

THE STATE OF THE

PUBLIC REALM IN BOSTON

**A TRANSLATION FROM
ONE LANGUAGE TO
ANOTHER**



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A Better City is a diverse group of business leaders united around a common goal—to enhance Boston and the region's economic health, competitiveness, vibrancy, sustainability and quality of life. By amplifying the voice of the business community through collaboration and consensus across a broad range of stakeholders, A Better City develops solutions and influences policy in three critical areas central to the Boston region's economic competitiveness and growth: transportation and infrastructure, land use and development, and energy and environment.

To view a hyperlinked version of this report online, go to http://www.abettercity.org/docs-new/State_of_the_Public_Realm.pdf.

FOREWORD

By Irene Figueroa Ortiz
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The State of the Public Realm in Boston invites us to reflect on the past, present and future role of public space in shaping the urban development of Boston and determining its economic and social success. This essay was commissioned by A Better City and authored by David Dixon, leader for the Stantec's Urban Places Group. It takes a glimpse at Boston's rich historical legacy of public spaces, exposes emerging design and planning practices reclaiming the public way for people, and identifies shifting trends demanding a bigger role in the city's public realm.

The 21st century brought the renaissance of public space as the central stage for urban life. Now, more than ever, providing vibrant and inclusive places for collective use is a fundamental ingredient for enhancing Greater Boston's economic health, competitiveness and quality of life. But with limited public and private funding dedicated to the construction and maintenance of public infrastructure, how can the region accomplish these goals? With this question in mind, A Better City embarked in a two-year Public Realm Planning Study in partnership with the Boston Transportation Department to find innovative solutions to the city's public realm challenges. This essay is part of a research series aimed at evaluating the past and present condition of public space in Boston.

THE STATE OF THE PUBLIC REALM IN BOSTON

By David Dixon

While Boston's historic landmarks, notable institutions, and innovation economy distinguish our city, our public realm—lively streets, neighborhood squares, the Boston Common, a reborn waterfront—is where people come together and our city comes to life. When we walk our streets together, play in our parks together, and gather in our squares together we experience the interaction, discovery, and sense of identity that make living in a vibrant community such a rewarding experience.

Boston's public realm is our region's single most valuable asset. But this is not unique to our city. Ask any mayor in America what defines the quality and character of their city—or determines its economic success or failure—and the answer is consistent: its public realm. Today the key for a great public realm in any city, is leadership that has the ability to bring together three key societal ingredients:

- **Community:** The art of a successful public realm has always been more profound than “beautification, it’s about building a sense of

community. For Boston and other cities, this means a focus on improving diversity and creating equity for its citizens.

- **Creativity:** Boston has never seen such a breadth of creativity or innovations as it does now. Our task is to translate ideas from our world-renowned designers, the makers and techies in our neighborhoods, and from cities around the world into great public realm.
- **Funding:** Traditionally, federal, state and local public funding sources paid the costs of building and maintaining the public realm, but those funds are now in short supply. Today we must create a new era of innovative partnerships (public/community/private sector/institutions/foundations) to fund the future of the city’s public realm.

For decades our public realm legacy has helped us capitalize on our intellectual and natural assets, tipping the balance in drawing people to live, work, play, and learn in Boston. So how did we get here?



