

CHAPTER

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A BOSTON EDUCATION

Project: Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway, Wharf District Park

Location: Boston, Massachusetts

Design Firms: EDAW, Copley Wolff Design Group

Scope of Project: Design \$16 million, five-acre urban park reconnecting the harbor with downtown

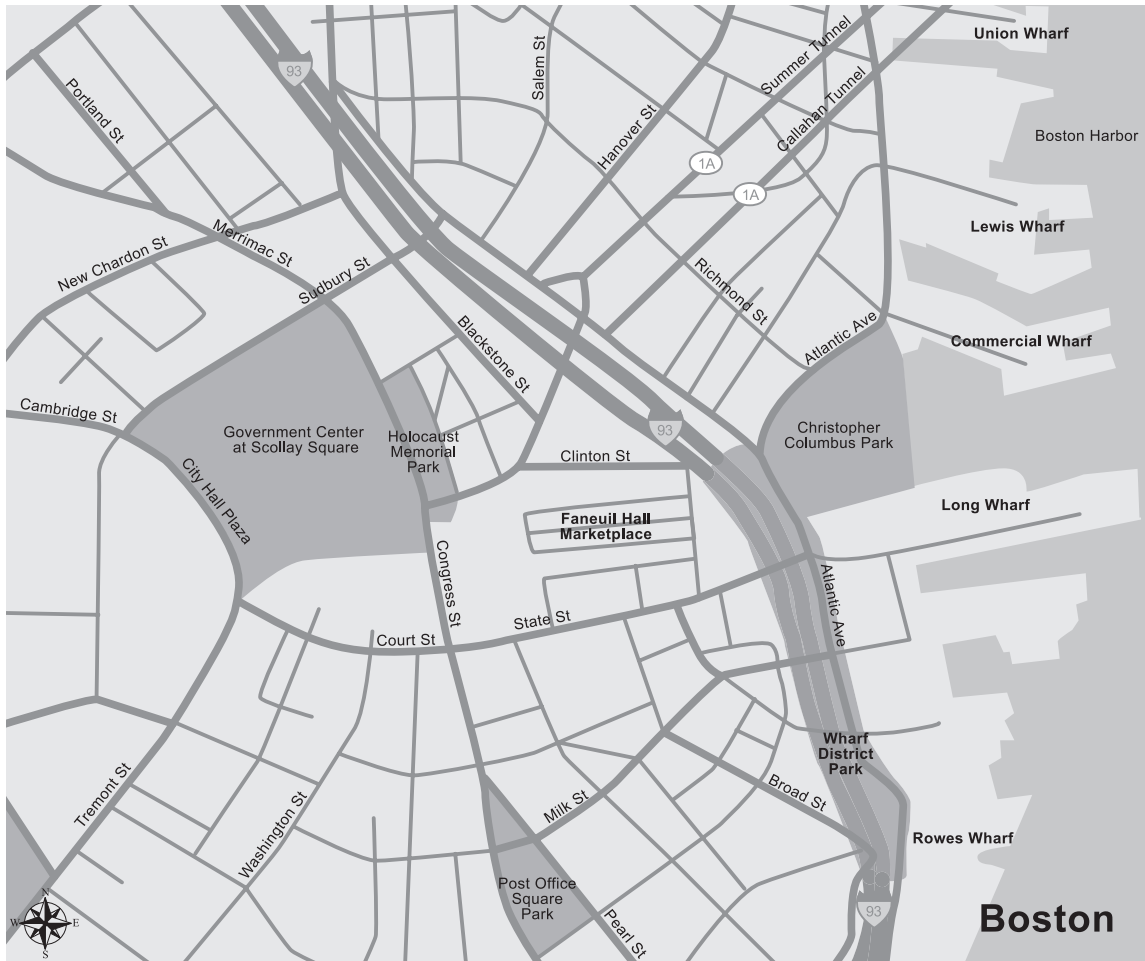
Key Players: Massachusetts Turnpike Authority (MTA), Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), Mayor's Completion Task Force, Wharf District Task Force, Artery Business Committee (ABC), Boston Society of Architects (BSA), Boston Society of Landscape Architects (BSLA), *Boston Globe*

Major Issues: Political control, final stage of a complex project with a long and embattled history



The Democratic National Convention in July 2004 marked a major event for Boston. It also set a milestone for EDAW. That same weekend, on July 26, on the large dirt field where once stood the Central Artery viaduct (familarly known as “the green monster”), the city of Boston dedicated the Rose Kennedy Greenway, an urban construction site reconnecting the waterfront with downtown. The big white tent set up on temporary sod sheltered flowers, fountains, folding chairs for 600, and a grand piano. Senator Edward Kennedy, Jean Kennedy Smith, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, and many members of the Kennedy family and their friends gathered for the impressive ceremony, during which the soon to be parkland was dedicated to Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy. Mrs.

