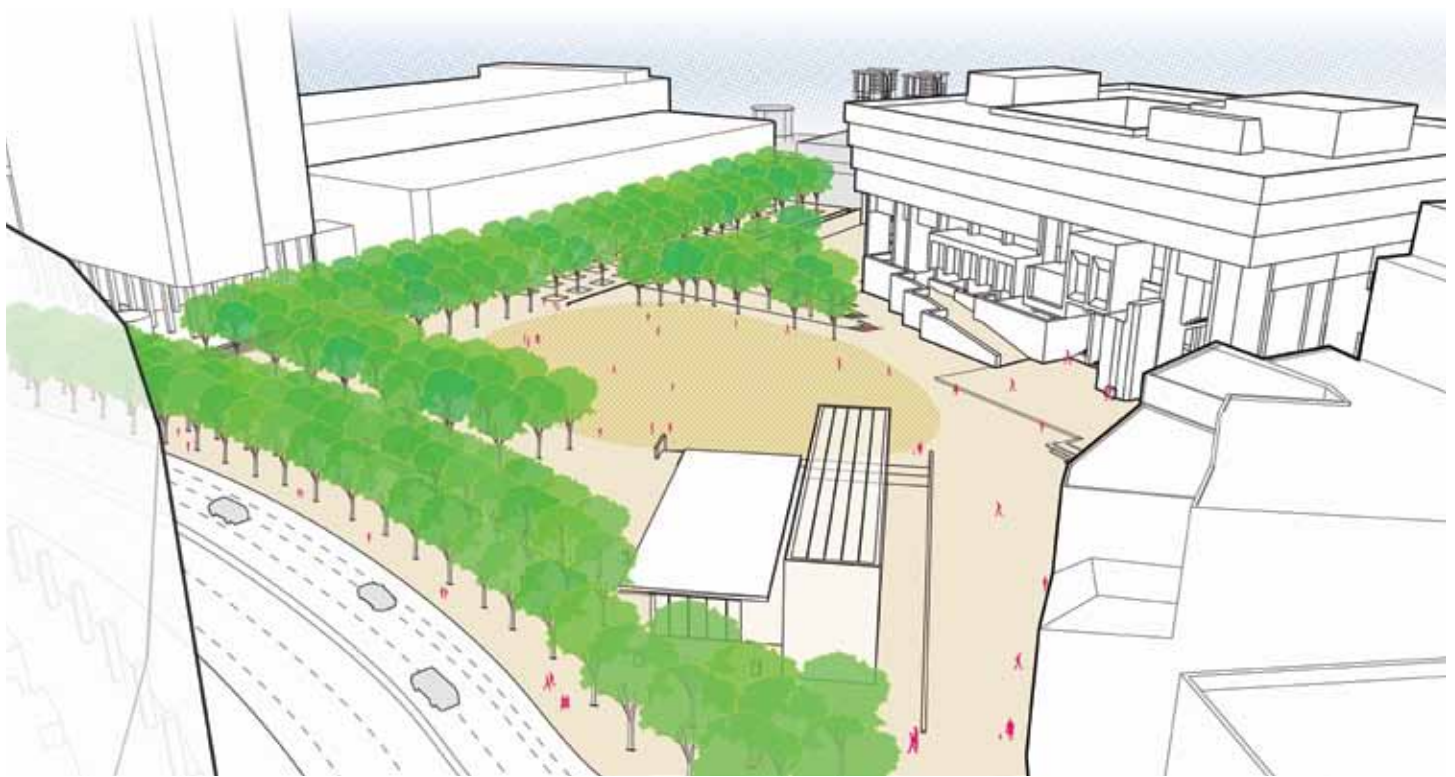


The Next Best Chance for Boston City Hall Plaza's Redesign

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One of several **City Hall Plaza** scenarios generated during an EPA-funded design charrette
Courtesy of Utile, Inc.

Letter from the Executive Director

By Sarah D. Kelly

This issue of the AllianceLetter explores the dynamic interaction between historic preservation and public space.

Contemplating the past and the future of Boston City Hall Plaza, Jon Seward calls attention to new opportunities for re-envisioning

the Modern landscape as a result of recent work by the Boston Redevelopment Authority, with support from the Environmental Protection Agency. Bill Barry describes the inception of one of Boston's most well-used urban parks, the Norman B. Leventhal Park at Post Office Square, and how the extraordinary stewardship of the park has transformed both the space and its historic context. Finally, testimony in favor of the recent designation of the Christian Science Center as a Boston Landmark demonstrates the interplay between the complex's extraordinary landscape and historic character.

