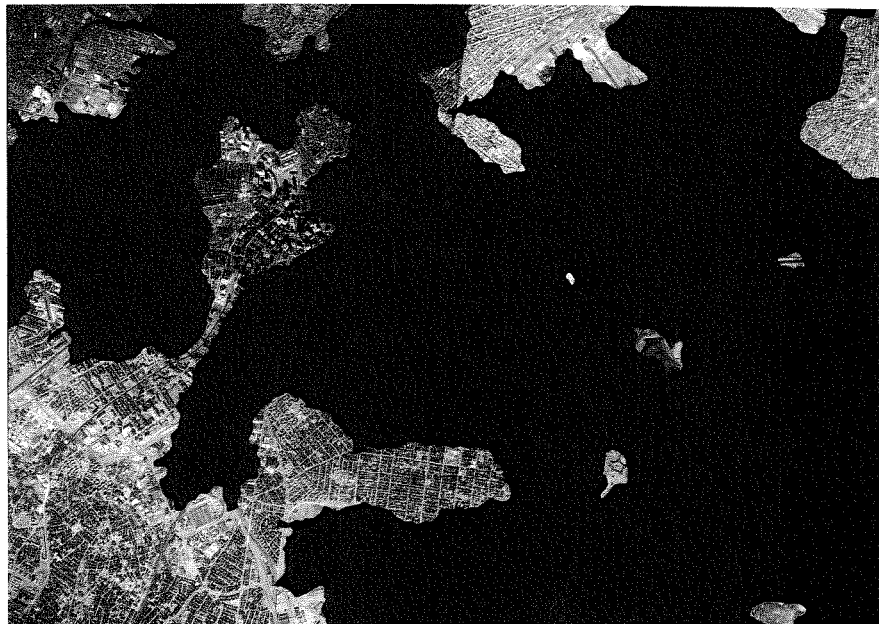
Boston: Visionary Plans and Practical Visions

American cities have always been characterized by their newness and boldness, by the portrayal of potential rather than the cherishing of a past. Some blame this on an absence of history. American cities are, after all, still new in comparison to their European counterparts. Even venerable old Boston has periodically embraced only a future, as the 1964 aerial photograph attests. But whereas the citizens of many American cities have simply come to expect and accommodate rapid, even radical, physical change, Bostonians have tended to anticipate the shaping of their city.

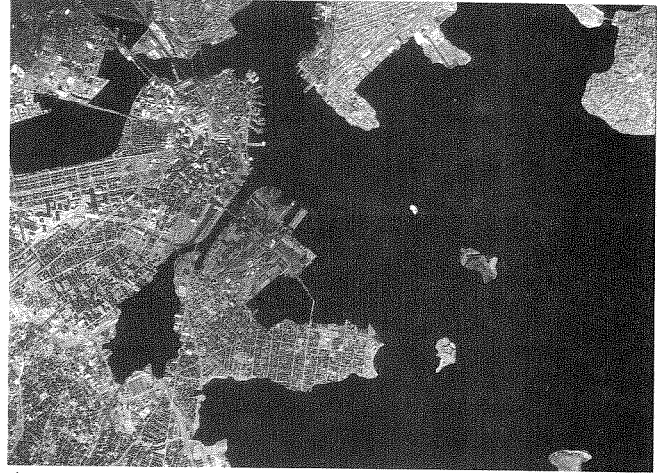
Enlightened self-interest coupled with necessity, caused by the topographic limitations of the originally inhabited peninsula, have compelled Bostonians to contemplate the manner in which their city was expanding, and to reflect upon its evolving form. Through personal initiative and collective pursuit, and with an unlikely combination of audacity and naivete, Bostonians have expressed their urban concerns by projecting schemes for ordering their city's growth. Boston's history, therefore, like that of any thriving city, vibrates with its past futures of places imagined and places made.¹

Note

¹ This material was originally assembled for an exhibition and catalogue entitled "Past Futures: Two Centuries of Imagining Boston," cosponsored by the Harvard University Graduate School of Design and the State Street Bank and Trust Company.



1-6 Boston, 1640-1985



Expansion of the City

Boston has had no option but to grow at the expense of its principal geographical feature, the shoreline. The city today has a land mass that is over four times the area of the original Shawmut Peninsula. Approximately 785 acres have become more than 4,000 acres by an ongoing series of landfill programs dating back to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The often delightful, sometimes frustrating fabric of Boston is largely the product of these landfills, many of which have left their imprint in the form of a distinct precinct of streets and open spaces. Using a 1985 aerial photograph of the city and “cutting” away the areas of landfill, the above images represent the actual configuration of land in 1640, 1795, 1830, 1885, 1920, and 1985.

Filling the Back Bay

By far the most ambitious landfill program in the history of the city was the filling of the nearly 600 acres of the former back bay of the Charles River. Work commenced in 1857 and for the next 40 years, day and night, a specially constructed railroad carried gravel and fill from Needham to provide raw material for the creation of one of Boston's (and for that matter America's) most distinctive nineteenth-century residential fabrics.

The first great plan for Boston, preceding by more than a decade the decision to fill the back bay, was both visionary and (although never specifically pursued) quite prophetic. A remarkable, three-mile-long crescent composed of several boulevards, and a series of circles and squares surround a newly defined Charles River Basin. Gourlay's home town of Edinburgh and his knowledge of London and Bath no doubt influenced his plan. It was an appeal to envision a city of three million people, which he correctly predicted would occur within a century, and to prepare for it becoming "the grand landing place from Europe." A decade before Boston had even seen a horse car, he recommended a network of suburban commuting rail lines that would continue underground as they passed the city. His underground railway alignments clairvoyantly anticipated several of the current subway lines and even individual stations.

