

Two cities with different issues, identities and planning priorities—for the first time, their respective urban-design gurus brainstorm on why the two cities are connected by much more than a river.

BY PRATAAP PATROSE ASSOC. AIA AND J. ROGER BOOTHE AIA

The Charles River both links and divides. While tourists, commuters, and joggers move back and forth seamlessly, in more meaningful ways, the two separate cities of Boston and Cambridge operate as two different worlds. Locally, the perception is one of separate parts. The “People’s Republic of Cambridge” is seen as a universe apart from Southie or Beacon Hill. And in the global quest to attract new companies and new talent, the two cities may need to compete with each other, while being perceived as one by the rest of the world.

HOW CAN WE EMBRACE OUR ROLE IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY?

The world is rapidly shifting from a top-down corporate culture to a youth-driven culture of ideas; the cities of Boston and Cambridge are an internationally recognized ideas hub. Stunning facts demonstrate the depth of this young, vibrant culture. In Boston, one in three residents is between the ages of 25 and 35, while Cambridge has a student population of 44,639—a reasonably sized city itself—of whom approximately 20% come from abroad. Combined, we have the highest number of creative professionals per capita anywhere.

We are one region made up of complementary parts. This is essential to maintaining and strengthening our leading role in the New World Order of Ideas.

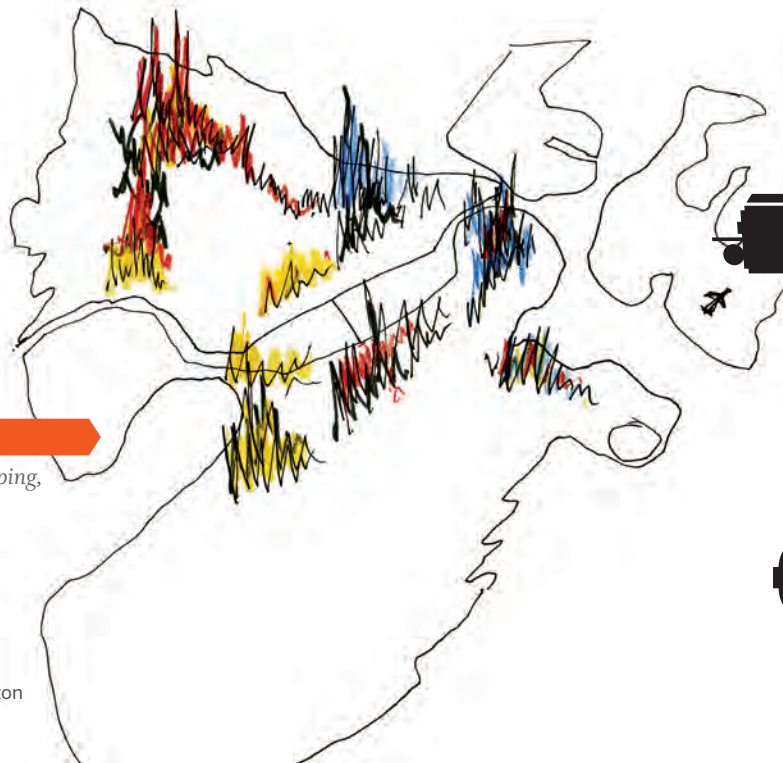
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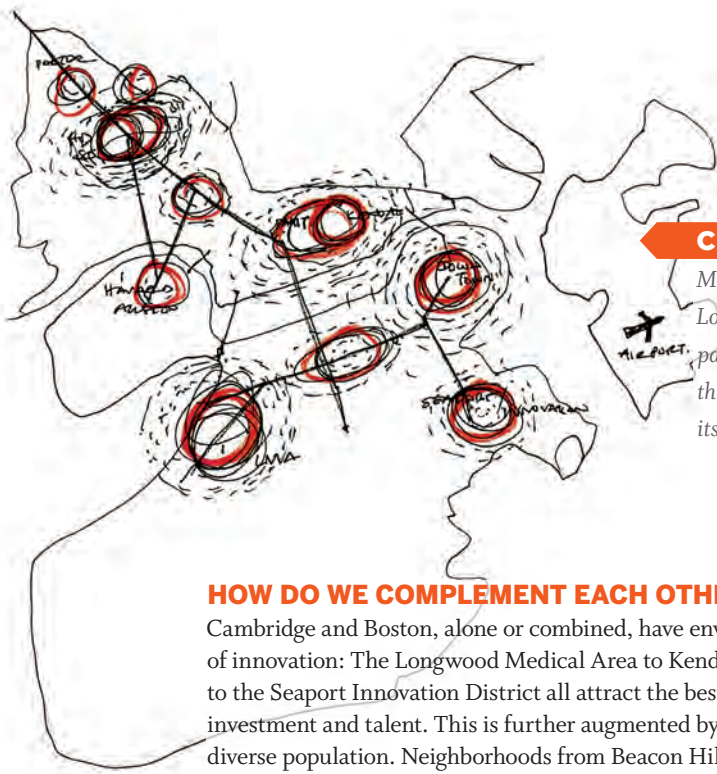
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Sketches by Prataap Patrose. More sketches and statistics and be found at www.architectureboston.com

