

The July 24, 2003 meeting of the Mayor's Central Artery Task Force was devoted to public comment on the current design alternatives for the Chinatown/Leather District and Wharf District parks. At the outset of the discussion on the Wharf District parks I referred to the BRA's role in approving the park designs at the end of the present preliminary design stage and stated that, while the Chinatown/Leather District designs were progressing in a fashion that would likely lead to approval, the three current alternative Wharf District park designs do not provide a basis for an acceptable preliminary design. The problem stems in part from their not being clearly grounded in guiding principles that draw upon their unique place in the city or within the Greenway as a whole. In his remarks Co-Chair Rob Tuchmann reinforced my concerns. I then asked Prataap Patrose, BRA Director of Urban Design, and Robert Kroin, Chief Architect, to make a presentation focused on the kind of analysis that is required to generate park design principles that capture the distinctive character of their site.

At the end of the discussion the Task Force requested that Rob's remarks and the BRA presentation be made available to the members and the public. We have placed them on our website to insure that all interested citizens have access to them.

Mark Maloney,
Director

Memorandum

From: Robert Tuchmann
To: Mayor's Central Artery Completion Task Force
Date: July 24, 2003
Re: Wharf District Alternative Design Concepts

We turn now to a continuation of our discussion from last week about three alternate design concepts presented to us by the Wharf District final design team.

First, I would like to say a word about the spirit in which we should conduct this discussion. We must proceed with the understanding that everyone involved is well intentioned, honest, competent and eager to do the right thing. This is not a discussion about motives but about results. We must acknowledge that we all want what is best for the City and that we all share a desire to identify what that is.

Second, we must acknowledge the difficulty of this task for the designers. They began with an excellent master plan which gave them a good understanding of both design issues and the anticipated program. However, that only gets us through 80% of the task. The job is now to search out the identity of these spaces, their context, their future, and their meaning to abutters, the surrounding neighborhoods, the city and the region. We must then create a design which expresses that identity in its simplest terms. This brings to mind the work of Maya Lin in designing the Vietnam Memorial. Her simple design provides the catalyst for memory, but the visitor brings his or her full range of emotions to the experience. I think we can see similar examples in the Public Garden, the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, the Esplanade and the Emerald Necklace. In each of these parks, the setting is clear and simple and the visitors bring the activity, excitement and diversity. The park setting provides the infrastructure and the opportunity.

Third, we are not "there" yet. However, we should not become angry but instead be inspired to help arrive at a solution. It may take some more time, but we must get it right. Our fellow citizens, our children and grandchildren will not forgive us if we don't.

The discussion last week, as well as the presentation in the neighborhood, and the memoranda which I circulated by e-mail, distill for me the following needs:

- A. We must have a focused discussion on what we want these parks to say about us and our city.
- B. We must determine what the unique physical context calls for.
- C. We must decide what uses and activities will occur there.
- D. Then we must determine what is the simplest design which will achieve what we want.

Needless to say, others in the room may have other questions which you feel we must address.

Now I would like us to determine how we should proceed to discuss these issues. Do we need to convince each other that we need to address these basic questions? If so, then let's do that. If not, then we need to plan the process to resolve these questions. For instance, should we have more Task Force meetings to discuss each one? Should we create subcommittees? Should the designers lead charrettes? And what should the timing of these discussions be?

Finally, how can we best use our time today? How do we get to the "ah ha!" moment? How can we create a discussion in which comments and ideas will spark insights by others and advance our thinking? In some respects, it is as if we are researchers looking for the cure for cancer.

