

the forces that shape

# Charles Circle

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11.340 Introduction to Urban Design and Development

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1 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Study*.

Fig. 1<sup>1</sup>



# ABSTRACT

Charles Circle is a complex and dynamic node in Boston's transportation network. Its history is one of competing efforts to increase access and mobility. These efforts, or forces, included private enterprise, social justice, state intervention, and institutional expansion. Each force swerved in and out of the transportation narrative of Charles Circle to catalyze major physical changes.

Through the American Revolution, the geographic area of Charles Circle was still an unremarkable patch of low-tide marshland beyond the quiet western edge of the Shawmut Peninsula. Yet once private enterprises were able to connect their land to Downtown Boston by building bridges across the Charles River, Charles Circle emerged as the foot of the West Boston Bridge. As this bridge drastically shortened the trip from Cambridge to Boston, Cambridge Street became a prominent commercial corridor and West Boston saw the development of many single-family homes.

Between 1850 and 1900, massive waves of immigrants crammed into cheap tenement housing in the West End. The city dealt with these surges in population and associated injustices with social reforms, many of which resulted in progressive projects at Charles Circle. These included the charitable Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), the cutting-edge Charles Street Jail, a toll-free upgrade to the West Boston Bridge, and the innovative Charlesbank Park along the river.

Over the Twentieth Century, however, many of these social amenities were effectively destroyed. Government forces seeking to modernize the city repeatedly bifurcated Charles Circle and its surrounding neighborhoods. An elevated subway track, road widening, the conversion of Charles Circle into a highway interchange, and clearance of the West End neighborhood all plunged Charles Circle into an identity crisis. By the 1960s, it was a jumbled mess of infrastructure, a swamp of traffic congestion and a hazardous pedestrian wasteland.

Yet as it functioned as a prominent entrance into the city and the city's grandest hospital campus, the force of institutional expansion finally began to reinvent Charles Circle in the early 2000s. Public-private partnerships between MGH, the city and the Commonwealth converted the old jail into the fabulous Liberty Hotel, created a new Charles/MGH T-Station as well as safer pedestrian walkways, and began to stitch together the segregated urban fabrics of historic Beacon Hill and the hospital campus. Each project dramatically opened up the intersection and its edges for pedestrian access.

However, future institutional expansion will only exacerbate vehicle congestion and continue to solidify Charles Circle as a 'playground for the rich' unless Charles Circle can be reconnected to the river and the park. Fortunately, there may be hope in a current proposal.

# INTRODUCTION

Not many outsiders know Charles Circle by name, but they know it when they see it. It is Boston's somewhat eccentric, and very much eclectic, gateway from Cambridge. It is situated to the Western extreme of Downtown, marking the transition from Cambridge Street to the Longfellow Bridge, and is part of the fabled West End neighborhood. Subway riders who depart at the Charles/MGH Red Line T-Station, which sits suspended over the circle, will likely be heading to the world-renowned Massachusetts General Hospital, the historic Beacon Hill neighborhood, the Charles River Park residential complex, or the Esplanade riverfront park. Yet they must compete with the massive volume of automobile traffic that floods into the intersection from all directions, plus the infrastructure that supports it. Hence, Charles Circle is a cluster of competing mobilization.

“If you want to know what happened to a place,” describes Duane Lucia, director of the West End Museum in Boston, “follow the transportation.”<sup>2</sup> For Charles Circle this is especially true. While it may appear confusing between its bridges, ramps, speedways, parking lots, elevated platforms, hotels, hospital superblocs and cool historic buildings, each element can be simply explained as the result of an effort to increase access and mobility. These efforts, or forces, were often at odds with each other, and different forces assumed dominance at various points in time. They can be grouped into four categories, in the order that they catalyzed major changes: private enterprise, social justice, state intervention, and institutional expansion.

This study chronicles the origins of these forces, the ways in which they interacted with concurrent transportation developments, and the effects they had on creating and re-creating the built form of the intersection. In layering these forces, one on top of the other, we can predict future development for the intersection.



Fig. 2<sup>3</sup>

NOTE: Charles Circle only truly resembled a geometric circle from 1932 to 1951. However, for clarity's sake I will use its current name to refer to the area at any point during its history. I reckon this is appropriate, as it has always functioned for traffic *circulation*.

<sup>2</sup> Lucia, Personal Interview.

<sup>3</sup> Moody, *Charles Circle Pedestrian Bridge*.



# THE FORCES OF PRIVATE ENTERPRISE (late 1700s)

the forces that shape

Charles Circle

page 4

Before the late 1700s, there were no bridges that connected the tiny peninsula of Boston to its surrounding landforms. Harvard College ran the only public ferry that carried passengers across the Charles River—for a fee. To protect this source of revenue (which supposedly subsidized tuition for its students), Harvard succeeded at blocking many bridge proposals throughout the 1700s.<sup>4</sup> This continued until the Charles River Bridge Corporation and West Boston Bridge Corporation won charters to build bridges so long as they compensated Harvard each year for its lost income.<sup>5</sup>

Fig. 3<sup>6</sup>

WEST BOSTON BRIDGE

CHARLES CIRCLE



<sup>4</sup> Freeman, "A Changing Bridge for Changing Times," p. 13

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-29

<sup>6</sup> Carleton, "An Accurate Plan of the Town of Boston and Its Vicinity Exhibiting a Ground Plan of All the Streets, Lanes, Alleys, Wharves, and Public Buildings in Boston, with the Names and Description Thereof, Likewise All the Flats and Channels between Boston and Charlestown, Cambridge, Roxbury & Dorchester with the Two Bridges and Causeway, and the Boundary Lines Between Boston and the above Mentioned Towns, from the Actual Surveys of the Publisher."