The two photographs, one dating from 1859 and the other 1984,



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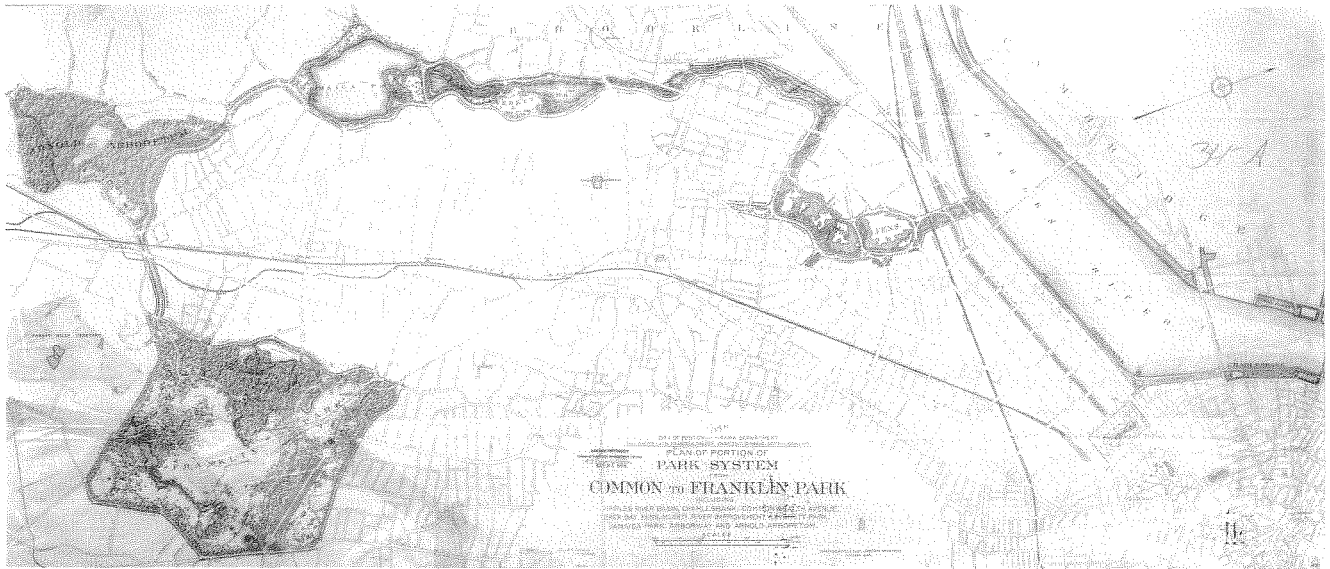


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look westward from similar vantage points and show the dramatic consequences of filling Back Bay. Today's Beacon Street (at the right of the 1984 photograph) corresponds to the Mill Dam shown in the earlier photograph. Once built the Mill Dam, along with the railroad beds which crisscrossed the mud flats, interrupted the daily tidal action that carried town wastes to sea and created a serious municipal health hazard that ultimately led to the landfill program.

7-8 Back Bay, 1859 and 1984

9 General Plan for Enlarging and Improving the City of Boston, Robert F. Gourlay, 1844.

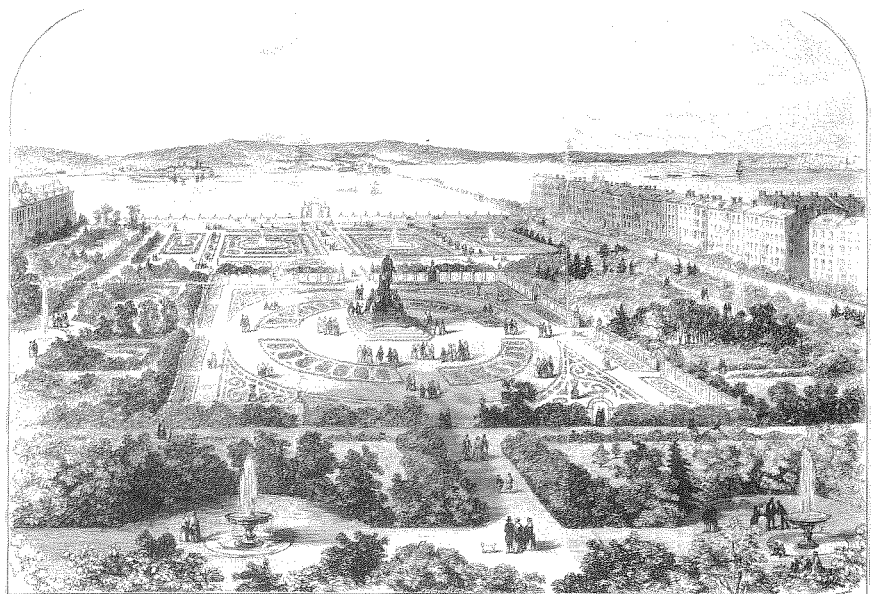


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The Park Systems

Perhaps Boston's most visionary plan, as it was for a number of American cities during the latter third of the nineteenth century, was the projection of a regional park network as a means of structuring the city's subsequent growth. This is the most familiar of Olmsted's drawings of the Boston Park System, and the one most associated with what would later be coined the "Emerald Necklace." A paradigm for urbanization was Olmsted's principal concern, the parks and connecting parkways simply a vehicle for responsible city planning. City dwellers, he argued, needed places in proximity to their daily habitats and activities where they could encounter the natural world, or an approximation of it. Such places would serve as counterpoints to the harsh and at times dehumanizing forces of modern urban life—places of stasis and repose amid the constantly changing city. These parks would thus be instrumental in maintaining the physical and spiritual well-being of urban dwellers, possibly even making them better citizens, as well as establishing boundaries for physical expansion of the city.

As the momentum to fill the Back Bay accelerated, various proposals



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to enlarge Boston Common were suggested. "Gleason's Pictorial" of February 26, 1853, showed this remarkable design for a formal garden. It is from the decade in which the controversy over the use of the land at the base of the old Commons was most pronounced, with each succeeding plan to subdivide it for residential uses (making it the first block of the Back Bay landfill program), generating a rebuttal in the form of an elegant projection of its possibilities as a public garden.

The advocates for a garden would eventually prevail and would go on to champion the cause for a city-wide park system.

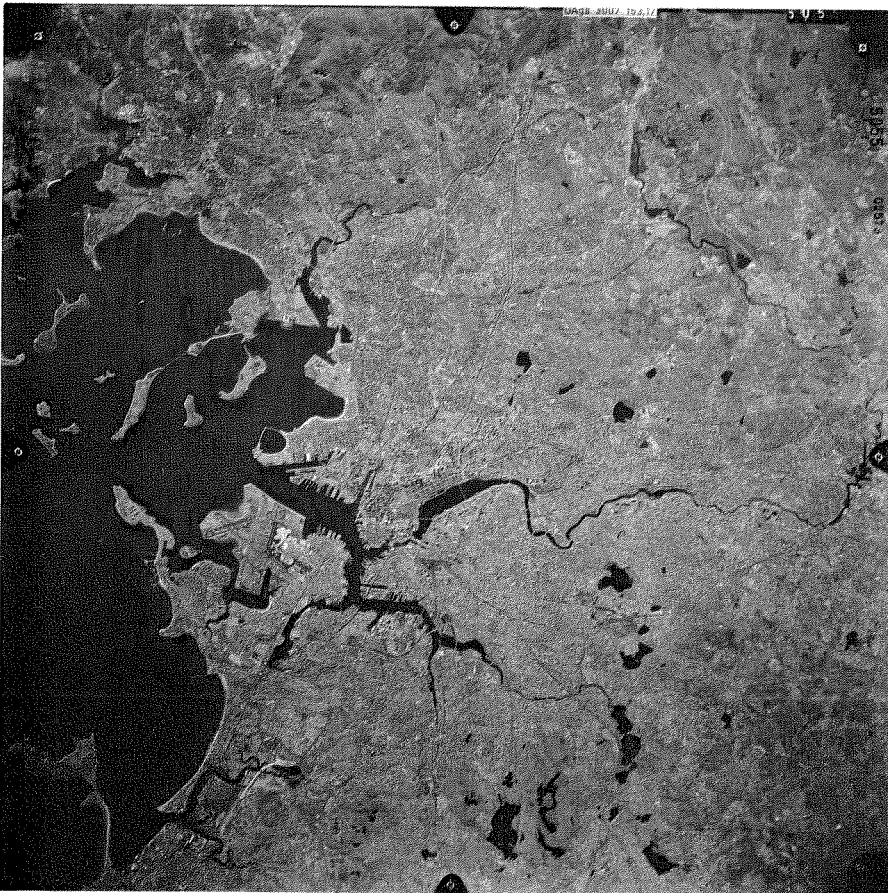
10 Park System from the Common to Franklin Park, Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot, 1894.