LOOKING BACK

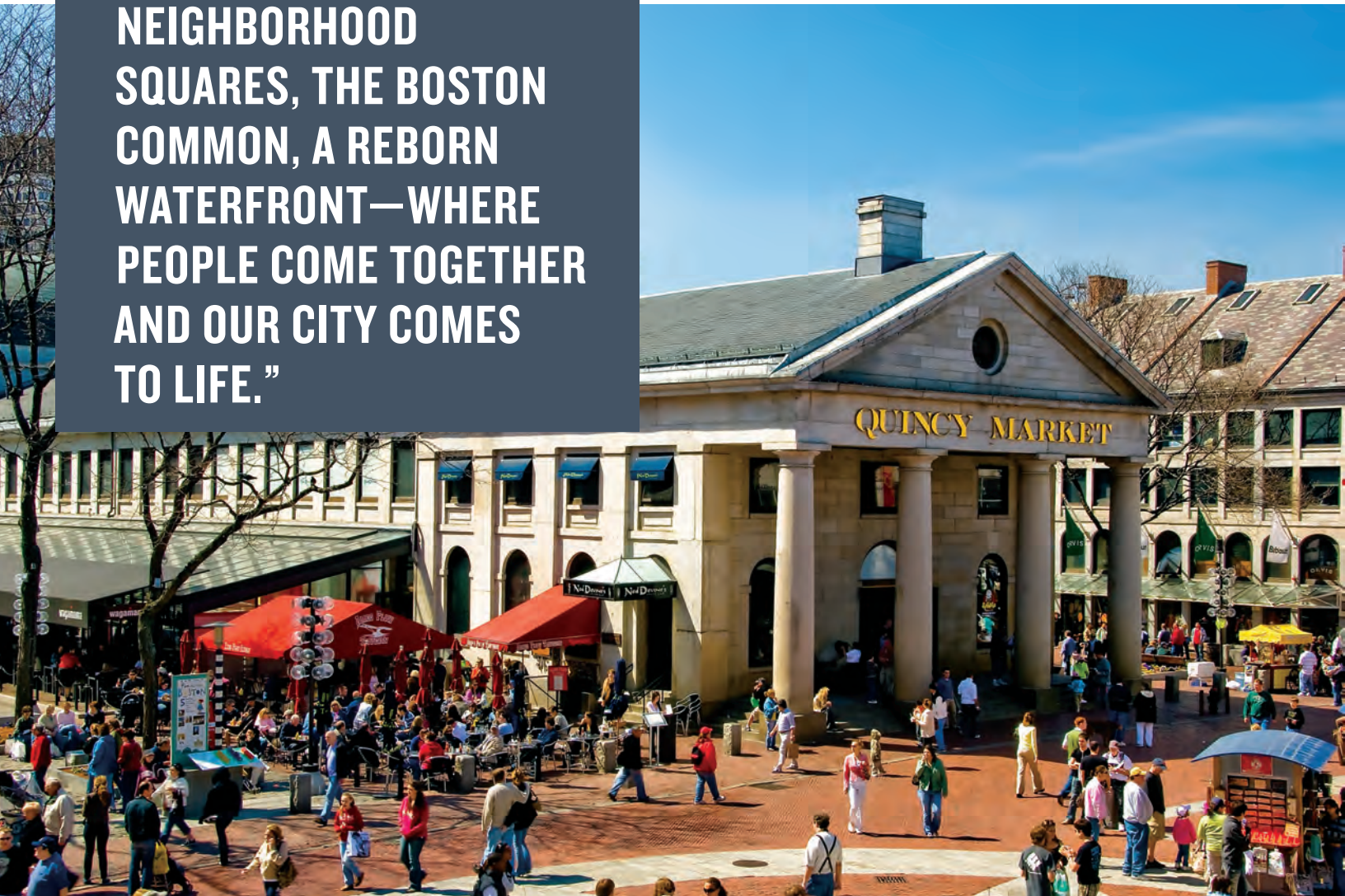
Boston's public realm legacy was built over four centuries. Throughout the city's history the main impetus for major public realm investments has been in response to dramatic social, economic and cultural change. This tradition begins with the city's founding and early growth in the late 17th and 18th centuries. For example, the development of Boston Common and Quincy Market represented significant public investments in our agricultural and maritime economies. However, much of their value to Boston over the subsequent years lies in the communal spirit and civic ambition that shaped them.

When Boston filled in the Back Bay in the middle of 19th century to support the city's rapid economic expansion, the results were far from utilitarian. The

Commonwealth Avenue Mall and Public Garden that came to be as a result have enriched life in Boston for more than 150 years. When Frederick Law Olmsted designed the Emerald Necklace later in the 19th century to connect the Public Garden to his new Franklin Park, it became a national model. The effect of the linked parks was more than just aesthetic; the Emerald Necklace created "lungs for the city" and provided working-class families an opportunity to enjoy nature. During the City Beautiful movement of the early 20th century, Boston drew inspiration from the Hamburg's Alster Lake when it constructed the Charles River Esplanade so that Bostonians could swim, promenade, and attend concerts together along the river.

In the 1950s and 1960s Boston followed the urban renewal initiative taken by many other American cities in an attempt to stem the steady flow of people and investment from the city to the suburbs. Although it destroyed substantial amounts of urban fabric at the hands of eminent domain, Boston's urban renewal program embraced a new aspiration for the public realm, most notably realized in City Hall Plaza,

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“BOSTON NEEDS A NEW GENERATION OF PUBLIC REALM THAT INVITES US TO COME TOGETHER AS A COMMUNITY ACROSS MULTIPLES LINES OF DIVISION.”

built in the 1960's. While criticized for its barren feel, the plaza nevertheless embodied the aesthetics of its era and continues to host regional celebrations and citywide festivals. A decade later we began creating our Harbor Walk—a far more ambitious initiative at the time than it appears in retrospect. 1970s and 1980s transit investments in extending the Red and Orange Lines, intended to stimulate economic growth and promote social equity. These efforts led to the revitalization of Harvard Square as a pedestrian haven and the construction of the 4.7-mile Southwest Corridor Park. As the Park neared completion, Bostonians began to focus on one of America's most transformative public realm investments of the 20th century, replacing the elevated Central Artery with the 15-acre linear Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway.