# THE FORCES OF PRIVATE ENTERPRISE (late 1700s)

the forces that shape

Charles Circle

page 5

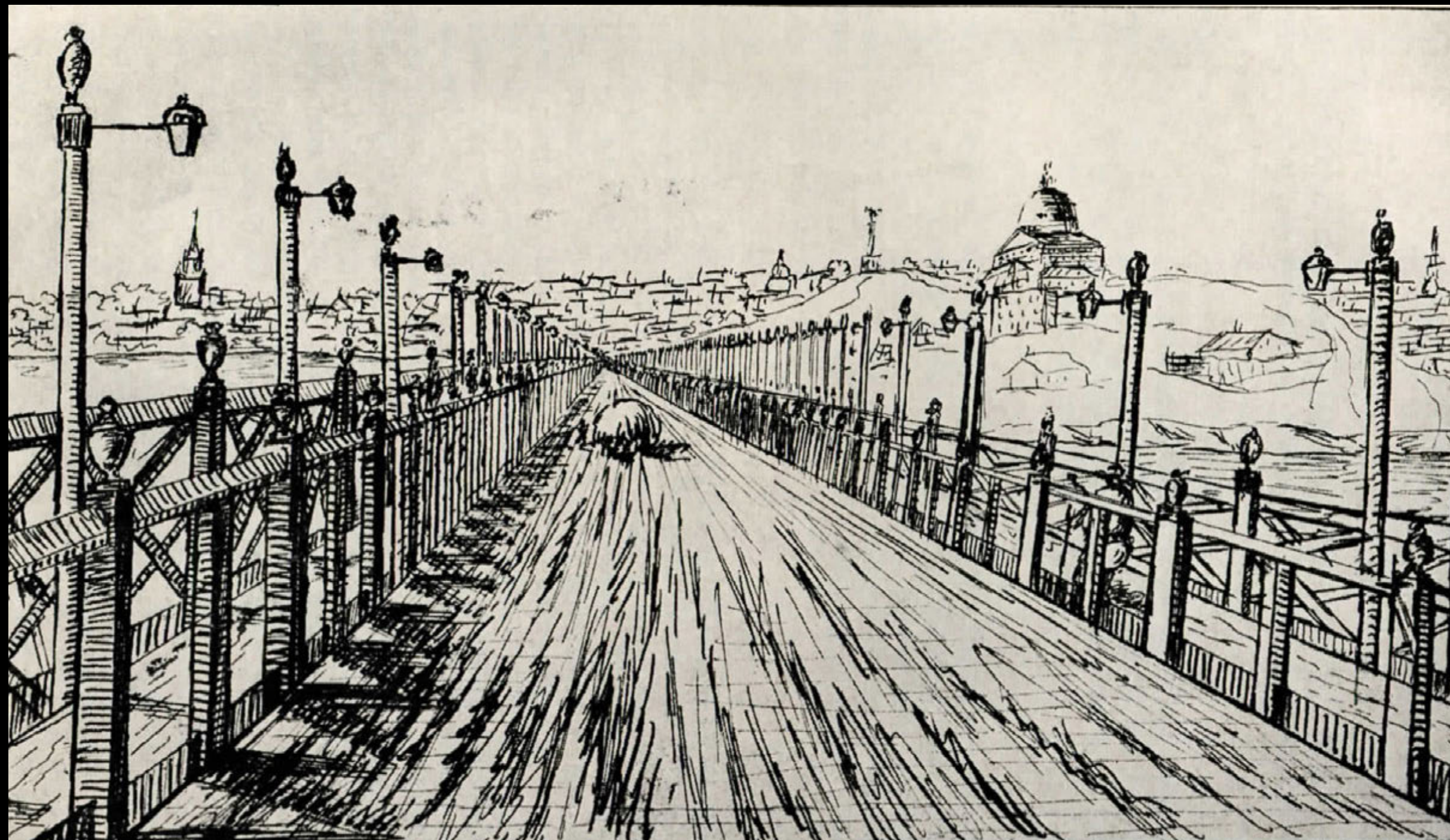
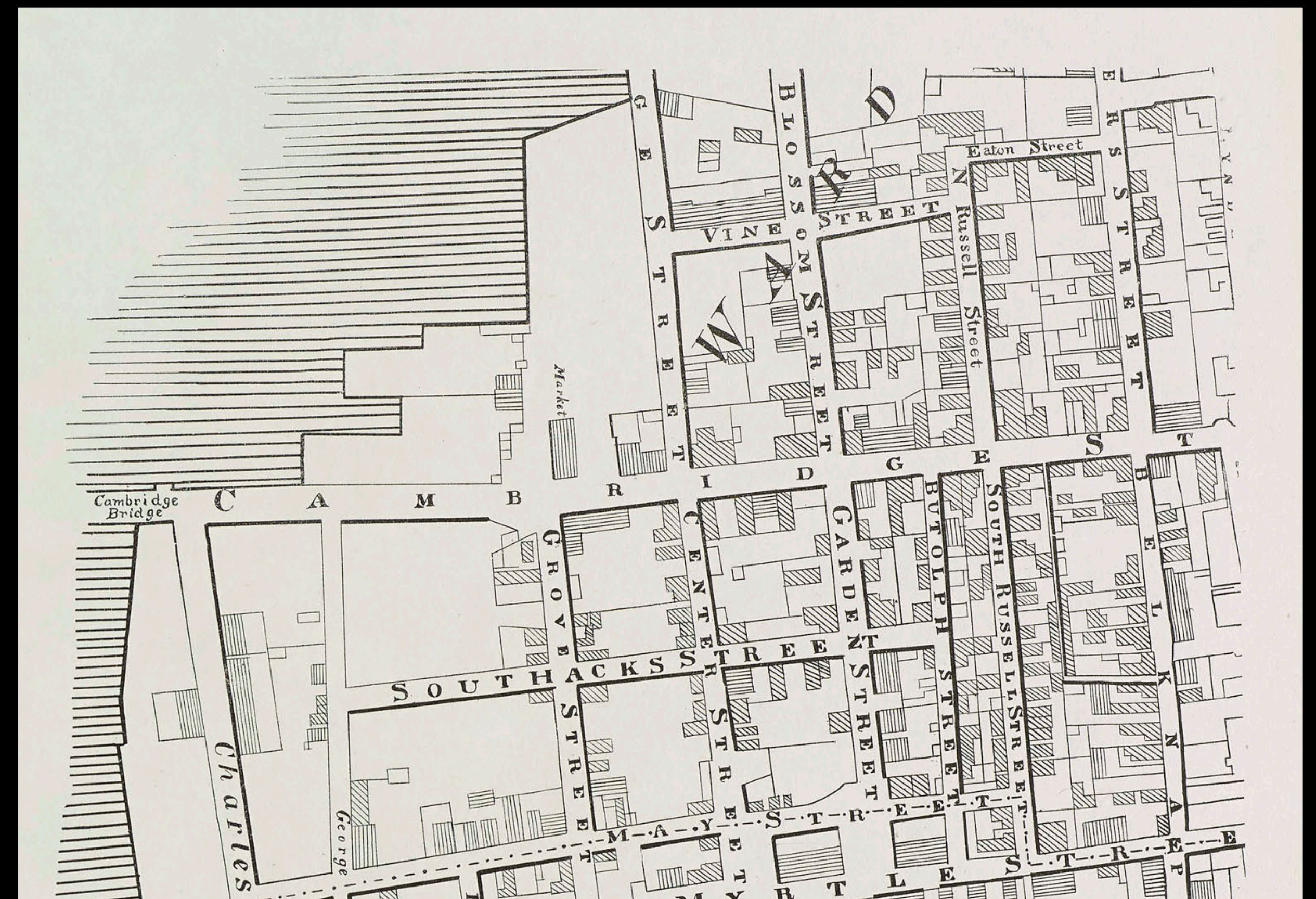