11 Proposed Plan for the Public Garden, Billings, 1853.



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The major figures involved in developing the Boston Parks had always imagined them as part of a larger, more ambitious metropolitan system. By the early 1890s, Charles Eliot and Sylvester Baxter were ensuring that it would be so by forming the Trustees of Public Reservations, which began to survey and acquire large areas of land. Out of this effort emerged this plan for a second “necklace” of open spaces dedicated to the public and to the preservation of the New England landscape.



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The vision and success of the builders of the Metropolitan Park system are apparent in comparing this high-altitude infrared photograph with the 1893 Eliot Plan for the Metropolitan District. Foliage reflects infrared radiation; both Olmsted’s Emerald Necklace and Eliot’s Metropolitan Reservations are gloriously red: the inner and outer-rings of an imagined, pursued, and implemented open space network unparalleled among American cities.

12 Existing Public Reservations and Proposed Open Spaces for the Metropolitan District, Charles Eliot, 1893.

13 Metropolitan Boston, NASA High Altitude Infrared Photograph, 1980.

The Charles River Basin

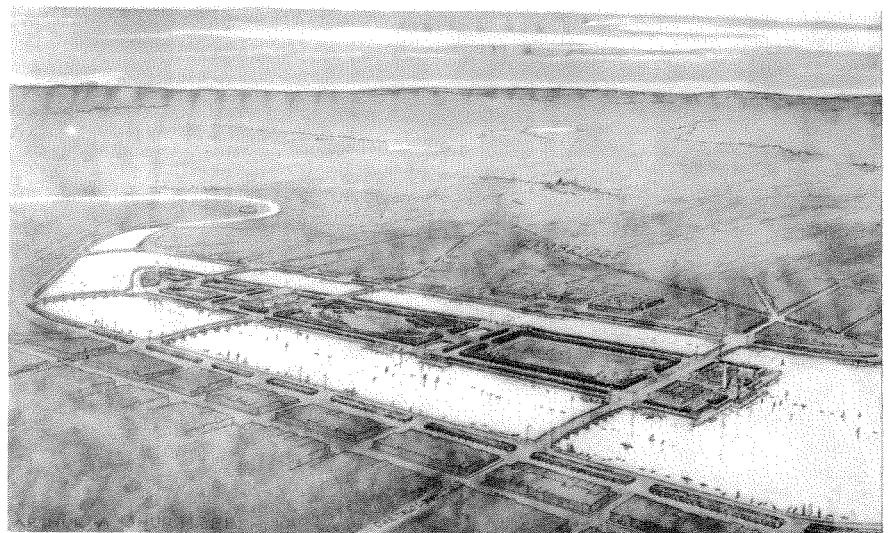
The potential of a grand basin at the heart of Boston captivated the imaginations of numerous Boston citizens and produced a succession of schemes from the 1850s until the 1930s, when the current Charles River Esplanade was finally realized. Robert Gourlay's metropolitan-scaled crescent was followed by Charles Davenport's romanticized evocation of Hamburg's Alster Basin and the plans by Olmsted to connect the river to the metropolitan park system. Nearly a dozen separate proposals for islands, invoking the qualities of the Seine, the Tiber, and the Thames, explored the virtues of intimate scale and density of activity. Marvelous projections of esplanades, terraces, and pleasure drives made apparent the need to reserve both banks for public purposes. Characteristically of the American city, eventual creation of the basin was propelled less by visions of place than by transportation imperatives, the esplanade being built as part of the widening of the embankment along the river to accommodate a road.

Calling himself the "First Projector of the Embankment," Davenport remained an ardent proponent of his riverside park idea throughout his life, ceaselessly publishing material, illustrating alternatives, and cajoling anyone who would listen to him to work toward this civic goal.

The rationales for Cram and Shurtleff were similar: to shorten the bridges being proposed to span



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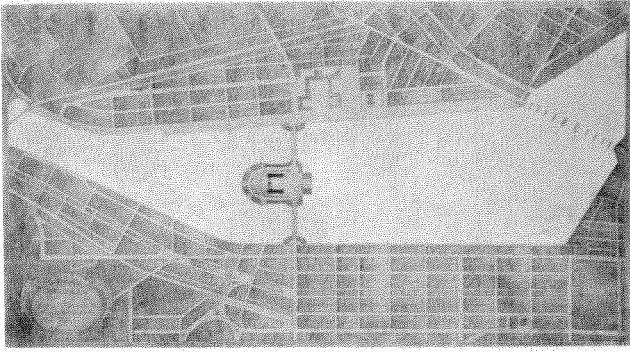


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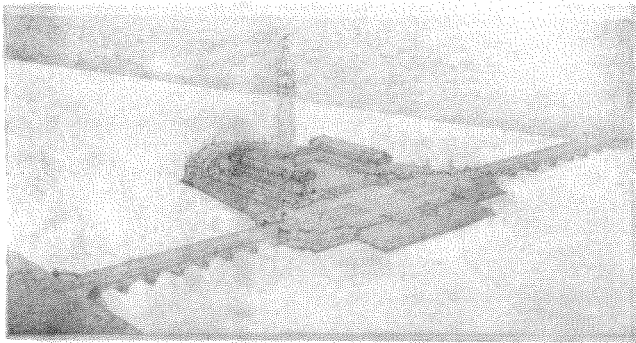
the basin, to offer prominent sites for important public buildings, and to increase the sense of connection between Boston and Cambridge. Both architects were convinced that the Charles River Basin was too wide and needed the equivalent of Paris' Ile St. Louis.

