

Park benchmarks

Boston's Esplanade can serve as a template for evaluating public spaces throughout the Commonwealth **BY ALBERT LAFARGE**

THE STATE DEPARTMENT of Conservation and Recreation recently announced that it will defer filing environmental reports on the rebuilding of Storrow Drive, with the likely result that repairs to the section near the Charles River Esplanade will not begin before 2011. Perhaps there is an opportunity in this delay. What if we were to take a close look at this beloved strip of open space, examine how it is being used, and consider how it might be improved? If we can come up with the right questions, we can generate some useful data to inform our choices in the coming years, not just on the Charles River but also at similar sites across the state.

Many people living near the Esplanade have voiced opposition to the various plans to fix Storrow, saying that the park must not sacrifice trees and green space to accommodate an upgraded roadway. (See "On District Matters, a Patrick Ally Turns Adversary," *CW*, Fall 2007.) But the Esplanade belongs to all of us, and its fate should not be determined solely by its neighbors. And who is to say that change is necessarily for the worse? After all, the Esplanade came about in the first place as compensation for the building of Storrow Drive. Maybe this new wave of construction is not a mere nuisance, but instead a chance to tweak the park in ways that will make it an even more attractive amenity.

For example, let's pay close attention to the beloved trees that might be sacrificed in the Storrow Drive repair. Do the park's users walk near them? Or do they serve more as a visual benefit to passing motorists? Are there simply too many of them? (There was a "yes" to that question in 2005, when some cherry trees were relocated because they blocked views of the lagoon.) Before we jump to conclusions, we should have a close look at the park. We might be surprised at what we find.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Several key elements of successful urban spaces were described by William H. Whyte in his book

City: Rediscovering the Center (1988), which is being republished by the University of Pennsylvania Press in a 20th-anniversary edition later this year. Among the most crucial of these elements are seating, sunlight, water, and shelter from the wind. These may sound obvious, but they're often missed by urban planners. Whyte figured out ways to measure them—and, more importantly, to gather data on how much the public actually takes advantage of these amenities. In some cases, all that he and his researchers needed was a camera and some graph paper.

SEATING. The Esplanade has many places to sit, including benches and sections of grass. But should there be more seating—perhaps to encourage people to stay longer, or to make the park more inviting for the elderly or disabled? A map that shows where people currently stop to rest, and for how long, would help answer these questions.

One place that has terrific seating is Jamaica Pond, in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood. The path around the pond is lined with old-fashioned park benches, and people use them, even if they came for a brisk walk or a jog. Recently I was walking there with my mother and we were surprised by a sudden rainstorm; luckily we were near the bandstand, a simple shelter with seats and a pleasant view in any weather.

"People sit where there are places to sit," observed Whyte in his jocular spirit of advocacy for pedestrians. He favored movable chairs, which allow people a feeling of control over exactly where they sit. But movable chairs are not widely used in Boston, although they once enlivened the parklet in front of the Boston Five Cents Savings Bank (now the Borders bookstore) at the corner of Washington and School streets. "The impulse to move chairs, whether only six or eight inches, is very strong," said Whyte. "Even where there is no functional reason for it, the exercise of choice is satisfying."

Of course, movable seats may not be practical in green spaces, and in heavily traveled spots, people may be too busy moving to and fro to stop and sit. But the movable chairs on Summer Street

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PERSPECTIVES

in front of Filene's Basement were good for a meeting spot, or a place to have a quick snack, and they should be part of the renovation plans for that block.

FOOD. "If you want to seed a place with activity, put out food," observed Whyte, stating another truism that is too often overlooked by planners. There's nary a roasted chestnut to be found on the Esplanade; in fact, food is in paltry supply throughout Olmsted's vaunted Emerald Necklace. A survey of park users would help us to discover whether there is a need that is going unmet.

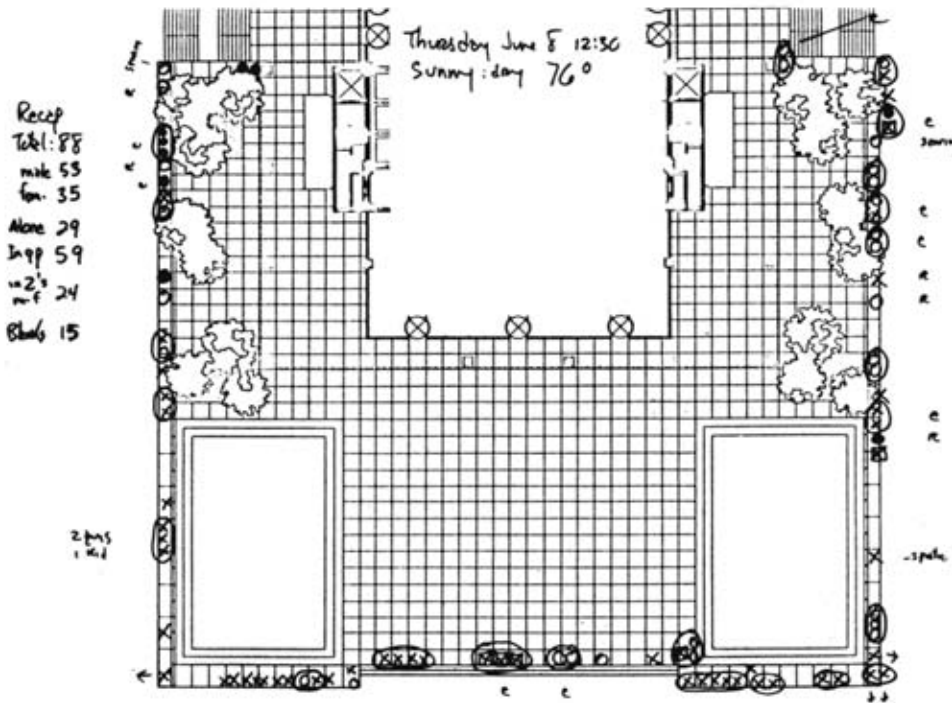
If a café or restaurant seems too complicated for the Esplanade, there are probably food vendors who would gladly set up their carts—if only they had a little encouragement from the powers that be. Whyte's observations in his pioneering Street Life Project in the 1970s led him to offer the following advice, which could be profitably applied to many of Boston's open spaces, including the Esplanade, a quarter of a century later: "People are told that food vending is bad for downtown business, bad for traffic, bad for them and their health. But people do not believe this. They like eating out-of-doors. They like the choices. They like the prices. They prefer a hot dog and a soda they can afford to a fuller lunch they cannot. So they buy. The vendors are providing what the established order is not."