Fig. 4<sup>7</sup>

The West Boston Bridge was built in 1793 and stretched a whopping 7,189-½ feet—over water, marsh and swamp—between West Boston and Central Square in Cambridge. Its principal proprietor, Dana Francis, practically owned the present-day region of Cambridgeport and had sought to connect his land to the center of commerce in Boston.<sup>8</sup> Building the bridge not only provided a direct “route to the colleges” from Bowdoin Square to Harvard Square along Cambridge Street, but it also spurred transit-oriented development in both West Boston and Cambridge.<sup>9</sup>

Before the bridge, West Boston was relatively quiet and pastoral. The main hum of activity was in fact an area close to the future site of Charles Circle. It hosted a small development “of a cheap nature and populated by a mixed and more or less questionable sort of people.”<sup>10</sup> This was Boston’s red light district of the 1700s, known to Revolutionary-era locals as “Mount Whoredom.”<sup>11</sup> But between 1793 and 1800 the bridge created a new type of landscape. Cambridge Street was now a legitimate commercial corridor. New streets extended southward from Cambridge Street and preexisting ones were renamed to clean up the reputation of the area.<sup>12</sup> A housing boom in the 1790s ensured that many house lots of three-story, single-family homes were laid out along these streets.<sup>13</sup> Seeing great profit potential in the growth of the area, Charles Bulfinch filled in his mud flats at the so-called “Flat of the Hill” to create sellable real estate along a connector highway between the Boston Common and the West Boston Bridge.<sup>14</sup> This “highway,” called Charles Street, would later become the spine of the affluent Beacon Hill neighborhood. To finally clean up the area, Mayor Josiah Quincy would completely displace the red light district in 1820s.<sup>15</sup>

Fig. 5<sup>15</sup>



7 Simpson, *Two Hundred Years Ago; or a Brief History of Cambridgeport and East Cambridge with Notices of Some of the Early Settlers*.

8 Ibid, p. 21

9 Ibid, p. 46

10 McKeever, “Determination of the Character of Housing to Replace the Deterioration on the North Slope .. Being a Portion of the Research Study of Beacon Hill,” p. 21

11 Whitehill, *Beacon Hill*, p. 1

12 McKeever, “Determination of the Character of Housing to Replace the Deterioration on the North Slope .. Being a Portion of the Research Study of Beacon Hill,” p. 21

13 Gans, *Urban Villagers*, p. 5

14 Freeman, “A Changing Bridge for Changing Times,” p. 49

15 Whitehill, *Beacon Hill*, p. 1

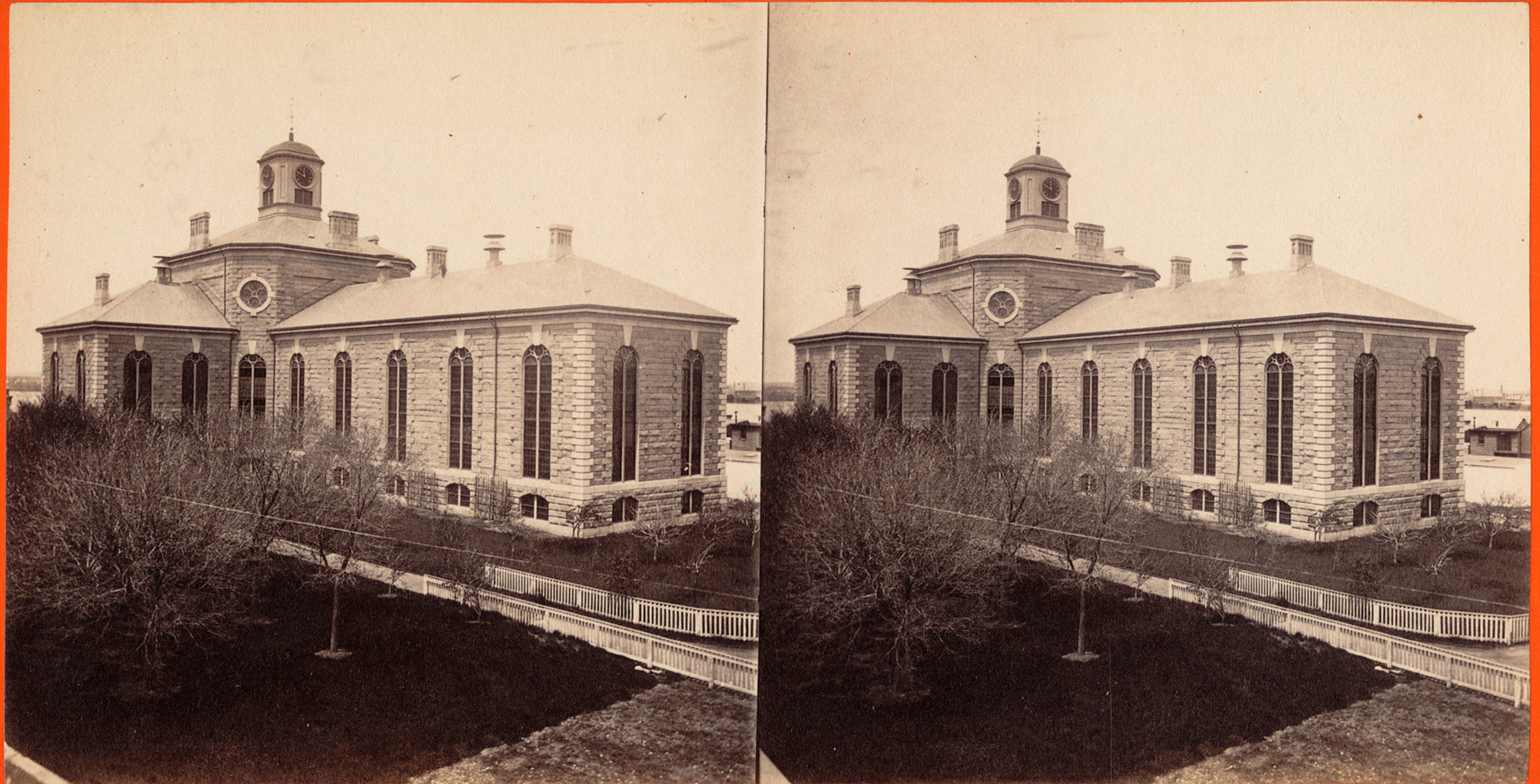
16 Hales, “Maps of the Street-Lines of Boston.”