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1-1 The Wharf District Park is the section of the Rose Kennedy Greenway that borders the waterfront. © 2005 by EDAW.

Kennedy grew up in the North End of Boston, the daughter of Boston mayor “Honey Fitz,” and later became the wife of legendary financier and ambassador Joseph Kennedy, mother of nine children and, ultimately, matriarch of a political dynasty that has shaped modern American life.

For the 16 long months preceding this ceremony, EDAW’s design team had been laboring day and night to shape the Wharf District Park, the centerpiece and “the part of the Rose Kennedy Greenway where the city meets the sea,” in the words of EDAW’s client, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority (MTA).¹ For me, the highlight of the presentation came as Mayor Menino, standing center stage in front of the crowd, with

large banner drawings of our proposed park designs behind him, told Governor Romney and MTA Chairman Matthew J. Amorello that the park designs looked great and it was time to end the public meetings and build it. His words marked the culmination of more than 100 public meetings, several daunting encounters with the Boston press, and a public process that put a lot of people through the wringer.

When I looked over the crowd, I saw familiar faces from our public (and not so public) meetings. If any one of these people had told me just a few months earlier that we'd be sitting together at this dedication, I'd have voiced serious doubts, for there had been moments when the whole project seemed in jeopardy. At times, in fact, our design team did not feel welcome anywhere in Boston, for the design process had turned into a political minefield, and we were not at all sure we would get through it in one piece. But here we were.

THE BIG DIG

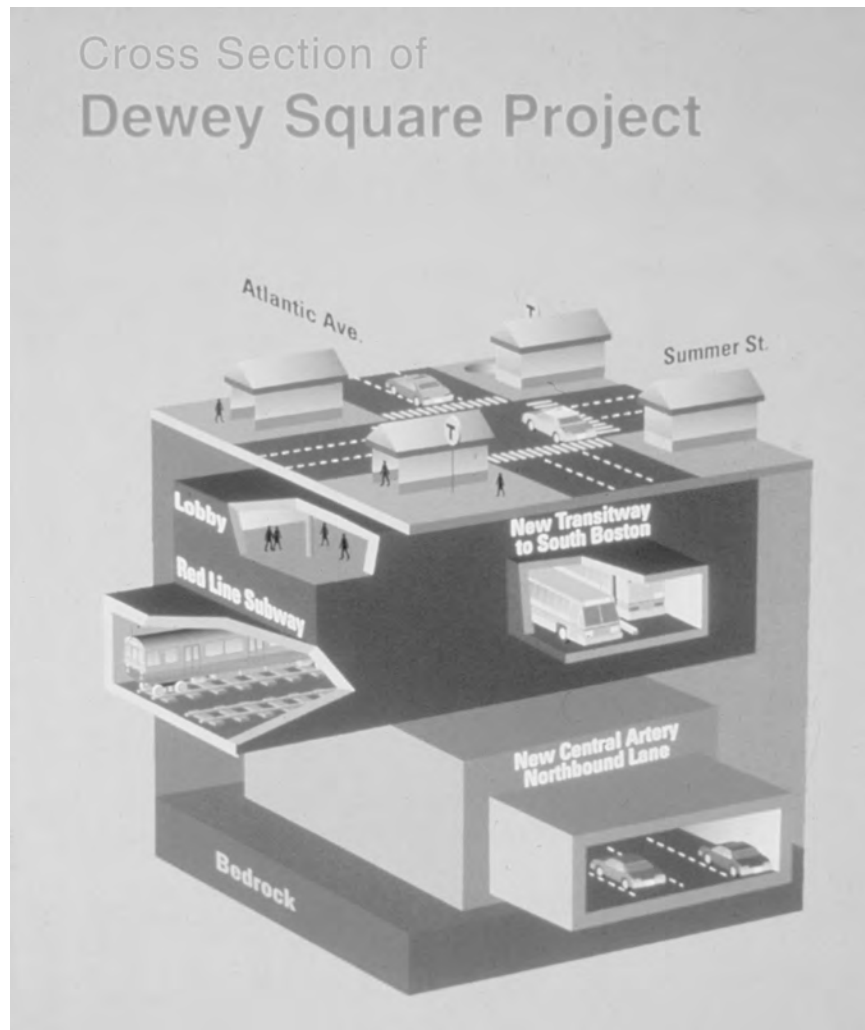
In retrospect, it is easy to cite many obvious reasons for the difficulties of this process and project. The Central Artery/Tunnel Project, more commonly known as the “Big Dig,” was a 20-year, \$16 billion effort to submerge a multilane highway (the Central Artery of the John F. Kennedy Expressway) through the center of downtown Boston.² As one of the largest public projects ever undertaken in the United States, and carrying the highest price tag, it was naïve of us to think it would be like other