14 New Boston and Charles River Basin,
Charles Davenport and Albert Coolidge,
1875.

15 Plan for an Island in the Charles River,
Ralph Adams Cram, 1907.



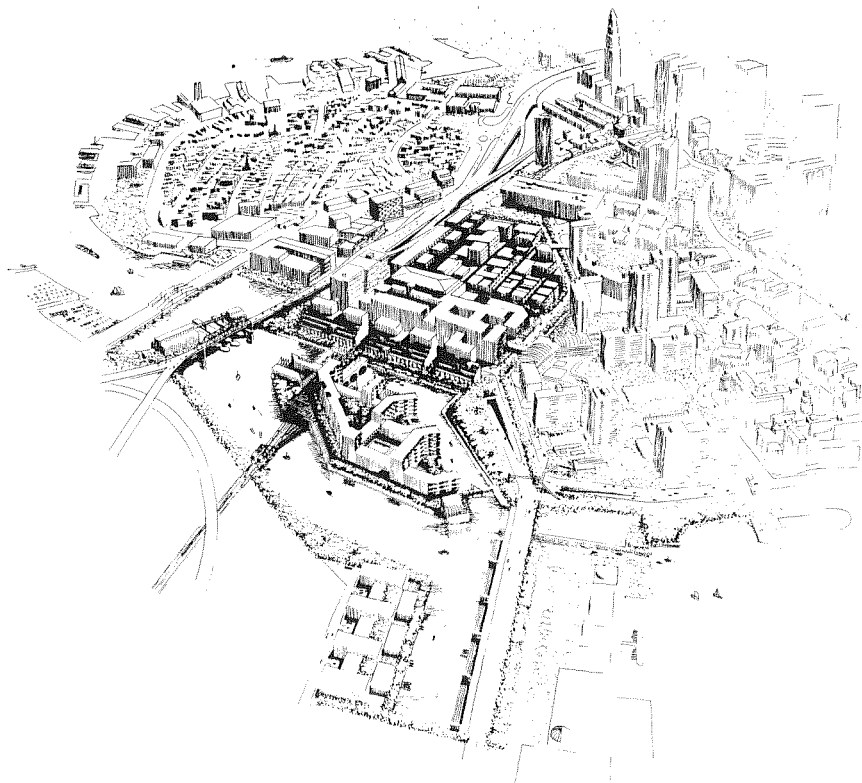
Plan showing the location of the proposed island in the Charles River basin upon which it is proposed to build the Memorial to Soldiers, Sailors and Marines who gave their lives in the Great War. It is contemplated to replace Harvard bridge with new bridges from Boston and Cambridge.



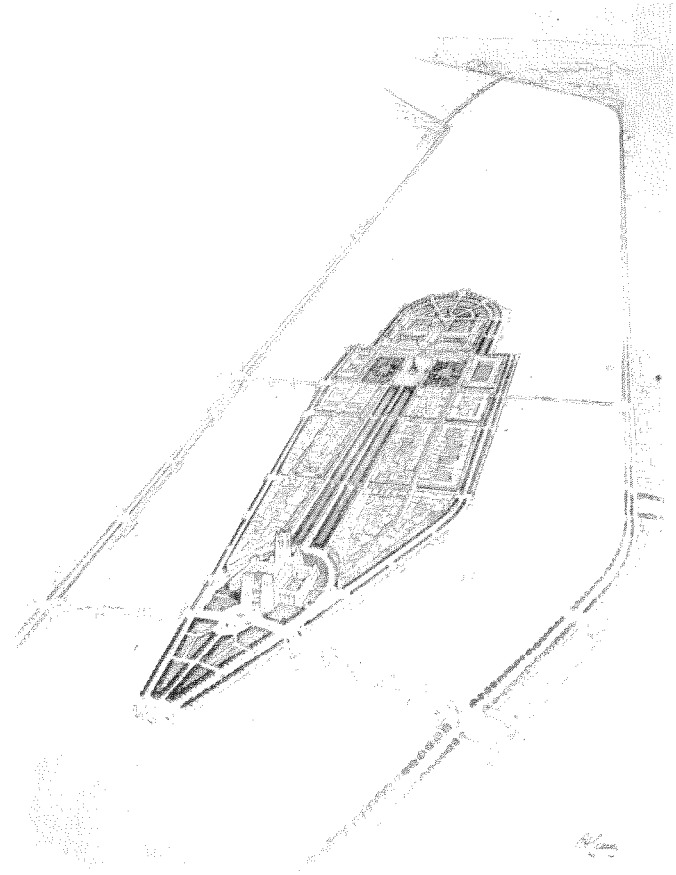
Air view of the proposed island in the Charles River basin at the Harvard Bridge on Massachusetts Avenue, upon which it is proposed to erect the Memorial to Soldiers, Sailors and Marines of Boston, who lost their lives in the Great War.

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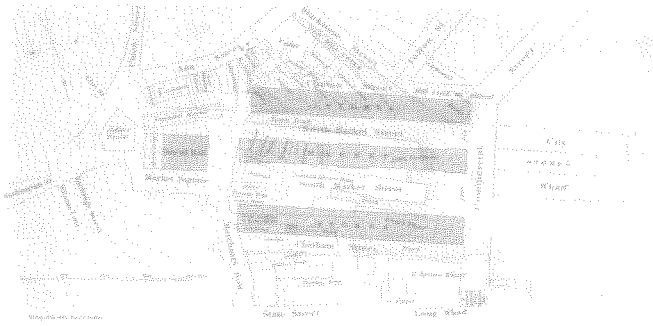
More than a decade following the initial island proposals, a committee that included Cram and Shurtleff designed a memorial island for Bostonians who perished during World War I. The city was to build this as part of an upgrading of a bridge across the Charles River. Since the same bridge is being rebuilt once more today, there may be an opportunity to reintroduce the concept.

Among the most provocative aspects of this plan for revitalizing the North Station area is the proposal for an island on which housing would be located. This plan briefly rekindled the now 75-year-old tradition of advocating an island for the Charles River.

16 An Island for the Charles River, Arthur A. Shurtleff, 1911.

17 Proposed Memorial to Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines, rendered by C. H. Walker, 1920.

18 North Station Master Plan, Moshe Safdie, 1978.



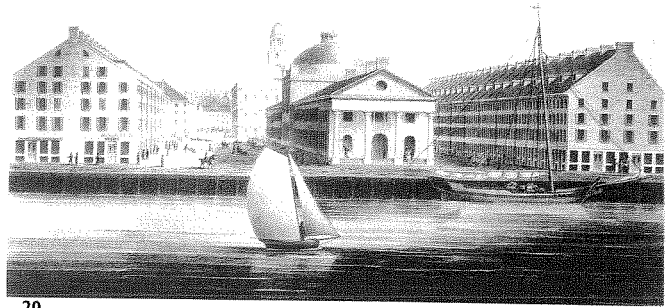
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The Waterfront and Harbor

The waterfront *and its design* have always been fundamental concerns for Boston. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries piers, markets, and wharves formed what Walter Muir Whitehill called the “avenue(s)” to Boston from the parts of the world that really mattered. Well into the twentieth century ambitious schemes for the enlargement of port facilities held the attention of municipal authorities and initiated landfill ventures. Today a shrinking port, abandoned maritime infrastructure, and polluted waters are principal challenges, as well as opportunities to recapture the waterfront for public purposes.