# THE FORCES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, PART I (mid-1800s)

the forces that shape  
**Charles Circle**  
page 6

Between 1800 and 1850, Boston's population soared from 24,993 to 136,881.<sup>16</sup> To accommodate the influx of immigrants, including a massive wave of Irish fleeing the Potato Famine, West Boston had to start saying goodbye to the single-family home and making way for the cheap, four-story tenement. As the transit nexus of West Boston, Charles Circle hosted many socially progressive civic investments and transit improvements.



No. 610. CAMBRIDGE STREET JAIL, Boston, Mass.

Fig. 6<sup>17</sup>: Charles Street Jail

16 Freeman, "A Changing Bridge for Changing Times," p. 78  
17 Boston Public Library, *Cambridge Street Jail, Boston, Mass.*



# THE FORCES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, PART I (mid-1800s)

the forces that shape

Charles Circle

page 7

In the first half of the Nineteenth Century, another project by Charles Bulfinch would establish a permanent influence in the area. The first edifice of Massachusetts General Hospital, designed by Bulfinch, was built just north of Cambridge Street. It was the first hospital in the country to be open to all. One of the institution's benefactors was the wealthy George Parkman, who owned much of the low-lying marshland in the West End. In the 1840s, Parkman sold much of this land to the City of Boston, to MGH, and to Harvard on which to build its new medical college.<sup>19</sup>



The city soon filled in a block-sized chunk of Parkman's former real estate near the present site of Charles Circle to seat the most enduring structure of the site: the Suffolk County Jail, better known as the Charles Street Jail. There had been a desperate need for a new jail to replace the old one near Leverett Street,<sup>21</sup> which had no way of heating the cells in the winter and was "a pit-hole that...could never be well ventilated."<sup>22</sup> Thankfully, Josiah Quincy Jr.—just as much a social reformer as his father—was in the mayoral office. His priority of improving public safety would ensure the building of the jail in 1851.

With the help of the penal reformer Rev. Louis Dwight, Boston's illustrious architect Gridley Fox Bryant designed the jail to reflect a more humane way of dealing with prisoners. This system, called the Auburn System, rejected the existing practice of quarantining prisoners in solitary isolation and individual exercise yards. It instead placed heavy emphasis on communal exercise and work, access to light and air, protection from fire, cell segregation depending on the nature of offense and gender, and the practice of silence.<sup>23</sup> While not exactly progressive by today's standards, this was incredibly progressive for the time. The jail's cruciform shape, central atrium, grand windows and surrounding exercise yard were crucial to achieving these goals.<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 9<sup>25</sup> After Quincy Jr.'s term had ended, Boston's Aldermen managed to convince the more conservatively minded mayor of 1949 to build the jail by submitting an estimate to build it more cheaply. The large granite blocks that Bryant used were not only cheap but conveyed "boldness, endurance, and permeability, attributes important in creating the public image of the penal system." This project had an immediate and imitable influence on penal design and architectural style across the US.<sup>26</sup>

19 The West End Museum, "The Parkman-Webster Murder Case."

20 McIntyre, "Map of the City of Boston and Immediate Neighborhood."

21 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Plan*, p. 21

22 Seasholes, "Gaining Ground: Landmaking in Boston's West End," p. 32

23 Johansen and Page, "Landmarks of Punishment: Eastern State and Charles Street."

24 Boston Landmarks Commission, *Report of the Boston Landmarks Commission on the Potential Designation of the Suffolk County Jail as a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as Amended.*

25 "- Charles Street Jail Complex, Jail, 215 Charles Street, Boston, Suffolk County, MA."

26 Boston Landmarks Commission, *Report of the Boston Landmarks Commission on the Potential Designation of the Suffolk County Jail as a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as Amended.*



# THE FORCES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, PART I (mid-1800s)

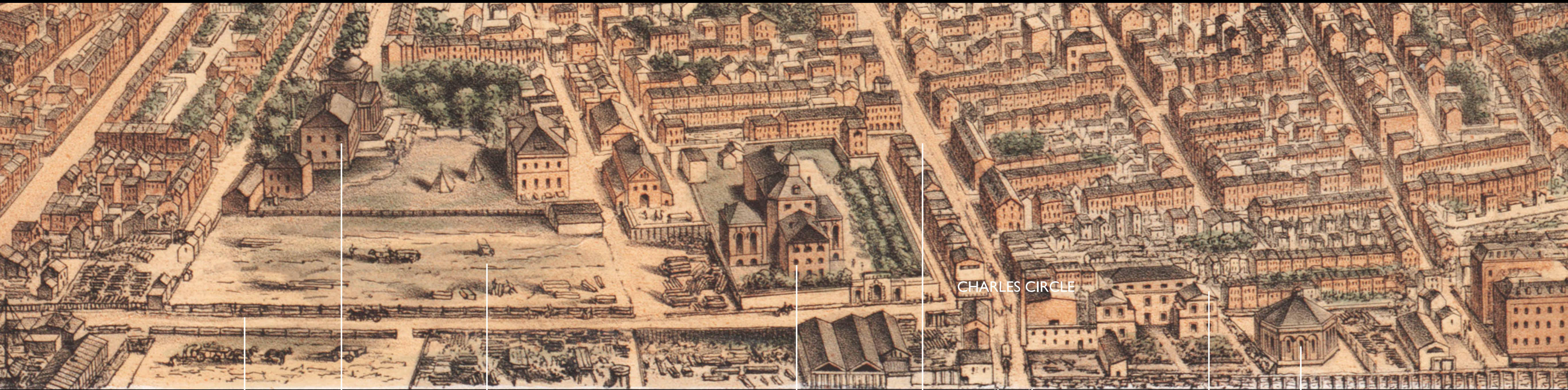


Fig. 10<sup>27</sup>

NORTH CHARLES ST.