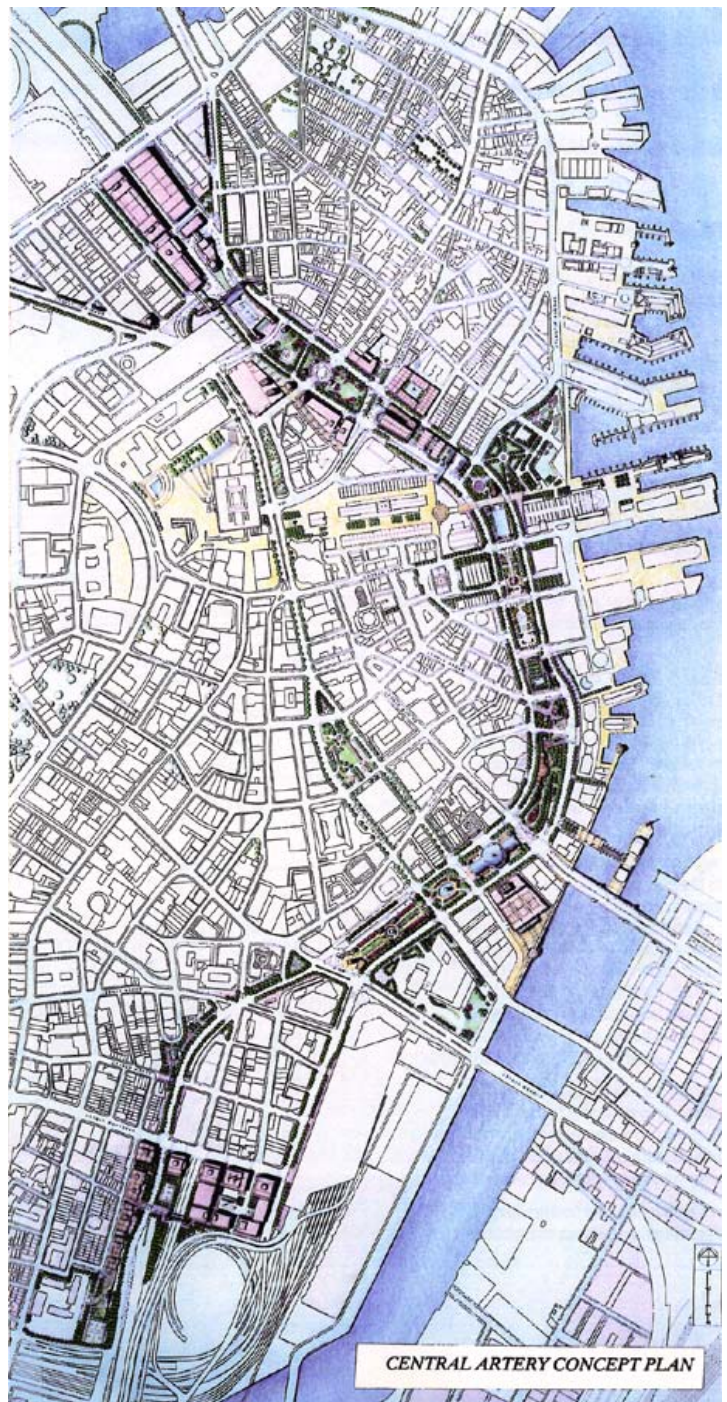
I invite your ideas and reactions.

BRA Response to Wharf District Parks Options

Background: Adding to Boston's Park System



For two decades the BRA has seen the city's surface above the Big Dig as an opportunity to dramatically enhance Boston's park system and to reunite the districts that were torn apart in the 1950s by the construction of the Central Artery. The parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted connecting the Commonwealth Avenue Mall through the Back Bay Fens to Franklin Park and beyond, often called the Emerald Necklace, has always been an incomplete loop. Recently however the notion of extending the Fens and the Charles River Esplanade as a series of parks running through the city over the Big Dig has emerged as a concept, the Rose Kennedy Greenway, for extending the Emerald Necklace and bringing it closer to completion.



The figure ground drawing clearly shows the damage, the tear in the urban fabric, caused by the demolition of hundreds of residential and commercial buildings necessitated by the building of the elevated highway. The North End was isolated from the rest of the city; downtown Boston was separated from its waterfront; Chinatown was cut through the middle with the loss of many homes and businesses. The Rose Kennedy Greenway makes it possible to reweave the urban fabric and reunite the downtown districts.