Each of these examples shows that the synergy between preservation efforts and public space enhancements is not generated by accident. Rather, it results from the hard work of individuals who recognize the potential for historic preservation activities to benefit the public realm and for public realm improvements to bring to life historically significant places.

Looking forward, the Alliance invites readers of this publication to help us identify new opportunities to foster the kinetic relationship between preservation and public space, which we believe is integral to Boston's vibrancy and quality of life. [f](#) [t](#)

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Cover Story: The Next Best Chance for Boston City Hall Plaza's Redesign

by Jon Seward

With support from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), portions of the Plaza are slated to be redesigned, enhancing sustainability and creating a public space that the public might actually want to use. This opportunity has potential to be this generation's best chance to fix the Plaza, providing transformed, usable space at the city's center.

City Hall Plaza is the hub of The Hub, the meeting place of old wharves, Beacon Hill, Downtown, and the North End. However, this part of Boston has always been contentious and problematic. In its previous incarnation, Scollay Square was a center of entertainment and transportation, a favorite watering hole for sailors in port and a birthplace of burlesque. Over a decade after the end of the Second World War, seedy Scollay Square was a natural focus for Urban Renewal efforts. What the area needed was a modern, cutting edge plan that included a civic complex to trumpet Boston's rebirth, vitality, and competitiveness for a new era. The result is well known: the I. M. Pei plan (building on the first Government Center Plaza scheme by Adams, Howard and Greely) — a vast red brick desert; the MBTA bunker; One Center Plaza; TAC's John F. Kennedy Federal Building; and Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles' contentious, aloof City Hall. Scollay Square's tumult seems to have instantly transmuted into pitched critique of City Hall and the Plaza, a pitch that has never wavered, not even for the Tomb of the Bambino.

For over forty years, City Hall Plaza has played host to concerts, tennis matches, Chowderfest, World Series and Super Bowl celebrations, farmers markets, development

proposals, and design competitions. They enliven the Plaza momentarily, sometimes renewing interest, yet every day, the Plaza repels the rapidly scurrying public. So great is its renown that the Project for Public Spaces named it America's worst public space. The contrast to Quincy Market is painful.

James Hunt, Boston's Chief of Environment and Energy, has secured a fifty-four thousand dollar grant from the EPA's Greening America's Capitols program to re-envision the Plaza as a crucial link in ecosystem services, and to transform it into a welcoming and vital civic center. The City engaged a team of experts, spearheaded by Tim Love of Utile, Inc., to conduct public forums and carry out a technical design charrette, and plans are now rapidly advancing with the first elements scheduled to go into construction later this year.

A crucial difference between previous efforts and the current round of design and discussion is that the plan is incremental. It builds on existing conditions and does not call for detailed or overly specific plans. The current plan leverages available funds and projects in order to provide better accessibility across the ragged plaza, integrate the MBTA's renewed plans to rebuild the Government Center subway station, and rebuild and narrow Cambridge Street. Mr.

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Boston's City Hall Plaza's Grade Changes
 Photo courtesy of Boston Preservation Alliance

Love wants to reshape the undifferentiated immensity of the Plaza with long, sculptural ranks of mature trees. Skewed rows of trees will provide strong edges to a redesigned Cambridge Street, bounding the Plaza as canopies of new circulation paths across the Plaza, and visually connecting the new MBTA station to the JFK building. Unlike other plazas, Utile envisions a continuous, water permeable surface throughout, so the Plaza can continue to be used by scores of people and not succumb to trampling. That task is made more challenging by the subway tunnels and utilities below, constraining the areas where trees can best be planted.

Later, Utile hopes to revamp the Plaza at the Sears Crescent building, rebuild the stairs that come up from Faneuil Hall with more of the grandeur and grace they deserve, provide Hatch Shell-scaled performance and concert space, reestablish the Hanover Street corridor, activate the edges of the JFK Building and City Hall (including the brick wall of Congress Street), and perhaps most importantly, plant hundreds of trees in leafy groves. Given Mayor Menino's environmental agenda and EPA funding, a chief objective of the plan is to intercept and manage storm water, channeling rain to soak into the soil lying

beneath the bricks, watering new trees and taking pressure off the sewer system and Boston Harbor. Improved water quality and reduced heat island effect, with increased tree canopy, are crucial goals. Trees will also provide shade, shelter, and humanizing scale for Bostonians and visitors, and provide dramatic settings for signature public art.