MGH

NEW LANDFILL

CHARLES ST. JAIL

CAMBRIDGE ST.

CHARLES CIRCLE

CHARLES ST.

GASOMETER

CHARLES

WEST BOSTON BRIDGE

RIVER

Building the jail here not only took advantage of the site's pleasant river breezes, but it also provided the city new advantages. The city now had valuable wharf property near downtown and it could extend Charles Street north to Leverett Street. Soon thereafter it filled in the low-tide flats between MGH and North Charles Street to give the hospital more room to expand.<sup>28</sup> Along with this came further residential development, and the land that would soon become known as the dense and dynamic "West End" neighborhood was taking its final shape.

Social movements also had a profound impact on the West Boston Bridge, which was rebuilt in 1854 to be toll-free. By the mid-1800s the idea of "vested rights" for companies to make profits off of public services, such as a bridge crossing, was no longer a respectable business practice in Massachusetts. To free themselves from the costs of having to pay every time they wanted to cross a bridge, several Cambridge business owners formed the Hancock Free Bridge Corporation and purchased the bridge from the struggling West Boston Bridge Corporation in 1846. They used the popular sentiment toward vested rights to garner public support, showcasing the free bridge as an extension of the walking city. Through initial tolls and transferring its management to the City of Cambridge in 1857, Hancock Free was able to recoup the costs of building a new bridge within ten years. It was toll-free by 1858. Not surprisingly, this stimulated housing, industrial and commercial development around Charles Circle and was complemented by new forms of transit.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, transit also responded to surges of population in Boston and Cambridge by making the bridge more accessible and more efficient. The city's first streetcars, known as horsecars, were faster, cheaper and more comfortable than the "omnibuses" that had served the bridge over the previous decades. As Dale Freeman illustrates, "Traveling between Boston and Cambridge was not reserved for the elite anymore and a wider spectrum of the population, however somewhat limited, could take advantage of this new mode of travel." Horsecars made the suburbs much more accessible and created a commuting population of skilled laborers, such as doctors, arriving and departing Boston at Charles Circle.<sup>30</sup> Still, the lowest classes of people, such as those packed into tenements in the West End, were left to buffer the more affluent neighborhoods of Boston from noisy streetcar corridors.

27 Nutting, "Birds' eye View of Boston."

28 Seasholes, "Gaining Ground: Landmaking in Boston's West End," pp. 34-35

29 Freeman, "A Changing Bridge for Changing Times," pp. 76-78.

30 Ibid, pp. 84-86.



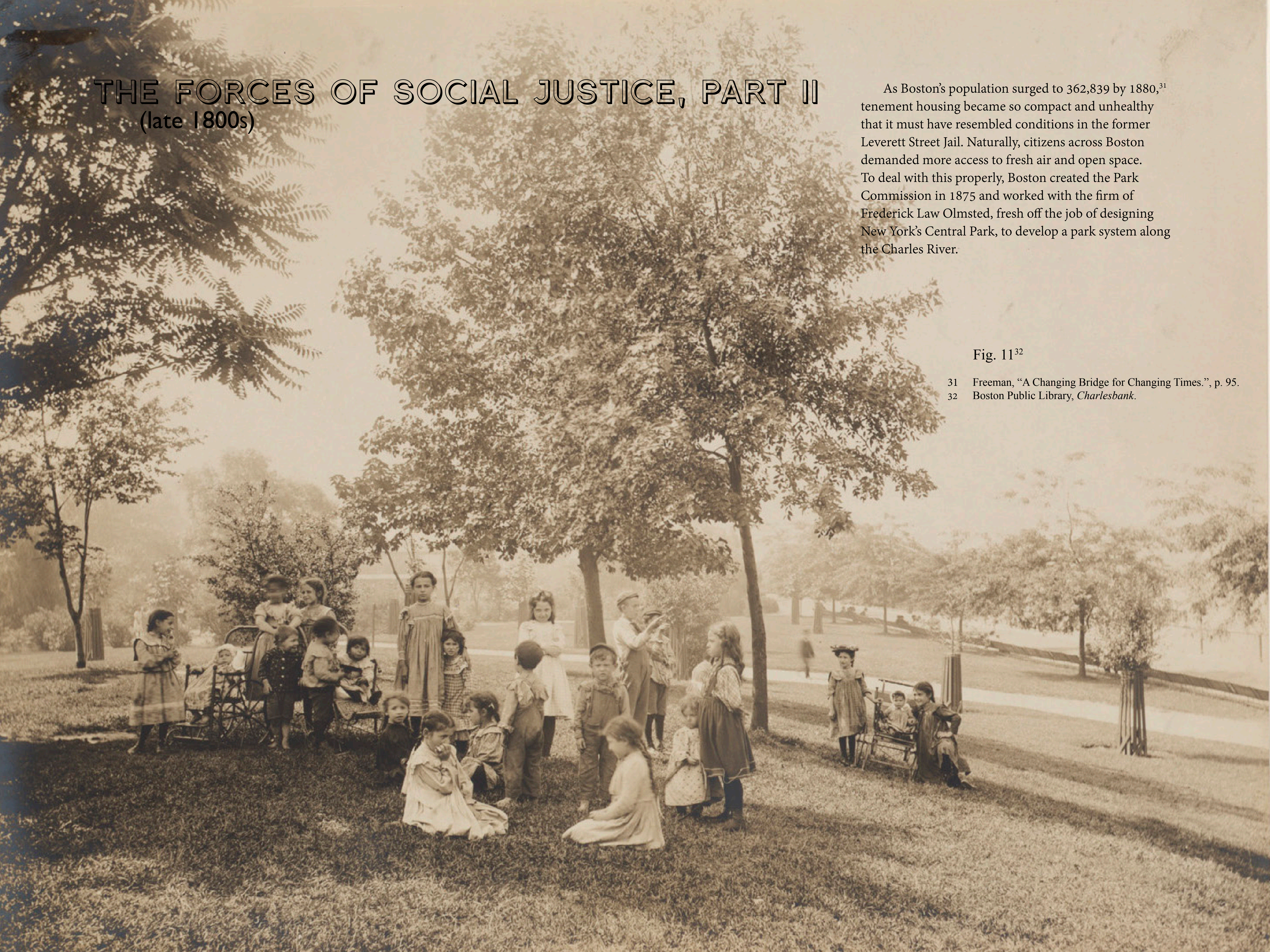
# THE FORCES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, PART II