1-2 The site of the future Wharf District Park. The elevated multilane highway, affectionately known as “the green monster,” had separated the city from its waterfront since the 1950s. © 2005 by EDAW. Photograph by Dixi Carrillo.

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1-3 Dewey Square Project, similar to cross section of Wharf District Park. The Rose Kennedy Greenway was the final phase of the Central Artery Tunnel, the most complicated and expensive project in U.S. history. © 2005 by Massachusetts Turnpike Authority.



parks and projects we had successfully completed around the world. In embarking on the final stage of a project with a long and notorious history, we would have been wise to take nothing for granted. But, of course, only hindsight is 20/20.

When it was announced in December 2002, after a four-month selection process, that the EDAW and Copley Wolff Design Group team had been awarded the Wharf District Park project, we were elated. We felt honored and fortunate to have won the design competition for the largest of three parks in the Rose Kennedy Greenway. The park site, a five-acre median in the historic wharf center of downtown Boston, was to be a long-awaited prize for its citizens. Competition for the project had been fierce. Every reputable and well-known firm had contended for

it. (The design contract for the North End Park went to the team of Crosby | Schlessinger | Smallridge of Boston, and Gustafson Guthrie Nichol of Seattle; and Carol R. Johnson Associates of Boston was awarded the contract for the Chinatown Park.)

The high point had come when we had presented our winning preliminary designs to Senator Edward Kennedy, and everything about the project seemed poised to move forward quickly. As it turned out, that would be our last moment of calm for a very long time. As Alan Berger commented later in an article he wrote for *Landscape Architecture* magazine, “After seeing what EDAW has gone through over the past year, the losing teams are probably now thinking they were the actual winners.”³

EDAW went into Boston with its usual resources: a talented design team, a sincere willingness to work closely with the public to forge a common vision, and adequate political know-how to deal with the powers that be. As we embarked on the project, we understood from the MTA that the Boston Central Artery Master Plan, put together in 1999 by SMWM of San Francisco, had set out the basis for the design and a vision for the Greenway. (See color image 1.) We learned that numerous public meetings had taken place over the last 15 years, and therefore we assumed that the general direction was determined and the issues resolved. Our job, we thought, was to design the \$16 million Wharf District Park and hold a few public meetings to vet the design with stakeholders and the public. Only much later would we discover that our public process for the Wharf District Park would be the most thorough and inclusive process ever attempted in Boston. It would have helped to have known this from the outset.

But in those early, halcyon days, everything seemed straightforward, including the public process. We would hold meetings with stakeholders, some in groups and several in one-on-one interviews. These would continue over a few months while we worked on the design for the park. We scheduled meetings with several groups of stakeholders. These included more than 60 business owners in the Wharf District, represented by the Artery Business Committee (ABC); occupants of the residential towers designed by I. M. Pei in the 1970s, represented by the Wharf District Task Force; and the Mayor’s Central Artery Completion Task Force, appointed by Mayor Menino and cochaired by Mark Maloney, director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and Robert Tuchmann, a prominent Boston real estate attorney. The Completion Task Force was charged with overseeing governance and funding of the parks and open space above the downtown portion of the project, as well as coordinating the interaction of the adjoining neighborhoods with the project.

Another stakeholder was the National Park Service, part of a parks consortium that planned to build pavilions in the Wharf District Park to

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1-4 High school students from Mayor Menino's Youth Leadership Council comprised one of several stakeholder groups that became involved in the design process. © 2003 by EDAW.



serve as downtown gateways to the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area. A number of other groups and individuals took part in discussions and meetings, including local historians, design professionals, high school and college students, and various nonprofit organizations.

