

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY of the New Boston



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CHAPTER 16

Shadow Boxing in the Public Garden

MOST OF THE PEOPLE SWEEPED UP INTO THE ACTIVISM AND protest of the New Boston lived in neighborhoods that were home to the city's many "have-nots." Residents of the two downtown neighborhoods that were home to the city's few "haves" had less reason to become involved. "We were an insular community over here," recalled Bernie Borman, president of one of the local civic associations. "Everything else that was going on in the city had no effect on us."¹ But that changed when a proposed massive development threatened to leave those neighborhoods, quite literally, in the dark.

BEACON HILL and the BACK BAY have long been seen as Boston's quintessential neighborhoods, and the home to what Oliver Wendell Holmes called the city's "sifted few." But both neighborhoods had extremely inglorious beginnings. The former served as the town's "red light district" until, at the end of the eighteenth century, it was "redeveloped" to attract Boston's first families. The latter was an actual bay, until a misguided attempt to create a dam and harness the tidal power turned it into "a great cesspool." Only after the whole area was filled during the second half of the nineteenth century was it able to accommodate those Proper Bostonians who couldn't all fit on or had grown tired of Beacon Hill.

By 1970, the Back Bay and Beacon Hill had a combined population of some 27,000 residents, 96 percent of them white, and many at least upper middle class.

If those residents engaged in any sort of activism, it was likely to be in the social, charitable, or civic spheres, and not the rough-and-tumble of Boston politics. Beacon Hill's last brush with anything resembling actual protest had probably occurred in 1945, when a group of matrons, described as, "maintaining their poise and dignity" by the Boston Post, staged a successful demonstration to stop Mayor Curley from replacing their cherished brick sidewalks with plebian concrete.

Beginning on May 30, 1970, however, residents of those neighborhoods were given a reason to belatedly join the era of activism and protest. That was when the Boston Redevelopment Authority issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for what was described as a "privately funded urban renewal plan" for the Park Square area. A commercial district across Boylston Street from Beacon Hill and the Back Bay, Park Square had become somewhat down-at-the-heels and was beginning to attract the "adult entertainment" establishments that the city was trying to confine to the "Combat Zone" on Lower Washington Street. Since federally funded urban renewal was winding down at the time, the city and BRA were hoping that they could interest the private sector to take its place.

The RFP for Park Square didn't arouse that much attention, but the plan that it subsequently attracted and the developer chosen to implement the plan did. Called Park Plaza, it was described as "a city within a city." The plan called for clearing 35 acres and building a 6-million-square-foot wall of mid-rise and high-rise luxury apartment and commercial buildings along the south side of Boylston Street, with the tallest building a 650-foot hotel at the corner of Arlington Street.² The developer chosen to build Park Plaza was Boston Urban Associates, led by Mort Zuckerman, who was a good friend of and generous campaign contributor to Mayor White.

The Park Plaza plan won the immediate support of the "pro-growth coalition" of government officials, the business community, organized labor, and the city's newspapers. Unlike the West End, Park Square wasn't a residential neighborhood, so the only opposition to its demolition came initially from owners of the buildings that would be taken and torn down, and from their commercial tenants who would be forced to move. The Beacon Hill Civic Association did register a mild objection on aesthetic grounds. But at the time, according to Borman, who would later serve as its president, the group consisted of only of "eight or ten people . . . who only cared about architectural preservation."³

Eventually, however, a more grassroots coalition began to form in opposition of the Park Plaza plan. When it did, one of its most effective members was a small group made up of people who weren't so much interested

in preserving nondescript commercial buildings, but in saving the grass, flowers, and the trees in one of the city's most revered parks.

The Boston Public Garden was founded in 1837 by Horace Gray and a few other wealthy, amateur horticulturists, originally as a private botanical garden. After Gray went bankrupt, the city took it over and began to make the charming additions—the lagoon, faux suspension bridge, and beloved Swan Boats—that turned the park into the crown jewel of Boston's so-called Emerald Necklace.

By 1970, however, that jewel had lost much of its luster, so Back Bay resident Stella Trafford and some her neighbors decided to try to polish it back up. They formed a group called the Friends of the Public Garden and prevailed upon one of their neighbors, Henry Lee, to become its volunteer executive director. Lee, a member of one of Boston's first families, was a Harvard College graduate who, after a stint with the State Department, began a career as a private school teacher and administrator. He was also a perceptive, humorous, and self-deprecating student of the city and its politics.

"The 'New Boston' might have started under Mayor Hynes," according to Lee, "but the parks lagged a decade behind everything else." He attributed the deterioration of the Public Garden to "lack of maintenance, the enormous numbers of hippies who camped there in the late 1960s, and the motorcycle police who drove across the grass trying to grab every long-haired kid with a guitar sitting under a tree."⁴

Concerned that Park Plaza would only further that deterioration, Lee and the Friends joined the new coalition that included the Park Square building owners and businesses, the Beacon Hill Civic Association, the Back Bay Civic Association, the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay, and other groups. They then formed what they called the Park Square Civic Advisory Committee (CAC), hired one of the city's top real estate lawyers to represent it, and compiled and released a report that criticized the plan for being too big and monolithic in design and for generating more pedestrian and automobile traffic than the area could bear.