(late 1800s)

As Boston's population surged to 362,839 by 1880,<sup>31</sup> tenement housing became so compact and unhealthy that it must have resembled conditions in the former Leverett Street Jail. Naturally, citizens across Boston demanded more access to fresh air and open space. To deal with this properly, Boston created the Park Commission in 1875 and worked with the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted, fresh off the job of designing New York's Central Park, to develop a park system along the Charles River.

Fig. 11<sup>32</sup>

- 31 Freeman, "A Changing Bridge for Changing Times.", p. 95.  
32 Boston Public Library, *Charlesbank*.





# THE FORCES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, PART II

(late 1800s)

In 1880 the commission acquired the industrial land off the shoreline north of Charles Circle and extended it with fill to form 24 acres of parkland. This park, which opened in 1891 as “Charlesbank,” was created expressly for the residents of the West End tenements, many of who were now first-generation Jewish immigrants.<sup>33</sup>

Charlesbank was significant in that it was the first public park in the US to provide active recreational facilities for free. It was landscaped in true Olmstedian fashion, with a promenade along the river and curvaceous lawns for passive recreation. “The most innovative aspect of the park, however, was the inclusion of two gymnasia, which were based on European precedents that encouraged active recreation to counteract the unhealthy conditions of urban life.”<sup>34</sup> The park was incredibly popular with West Enders,<sup>35</sup> yet it represented the last major socially progressive intervention at Charles Circle for more than 100 years.



Fig. 12<sup>36</sup>: Charlesbank men’s exercise yard



Fig. 13<sup>37</sup>

33 Seasholes, “Gaining Ground: Landmaking in Boston’s West End,” pp. 35-37.  
34 Berg, *Cultural Landscape Report: The Esplanade Boston, Massachusetts*, pp. 8-9.  
35 Seasholes, “Gaining Ground: Landmaking in Boston’s West End,” p. 37.  
36 Esplanade Association, *Charlesbank, Men’s Gymnasium, Boston, MA, 1889 Library of Congress - Copy*.  
37 “Map of the Central Business District of Boston.”



# STATE FORCES, PART I (early 1900s)

However progressive Boston was at promoting social justice in the 19th Century, government efforts to increase transit mobility in the early 20th Century marked the beginning of a systematic sidelining of Charles Circle and the West End.

Fig. 14<sup>38</sup>: Jones, *The Widening of Cambridge Street*.





# STATE FORCES, PART I (early 1900s)

the forces that shape

*Charles Circle*

page 12

In the 1920s, more buildings were destroyed as both Cambridge and Charles Streets were widened to accommodate growing automobile traffic. These two projects, along with the creation of the Embankment Road through the parks a decade earlier, had the effect of isolating the corners of Charles Circle from each other. There was now a symbolic separation between the “The Back of the Hill” south of Cambridge Street and the flat area north of it, and between the West End and the Embankment along the river. Cambridge Street became a major artery in the road network, reflected in the introduction of gas stations and repair shops. The Embankment Road provided a nice, leisurely drive along the river but West End residents who did not own cars were distanced from their park. Soon enough, residents and MGH employees demanded access to the subway system. In 1932 the Metropolitan Boston Transit Authority granted them access with the construction of Charles Street Station over a circular island in the middle of the intersection, from which Charles Circle derives its name. Yet this would necessitate *further* widening of both Charles and Cambridge Streets and pedestrian underpasses to avoid unnecessary entanglements with vehicles in order to access the central island.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 15<sup>39</sup>

In 1889, the streetcar system abandoned horsepower for electric power. Yet by the 1890s the system was overloaded with passengers as more than 30,000 people crossed the West Boston Bridge each day.<sup>40</sup> In 1906 Boston, Cambridge and the Boston Elevated Railway Company finally replaced this crumbling bridge with the magnificent Cambridge Bridge, known today as the Longfellow Bridge.<sup>41</sup> Elegant and strong, it was meant to alleviate congestion problems, beautify the river along with Charlesbank and the greater Charles River Embankment, and provide subway rail access across the river in Cambridge. To connect Boston’s underground subway system with the right-of-way on top of the bridge, an elevated structure was built over Charles Circle in 1912 and required the demolition of twenty-two structures along Cambridge Street. This created a grim void underneath the angled overpass that remains grim even today. Notably, the subway did not stop at Charles Circle; it rocked straight past on its way to either Cambridge or the other side of Beacon Hill, essentially miring the West End from Boston’s newest transit system.<sup>42</sup>



Fig. 16<sup>44</sup>

39 *Cambridge Bridge Post Card.*

40 Freeman, “A Changing Bridge for Changing Times,” p. 95.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

42 Duerr, “Access to the River: Rethinking the Role of Storrow Drive,” p. 62.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

44 *Aerial circa 1950s.*



# STATE FORCES, PART I (early 1900s)

the forces that shape

Charles Circle

page 13

The influence of the city's thoroughfare plan of 1929, known as the "Whitten Report," continued to have a partitioning effect on Charles Circle over the following four decades. Patrick Duerr points out that,

In order to minimize costs, selected locations for rights-of-way were typically through low-income neighborhoods or public land, often parks, a trend quite visible with road construction schemes in the early postwar years. Environmental and social costs were words of a vocabulary yet to be invented. The report was explicit about stating the dependence of economic prosperity on time- and cost-efficient access between activity points within the metropolitan area.<sup>45</sup>



Fig. 17<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Duerr, "Access to the River: Rethinking the Role of Storrow Drive," p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> "Atlas of the City of Boston," 1938.