As previously noted, for the project, we associated with Copley Wolff Design Group, a Boston-based firm. Both Lynn Wolff and John Copley, long-time residents of Boston, are committed professionals who have been adroit at producing award-winning work in the Boston environment. Our lead designer was Dennis Carmichael, an EDAW principal and vice president, recipient of dozens of design awards, and 2006 president of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA). In short, ours was a highly experienced and capable team. Initially, many of the stakeholders, who were interested in the design team's depth and range of experience, seemed satisfied with the prospect of working with us. But soon we were hit with the opposite impression—specifically, that the local design community believed that a *Boston* park needed a *Boston* firm in the lead. This was our earliest and clearest sign of trouble ahead.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Boston began constructing the Big Dig in 1991, and the Rose Kennedy Greenway is in its final stage. Because it seems to have gone on forever,

anticipation for the Greenway parks had grown to a fever pitch. Completion of the Wharf District Park would mark the reconnection of the city and financial district to the harbor. Our mission was to design a world-class park, a twenty-first-century icon suited to historic Boston. A challenge for our design team, certainly, but the objectives seemed clear. In early meetings, a group of local architects, designers, and artists expressed their lack of enthusiasm for yet another round of discussions about ideas and visions. This was the message as we understood it: if we were award-winning international designers of urban parks, we should just get on with the work and show them some designs.

► **Lynn Wolff, Principal, Copley Wolff Design Group:** During the public process, and as the physical structure of the “green monster” was being disassembled, the excitement, urgency, and passion that participants felt was palpable. In their minds, this park had to be worth the long wait, worth the inconveniences of construction, and worthy of their investment of time and energy. The Wharf District Parks was the most important final reward the City of Boston had within its reach.⁴

During a weeklong public charrette in April 2003, we produced five design schemes (Cultural Plaza, Four Seasons Garden, Civic Promenade, Historic Tableau, and Common Ground). (See color images 2 through 6.) At the end of the week, we previewed the designs at a well-attended presentation at the Boston Aquarium. Many Boston residents came to the soiree afterward and shared their comments, both positive and negative. The next day, during a meeting with the MTA and the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), the city’s planning and development bureau, everyone politely expressed myriad likes and dislikes. Overall, however, things seemed to be moving smoothly. Indeed, an article written by Tom Palmer for the *Boston Globe* noted “the euphoria over actual forward movement on Surface Artery designs.”⁵ We thought we were on our way in what appeared to be a challenging but fairly normal process. As it turned out, our sense of well-being would be short-lived.

Five days later, another article by Palmer appeared in the *Boston Globe*, this one conveying quite the opposite impression. It reported strong criticism by “Boston officials and the Mayor’s Surface Artery Completion Task Force” of our charrette designs, which were suddenly labeled uninspiring and disappointing.⁶ True, the article noted that city officials had aimed their criticism at the MTA rather than EDAW; nevertheless, we felt wounded in the crossfire. Worse was to come, and quickly. The next day, after settling into an airline seat for a trip back to Atlanta, I turned to the *Boston Globe*’s opinion page, where my eyes fixed on this headline: “Mawkish Clichés for the Wharf District.”⁷ Written by William M. Fowler, Jr., the executive director of the Massachusetts

Historical Society, the piece was scathing. He declared that one of the charrette designs “succeeds only in enshrining clichés about our past” and that the others “give virtually no recognition of the neighborhoods around them.” He punctuated these remarks by saying that “EDAW has gone astray.” Fowler concluded (echoing criticism of the MTA): “Until the city becomes the client we are likely to continue to suffer from well-meaning but ill-informed designers.” It was a rude awakening, and as the plane took off for Atlanta, I began to feel deeply uneasy about EDAW’s future in Boston.

The design ideas that emerged from our charrette had not been intended to be particularly edgy. Rather, the design team, having done this many times in many cities, responded to the challenge to show the public something quickly. After all, the primary reason for conducting open public design workshops and charrettes is to give the public and the designers the chance to exchange ideas and illustrate the results. Most designers will agree that charrettes offer an opportunity to share ideas and reach some kind of understanding as to what the public is seeking in a design solution. We believed that our designs at this stage achieved this and could serve as a good basis for going forward. Others, clearly, viewed the designs differently. The professional stakeholders wondered if this was the best we could do, while members of the public thought that the designs were our final offer and now it was up to them to make a choice. Unfortunately, this miscommunication was not immediately apparent to us, and it took us a while to figure out what was going on.