With economic success at the end of the 20th century, we became less focused on the public realm. Today the Southwest Corridor Park, nearly 40 years after its completion, remains the high point of Boston's commitment to ambitious public realm. Not coincidentally, the park also marked the high point of federal investment in urban public realm. When in the 1990s designers from around the world proposed an extraordinary series of public spaces along the Greenway, the disappearance of federal and state funding—and the lack of innovative new partnerships to pick up the slack—greatly narrowed the scope and ambition of the design process.

Boston's inherent creativity and entrepreneurial spirit did not die with the disappearance of federal dollars, however. The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy's hard work continues to produce incremental improvements that move the park steadily toward its original promise. In the South End and the Fenway, neighborhood-based initiatives restored local parks. Roslindale Square has witnessed a literal “flowering” of innovative pocket parks—including relocation of a beautifully designed “parklet” that creates an instant outdoor café. In an example of “tactical urbanism,” which is the use of low-cost, temporary alterations of the built environment to improve neighborhoods and city gathering places, the Fairmont Cultural Corridor Partnership produced a series of events that have added new life and appeal to places like Uphams Corner.

From another perspective, most of our public realm history has been conceived as connecting people to place. We describe these places as “beautiful,” but they draw us because of the unique ways in which they are inviting, fun, meaningful, informative, and exciting. Today, public realm still connects people to place, but it also connects people to each other. The Southwest Corridor Park began to suggest this additional dimension because it carried a strong social mission—replacing a railroad embankment that had long segregated people by race and income with a park that actively connects them to each other. We can no longer afford to be merely stewards of a productive past. What can we contribute, and why do we need to start now?

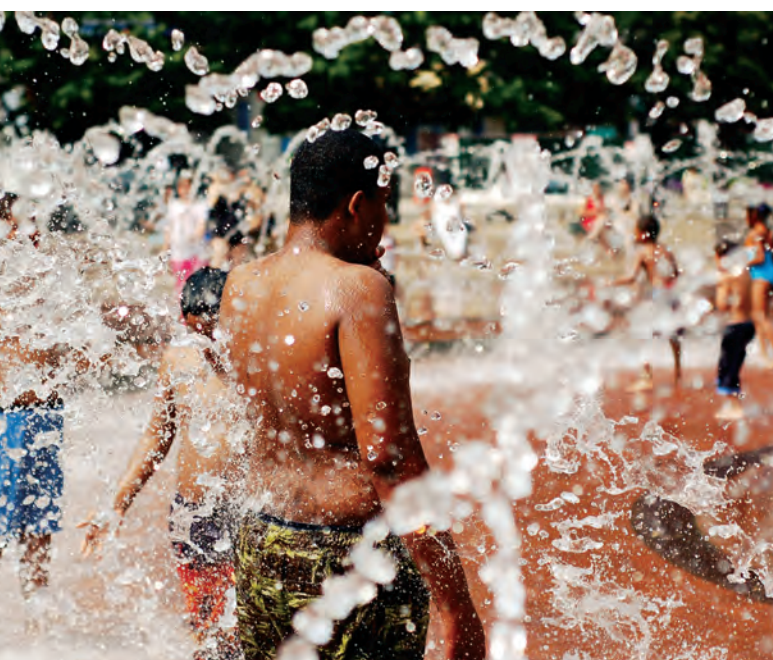
LOOKING FORWARD

While progress in our public realm remains slow, the social, economic and cultural changes that have historically spurred public realm innovations are beginning to accelerate again. Rapidly mounting challenges in all three arenas mean we will need to shift from could to must as we imagine, design and invest in the next era of Boston's public realm:

- Social: Across Boston an intensifying search for community in the midst of growing diversity calls for a public realm that creates a new generation of common grounds.** Put another way, if we can't play together, how can we make tough decisions together? From a city that was 80% white in the early 1970s, Boston has become a city where more than half the population identifies as something other than non-Latino white.¹ A city that was once criticized for being visible segregated by race, is now segregated more subtly by education, age, ethnicity, and similar distinctions. Looming ahead is a growing diversity crisis tied to increasing economic disparities. Historically dominated by working-class neighborhoods, Boston is now more economically divided than ever. As the city competes for investment and job creation, Boston becomes not only more desirable, but more expensive. The city needs a new vision for the public realm that invites us to come together as a community across multiples lines of division.
- Cultural norms: Within Boston's increasingly fragmented neighborhoods the loss of "organic community" calls for a public realm that creates a new generation of "third places."** Author Ray

Oldenburg coined the term "third place" in his book *The Great Good Place*.² Home was the "first place," work the "second place" and the markets, pubs, hair salons, and other places lined up along neighborhood Main Streets were the "third place." Oldenburg argued that third places were where people gathered not as family members or co-workers, but as neighbors. Third places were the "anchor of community." They thrived in an era marked by homogeneous neighborhoods held together by bonds of shared religion, history, family ties, and often workplaces. In a city once known for ethnic working- and middle-class neighborhoods, Boston's neighborhoods are now places of diversity and transience. Just as common social bonds have disappeared, so have the third places that generated neighborhood-based communities. In an increasingly atomized society, we need a public realm that invites people to interact, get to know each other, and share ideas. We need the public realm to be Boston's 21st-century third place.

- Economic: Competition between Boston and her peer cities for increasingly scarce knowledge workers, the limiting resource for a growing innovation economy, calls for a public realm that constantly experiments with new ways to promote walkable community.** As we, along with much of the developed world, grow increasingly dependent on the knowledge economy, America is producing a smaller educated workforce than that economy demands. The result is growing competition for knowledge workers—particularly those under the age of 35, who are far more likely to be mobile. Companies follow the workers they need rather than vice versa. Investment follows, as do the legal, design and other services that support knowledge industries. When this author prepared a 2014 plan for Kendall and Central Squares in Cambridge, a human resources director noted that "if our workforce decides they would rather live in South Lake Union [Seattle's Kendall Square] because they like that lifestyle better, then we would pull up stakes and follow them." Comment from a young researcher five minutes later, "I can find lots of jobs, I want to live in a 'social place.'" Why worry? Because, as City Observatory has documented, a large majority of America's college graduates under the age of 35 choose lifestyle first and assume they will find a job where they want to live.³ Boston needs to stay at the cutting edge of an urban realm that expands opportunities to interact, discover, and celebrate together.





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Taken together each of these dynamics suggests various paths forward—parks and public spaces designed and programmed to invite people separated by age, income, ethnicity, or other differences to discover each other—and tell their own diverse stories; lively streets and squares animated with interactive art and innovative streetscapes that invite people to experience the rich variety of urban life; and public realm spaces of every type filled with permanent or periodic opportunities for people to connect to each other. The way forward along each of these paths leads to the same place: creating community. So why aren't we creating more of it in Boston?

For several decades we had an excuse: public realm fell out of fashion. In the early 1970s the internationally acclaimed architect Robert Venturi accompanied his and Denise Scott Brown's book *Learning from Las Vegas* with a museum exhibit that contrasted pre-World War II with 1960s America. Main Street had been replaced by the family room, the city park

by the back yard, weekly trips to the cinema by staying home to watch television, and the bus, streetcar, and train by the automobile. An America whose “dream” was a self-contained life celebrated by a new car, a color TV and life in a single-family suburb wasn't searching for community or interested in paying for imaginative extensions of the public realm.

But that era ended more than a decade ago. Today Main Street is back. Community is back. Walkability is bigger than ever. Density is a virtue. The Municipal Arts Society of New York, which convenes the city's movers and shakers to think about urban form, hosted one of its best attended conferences in 2015 on the need for more “civic realm” in response to growing diversity. Cities across America are investing heavily in innovative public realm as a high-priority strategy for economic development. New York City's transformation of a car-choked stretch of Broadway in Times Square into a pedestrian boulevard proclaims clearly that times—and squares—have changed.

We certainly don't lack for ideas. A new, exciting generation of designers has emerged across America to point the way to 21st century urban realm—transforming San Francisco bus shelters into digital playgrounds; creating software that enables London-



ers to make new friends as they use their phones to turn a fountain into a symphony of water and color; bringing Seattle neighborhoods together to recast traditional streetscapes as imaginative rain gardens. Boston itself is a hotbed of ideas. In Dewey Square, the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy coordinated the installation of Janet Echelman's beguiling aerial sculpture that turned the area into a destination. At the convention center, Lawn on D—featuring swing sets, ping pong and beer—has set a precedent for Millennial-friendly social urban parks. Roving events like Illuminus have turned surface parking lots into nighttime canvases for projected digital art. And the City's *Complete Streets Guidelines* has become a national model.