Parris’s design could be called the first great effort at waterfront urban renewal. The markets were built over the seventeenth-century Town Dock, which had become a local slum and eyesore by the beginning of the nineteenth century. They provided badly needed storage and retail space for the rapidly expanding town and, equally important, projected a noble new civic face seaward.

Bourne, a prominent Boston architect, undertook a common turn-of-the-century problem for his MIT thesis. The design is for an immense Beaux Arts-inspired circular harbor, as large as the entire peninsula of Boston. Seventy-five years later another MIT graduate, I. M. Pei, recognized the area’s potential as a visual gateway to the city, and designed the John F.

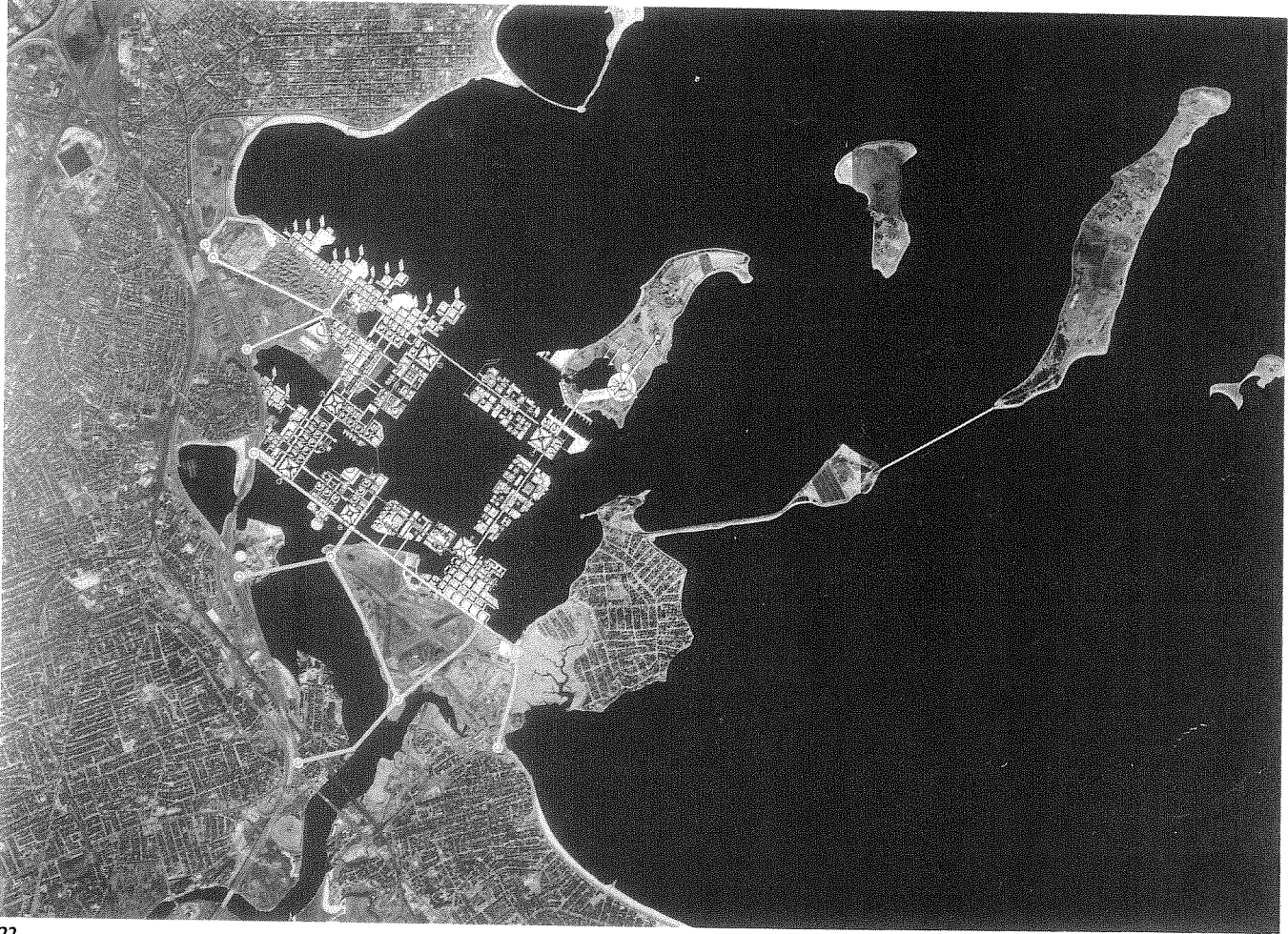


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Kennedy Library on a site that would have fallen somewhere in the middle of Bourne’s harbor.



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This was the second serious effort to host an international exposition in Boston. It was to have been the centerpiece of the nation's Bicentennial celebrations. The first attempt was part of the Boston-1915 movement and was intended to culminate a five-year program of municipal improvement. The Bicentennial Exposition was to result in a new community of 20,000 units, and

was to serve as a prototype for similar communities throughout the world. Interestingly, both chose the city and contemporary urban life as the principal theme for an exposition. Both sought to create a "laboratory" for testing solutions to urban problems. Though neither was realized, each confirmed long-standing Bostonian interest in urban affairs and design.