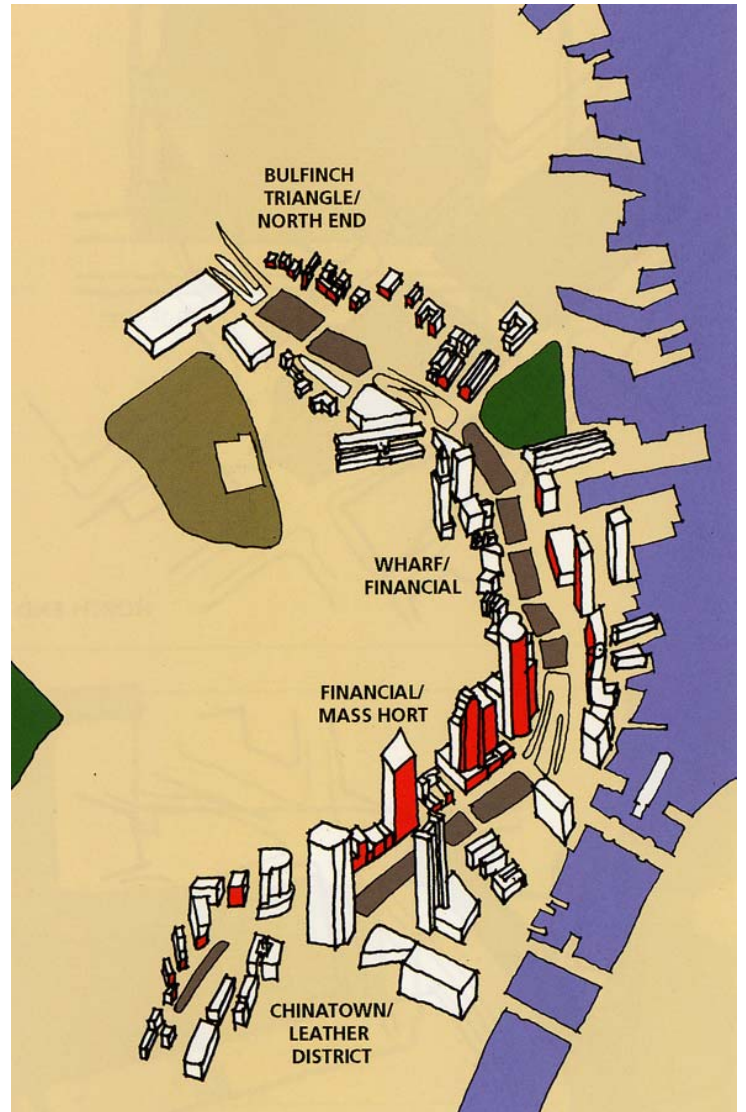
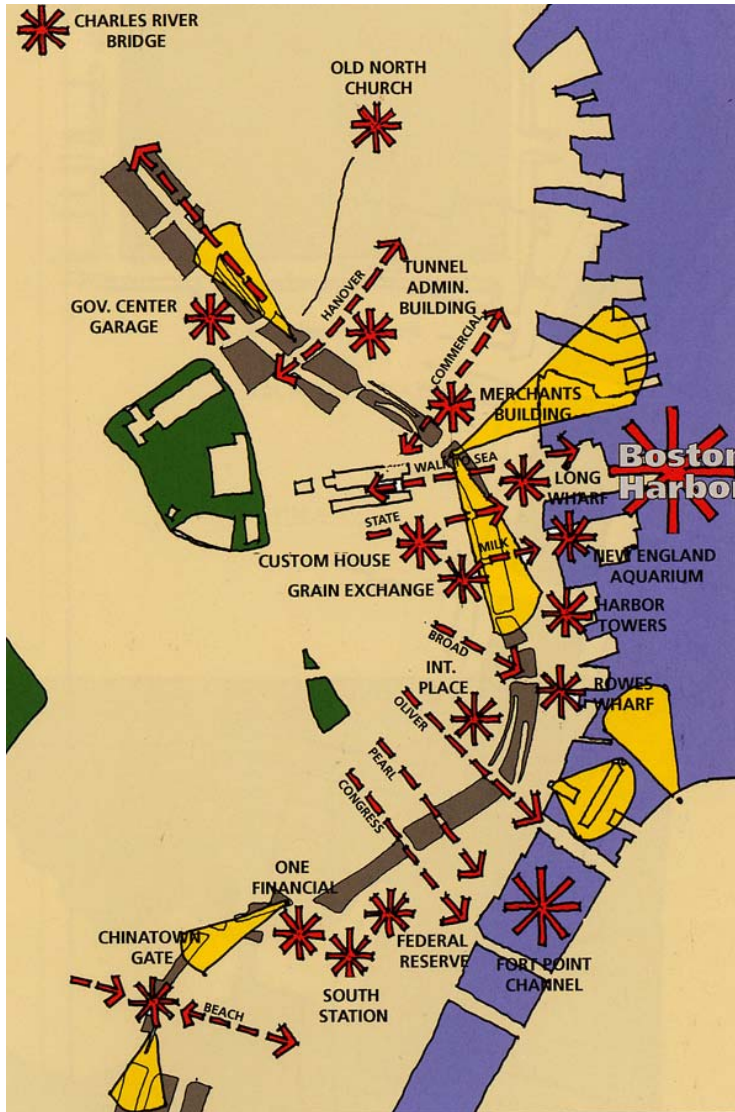
In the 1980s the BRA led the effort to create a design concept that would guide the State and the City in rebuilding the area over the underground central artery. The State and City agreed that the surface would be reconstructed as a sequence of related parks. The State's environmental certificate and the City's new zoning established the regulations for implementing the parks concept. Inherent in the concept was the idea that the parks would offer continuity from north to south and connections from east to west.