The CAC wasn't out to stop the project from being built. It just wanted to scale it down, modify its design, and lessen its impact. But when the committee asked the developer to make some changes to the plan in order to do that, Zuckerman flatly refused. When the CAC appealed to Mayor White, it met with the same result. As Robert Kenney, the BRA director at the time, later explained, "Mort played to Kevin's ego. He wouldn't negotiate at all."⁵

In October 1971, when the city council held hearings on the Park Plaza plan, Henry Lee suspected that most of the councilors saw the Public Garden as just a neighborhood park for the very well-off, and he tried to counter that in his testimony by explaining it was a treasure used and enjoyed by people from the entire city. To prove his point, he introduced a newspaper photo of two kids returning to the North End after a day of skating on the frozen lagoon—since councilor Fred Langone, a North End resident, was chairing the hearing. Lee recalled that “Freddie had to admit that when he was a kid, he used to skate there, too.”⁶

The evidence the Friends introduced next, however, proved to be the most powerful argument against the Park Plaza plan. In a move rare up until this time, the Friends had commissioned two studies to assess the environmental impact of the project on the Public Garden. The first study showed that the shadows from the proposed wall of tall buildings along Boylston Street would keep most of the park in the shade during most the day for much of the year. The second showed that those buildings would create a “sail effect” that could generate winds of as much as 60 miles an hour. “In terms of impact,” Lee said later, “it was the same as putting Mount Monadnock next to Central Park.”⁷

This environmental argument attracted a lot of media attention and swung public sentiment against the project. It also got Zuckerman to budge, slightly, and agree to lower the height of the hotel to 550 feet. But it took a chance meeting with Mayor White in the Public Garden to convince Lee that the opposition was on the right track. “The mayor said to me, ‘You’re doing good work,’ then he added, ‘but I’m going to fight you on this Park Plaza thing.’ Well, I went home elated. The mayor of Boston said he was going to *fight* us. He didn’t say he was going to *squash* us. He thinks we’re *somebody*!”⁸

That the Friends and the other opponents of Park Plaza were “somebodies” was further confirmed on June 9, 1972, when the Massachusetts Department of Community Affairs rejected the plan. DCA’s commissioner, Miles Mahoney, said his ruling was based on a number of factors, including that the developers had failed “to safeguard effectively the Public Garden and Boston Common.”⁹

Now all of the opponents of the plan were elated. But supporters—especially Mayor White—didn’t take the rejection well. The mayor called the decision “personal, arbitrary, and strictly political,” and a few weeks later allegedly had a hand in organizing the biggest “pro-growth” demonstration held yet in the New Boston.¹⁰

Shadow Boxing in the Public Garden

On June 28, 1972, some 20,000 angry construction workers marched from Boston Common to the State House to protest the state's rejection of Park Plaza. As they marched, they chanted, "We want jobs! We want jobs!" Governor Sargent, who was already in hot water with the unions for halting construction of those two proposed highways, gamely went out on the steps of the State House to face the hard hats. "You want jobs, I want jobs," Sargent told them. "You want Park Plaza, I want Park Plaza; but the plans have to be right." The next day, the governor reportedly told DCA commissioner Mahoney to "see if there isn't some way for us to work this out."¹¹

But Mahoney couldn't find a way. Although a second Park Plaza plan was subsequently submitted, it differed little from the first. So on February 26, 1973, Mahoney rejected that one, too. He also felt compelled to submit his resignation to the governor. Mahoney's courage as a public servant won him a lot of praise, attracted a lot of publicity, and generated even more sentiment against Park Plaza. The city council rescinded its approval for the plan.¹² A few months later, the *Boston Globe's* development reporter Ian Menzies questioned Mayor White's continued support for it—as well as the mayor's memory—when he wrote, "Has White forgotten how Mayor Hynes was saddled with the rap of the West End, or how Edward Logue, architect of the 'New Boston,' could run no better than fourth in the primary run-off for mayor in 1967?"¹³

In 1974, after Zuckerman agreed to lower the height of the hotel to 450 feet and the BRA agreed to recognize the Civic Advisory Committee as the project's "official" neighborhood review organization, the Massachusetts Department of Community Affairs finally approved the Park Plaza plan. But a year later, the state's new Office of Environmental Affairs found that the "shadows from the proposed towers were far worse than the BRA and developers had indicated," and demanded further changes before it would give its OK.¹⁴

The plan was further revised. The now-official CAC suggested 29 changes and the BRA agreed to 28 of them.¹⁵ On October 21, 1976, the Park Plaza plan finally received the necessary approvals from the state. By this time, the size of the project had been reduced from 6 million to 2.3 million square feet and the height of the hotel from 650 to 350 feet.¹⁶ The Friends of the Public Garden and their friends in the opposition could live with this plan. But it turned out the developer couldn't. Zuckerman and his Boston Urban Associates pulled out of the project, apparently deciding that if they couldn't build it the way they wanted to, they wouldn't build it at all.¹⁷

Park Square was eventually redeveloped, but by various developers, in stages, and at a scale and in a manner that reflected the recommendations made by the Civic Advisory Committee. The battle over Park Plaza showed that even well-heeled residents were prepared to resort to activism when the quality of life in their neighborhoods was threatened. It also showed, once again that, in building the New Boston, the people of Boston didn't have to go along with every plan that was put in front of them.

The battle also left the Friends of the Public Garden with a reputation as something of a giant killer. Some years later, Henry Lee got a phone call from someone in New York who was a member of a group trying to stop a massive project that Zuckerman, who had since moved to New York, was trying to build in midtown Manhattan. "We have Robert Redford and Mrs. Onassis with us," the man said," Lee recalled. "Then he asked me, 'Who did you have?' I told him, 'Oh, just a few tulip lovers.'"¹⁸