# STATE FORCES, PART II (mid-1900s)

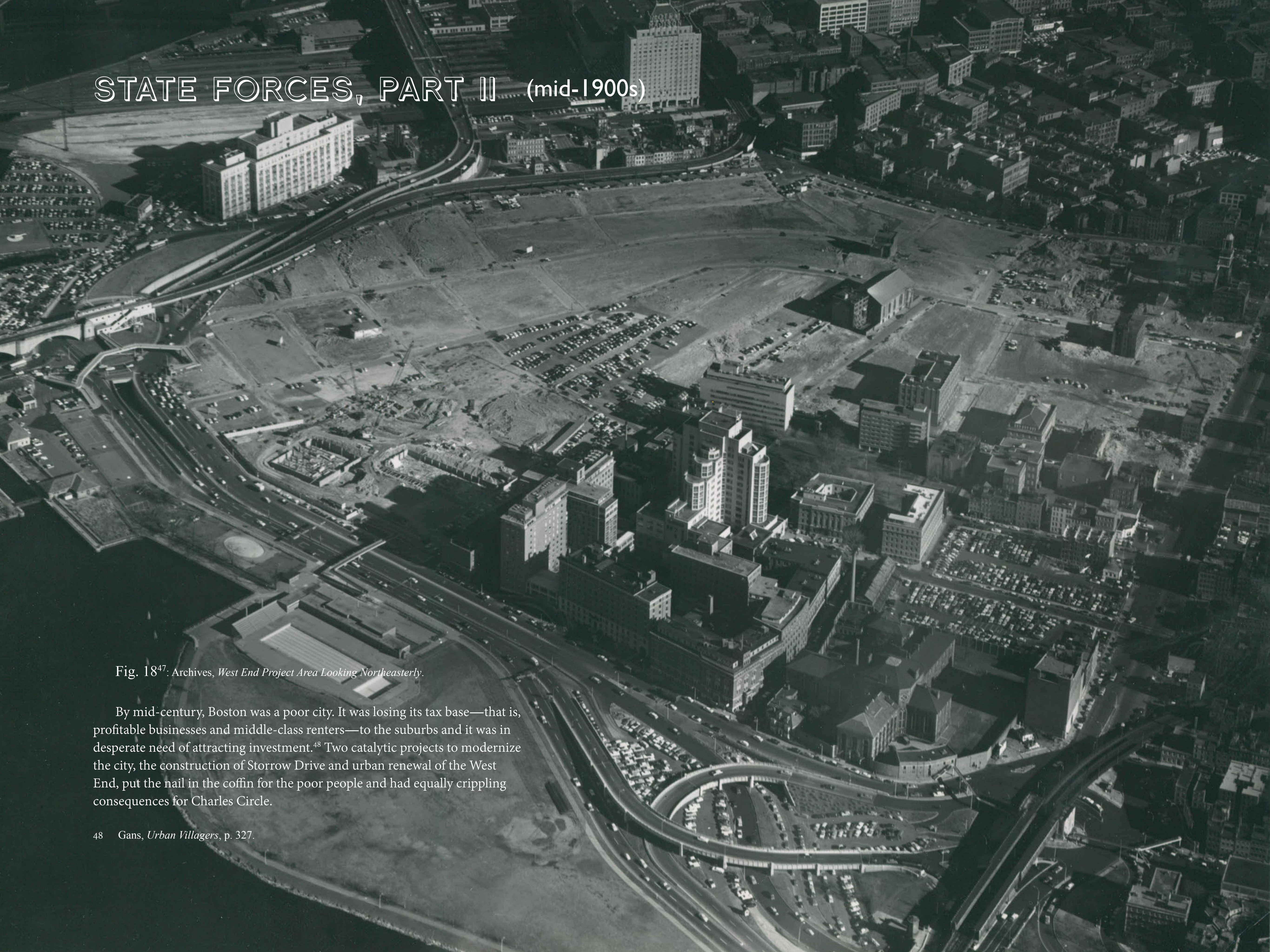


Fig. 18<sup>47</sup>: Archives, *West End Project Area Looking Northeasterly*.

By mid-century, Boston was a poor city. It was losing its tax base—that is, profitable businesses and middle-class renters—to the suburbs and it was in desperate need of attracting investment.<sup>48</sup> Two catalytic projects to modernize the city, the construction of Storrow Drive and urban renewal of the West End, put the nail in the coffin for the poor people and had equally crippling consequences for Charles Circle.

48 Gans, *Urban Villagers*, p. 327.



# STATE FORCES, PART II (mid-1900s)

Massachusetts's new Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) acquired the Charles River Embankment in 1947 and managed to pass a controversial roadway bill in 1949 that would turn the Embankment Road and North Charles Street into a regional highway link. Consequently, the six-lane Storrow Drive expressway was constructed in 1950-51.<sup>49</sup> James and Helen Storrow, who had contributed substantial sums to the Embankment earlier in the century, had always stipulated that there never be a road through the park. Yet after they died, their worst fears were realized when an expressway bearing their name destroyed substantial areas of the Esplanade and severed the entire park from the rest of the city.<sup>50</sup>



Fig. 19<sup>51</sup>

Charles Circle was selected as a major interchange along Storrow Drive. To accommodate increases in traffic volume, two overhead viaducts were built to connect the expressway with the circle. The once green area below the viaducts became a series of awkward, disconnected parking lots for the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. These layered walls of concrete and asphalt effectively cut off access to Charlesbank Park from Charles Circle. Additionally, the elegant traffic rotary of 1932 was subdivided for greater vehicle turning possibilities, creating a confusing and dangerous streetscape for both the car and the pedestrian. In a gesture of safety, two narrow footbridges were constructed in 1961 to allow for safe passage between the platform of Charles Street Station and the sidewalks north and south of Cambridge Street.<sup>52</sup> However, this not only made it impossible for the elderly or disabled to use the station, but it also clearly symbolized the dominance of the automobile over the pedestrian.<sup>53</sup>