Boston's Complex Urban Fabric



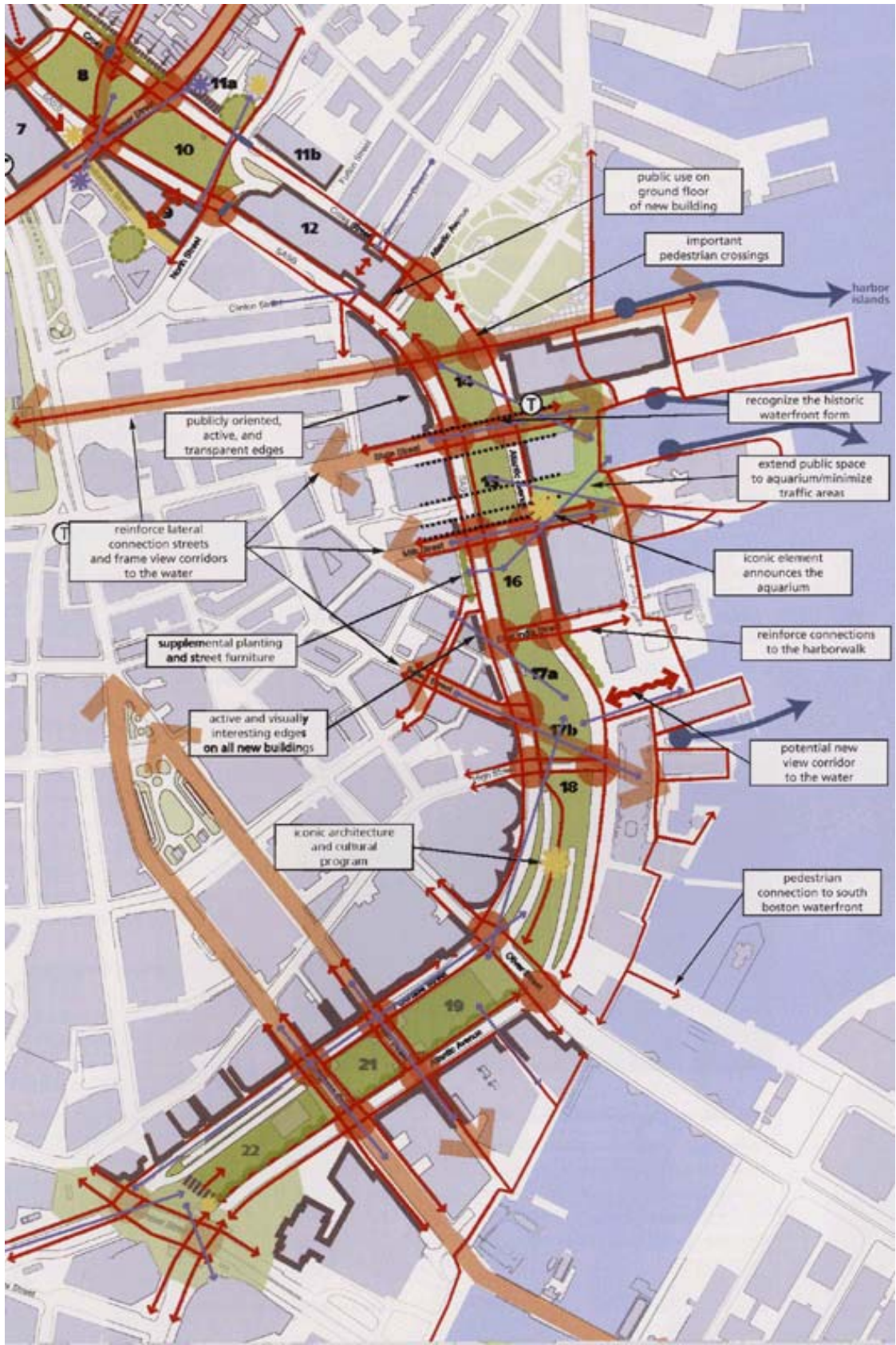
Boston's complex physical character, its irregular street pattern and its unpredictable juxtapositions, makes connections between neighborhoods difficult to create, but nowhere in the city is it more complex than in the Wharf District where land and water, large and small, old and new, built and natural all of its 400 years of history come together. Making a seam that sews together the waterfront, financial district, the historic Broad Street district, and the Faneuil Hall markets at the location where the Greenway changes its direction and also connects to the South Boston waterfront requires an intimate understanding of the complex city form and reliance on the long-established principles that should inform the creative effort.

