

## **The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace in Contemporary Boston**

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### **Introduction**

A few years ago, I was reading about a booming Chinese city that wanted to complement development with parks. Planners in Shenzhen were debating whether to create a “Central Park” or an “Emerald Necklace,” referencing the parks that landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted designed for New York (1858) and Boston (1878-1896) respectively. Shenzhen ended up creating an “Emerald Necklace” network of parkland, presumably because it served residents more effectively. This story indicates the strong influence that Frederick Law Olmsted still holds over planners and the public around the world.

### **Background**

In Boston, Frederick Law Olmsted and his Olmsted's “Emerald Necklace” (The Boston parks were never referred to as the “Emerald Necklace” until at least the 1920s. Olmsted simply called them a “system of parks.”) parks have maintained a strong hold on the city's approach to planning. The Emerald Necklace includes six parks—Back Bay Fens, The Riverway, Olmsted Park, Jamaica Pond, Arnold Arboretum, and Franklin Park, with the park units connected by parkways. The six-mile-long park system that Olmsted planned in the 1870s was so successful that the Greater Boston region emulated the green belt concept in creating the Metropolitan Park System, in 1893.

Designed by Olmsted's protégé Charles Eliot, the Boston Metropolitan Park System dramatically expanded the park-and-parkway model across 38 municipalities. British writer H. G. Wells reported favorably on the Metropolitan Park System, observing that, in comparison with New York, Greater Boston had been “planned out and prepared for growth.” Wells praised “the serene preparation Boston has made through this [Metropolitan Park] Commission to be widely and easily vast. ... Boston confesses design” (Wells, 1906, p. 1018).

Like most urban design creations, Olmsted's green belt concept was eclipsed by events, in this case, the rise of the automobile and development encroachment. By the 1920s, the parkways of Boston's Emerald Necklace and the Metropolitan Park System had become the main automobile highways on

Greater Boston. They were clogged with motor traffic, and the park-like qualities eroded. By the 1950s and 1960s, the public was shunning traditional urban parks because of suburban flight and the accessibility of more remote resort areas. Development pressures ate away at the fabric of parks. Frederick Law Olmsted and the preeminence of the green belt faded from public consciousness.

By the 1980s, Frederick Law Olmsted and his parks were coming back into favor. In 1980, the National Park Service opened the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site at Olmsted's home and office at Fairsted in Brookline, MA, a suburb bordering the Emerald Necklace parks. Fairsted is famous for housing the entire archives (1857-1980) and engaging exhibits on the entire landscape architecture and city planning output by Olmsted, his sons John Charles and Frederick, Jr., and a host of talented designers. New York's Central Park was being revived.

In Massachusetts, Governor Michael Dukakis's 1985 Open Space Bond Bill earmarked \$13 million to start restoring Olmsted parks, including the six Emerald Necklace parks. Governor Dukakis claimed that Olmsted would become an "angry man" if he could see how his elegant parks had been allowed to deteriorate. ("Dukakis Details Plan to Beautify Roads and Parks," *Boston Globe*, April 2, 1985) Four years later, Boston adopted an Emerald Necklace Master Plan.

## Goals

As Boston's Emerald Necklace parks have become rehabilitated in recent years, the paradigm of Frederick Law Olmsted's park system has developed a strong hold on the planning imagination of metropolitan Boston. When landscape architects discuss the creation or redevelopment of open space, they ask: "What would Olmsted do in this situation?" Planners have become infatuated with the idea of completing Olmsted's proposed park system by building the missing parkway link on Columbia Road as well as creating additional greenways to create an "Emerald Network" linking trails and parks within Boston's inner metropolitan area.

Certainly the aura of Frederick Law Olmsted on its own matters a lot in Greater Boston planning circles, but it is Olmsted's basic design principles that are most important in influencing current greenway projects. Three fundamental planning principles of Olmsted are particularly relevant today:

1) Connectedness—When Olmsted was designing his parks in the 1860s and 1870s, he recognized that it was essential create pathways for the public to

travel to his parks. Olmsted's first parkway—the Ocean Parkway (designed 1868; completed 1880)—connected Brooklyn's Prospect Park with Coney Island and other Atlantic Ocean beaches. Today, Boston and many cities around the world are using greenways to link parks and other public spaces.