In the next few months, we did our best to respond to numerous critiques. We worked hard to keep up with a challenging schedule of seeking more feedback, revising designs, and conducting public meetings to display the latest new and improved designs. But it seemed the more changes we made, the more negative our detractors and the press became. What we didn’t realize then was that we were trying to find solutions through the design when the problems actually lay elsewhere.

One midweek night, Tom Palmer, the *Boston Globe* reporter who had been covering our saga, called to ask me for a quote about a copy of a letter he had received. Addressed to Matthew Amorello, our client and chairman of the MTA, and cosigned by the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) and the Boston Society of Landscape Architects (BSLA), the letter pointedly disparaged the EDAW team’s designs and suggested that the BRA should take over the process.⁸ I hadn’t seen the letter, and Palmer’s deadline was looming, so he faxed it to me in Atlanta. “We feel [the EDAW design team] have so misunderstood our city that we are recommending the process stop and we all take evaluation of what went wrong,” the letter read. It went on to ask, “How could such a great opportunity and large public process result in such uninformed designs?”

We encourage the Turnpike Authority to utilize the BRA for their insight into the context we are working in.”⁹ I was taken aback, to put it mildly. I’d never experienced professionals, without some previous conversation, publicly airing their complaints about another firm’s work. Some Boston friends brought me up to speed with a local saying: “The favorite pastimes of Bostonians are baseball, politics, and revenge.” Well, this game seemed to be hardball, and we were clearly striking out.

We couldn’t help noticing that the design teams for the North End and Chinatown parks were not encountering the same vehement second-guessing. Their public process was very different. They had far fewer constituencies to work with, and the primary players were neighborhood groups. In the North End, one neighborhood leader dealt ably with the stakeholders, including a few Italian families who insisted on duplicating the Piazza Navona. (At one point, I jokingly offered to buy her a condo in the Wharf District’s residential towers if she would help manage our public process.)

But for us, the politics kept getting rougher. We worked with our client to revise the public process plan as best we could. Commendably, MTA wanted any design revisions to be totally public. The management team, led by Fred Yalouris, was aboveboard and straight with the public every step of the way. The original public process plan, a series of five public meetings, in addition to five to seven meetings with the Mayors’



1-5 The Wharf District Task Force, organized by the City of Boston, was another stakeholder group that EDAW met with regularly throughout the duration of the public process. © 2003 by EDAW. Photograph by Dixi Carrillo.

Completion Task Force, morphed into a seemingly endless series of public meetings held every few days.

The Wharf District Task Force held standing meetings the first and third Wednesday evenings of each month, and the Mayor's Completion Task Force met every Thursday morning for several hours to review designs. Though it was not easy to turn design revisions around so quickly, the standing meetings helped us in the end by providing a regular venue to air design changes with an interested group of participants. The members of the public became the stars of the process. They seemed to sense that they would eventually get what they wanted if we all kept slogging through the process together.

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF THE PROBLEM

EDAW's experience designing high-profile parks and other projects around the world did not prepare us for what we faced in Boston. It wasn't simply that the "rules" for criticism and debate were different, but they were implemented in ways unfamiliar to us. We became caught in not one but several governance and funding dilemmas. The City, Mayor Menino, and Governor Mitt Romney all wanted control of the parks, while the MTA, led by Chairman Matthew Amorello, had no intention of relinquishing the lead. This was hardly a recipe for a productive partnership. With no accord on the question of ownership and operation of the Wharf District Park, battles raged over how maintenance and programs would be funded. No consensus had been reached on the 1999 Master Plan, no governing body had been appointed, and worries about underfunding and stewardship continued to percolate. A further complication was that the Big Dig was a major employer, and the 5,000-plus people who came to work every day with some connection to the project had very little incentive to resolve the issues—an end to the commotion could mean an end to their jobs. Perhaps most important from our point of view was the fact that EDAA had no political clout in this eminently political city.