ACTIVITY PULSE

Daily life activities—shopping, museums, dining—ignore municipal boundaries.





CLUSTERS OF INFLUENCE

Many neighborhoods—such as Longwood or Kendall Square—are part of a global network in which the dividing line of the Charles loses its significance.

HOW DO WE COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER?

Cambridge and Boston, alone or combined, have enviable clusters of innovation: The Longwood Medical Area to Kendall Square or MIT to the Seaport Innovation District all attract the best of 21st-century investment and talent. This is further augmented by our extremely diverse population. Neighborhoods from Beacon Hill to Harvard Square or East Cambridge to Hyde Park offer a vast array of lifestyle choices and are complemented by centers of art and culture such as the BSO, the ICA, Harvard’s Fogg Art Museum, and MIT’s Media Lab. Both cities have been consistently voted “most walkable” by major magazines and indexes. In short, we are an array of world-class institutions and neighborhoods that provides a rich network of urban options and opportunities. All this is set in a dense, sustainable, easily accessible compact landmass that is well suited to keep us a global model for complementary economic and urban development. Our assets are larger than the sum of the parts. The challenge, then, is less about changing our urban setting and more about changing perceptions.

Architects and planners are at the forefront of influencing public perception through the facts and stories we choose to highlight and the ideas we reinforce through design. In our medical and educational clusters, we build to complement one another; in our physical connections and bridges, we repair and reinforce how mindful we are of the skylines and street views; and, in the physical and symbolic “lanes of innovation,” from bike lanes to the Innovation Express, we connect. A healthy rivalry is part of what makes both cities richer, by increasing our depth of options for those who want to explore, invest, play, and live here. Architects and urban designers are in the business of visualizing alternative futures in which the parts and whole can be seen as different yet complementary.

The design qualities of the Boston region reflect our New England culture: Our history is one of different villages growing together into an intricate urban web, featuring diverse New England squares and commons as uniquely defined, livable centers. We are all enriched by respecting these special spatial qualities, even as we welcome excellent new architecture, expand our extensive network of open spaces, and increase the density of our urban centers. Architects can serve as curators and spokespeople for this concept of “different yet complementary” when designing buildings, streets, open spaces, and whole new districts that define and connect the complex urban fabric joined by the Charles River. Where could we be working to strengthen the perception of the Boston/Cambridge region as a whole?