So why does so much of Boston's public realm reflect thinking that prevailed two decades ago? Where is our 21st century? For some time we felt we could afford to be complacent. However, as evidence mounts that we can no longer afford complacency a new question has emerged. How can we afford the alternative?

THE ECONOMIC CONUNDRUM: CONNECTING THE DOTS

Much evidence exists to show that great public realm—when it promotes community—is a great investment. As recently as the 1990s that investment was easy: tap federal and state funds to pay for any expansion of the public realm. Those resources have disappeared, and although the City has paid increased attention to public realm, Boston has yet to create a new public/private partnership (P3) model to pick up the slack.

In other American cities, partnerships have figured out how to fund public realm by capturing the economic value it creates. Private fundraising paid for the \$200 million Klyde Warren Park in Dallas, which has generated several billion dollars in new investment around it. Little wonder that it won the Urban Land Institute's 2014 Amanda Burden Urban Open Space Award.⁴ The International Downtown Association reports that last year its 20 largest downtown-association members raised a half-billion dollars from their members—much of it spent to animate the public realm.⁵ Three decades ago in Boston the Friends of Post Office Square raised the funds and created an income stream to build and operate a new open space for the Financial District, the Norman B. Leventhal Park. This park became a national model for successful P3 public realm initiatives. But public realm value creation is not limited to downtowns. The real estate firm Redfin compiled



data for one million home sales over two years to see if walkability affected prices. In the 14 metro areas it studied, each additional “WalkScore” point a location earned translated into a median added value of \$3,250.⁶

The City of Boston has taken meaningful steps to re-energize the city’s streets. In addition to its Complete Streets Guidelines, the City is retrofitting Uphams Corners and several other areas to restore a neighborhood-center identity. The Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics has launched a Public Space Invitational to promote interactive public art, including the creation of a portable reading room designed for the Greenway. The “Circle the City” festival brought thousands of people together to celebrate along a Blue Hill Avenue that was closed to automobiles. The Mayor’s Office of Arts and Culture is working with neighborhood artists to install public art across the city. Turf and lawn chairs have appeared on City Hall Plaza. The Greenway Mobile Eats program turns Dewey Square into a real city square for five hours each weekday. Community-based organizations like Arts on the Line are taking the initiative at a grass-roots level to bring people together around art in the public realm. While real estate developers are investing in increasingly innovative public realm projects in conjunction with development.

These initiatives are bold, imaginative and new. They represent top-down and bottom-up strategies. They draw government, neighborhood and arts

organizations, developers, foundations and others together into a variety of experimental partnerships. The results are exciting, but we haven’t yet turned the corner. These are early signs of revival, and Boston is working to develop the leadership and funding models to unlock a full-blown public realm resurgence. Searching for best practices offers a number of intriguing models. San Francisco’s parklets program (the Boston Transportation Department runs its own parklets program); Chicago’s upcoming 6th Annual Placemaking Challenge (Boston’s Public Space Invitational just completed its second year); and ArtPlace’s National Creative Placemaking Fund are all funding well-developed neighborhood public realm initiatives across the country.

Boston has the creativity, the dollars, and the will. We can build the leadership and funding models that open the door to a 21st-century public realm rich in community. And when we open this door, we will discover an amazing set of new tools, with which we can build amazing new public realms.

NEW TOOLS

Boston has great examples of public realm that connect people to place. We have made great use of a familiar toolkit: street trees and landscaping, lighting, street furniture, monuments and public art, historic interpretation, banners, and paving. We have used these tools well to do important things: preserve and convey the historic character of Commonwealth Avenue and the Public Garden; identify and tell the Revolutionary story of the Freedom Trail and our maritime story along the Harbor Walk; give new faces to neighborhood squares; make our neighborhood Main Streets more inviting and interesting; create plazas in front of neighborhood T stations; and create handsome parks along the Greenway. One could even say we use these tools to add civic gravitas to City Hall. We have mastered the use of these “static” public realm tools. While they will always be useful, we have just begun to test a much more interactive set of tools. These are the tools that connect people to each other and will put a 21st-century stamp on our public realm.