Why was none of this clear to us at the beginning? Because we didn't do our homework. Although EDAA has 16 offices throughout the United States (as well as 5 in Asia, 4 in Australia, and 3 in Europe) and our staff is highly skillful in dealing with a wide variety of cultures, social situations, and locales, many of us found Boston to be unlike anywhere else we had worked. Simply put, we experienced some culture shock—there was something about Boston we didn't "get." And our lack of preparation and research in the beginning made our learning curve even steeper.

For example, among those who attended the public meetings, we had a broad following of professors from several universities. Indeed, it seemed that everyone at our meetings was well educated, and they all seemed to enjoy lecturing to one another. For our part, we were unprepared for the level of rhetorical flourish. And the meetings seemed to us like time-consuming and artful filibusters. In place of the usual run of comments that all design professionals have heard during public meetings—such as the need for a carousel, more play areas for children and grandchildren, and strategies for keeping skateboarders away—the Boston discussions had a distinctly loftier tone. They addressed such questions as: Where is “there?” What is the “big idea?” What is the iconic element, the “Eiffel Tower moment” of the design? I had never been involved in a public process in which so many participants seemed to delight in debate for its own sake. The Copley Wolff team members took all this in stride, but I was amazed to watch our public meetings turn into a running public seminar on design, philosophy, and history.

The Boston public seemed especially knowledgeable regarding design and fluent in the technical terms that designers use, such as “FAR” (floor area ratio) and “schematics” (early phase design drawings). Many of those who participated in our public meetings were highly accomplished designers themselves. The Big Dig process had even developed its own following—some people had been attending public meetings for 15 years. Many of them were paid to be there as consultants and attorneys hired by stakeholder groups to follow the proceedings.

Another factor that stymied us was the lack of consensus among the many stakeholder groups about what they wanted to see in the design. Each group had its own agenda, vision, and power issues. This is certainly not unusual, but, as noted earlier, we had thought that many of these issues had already been thoroughly examined and resolved.

As we struggled to keep up with the metaphysics of our park designs, we felt out of sync with the political undercurrents, unable to guess when and why complaints would arise. When we produced initial designs, the BRA planners said they were looking for the *big* design. We’d meet with the MTA and BRA, list and respond to comments, and leave town thinking all was well, only to learn by reading the *Boston Globe* a week later what the BRA did *not* like. The articles highlighted the negatives in great detail and skimmed over what we saw as positive developments.

We eventually figured out the primary source of the conflict. Years before we came on the scene, the planners at BRA had decided that they, and only they, should be responsible for the Greenway Parks and open space planning. Although they were not legally charged with park construction nor funded to design or build the parks, BRA planners strongly believed that they should be in charge. When this proposition didn’t pan

out, relations between the BRA and MTA—and everyone connected to the MTA, including our design team—became strained. Throughout the first 12 months of the Wharf District Park’s public process, the BRA’s agenda seemed to focus on taking control of the park. While residents, businesspeople, and other members of the public showed up at countless meetings to talk about their vision for the park and the evolving design, the BRA planners pursued their own objectives. Based on the process, it appeared that one of these objectives was to cast doubt on the MTA’s leadership by disparaging the park designs.

It became clear to us that the BRA’s desire to take over management of the design process was, intentionally or unintentionally, hijacking the public process. We began to interpret the BRA’s insistence that the design be “of Boston” and “common ground” as code—the implication being that we were interlopers, who ought to be run out of town. We were, we realized, caught in the middle of two parallel and challenging processes: one political, the other public. We knew we could not win both, so we chose to focus on the public process. Why? My conclusion, after years of watching the evolution of public participation, is that an astute public can always prevail. Politicians, on the other hand, follow the polls; and elections can quickly change the power structure. In the end, it’s the public who makes the decisions.

DIGGING OUT

In an effort to figure out what the real issues were, we talked to several acquaintances in Boston to gain an insider perspective. One of them told us something particularly unnerving: “The buzz about EDAW is not good.” That meant we had to fix the buzz or get out. Of course, we weren’t about to give up, so we set ourselves the task of getting the people of Boston on our side. To begin with, we had to get up to speed on a few things. We had to continue to familiarize ourselves with local issues and sort out the committees and their real agendas. They had developed their own game plans; now it was time to develop ours.

Our first order of business was the media: it was clear that our damage-control stance toward the press was not working, and we had to dispel what we felt was an unbalanced portrayal so far. Generally, we don’t use public relations consultants on specific projects, but in this case there was an obvious need to improve our public image. We brought in EDAW’s media relations manager from San Francisco, as well as Atlanta-based PR consultants we had used with success along the East Coast. Unfortunately, this initial strategy backfired. Bringing in more

people who were not “of Boston” didn’t help our cause. Our next move was to retain O’Neill and Associates, a highly recommended and politically savvy public relations firm with deep roots in Boston.