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OUR OPEN-SPACE SYSTEM:

The Charles River Basin has long been the defining public open space for our region, and the New Charles River Basin will extend that space to the harbor. For decades, the parks along the Charles have been disconnected from the public spaces of Boston Harbor, separated by dams, highways, railroad tracks, and other urban infrastructure. A design process, with representatives from Boston, Cambridge, and the Commonwealth, is transforming this “Lost Half-Mile” into a place for people. Recent successes include the addition of 40 acres of new parkland connecting miles of newly accessible river frontage from the Charles River Basin to Boston Harbor. More coordinated work is on the way. Where is the next “lost mile” for us to tackle together?

OUR TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM:

Cambridge and Boston are linked together by a limited number of older bridges along the Charles. The ongoing bridge-repair planning process, which engages all users, is nearing a successful conclusion. Well-designed construction that meets the needs of all modes of travel is underway. What might be new modes and points of connection across the river?

OUR COMMON WATERFRONT:

The improvement in Charles River water quality in recent years is heartening and strengthens the draw of the river as a place for everyone. Yet more ways for people to access the water and more destinations along the waterfront need to be made. Should there be a common vision for the river?

OUR INSTITUTIONS:

The strong, urban presence of our premier academic institutions along the Charles River and throughout our cities helps define our collective image. In the coming years, Harvard University, Boston University, and MIT are likely to be building new landmarks that will be visible across the river in both directions. The schools’ future physical changes need to have input from both sides of the Charles. How do our institutions relate across our shared waterfront?

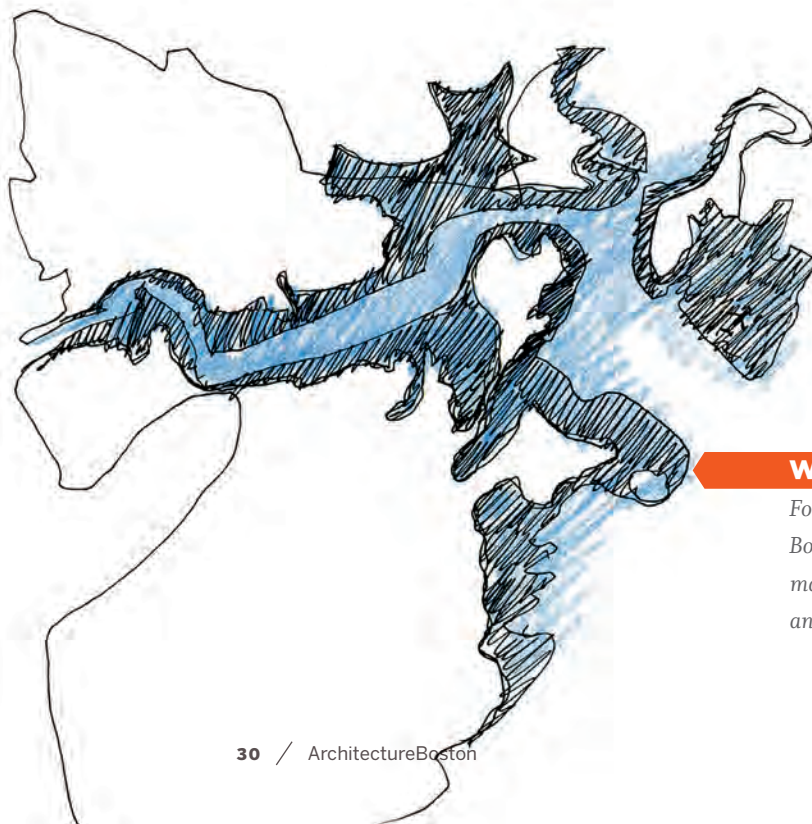
OUR ECONOMY:

Whether a brilliant new idea is brought forth in the Seaport Innovation District or in Kendall Square, we all benefit. The growth of ideas defines our collective regional economy and enables us to compete in the global arena. Can we embed entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity into our urban fabric?