As important as the environmental elements may be, the real proof lies in how Bostonians will feel about a revamped City Hall Plaza, and how they will use it. It is estimated that as many people work around the Plaza as around Post Office Square, yet none linger willingly. The goal is to encourage the public to find a spot to stop, linger and chat with a friend, or even eat their lunch. Thousands of people cross the Plaza daily and the challenge of this new planning effort is to design a space that will finally bring life to a space that is primed for activity. The people are already there. The trick is making them stay. Likely, this will take further rounds of planning to devise and assemble essential bits of friction and interest that catch attention and make people feel welcome and wanted. We already have what we don't want; change for the better could soon be transforming fatigue into enthusiasm. 🌱

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The Alliance would like to extend a special thank you to our friends and supporters who helped to make our 2011 Auction such a success.

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Post Office Square draws crowds in the summertime

The Vision, Success, and Legacy of Post Office Square

By William G. Barry with Research by Jennifer Barrington

For two decades, the Norman B. Leventhal Park at Post Office Square has been an undisputed success. It was visionary in its focus to provide the public amenity of an urban park, and it has thrived on many levels, including its sustainable financial model, strategic implementation, creative design, meticulous operation, and overwhelming popularity.

The area we now know as Post Office Square has a varied history dating back to its origins in early eighteenth century maritime rope making. However, by the late 1970s, the blight of a deteriorating parking garage under seemingly intractable ownership was causing surrounding buildings to reorient their street addresses outward and away from the structure. Boston developer Norman B. Leventhal, a native of Dorchester and son of Jewish immigrants, was on the heels of a successful development in the neighborhood when he decided that the city deserved better. He began to create awareness among civic and business leaders, convincing them of the potential to turn things around. The vision of an urban

park for downtown Boston would require a sustainable financial model and tactical expertise in planning and execution. For this, Mr. Leventhal turned to Robert Weinberg, former director of Massport, to build and lead a coalition of supporters, which was incorporated in 1983 as the Friends of Post Office Square.

The success of Friends of Post Office Square would grow from an initial investment in creating a unique place, a sustained cash flow, the practicalities of operation, and a commitment to long-term maintenance and care. The seven-story underground parking garage, which required state-of-the-art, below grade construction, has put into place a sustainable revenue

stream to support the park above. According to Pam Messenger, general manager of the Friends, “the park and garage are an integrated operation, yet many who enjoy the park above don’t even know about the garage below, and that’s fine with us.”

The Halvorson Design Partnership was selected to create the space through a major competition. Their work resulted in a pleasant composition of a small yet diverse landscape including several specimen trees on loan from the Arnold Arboretum. The evidence of their success is the park’s aesthetic appeal and popular support. We know that quality design elicits the respect of users. So does good maintenance – people take better care of places that are taken care of. The



Activity in Post Office Square

commitment to design and maintenance here have proven to be wise investments. Quality design can be discussed in terms of form, material, and detail, and this park has it all. The parking garage ramps are skillfully placed and hardly noticeable, and a variety of informal seating options on perimeter walls enable amazing capacity at peak hours. This delightful and lush place is a decompression zone, essential to the success of the surrounding urban density.

Today, the Norman B. Leventhal Park at Post Office Square is hugely popular. “During the summer it’s like throwing a party for one thousand people every day, including set up and break down,” says Pam Messenger. The social aspect of the park is one of its most celebrated qualities. Here, people can watch or engage on their own terms, as indicated by one of the park’s many nicknames, “Green Beach”.

The on-going efforts to improve the quality of place keep it attractive. The park’s management seeks to anticipate trends and look for ways to capitalize on change, like offering Wi-Fi to those enjoying the park. Soon, a “Library on the Lawn” will provide a rolling cart of books for free use as an extension of the very successful seat cushions currently offered. The park is always brainstorming new programs and activities, and they stay in touch with users through Facebook and Yelp. It is by popular demand that experimental musical

entertainment such as a harpist and a strolling violinist will be returning this season. As an urban living room, people use the park for recreation as well as an alternative work place. The park’s attention to detail and vigilant maintenance is obvious at first glance. As the physical fabric of the park ages, components will at some point require replacement. However, the Friends of Post Office Square hope to recognize those moments as an opportunity, not just to refresh, but also to re-invent certain aspects and keep things interesting for all.