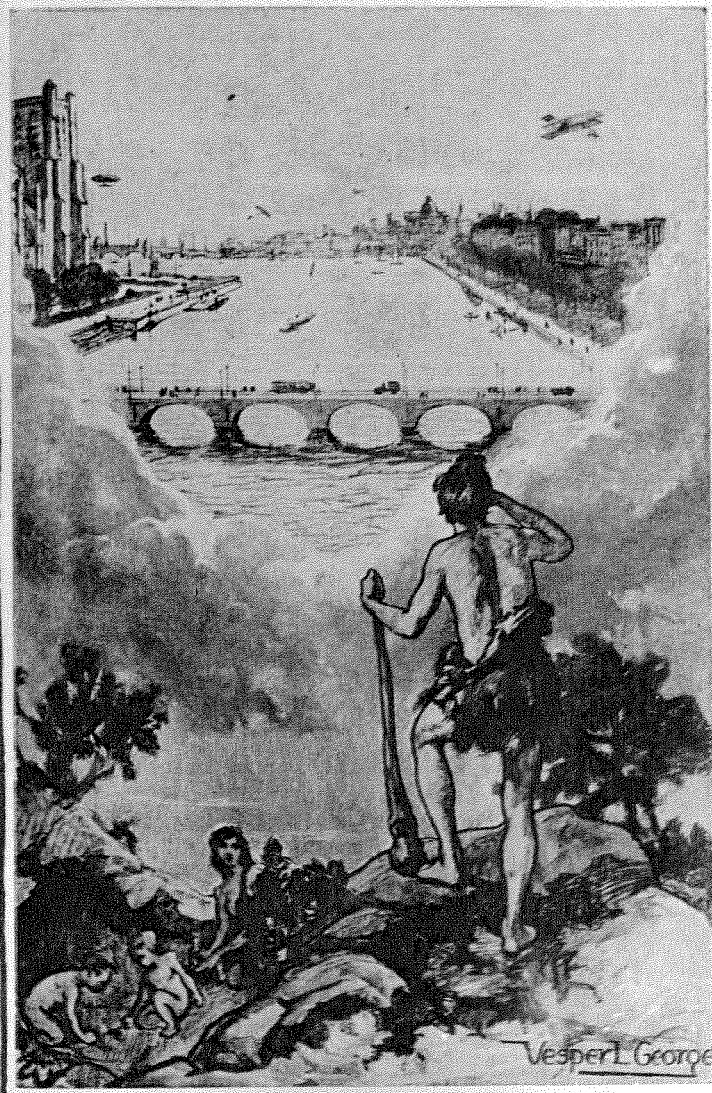
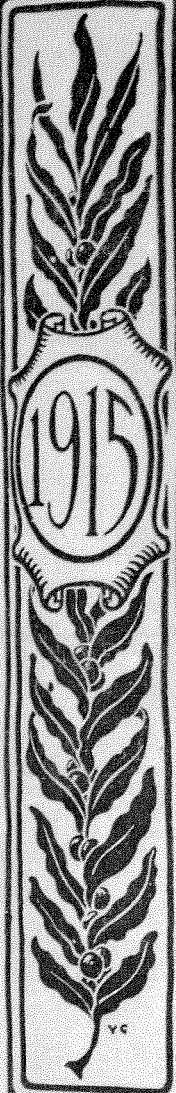
19-20 Faneuil Hall Market, Alexander Parris, 1825. Restoration and reuse, Benjamin Thompson and Associates, 1967-1974.

21 A Free Port for Boston, Frank T. Bourne, 1896.

22 Proposal for a U.S. Bicentennial World Exposition, Jan Wampler and the staff of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, 1969.

NEW BOSTON

CIVIC ADVANCE CAMPAIGN



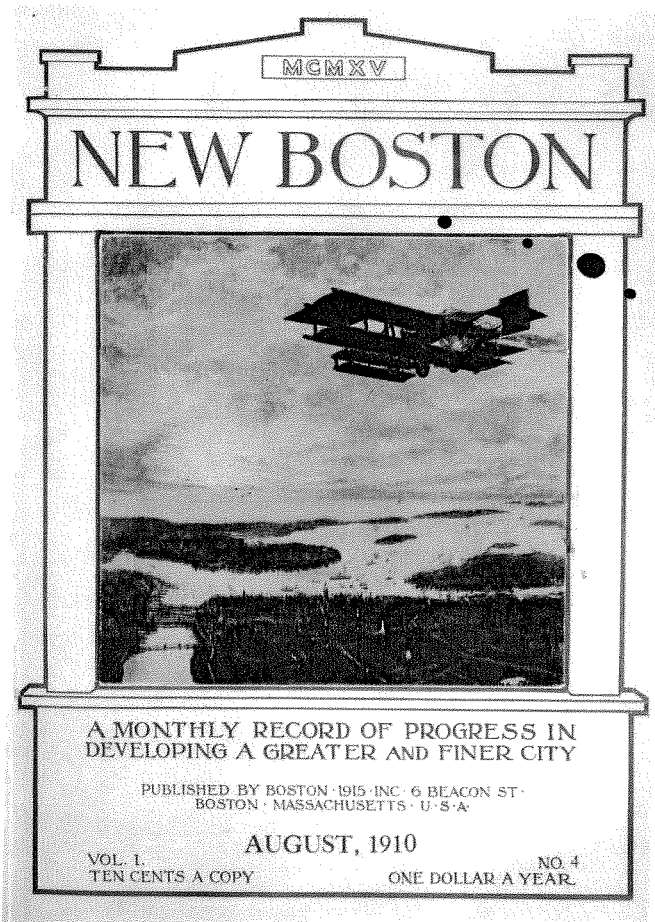
A MONTHLY RECORD OF PROGRESS IN
DEVELOPING A GREATER AND FINER CITY

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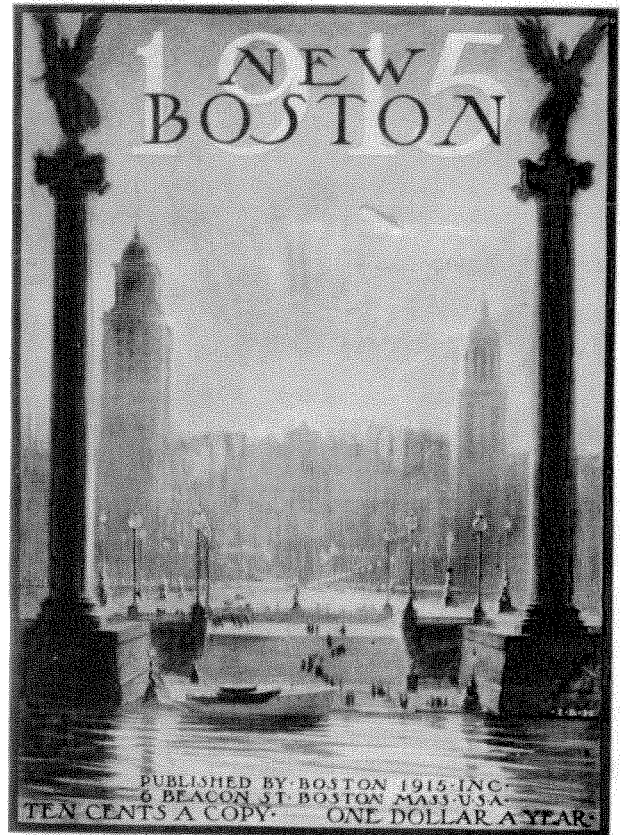
DECEMBER, 1910

NO. 8
ONE DOLLAR A YEAR



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WHAT A CITY PLAN COULD DO FOR BOSTON