THE WHOLE COMMUNITY:

As we continue to grow and complement our differences, we should also continue to consciously expand on the narrative of what makes our shared story even more compelling in the new World of Ideas. Should a regular forum convene designers and nondesigners to focus on “celebrating our differences”?

It is an exciting opportunity for the two of us to jointly share our critical views of our two cities, building on our complementary differences and assets. We invite you to continue this dialogue. We believe that together, as architects and planners, we can create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. ■



WATERFRONT CITIES

For centuries, Cambridge and Boston have been increasing land-mass, streamlining their shorelines, and growing towards each other.

EMPLOYMENT

Education
26%=28,000

Hospital/Healthcare
10%=10,866

Total Jobs
106,405

PEOPLE

Total Population
105,162
Students: 44,639

Population Density
26 people/acre

Foreign Born
27%=28,000

Education
Population with bachelor's degree or higher
73%
National average: 23%

Housing Units
49,530

Bars/Restaurants
360

Hotel Rooms
3,100

LAND

Land Area
6.24 sq. miles

Tax-exempt
55%

Dedicated Open Space
8.5%

Miles of Bike Lanes
16 miles

BOSTON

9% = 47,630

22% = 119,046

550,000

600,000

Students: 150,000

19.94 people/acre

27% = 168,000

44%

272,481

1,970

18,400

49 sq. miles

50%

16%

50 miles

A CASE STUDY:

TRANSFORMING THE "LOST HALF-MILE"



At the heart of this process was a classic case of getting a lemon and making lemonade.

For more than one hundred years, the "Lost Half-Mile" was so called for the lost opportunity to connect the Charles River Basin parks to the Boston Harbor. It was not a place for people. That's changing. Where there had been a rusty warehouse district, there are now 40 acres of new parks, pedestrian paths, two housing towers, the US headquarters for the international Education First company, and the Zakim Bridge, with more improvements and connections yet to come. How this all came to pass is a useful case study for how Boston and Cambridge have worked together, looking for and finding common ground to link the communities physically and visually.

Burying the Central Artery—the Big Dig—had an unfortunate side effect in the Lost Half Mile. "Scheme Z"—a spaghetti of highway ramps that were to emerge from the ground as the Artery resurfaced—was proposed to link the new downtown tunnels with the highways on the other side of the Charles River. The city of Cambridge, along with others, brought lawsuits, leading the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to form the Bridge Design Review Committee and the New Charles River Basin Citizens Action Committee, both with representatives of Boston, Cambridge, and the broader community.

This city-building endeavor transformed what could have been an ordinary highway

bridge, lost in a maze of highway ramps, into the iconic Zakim Bridge, now so memorably marking the confluence of the river and the harbor. In addition, marvelous new parks, such as Nashua Street Park in Boston, Revere Landing Park in Charlestown, and North Point Park in Cambridge, now line both sides of the river. A "sinusoidal" bridge is designed to snake through this complex landscape and is currently under construction, soon to link pedestrians and bicyclists from North Point to Revere Landing. More is yet to come, as some \$30 million in mitigation funding is still available to help realize the promise of the masterplan.

In addition, slightly west, at the junction of Cambridge, Boston, and Somerville, sits the 60-acre North Point development area. North Point will eventually include 23 buildings centered around a five-acre central common, connected by a shared-use path that will also complete the link from the Minuteman bikeway to the Harborwalk. The process of coming to agreement about what should happen here, designing the various elements, and getting them built has been extremely dynamic, sometimes contentious, and ultimately quite productive. Scores of architects, landscape architects, engineers, planners, government leaders, and citizens have toiled in a series of forums over decades to hammer out these new places. This is just one story of change that illustrates how we can successfully build on our common urban values as we design and "celebrate" our differences.

ABOVE LEFT

This late-1970s photograph shows the warehouse district known as the "Lost Half-Mile."

ABOVE RIGHT

This contemporary view from a new residential tower in Cambridge looks over the same area, highlighting two decades of change that have helped bring Cambridge and Boston closer together.