2) Sequencing the Urban Park Experience—Olmsted created a sense of an unfolding order in his parks and parkways, allowing visitors to have a range of experiences as they traveled through the parks. The public passed through open fields and wooded areas, mounted scenic outlooks, and visited constructed places like pavilions and boat houses. Today, Boston and other cities are carefully designing greenways to provide a sequence of experiences that provide meaning and variety to the visitor.

3) Multi-Modal Accommodation—When Frederick Law Olmsted designed the Ocean Parkway, he designed separate lanes for each mode of his era's transportation—pedestrians, horse-drawn service wagons, bicycles, and recreational horses and carriages. When automobiles entered the urban scene by the early twentieth century, they, too, used the parkways, ultimately transforming them. Today, Boston is seeking to complement the dominant presence of automobile thoroughfares with pathways that can be used by bicycles, pedestrians, and other means of non-motor transportation.

Today, Boston is grappling with many of the same issues that Frederick Law Olmsted addressed in his nineteenth-century parks and parkways and is seeking to apply his basic principles of greenway design to solve transportation, urban beautification, community revitalization, and public health problems. This paper will examine two cases studies to understand Olmsted's contemporary relevance.

## **Discussion**

### Completing the Emerald Necklace

When Boston was preparing the plans for city's recent unsuccessful 2024 Olympic Games bid in 2015, the 2024 Olympics Committee included a number of transportation infrastructure improvements. Among them was completing the missing link of Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace parkway system, connecting Franklin Park along 2.3 miles of Columbia Road with the Moakley Park and the South Boston beaches. Despite the demise of the Olympic bid, the City and private partners are moving ahead to make Columbia Road comparable to the other parkways of Olmsted's Emerald Necklace, such as the Jamaicaway and the Arborway.

Although Olmsted's original parkway plans from 1883 called for turning Columbia Road into a landscaped parkway, that work never occurred. There was much development at that time that crowded along Columbia Road. Planners felt that it would be impossible to shape a green parkway on the street. It was only wide enough to be a functional arterial street. In 1897, the City of Boston laid out Columbia Road like Huntington Avenue and Blue Hill Avenue, with a street railway running down the middle, bordered on each side by lanes for pleasure and commercial traffic. The street was so narrow that there was only room for token tree plantings. When Columbia Road was completed, it connected with the Dorchesterway and Strandway (which was renamed William J. Day Boulevard in the twentieth century), which ran along Boston's Pleasure Bay to Castle Island. (Zaitsevsky, C. p. 93)

The current proposal to transform Columbia Road into a parkway, which was developed by architect David Manfredi for the Boston 2024 Olympics Committee, is to remake the boulevard by removing the median strip, installing bike lanes separated from traffic, and planting two rows of trees on either side. [David Manfredi, Bid 2.0: Venue Planning, Boston 2024, 2015, n.p.] It may seem remarkable that the now defunct 2024 Olympics proposals are still being pursued; but the Boston 2024 Olympics explicitly called for the Olympic Games to leave physical legacies across Boston.

In this case, the completion of Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace with a parkway on Columbia Road not only fulfills Olmsted's design vision of encircling central Boston with parks and parkways, it embodies Olmsted's principles providing the public with urban green space, promoting public health through recreational exercise, and providing transportation links with well-designed bikeways. Perhaps most importantly, the Columbia Road Parkway accommodates social equity needs, as the roadway traverses mainly low- and moderate-income minority neighborhoods.

The Columbia Road Parkway has been gaining further traction due to another effort inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted, namely Boston's Emerald Network. The Emerald Network is an initiative of Boston's Livable Streets Alliance, which is dedicated to promoting greenways for walking and biking in the metropolitan area. The Livable Streets Alliance has recognized that there are numerous disparate efforts to create greenways in the Boston area, but that they did not have a unifying design to connect all the region walking and biking trails into a cohesive network. In 2015, the Livable Streets Alliance set out to organize a coalition to promote this vision. The Livable Streets Alliance considered several names for its initiative: "Greenway Links," "Green Routes," and "Emerald Network." Livable Streets ended up adopting the name

“Emerald Network” because it expands upon Olmsted’s Emerald Necklace, adding 200 miles of walking and biking trails in the metropolitan area.

The Emerald Network initiative has identified 20 different trails to be part of the interconnected network. Of these, 100 miles have already been built, 30 miles are in construction, and 70 miles have yet to be designed and funded. Some of the notable trails already in place (but still with gaps to be filled and upgrades to be made to make them fully safe and accessible) include Olmsted’s Emerald Necklace, the Charles River Esplanade, Dr. Paul Dudley White Path along the Charles River, the 47-mile Harbor Walk (along Boston Harbor), Mystic River Greenway, Neponset River Greenway, the 11-mile Minuteman Bike Path, the Southwest Corridor, and the Rose Kennedy Greenway.