We knew our approach should be multifaceted if we were to counter the BRA’s power play, build our relationships with other stakeholders, turn around the negative press, and establish our Bostonian “bona fides.” First, we reorganized our public meeting lineup. Copley Wolff Design Group, the local firm on our design team, took on a more prominent public role. Lynn Wolff became the project’s voice, and she gently but adroitly articulated the troublesome points that people did not want to hear. John Copley applied his enviable ability to make controversial statements in public without giving offense.

Our attempt to establish boundaries with the BRA planners was less successful. After meeting with and trying to engage them, it became clear they were invested in their struggle with MTA, so we cut our losses and scheduled additional meetings with the other stakeholder groups, to get to know them and better understand their ideas and concerns.

At the same time, we continued to work diligently on the design. Our design team had to prove that we understood what “of Boston” and “common ground” meant—not just as code, but in practice. So we brought in Richard Marshall, an urban designer in our San Francisco office, who was new to our firm but well known in Boston due to his previous tenure at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He took the design back to basics, using a step-by-step, layered approach to clarify our design. (See color images 7–14.)

Although we had gone through several design phases, Richard perceived that we had failed to bring the public along with us. They may have understood design concept, but they were confused about our design and suspicious of our intentions. When we presented different visions for the entire park as a way to elicit responses, people thought we simply wanted them to choose which one they liked best and that we weren’t really interested in further suggestions. To counter this misinterpretation of our intent, as Richard put it, “The key to our success on the design side was not to intellectualize what we were doing but to simplify it and, indeed, to stop designing for awhile.”¹⁰

Richard, along with Lynn Wolff and Dennis Carmichael, dissected and clarified every inch of the design, as well as the concepts that served as its foundation. They demonstrated the design’s strong ties to Boston and the historic Wharf District. Then they pursued what Richard called an “incremental approval process,” to argue the merits of each design detail and gain approval “piece by piece, layer by layer.” The public gradually ratified the notion that, far from being generic, our design strategy



1-6 Watercolors were effective in helping the public to envision a fully built park. © 2004 by Barbara Worth Ratner.

was soundly “of Boston” and would not fit anywhere else.

Slowly, we began to gain ground. By the end of 2003, we felt we could once again open the Boston newspaper without dread. We had generated greater trust with different stakeholder groups by responding effectively to their comments. Most importantly, we had not been fired; and the MTA had stood by us despite the criticism.

The meetings continued through 2004, as the design team eked out and vetted every detail. We used plans, slide presentations, and watercolors to communicate our design ideas. Through trial and error we discovered which type of graphics the public understood and which fell flat. (See color images 15 and 16.) Numerous sections and illustrative simulations later, we hit on the secret to conveying the design ideas clearly to the public: a 1/16”=1’0” scale model that seemed almost big enough to walk through (paid for by the MTA). The model was a success—and, in retrospect, something we should have done much earlier. Once members of the public had time to study the model, they began to really comprehend what we were doing, and we were able to stop explaining and start making decisions.

As we worked more comfortably with the public, and our supporters felt more empowered, the BRA planners began to step aside. Although still raising issues from the sidelines, they seemed to turn their attention to other issues surrounding the Big Dig. Eventually, certain neighborhood and business factions that had previously been at odds joined together—a very rewarding development. The BSA and BSLA, for example, began to show some support for our efforts. Perhaps our persistence impressed them; in fact, they seemed surprised we were still around. Even the BSA member who had signed the egregious letter commented in a meeting that the design looked good, “especially after we put you through hell last summer.” Some of this vindication played out in the pages of *Landscape Architecture*, prompted by a review of the Boston process in the April 2004 issue by Alan Berger, a Harvard professor of landscape architecture.¹¹ “The advocacy groups’ modus operandi appears to be to attack one another through EDAW,” Berger wrote, “in



1-7 This model, built at 1/16"=1'0" scale, cost the client, MTA, \$40,000. Model constructed by GPI Models. Photo courtesy of Sergio Marino, GPI president.

1-8 Models, while expensive, are the best way of demonstrating the design to the public. © 2004 by Copley Wolff Design Group.