Boston's Post Office Square offered a shining example of food vending that works. A branch of the Milk Street Café was a terrific little business that helped make the pocket park one of Boston's—even the world's—best urban spaces. (The branch closed at the end of last year, but a new eatery is planned for the spot.) You could get a cup of coffee, or a bowl of soup and sandwich, or just run in to beg a napkin if you brought along a bag lunch. It was easy and informal, inviting you to stay a while.

The same goes for water fountains. Are there water fountains anywhere around? If not, why not? If so, do they work? One of the most popular features of Jamaica Pond is the big water fountain right between the boathouse and the bandstand. It's a hit. Why aren't there more of those around Boston?

EVENTS. The Boston Pops is, of course, a huge draw to the Esplanade, and the Fourth of July fireworks over the Charles River Basin rank among the biggest and most festive public gatherings in the city (not counting the Red Sox's triumphal parades). But the Hatch Shell is put to only sporadic use. On most summer days it sits empty and even a little forlorn. Do people congregate there nevertheless, as if waiting for something to happen?

If more Hatch Shell events are not feasible, there might be room for smaller-scale entertainment in various spots where people can linger for a moment, as with the street performances you see now and then at Quincy Market. The heart and soul of a lively urban space is the ebb and



A “sighting map” from William H. Whyte’s *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, produced in five minutes by counting each man (x) and woman (o) sitting in a New York City park.

flow of people, hour by hour, day by day, season by season. And while the big events have the virtue of drawing people who might not otherwise visit the Esplanade, the serendipitous pleasure of ambling past a mime or a magician or a small outdoor children’s theater can enhance the experience of a summer stroll.

DENSITY. “What attracts people most, it would seem,” wrote Whyte, “is other people.” Density is one area where merely asking park users for their preferences might not yield adequate data—because they might not be fully aware of their own surroundings. Whyte’s study of New York City’s urban plazas confirmed this “self-congestion” paradox: “The two places people cite as the most pleasing, *least* crowded in New York—Paley Park and Greenacre Park—are by far and away the *most heavily used* per square foot. This is immensely encouraging, for it demonstrates how great is the carrying capacity of urban space, given a sensitive design.” (Italics added.) You can say the same about Post Office Square, or Jamaica Pond, or the Esplanade on a busy day. They feel like places you can escape to, even while thousands of other people are doing the same thing.

But you can’t discover the ideal density of a public space by asking people to guess what it would be. We need hard data on how many people the Esplanade can accommodate while still being a pleasant spot to rest.

A CALL FOR DATA

If we take a close look at the Esplanade and examine current patterns of movement and use (taking note of how we actually behave, as opposed to how we assume we

behave), we’ll learn a few things that will help us focus on smart ways to accommodate its users. If part of the Esplanade is going to get torn up in the process of the Storrow Drive repair work, and we’ll have to put it back together anyway, we might as well improve it in the process, if possible. And if the work needs to be done, we should put our energy into figuring out what users can get in return for the disturbance that will result from construction. What we don’t ask for, we won’t get.

Of course, all this speculation rests on the assumption that Boston *wants* more use of its public spaces. The overarching question is whether we want Boston and other Massa-

We need hard data on how people use the Esplanade.

achusetts cities to be big, messy, and vibrant (in short, urban) or civilized, orderly, and underused (that is, provincial).

Boston has a well-deserved reputation as one of America’s most walkable cities, and it boasts some of the best urban parks and plazas in the world. Certainly few elected officials would publicly call for less use of these urban open spaces, but underuse of space may still be a result of their policies. To the extent that voters tolerate or encourage these policies, we’re getting the city we deserve.

We may have the city we deserve, but we can still create the city we want. It’s up to us to muster the data, even if it means upsetting long-held assumptions of what a public park should look like. **CW**

Albert LaFarge is the editor of The Essential William H. Whyte (Fordham University Press, 2000).