The impact of the Norman B. Leventhal Park beyond its existence as an urban amenity and as a catalyst for redevelopment of the surrounding historic properties is made clear in a conversation with Dick Galvin of Commonwealth Ventures, the developer of the New England Telephone & Telegraph Building at 50 Post Office Square. He reminds us that, “In the end, real estate development is all about leasing to tenants, and having an amenity like the park outside your front door is key. In our case, it was a major driver for our investors.” The park is a key component of his development’s brand, influencing design, as well as programmed uses. As a design response to a park that was not there when his building was first built, the front lobby will open up to visually connect with the park. Moreover, the restaurant he has planned for Pearl Street might just get Boston closer to

evening activity that will only expand the park’s hours of use.

In addition to its great value as a world-class urban park, the legacy of Post Office Square is also found in the relationships it has helped cultivate. Many of these relationships have spun off to create new organizations and have enabled other collaborative successes elsewhere in the city. The coalition of supporters for the Norman B. Leventhal Park created links of lasting value to the city. Today, however, Bob Weinberg emphasizes that you would not be able to do a project like Post Office Square in the same way. He explains, “Major businesses are no longer locally rooted as they once were, and important civic matters are less driven from the top down, but more from the bottom up. That means advocacy and activist groups who reach out to broad constituencies like the Boston Preservation Alliance are essential to the city’s future.” He believes that success in Boston’s competition with other major cities comes down to simply being a desirable place to live and work.

The sustained success of the Norman B. Leventhal Park at Post Office Square seems assured with such an exemplary initial development and forward thinking management regarding its continued fiscal health, aesthetic appeal, and popular amenities. This is a special place that has a lot going for it — location, design quality, sun, air, food, and people. 🌳

Boston's Christian Science Center: A Modern Complex Celebrated



The length of the **Reflecting Pool** punctuated by the height of the **Administration Building**
Photo courtesy of Boston Preservation Alliance

Following over two years of advocacy, Boston's Christian Science Center was designated as a Boston Landmark in March 2011. The designation resulted from careful deliberation by a subcommittee of the Boston Landmarks Commission with active participation from the Boston Preservation Alliance and others.

The designation of the Christian Science Center was as much about its publicly accessible and much-enjoyed landscape as it was about the individual buildings that it contains. Many voices spoke out during the review process for designation, touching upon the many ways in which the public space of the complex interfaces with its Modern architecture. Following are a sampling of these voices.

David Fixler

President, and Marie Sorensen, Content Coordinator, New England Chapter of Docomomo/US, a working party of Docomomo International

The Christian Science Center is one of the most important and complete works of modern urban design in the world. Its significance stems from the quality, unity, and integrity of the buildings, landscape, and three-dimensional urban space. The architectural features of the complex — including the reflecting pool, hardscape, and planted areas — are interdependent as critical design elements in a manner that reinforces the relationship of the buildings to their site, and the complex as a whole to the city.

The Christian Science Center Complex is not only important as a modern site, but also as an example of a uniquely Bostonian manifestation of modernism as it responds to and engages with historic buildings in a dynamic, contemporary, and sustaining way. Modern and historic meet and engage within the plazas, colonnades, and façades. For Boston, this complex is one of the most important examples of an historic institutional and urbane space that joins classical buildings with modern formality and public character.

For the benefit of those who were not present at the designation hearings: it has been an excellent and thorough process of understanding, discussing, and describing the nature and history of the complex — documenting and agreeing upon the importance and integrity of the basic relationships of landscape, buildings, and urban space — and of foreseeing the opportunities and possibilities of change, and the meaning of change within this internationally and locally significant urban site.