SMWM analysis: Artery Corridor



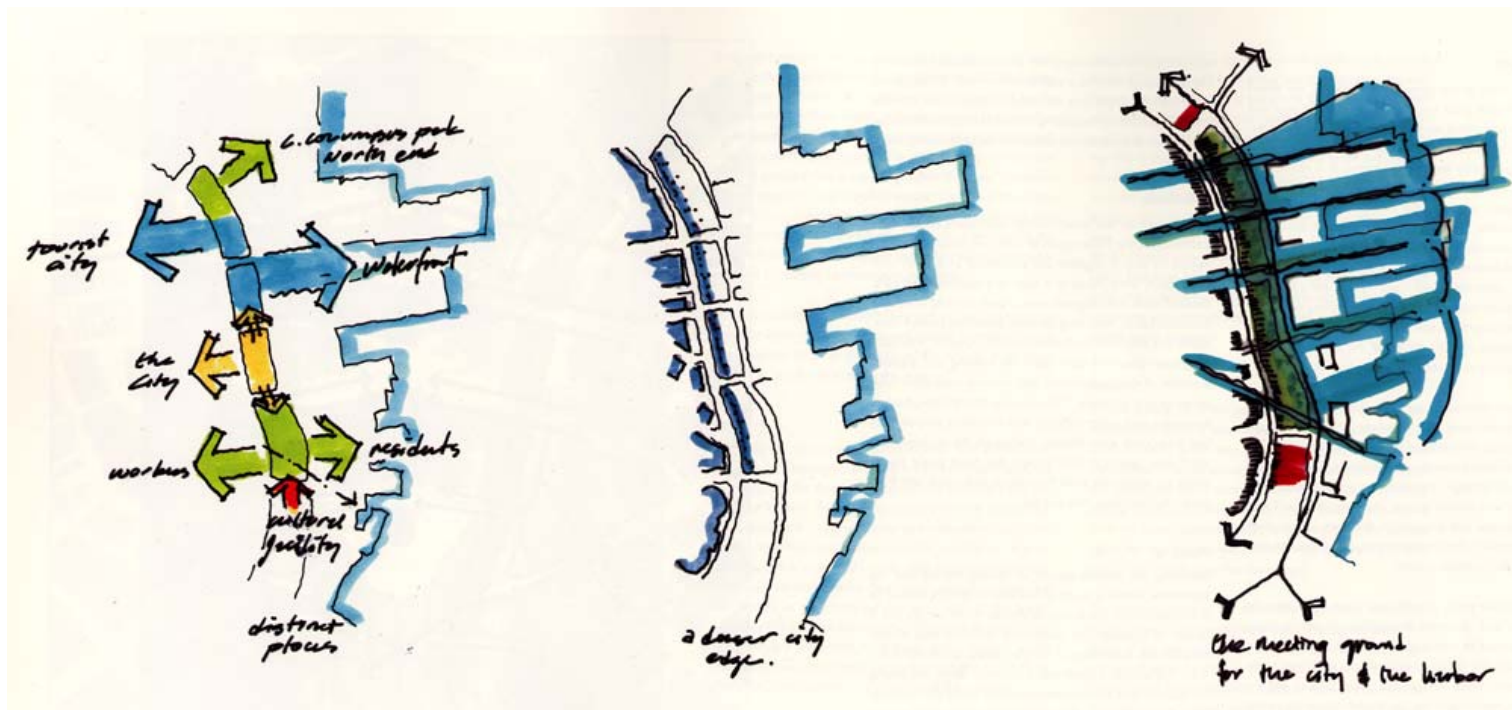
The BRA's Guidelines, the Boston 2000 Plan, the SMWM Master Plan, the STAF Process, and numerous other documents have analyzed the Wharf District and its relationships to the other sections of the Greenway and described the principles necessary to guide a creative response to the challenges. The findings have been published as both simple and complex diagrams indicating the importance of the overlapping contexts.