INTERACTIVE PUBLIC REALM

For a long time Boston’s most interactive public realm was an accident. Despite “do not touch the water” signs, the Christian Science Center fountain’s stone and water has for years hosted a mini-United

Nations on hot summer days. The fountain is full of kids of every color, from morning to night, laughing, chasing each other, inventing water games. Sitting and standing just far enough away to avoid getting wet are their equally diverse parents. The kids are discovering each other. And so are their parents. The Greenway fountain and carousel achieve the same results. Incidentally, both fountains are works of public art and contribute to making great places.

These fountains are also interactive public art, beautiful both for its physical form and the ways they invite people to interact with them and with each other. These fountains invite Bostonians to enjoy old friends and make new ones. They bring strong social, civic, and cultural dimensions to public realm. They build community and common ground.

The list of placemaking projects around the world is growing rapidly. Water, light and sound can be orchestrated by groups of people using smart phones. An artist has designed laser installations that would, for example, engage people along the Greenway together in bringing the façades of nearby dark office buildings to life with stunning graphics. Audio/video installations can put people in touch with each other—five feet or five miles apart. John Ewing’s installation in 2010 invited people in Roxbury and Brookline to communicate live via a storefront-sized video screen. Games can be interactive art, like a game of “Pong” that strangers on opposite sides of an intersection can play while they wait for the signal. Information can be interactive art—an installation in Seattle invites people to talk about what residents in a large apartment building—

and across Seattle—are tweeting, in real time. Naturally, the term interactive doesn’t limit public art—and public realm—to technological realms. Bus shelters can substitute swings for benches. Work-out stations designed as public art can enliven a neighborhood park or a city street.

These examples are about fun and intriguing ways for friends and strangers alike to engage each other. For a city like Boston, struggling to bring diverse people together, appeal to people seeking urban lifestyles, and create new third places these represent potent tools. But these tools can also serve another purpose—empowering neighborhoods, racial and ethnic communities, immigrants, artists and musicians, and many others to tell their stories. As demographics and a dynamic economy change our city faster, it becomes more critical for those who built our neighborhoods, raised families, practiced our arts, fought the good fights—and in other ways shaped who we are today—to tell their stories. Today we do this with murals, statues, and plaques. Tomorrow we will use video, audio, musical, and holographic installations to bring these stories to life in much more compelling ways in parks and along city streets.

TACTICAL URBANISM

The most exciting new frontier is not about interactive installations, but interactive events. Tactical urbanism is literally redefining the boundaries of public realm in

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terms of time and space. An article in *The Smithsonian* hinted at the impact of this transition.⁷ Exciting, profound, and unsettling, tactical urbanism has unlocked redistributions of public space from cars to pedestrians, turning car-filled streets, surreally and sublimely, into informal beer gardens or flash mobs create evanescent communities to bring instant theater to venues whose designers never imagined them as places for theater. At a deeper level, tactical urbanism can provide opportunities for people who want their voices heard about issues like gentrification and social inequity in hopes of driving social change; for example, recent Black Lives Matter “die ins” draw a fine line between protest and programming.

Looked at another way, tactical urbanism has made the art of public realm far more democratic. It has expanded the universe of those who can create public realm from a handful of decision makers and designers who command budgets to a far larger number of people willing to invest their hard work and innovative spirit. It is akin to unleashing the early democracy of the Internet on public realm. The results can be magical or unnerving, but rarely dull, and their future scope is unknowable. At the same time, tactical urbanism is as inevitable as the Internet, and Boston will benefit immensely from becoming “tactical-urbanism savvy.”

Boston has begun experimenting with many forms of tactical urbanism. Early results include the City’s emerging “parklets” program—empowering a Main Street organization to convert parking spaces into public spaces (“PARKing Day”). Ethnic or arts organization lay turf across a city street, inviting neighbors to perform and setting up pop-up cafés to host a weekend festival. Boston is working with artists to create temporary, “out of the box” exhibitions on vacant lots, with arts organizations to engage neighborhoods in new ways of telling their stories, with businesses to create pop-up stores—and in keeping with the democratic spirit of tactical urbanism, exploring news ways to empower people from every walk of life to bring their unique inspiration to the art of creating public realm. We can learn wonderful lessons from the experiences of cities as diverse as Birmingham, San Francisco and Edmonton.

Boston is one of the world’s most educated, civic-spirited and affluent cities. With determined leadership and innovative partnerships we will unleash our creative energy and build a public realm renaissance. The first next step is to explore the innovation exploding around us—and around the world.

ENDNOTES

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