VOL. 2
25

MAY, 1911

NO. 1

Progressive Municipal Reform

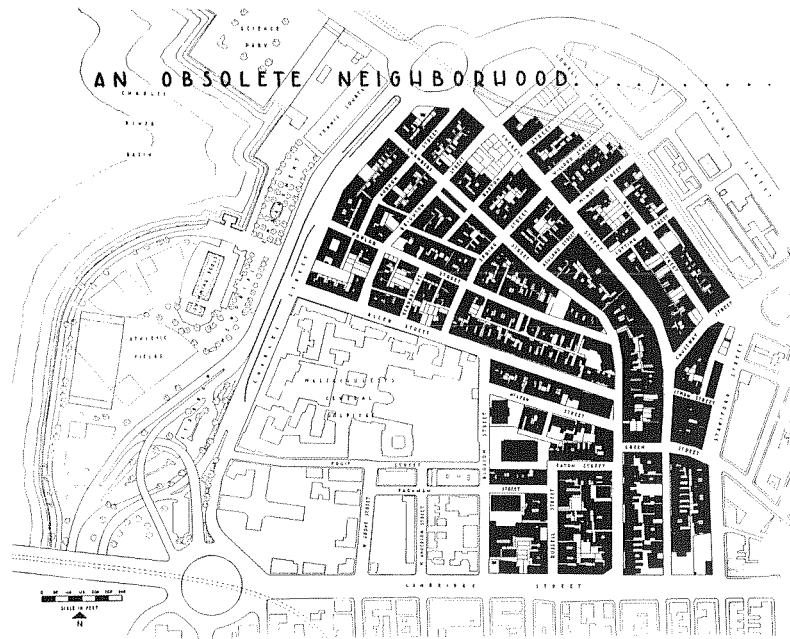
A monthly periodical called *The New Boston—1915* was the principal instrument of a local municipal reform movement dedicated to educating the public on the imperatives and possibilities of city planning. Characteristic of the City Beautiful era, a monumental civic image graced the covers of the 19 issues published between 1910 and 1912. Thirteen of the covers included a visionary gateway for the harbor. The subject of the image was not merely a renderer's whim. Where else but toward the harbor, long its lifeline, would a prospering and progressive Boston turn its new face? For the organizers of *Boston—1915*, the vertical city growing beyond the twin columns represented a modern counterpart to the eighteenth-century Long Wharf and the nineteenth-century Faneuil Hall Market. For contem-

porary Bostonians the cover may represent the first conceptualization of the "Walk-to-the-Sea."

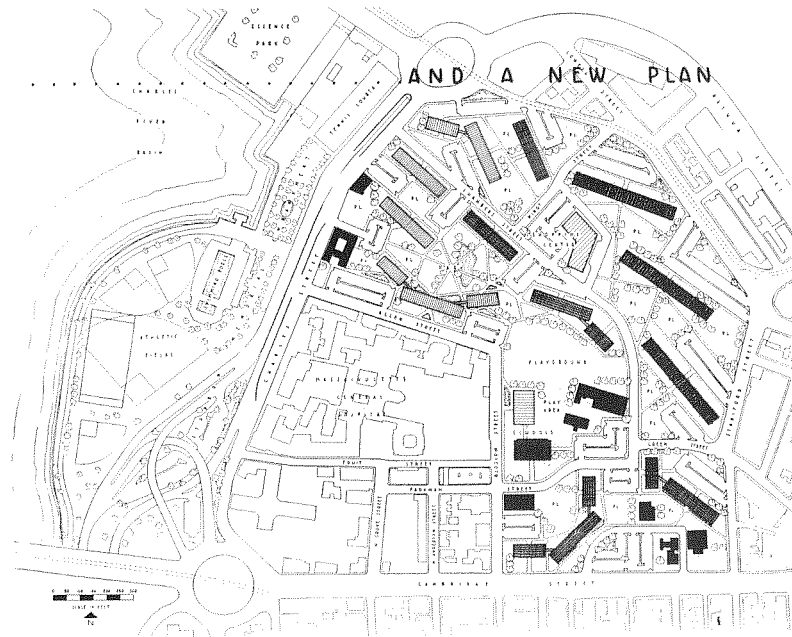
Urban Renewal

For nearly half a century, between World War I and the late 1950s, Boston hibernated, gradually losing its industrial and mercantile economic base and a good third of its population. People came to regard it as a dying town with hardly a prospect for resurgence, until the rampant economic stagnation and urban decay instigated what many considered a hopeless effort toward large-scale redevelopment. Propelled by practical-minded visionaries and generous federal urban renewal subsidy programs, an almost desperate period of reconstruction ensued. A quarter of a century and much success later Boston is flourishing again, and paradoxically is also facing a crisis. The very attractions of a momentary balance between progress and preservation have brought new and even greater pressures for large-scale development. Boston's response to this predicament will surely determine the longevity of its current renaissance and its next future.

Facing pages from the 1950 General Plan for Boston readily showing the somewhat heavy-handed initial approach toward renewal and reminding one of the frequent rejoinder to critics of urban renewal: "You can't make an omelette without cracking some eggs." The old West End was selected as among the first eggs, but the tragedy of its complete demolition probably helped save the Back Bay and most of the South



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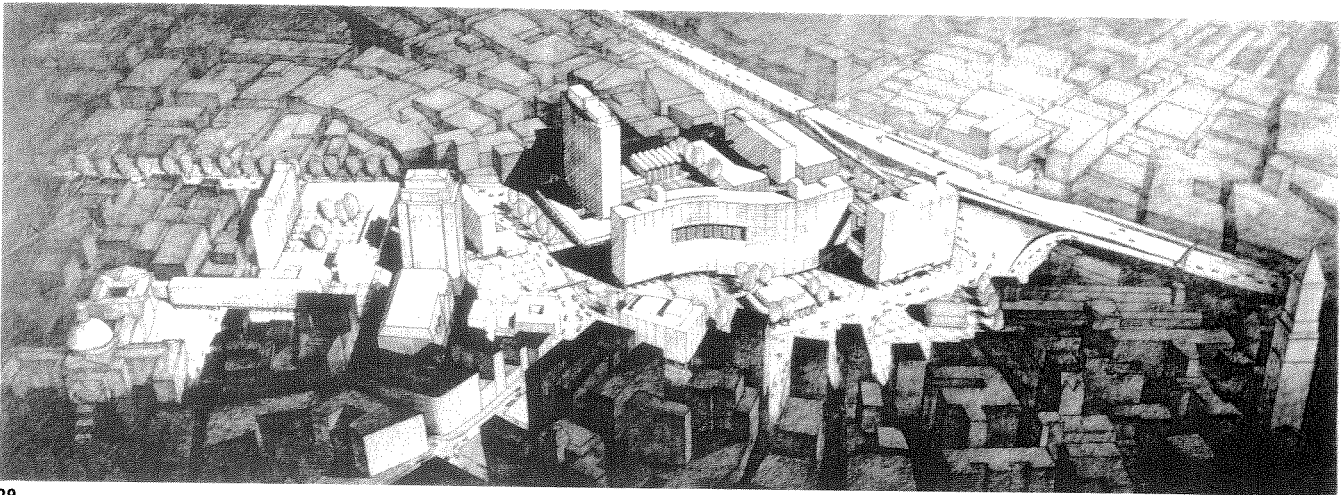
End, both of which came perilously close to becoming "ground zero" for additional "Charles River Parks."