SMWM analysis: Wharf District



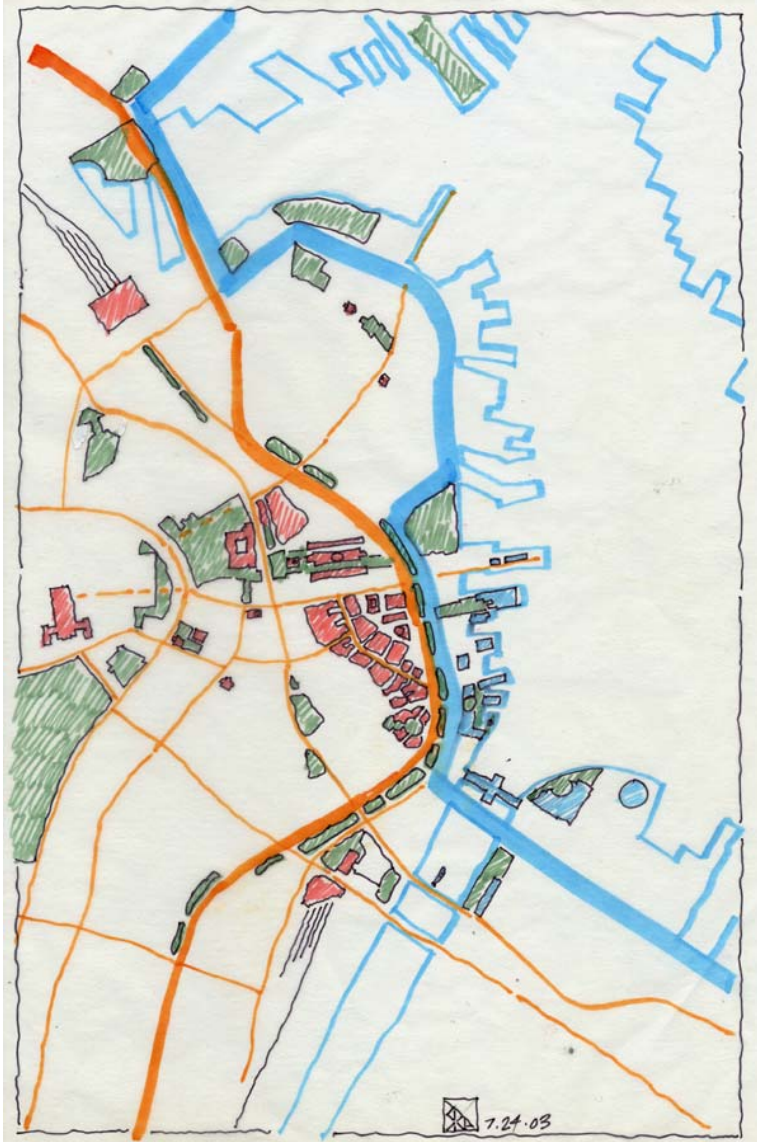
The Wharf District Parks Design Process has so far been unable to produce the synthesis that could bring together disparate but essential elements of a successful design. At this point we need the creative spark that absorbs the analysis and gives it the kind of form that has the power to capture the imagination.

The Wharf District: The Opportunity



The following three maps illustrate and reiterate the principles and standards which have been on the table since the beginning of the Wharf District Parks Design Process as our guidelines for evaluating the park designs. The Wharf District blocks represent a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make both connections and reconnections: to connect the city to the harbor, certainly, but beyond that to connect *us* with a transformed experience of the city, to connect us to our history, our past, present, and future—our memories and desires. Our history includes our mistakes as well as our triumphs. We believe we are strong enough to acknowledge our mistakes. The parks ought to demonstrate our triumph over our mistakes and our ability to turn blight into delight. The Wharf District parks offer the opportunity create common ground where people of all backgrounds come to share not only space but experience. To fulfill this grand opportunity the parks need not only the place for people to get together but also the reason to be there.

A Review of: The Bigger View



One way to think about the unities and continuities in the city is that they provide the organizing framework to display the special character of each district. Think of Commonwealth Avenue and how its organizing framework unifies, the not so obvious, outrageously different architectural styles along its length. Consider how much would be lost if each block of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall had a different park on it.

The blue band represents our waterfront boulevard; it collects and organizes the harbor buildings, views, parks, and paths. The orange band represents the urban artery; it collects and organizes the districts, streets, landmarks, and places. The green band takes the Greenway concept and makes it a reality that enhances the parks system. All three of these bands come together at the Wharf District—a very special condition.

We have to be able to see the Greenway as one park. Likewise, we must see the Wharf District blocks as one park. Each of the individual blocks must refer to the larger whole, to the elements that unite them. The Wharf District parks have to relate to the city, the harbor, the park system, and each other in a way that responds to the dynamic nature of how we will experience them in three dimensions over time.