The Emerald Network’s vision entails knitting together neighborhoods by providing families and children safe and easier access to open spaces; improving climate change resiliency and sustainability by relieving pressure on roadways and public transit with parallel routes for non-motorized transport; enhancing Boston’s competitiveness in the global economy by enhancing the quality of life with a linear park system for the 21st century. (“Emerald Network,” Livable Streets Alliance, [www.livablestreets.info/emeraldnetwork](http://www.livablestreets.info/emeraldnetwork))

The Emerald Network has brought new energy to the movement to transform Columbia Road into a parkway. But more must be done. Although the City of Boston and the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation have expressed interest in this project, these two government entities, which are the most likely funders of the work, have not made any financial commitments. Architect David Manfredi estimated that the Columbia Road parkway project could cost around \$15 million, which is nominal, considering the cost of other infrastructure projects. Project supporters are counting on the strong reputation of Frederick Law Olmsted’s compelling vision to obtain the requisite funding.

#### The Rose Kennedy Greenway

The case of the Rose Kennedy Greenway provides another example of the difficulty of achieving functioning greenways and realizing the principles of Frederick Law Olmsted. The Rose Kennedy Greenway was the result of the Central Artery/Tunnel project, a \$22 billion project to relocate in a tunnel an ugly, dysfunctional elevated highway running through downtown Boston. Referred to as the “Big Dig,” it has been one of the most complex and costly public works projects in America. With the elevated highway being buried,

Boston had the opportunity to create 1.5 miles of green space (15 acres), which has been named after Rose Kennedy, the Boston-bred mother of President John F. Kennedy.

When the “Big Dig” project was being planned in the 1990s, some argued that the surface-level green space should provide the mental and spiritual refreshment of the Emerald Necklace, if not physically link with the Olmsted’s park system. The resulting open space is the Rose Kennedy Greenway, which was dedicated in 2008. Pedestrians are able to walk along the 1.5-mile greenway, which courses through the historic city and virtually borders the harborfront. But a major element of most greenways is missing—a path for bicycles. The entire highway relocation and park development project has been designed and managed by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, which has maintained a strong automobile orientation, partly because the underground artery is part of the Interstate-93 Highway. In order service the highway’s entrances and exits, there are three lanes of motor traffic running in each direction.

But bicycle use has received short shrift. Bike lane markings have been painted on the edge of part of the roadway. But there has been resistance to creating dedicated bike paths because it would cut into the space allocated to motor traffic. In the meantime, Boston’s bike use has been increasing dramatically. Since 2007, bicycle use in Boston by commuters has increased over 100 percent. The Hubway bike rental system (established 2011) experienced 1.2 million trips in 2014, using 140 stations sprinkled across Boston and surrounding communities. The Emerald Network, bicycle advocates, and other citizen groups have been calling for dedicated bike lanes on the highly-visible Rose Kennedy Greenway. The private non-profit management organizations, the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, would like to see permanent bike lanes, but it does not control the road’s right-of-way. The actual 15 acres of parks comprising the Greenway have designs and uses that prevent those spaces from being turned into a dedicated bike path. The only way to create a dedicated bike path is to carve out space in either the road or the abutting sidewalks.

So far, this initiative has made little progress. Probably the only way a dedicated bike path will be established along the Rose Kennedy Greenway will be if either the city of Boston or the Massachusetts Department of Transportation commit, with a sensitive design and adequate funding, to make it happen.

This case study, along with that of the Columbia Road Parkway, demonstrates the strong legacy that Frederick Law Olmsted and his ideas about creating greenways still exert on Boston’s imagination.



**Figure 1. Boston 2024 Olympics Partnership Legacy Map, indicating completion of the Emerald Necklace park system by creating a Columbia Road Parkway**



**Figure 2: Map of the Rose Kennedy Greenway, Boston**

## Conclusion

These two case studies demonstrate the strong legacy that Frederick Law Olmsted and his ideas about creating greenways still exert on planning in Boston and around the world. They also attest to the complexities of long-term city building, of how circumstances and social needs change, but basic principles of urban design can have long-standing validity. The works and planning principles of Frederick Law Olmsted continue to be worthy of study and emulation.

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