

Cognoscenti Article – WGBH

This spring, the Norman B. Leventhal Map center at the Boston Public Library debuts “[Breathing Room: Mapping Boston’s Green Spaces](#),” an exhibit that surveys the creation and evolution of open space in Boston over nearly four centuries.

The exhibit is a well-timed contribution to Boston’s ongoing dialogue about the preservation, expansion and importance of public open space in the face of burgeoning development.

Last year there were 100 projects worth over \$9 billion under construction in multiple neighborhoods of the city, with a dozen 500-foot towers in various stages of approval for downtown Boston alone. Boston’s tremendous growth enriches the city in many ways, but there are also trade-offs. Heavy building shade weakens lawns and woody plants and makes the vegetation in our urban parks less resilient, more prone to disease and lacking in vigor. We can mitigate the effects of drought with water, or the lack of fertility with feeding programs for trees and lawns. We cannot manufacture sunlight.

Boston’s greenspaces were recognized in the mid-nineteenth century as essential oases in an increasingly crowded and polluted city, and they continue to serve that vital function today.

The evolution of the Boston Common, our country’s oldest park, highlights the importance and multiple roles played by greenspace in Boston throughout its history. Beginning as a grazing pasture, the 50 acres of the Boston Common have been the center of Boston’s civic life since 1634.

The Common has remained remarkably consistent in size and character, an active green sanctuary in the heart of the city. From pasture to military training grounds, celebrations, punishments, protests, and recreation, the Common evolved over the centuries, changing as the urban population grew around it.

The concept of a park in the nineteenth century as a place of enjoyment influenced decisions to remove cows, add paths lined with trees, and smooth the Common’s rough surfaces. Through all the changes, the recurring themes of community celebration and protest, of respite and recreation reflect the original purpose and pivotal role of the Boston Common throughout the centuries.

But then, in the last quarter of the 20th century, as fewer public funds were allocated to maintaining public parks, the Boston Common, Public Garden, and other parks in the city suffered from neglect, crime, vandalism and misuse. The downtown parks were also ravaged by Dutch elm disease, which was killing up to 40 elm trees a year. A small group of concerned citizens, which became the Friends of the Public Garden, organized to address the deplorable conditions. Beginning with the Pubic Garden, they expanded their focus to speak out about the needs of the Boston Common and Commonwealth Avenue Mall as well.

At the time, the group's biggest foe was the Park Plaza Urban Renewal Plan – a proposal for high rise towers, up to 650 feet high, along Boylston Street that would have cast massive and damaging shadows over the Garden and Common. This proposal came at a time when environmental impact studies were not yet required for development projects. However, after much vocal opposition by the Friends and other citizen advocates, the city finally produced shadow studies that realized everyone's worst fears about massive shadows across the parks and the damage they would do.

The ultimate defeat of the Park Plaza plan brought widespread attention to the condition of the parks, which led to the restoration of parks throughout Boston.

The latest flood of construction is unlike anything Boston has seen in its nearly 400-year history, according to the Boston Planning and Development Agency. Today, 80% of Americans live in urban areas, and this number will only increase. It is all the more critical that there be adequate and well maintained parks and open spaces for this expanding population, and that protection of our existing parks be a primary consideration when planning new development.

Our public spaces age, renew, and change with the times but have always provided physical and emotional benefits, serving as a refuge from urban sprawl. Every neighborhood is made better by the preservation and protection of their greenspaces. Research has shown that physical activity is the single biggest factor in promoting fitness and health. Proximity to a park is one of the best and least expensive ways to find that. Research has also drawn a clear connection between being in a natural setting and promoting relaxation as well as increasing focus. But perhaps most importantly, parks connect us, removing many of the barriers and suspicions we feel when we encounter one another on the city's streets. Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted referred to parks as "democracy in trees and dirt." They belong to us all, and we meet as equals in them.

(Resources: City Parks Alliance: <https://www.cityparksalliance.org/why-urban-parks-matter>

Trust for Public Land:

<https://www.tpl.org/sites/default/files/Parks%20%2B%20Health%20Brochure.pdf>

Boston Park Advocates: <https://www.bostonparkadvocates.org/>)

Whether you weave through the Fens on your way to work or jog on the weekends through Franklin Park, Boston would not be the global metropolis and tourism hub it is without our public greenspaces.

As Boston witnesses its current building boom, we are forced to ask what services and functions our public parks contribute to the quality of life in our city. Decisions about urban growth impact all of us and, therefore, all residents must become voices for greenspace, the breathing rooms of our city. The Parks Department budget has increased over the years, particularly for

capital expenditures, but still is not what it needs to be to support the level of maintenance that our parks require to be in excellent condition. Each of us must speak out on behalf of our urban parks, and advocate for an increase in operating funds to support the important work of the Parks Department. We also need to support the many nonprofit partners that expand the city's capacity to care for our parks.

Take a walk through our parks with a renewed sense of pride and understanding. Know and treasure the service of these spaces as we continue to grow and develop as a city and a community.

Elizabeth Vizza, Executive Director

Friends of the Public Garden