The Wharf District



The closer view of this district illustrates the obvious: it's all about the harbor, because that's what draws us here. The parks should anticipate the harbor by allowing us to see, smell, and feel what's in store at the water's edge, as well as views back to the Boston downtown skyline and layers of history present in these views. The parks aren't a substitute for the waterfront. Perhaps the parks shouldn't be destinations at all but rather spaces that prepare us for the bigger experience.

The orange, blue, and green bands are time lines as well as lines through space; they bring us in physical and visual contact with four hundred years of history. The intersection of the three bands illustrates the complexity of the Wharf District. Things don't fall into neat patterns and that's part of what makes it Boston. The parks need to interpret this complexity for us—not on brass plaques, but in their urbanism and design.

Views: an Example of Wharf District Complexity



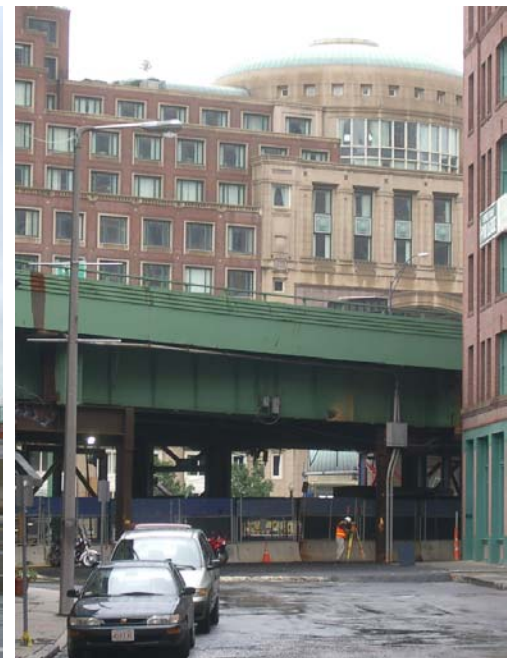
Views and view corridors are one aspect of that complexity. The views include distant vistas, broad panoramas, and fleeting glimpses. The views aren't static; take a few steps and it's all different. They overlap each other. They juxtapose land and water, old and new. Our narrow downtown streets don't allow us to see the big picture but the parks give us a 'picture window' and a way to understand our city. They show us how the Wharf District is unique 3 dimensional, changing experience that orients and re-oriens one to the complex relations that make up the district. What a different city we see when we look at the Back Bay from Commonwealth Avenue Mall, for example, or East Boston from Piers Park.

Views are important because they connect us to place and time; they make history visible; and they make Boston's topography understandable by revealing the shape of the peninsula.

Wharf District Views: View Corridors and Panoramas



In the panorama of downtown the buildings noticeably change their relationships to each other as we look at them walking from Rowes Wharf to Christopher Columbus Waterfront Park. This emphasizes the need to understand the three dimensional and dynamic experience of moving through the district.



The view of the harbor along High Street extends all the way back to the State Street Bank at Oliver Street, where the view 90 degrees to the right also reveals water, the Fort Point Channel. This illustrates the curved shape of the Shawmut Peninsula.

The view down Central Street of the New England Aquarium and the harbor beyond is visible four blocks away at Broad Street.

From Milk Street the view down Broad Street focuses on the arch at Rowes Wharf framing the pavilion at end of the pier and the ferries.