Keith Morgan

Director of Architectural Studies,
Boston University

To use the term important for the development of the Vieux Carré Commission in New Orleans, it is the “tout ensemble” of the Christian Science Church Center Complex that makes all of the elements detailed in the Study Report important as an interlocking matrix. Obviously, the magnet of the group is the Mother Church Extension as an object that dominates the neighborhood and is easily recognized on the skyline of the city. What gives

the church building gravitas and urban punctum is the framing of the core with a subtly coordinated series of functional objects — the buildings — of uniform and very fine quality concrete construction. This hardscape is both characteristic of international developments in architecture and planning of its period and distinctive as one of the greatest visual successes of its moment and typology. Brilliantly holding its own against the concrete geometry

inappropriate changes. Cutting across the pool or lessening the depth and the way that the water spills magically over the elevated curving edge would remove much of what makes this central element so unusual in world architecture. For residents of this section of Boston, highly successful park areas exist in close proximity in all directions. However, the Christian Science Church Center Complex represents a very different, an atypically Boston, form of urbanism

Hideo Sasaki had on the creation of the landscape. Ideas of nobility and authenticity couple with the material, the formal organization of the complex, the clarity of the architecture and the elegance of the public environments, are all part of a sense that architecture can aspire to envision a public realm that ennobles society.

The more we (co-curators Mark Pasnik, Michael Kubo, and I) have been involved with the Boston Preservation Alliance, the



Modern detailing
Photo courtesy of Boston Preservation Alliance



The **Sunday School Building** seems to “float” on the Reflecting Pool
Photo courtesy of Boston Preservation Alliance

and armature is the magical floating form of the reflecting pool. The excellent Study Report quotes Araldo Cossutta’s own description of the rationale for the design:

Today it is difficult to imagine the Church Center without its reflecting pool. Yet, the idea was not immediately evident. Apart from the symbolic aspect of water in Christianity and its capacity to reflect and enhance reality, the water mirror lends character, resolves the dilemma as to the architectural purpose of the space, and clearly organizes the relationship of the Sunday School, Colonnade, and Administration Buildings, which together with the Publishing House support as they do the Church Edifice.

Cossutta directs our eye to the shimmering sheet of water, the water mirror, as the element that integrates and resolves the competing interests of the granite, limestone, and concrete structures. The water is the essential component of this internationally important complex and is potentially the most vulnerable element. We must insure that this great water mirror not be allowed to crack or be clouded by

that needs to be preserved without being destroyed by some misguided softening.

Chris Grimley

over,under and pinkcomma

Two years ago our office, over,under, and our gallery, pinkcomma, began the HEROIC Project. The goal of our project is to reread Boston’s concrete buildings as Heroic not for their formal qualities alone (although they are often structurally, conceptually, visually heroic), but more notably for the ambitions, aspirations, and ideals that underlay them. This project documents over one hundred and fifty buildings constructed and made during the years 1957 — and the founding of the BRA — through 1976 — with the re-opening of Faneuil Hall, and a return to a more historic understanding of the city.

Of those buildings catalogued, we have begun to prioritize our research on a number of the top buildings of that era, and the Christian Science Complex is easily at the apex of the list. This is not simply attributable to the exquisite work that Araldo Cossutta and I.M. Pei’s office were able to accomplish, but also the integral role that

more we understand the difficulty in attaining status for landscapes. While attending a discussion organized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation this past summer at Paul Rudolph’s Second Church, it became apparent that the landscape was an equal player in both the preservation of the complex and integral in cementing Sasaki’s reputation as the prime catalyst in the modernization of landscape architecture. The ideas embodied in the center are orchestrated to elicit joy: the reflecting pool’s silent and stoic beauty; the bosque of trees that shade and frame the contained gardens that buffer the approach to the pool; the commensurate open space opposite, allowing for unimpeded views and strolls; one could go on. Of all of the open spaces that were made in Boston during that period, we believe that the Christian Science complex resonates the most with the surrounding neighborhoods and provides many kinds of experiences not available in other open ‘gardens’ in the city. In the summer, the pool and fountain become one of the most active and wonderful landscapes to be on a hot summer’s day. 🌊

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Sarah D. Kelly, the Alliance's executive director, presents **Pam Messenger**, general manager of the Friends of Post Office Square with a token of appreciation.
Photo courtesy of Boston Preservation Alliance

Alliance Honors Friends of Post Office Square at 2011 Auction

Over two hundred people joined the Boston Preservation Alliance as we honored the Friends of Post Office Square at our 16th annual Auction on April 14th. The event was held at the New England Telephone & Telegraph Building on Post Office Square, thanks to the generous donation of event space by Commonwealth Ventures.

The Alliance raised over \$80,000 at the event, all of which supports our ongoing advocacy on behalf of Boston's historic places and our neighborhood preservation workshop program in underserved communities throughout the city. Thank you to everyone who attended and helped to make the evening a great success! 🙌

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