With its heart virtually demolished (including the area labeled an "obsolete plan") Boston awaits reconstruction, its planners confident that only a step this radical would bring economic and cultural renewal.

26-27 General Plan for Boston, Boston Planning Board, 1950.



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This was among the first renewal-era plans for the rebuilding of historic Scollay Square into the new Government Center area. Gropius's proposal echoes with his words from a public address made 20 years earlier: "Today we are in a position to prove conclusively that the outward form of modern architecture and design are not the whim of a few architects or artists hungry for innovation, but the

inevitable consequential product of the intellectual, social and technological conditions of our age." By the early 1960s a final plan that was only slightly less bold and extensive was designed, approved, and had begun to be implemented, serving as a symbol of a more confident Boston reestablishing itself after its long stagnation.

28 Aerial View of Central Boston, 1964.
29 Proposal for a Government Center,
 Walter Gropius and The Architects
 Collaborative, 1957.

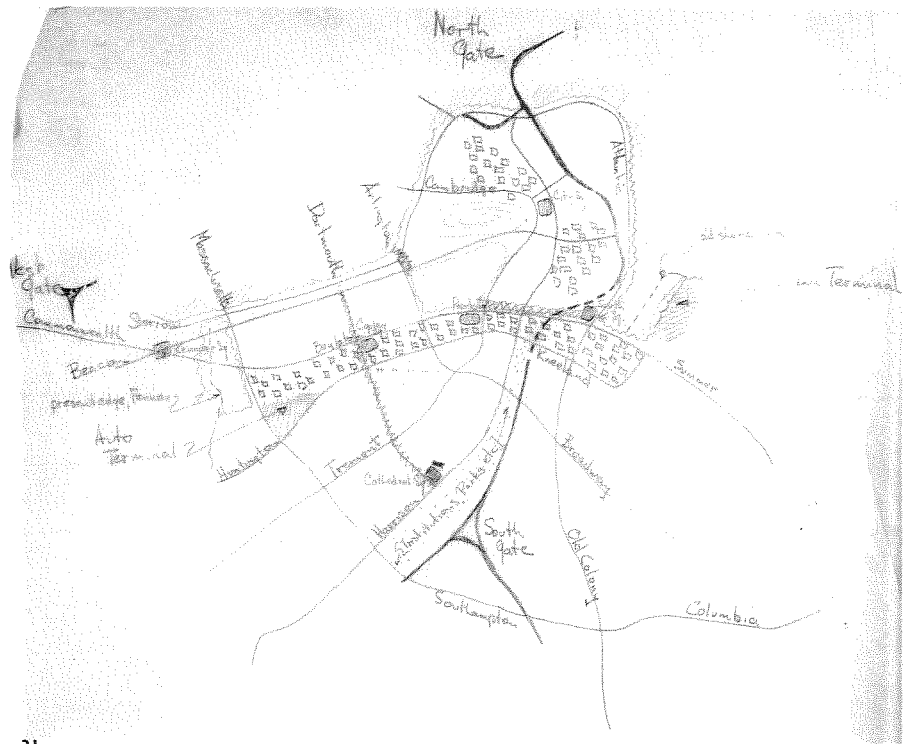
Visions of a Vertical City

Among the most recent of the visionary proposals motivated by practical aims has been the concept of a “tall spine,” a rationale for distributing tall buildings—the paradigmatic building type of the modern city—in and around the central core. Though greatly stressing the fragile fabric of streets, spaces, and buildings of the old Boston, an unanticipated consequence of the new forest of tall buildings has been to recall in a new way the general form and orientation of the original peninsula, fundamentally altered by two centuries of landfill.

Compelled by a modernist fervor to express new urban form, this project by a German disciple of Walter Gropius proposes a radical physical transformation of the city, and thus anticipates the “tall spine.” The future Boston would take the form of a continuous megastructure following the alignment of the principal highway. Selected survivals of the old city—the historic monuments—would remain as pavilions in a new park that would fill the Shawmut Peninsula.

A conceptualization of the “tall spine,” as an expansion of the downtown into a dense linear band between the historic neighborhoods of the Back Bay and the South End. Merely a sketch, its logic has both officially and unofficially guided the physical transformation of the commercial core. Kevin Lynch foresaw the need to channel contemporary-scaled development

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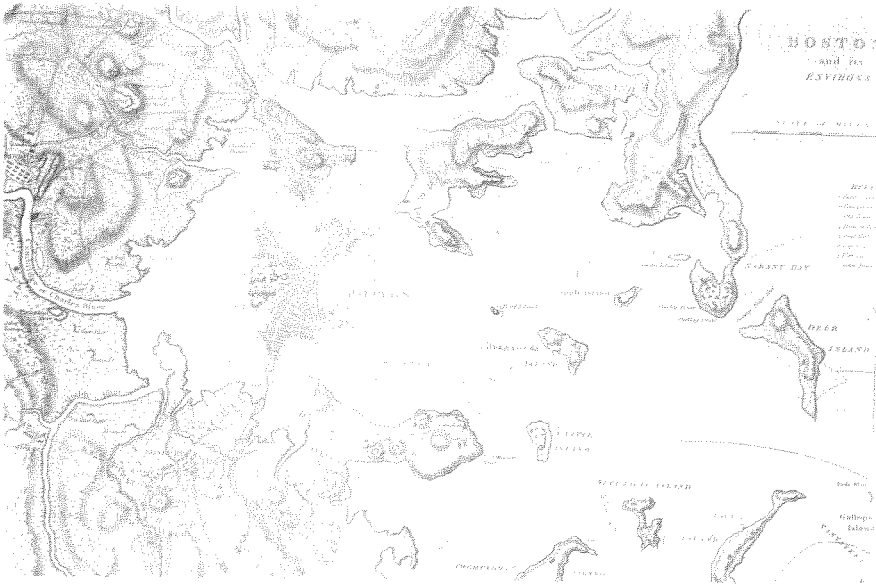
away from fragile historic districts. Being more optimistic about tall buildings than Boston’s current planners, and more mindful of the fact that they are as characteristic of the late-twentieth-century city as the Back Bay was for the nineteenth-century city, he devised a system for locating them. Current sentiment, after several decades of building them, favors radical curtailment, if not a total ban, on their construction in the downtown.

30 Plan for Central Boston, Martin Wagner, 1947.

31 Concept Sketch for the Architects’ Plan for Boston, Kevin Lynch, 1961.



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- 32 **View of the “tall spine”** after 25 years of building—the unanticipated yet somehow poetic result.
- 33 **Eighteenth-century map of Boston** showing the original topographic conditions of the region with the Shawmut Peninsula being virtually an island.
- 34 **Contemporary aerial photograph looking toward the downtown**, indicating the unanticipated yet somehow poetic consequence of the “tall spine” serving to reassert the contours of the original city.