Wharf District: Integrating 400 years of History

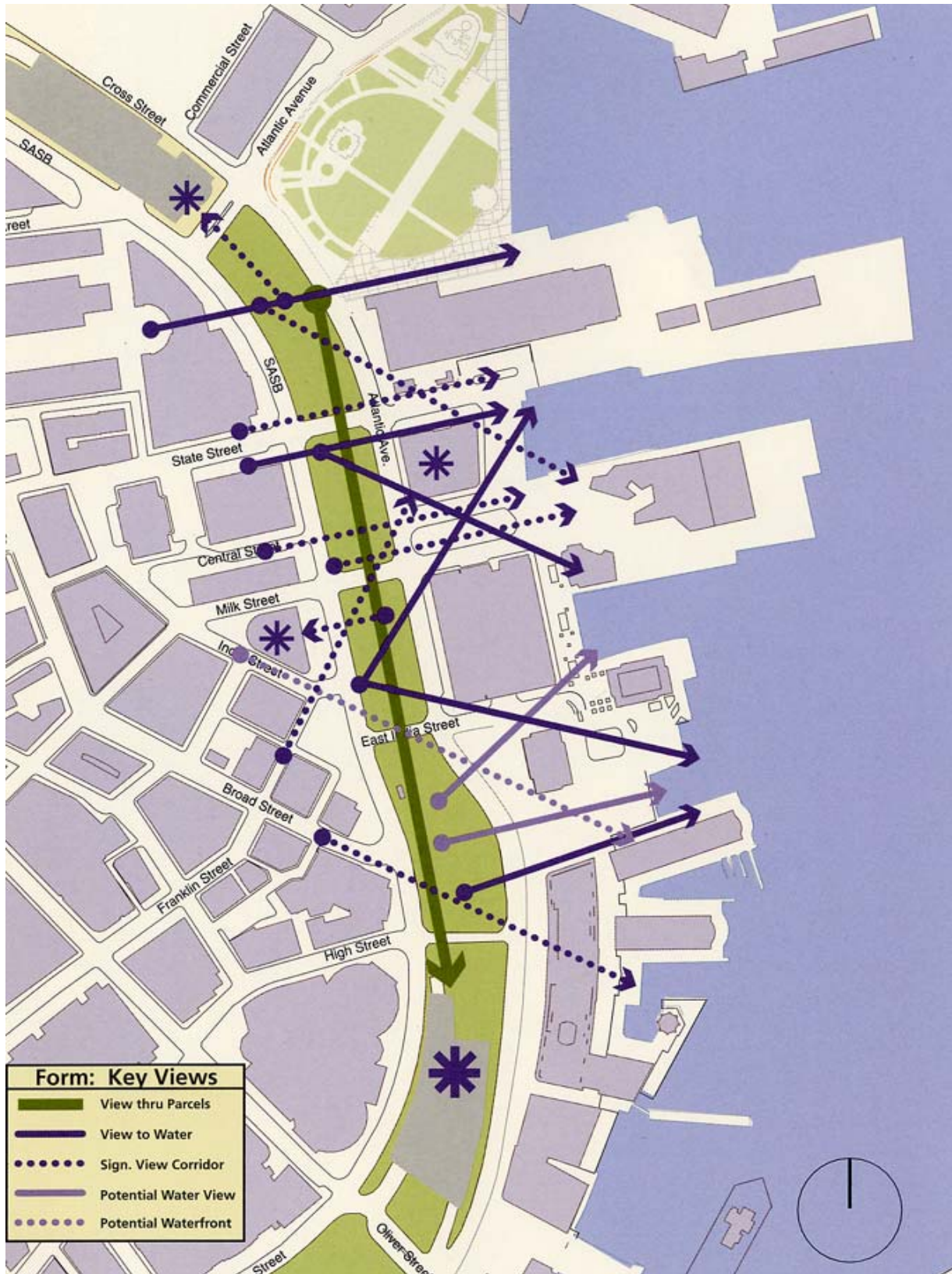


The Old State House terminates view looking up State Street from the end of Long Wharf, 2700 feet away.



This may look like blank walls but it really speaks about centuries of our history: how the water was once on this site; how the wharves were so important to our place in the world that they were graced with some of our most noble granite buildings; how these buildings were truncated to make way for the automobile; and how we can regain the connection with our past in views from the parks.

Comments on the Current Park Designs



What has been described is not new. It is only a brief summary of all the analysis of views and the other principles that has been laid out by the BRA and others; the analysis and principles can also be found in the SMWM Master Plan; the principles have been adopted by the Task Force.

Comments on the Current Park Designs



But the current three design variations don't meet the standards implied by these principles. The scope is too small: the design does not look very far beyond their immediate parcel boundaries to an integration with the other sections of the greenway in a meaningful way that would help unify it. The variations do not adequately create connections between the city, the harbor, and the parks and in some areas the designs obstruct the connections. The variations do not clearly relate to city or harbor; it's hard to tell without the map which side is land and which is water. They fail to respond to opportunities for views of landmarks, notable features, and the sea. The three design variations don't consistently include the basic elements of urbanism—sidewalks, for example. While the current park designs may provide space for people to gather, they don't provide motives for gathering that evolve from the site. At best they make passing references to the underlying principles that need to form the underpinning of any design.

The problems in the design process don't lend themselves to an easy fix by adjusting, for example, the location of trees or combining elements from different variations. We aren't looking for a collection of features, no matter how lovely they might be, that look as if they could fit any city's waterfront. The problem is deep; these are variations without a theme. The challenge here is about creating a synthesis that integrates our experience and grows from careful, intelligent analysis of the Wharf District in all its dynamic, three dimensional complexity.