Fig. 20<sup>54</sup>

49 Seasholes, "Gaining Ground: Landmaking in Boston's West End," p. 41.

50 Duerr, "Access to the River: Rethinking the Role of Storrow Drive," p. 24.

51 American, "City of Boston."

52 Elkus/Manfredi Architects Ltd. and HDR, *Charles/MGH Red Line Station Design Summary Report.*, p. 7.

53 Duerr, "Access to the River: Rethinking the Role of Storrow Drive," p. 66.

54 Severy, *19910908g\_rob\_t\_bayard\_severy\_we.jpg*.



# STATE FORCES, PART II (mid-1900s)

Within a decade of these traffic alterations, the “federal bulldozer” of urban renewal would wreak havoc on the West End and create further imbalances in the circle. By this time, the West End was “a run-down area of people struggling with the problems of low income, poor education, and related difficulties. Even so, it was by and large a good place to live.”<sup>55</sup> Yet after the city planning board secured funds from the post-World War II federal slum clearance program, it decided to clear the majority of the West End to make way for the construction of luxury, high-rise apartment buildings. A systemic prejudice against the neighborhood ensured that West Enders would be helpless against the renewal. In the 1950s the city perpetuated the outsider’s perception of the area as a slum by cutting funding for public works such as trash cleanup. Some West End community organizations even partnered with the Boston Redevelopment Authority to usher in the wrecking ball.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, the average West Enders could hardly believe that it would happen.<sup>57</sup> During the redevelopment and displacement, which lasted between 1958 and 1962, fine-grained streets gave way to superblocks. 2,700 working class families gave way to couples with a double income and no kids. Seven schools were demolished and never replaced, and a sense of community was all but eradicated.<sup>58</sup>



Fig. 22<sup>60</sup>

Notwithstanding Jerome Rappaport (the developer who built the Charles River Park apartments over the site) and Boston Garden (whose sports complex was just north of the district), the principal beneficiary from urban renewal in the West End was MGH.<sup>61</sup> MGH had been expanding rapidly during the previous decades, “and its trustees had long been unhappy about being surrounded by low-income neighbors.”<sup>62</sup> After renewal it could grow unchecked. While the redevelopment plan included provisions for ground floor retail, this barely happened in actuality. Instead, MGH purchased nearly all of the parking and ground floors of Charles River Park. Today, it leases most of these high rises, and most of the people who live in the buildings work at MGH.<sup>63</sup>

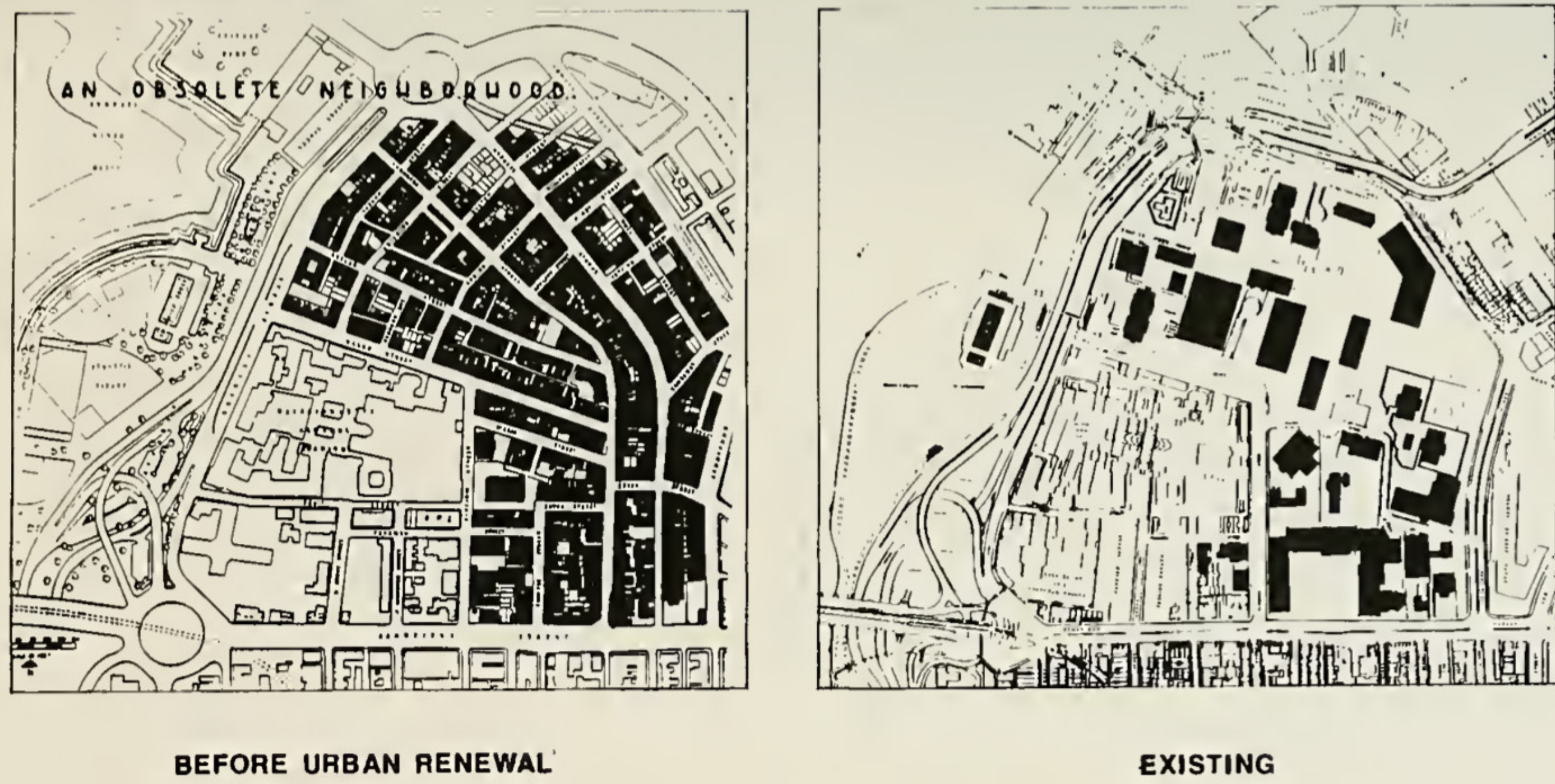


Fig 21<sup>59</sup>

55 Gans, *Urban Villagers*, p. 16.

56 Ibid, pp. 328-329.

57 Ibid, pp. 330-340.

58 Lucia, Personal Interview.

59 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Study*.

60 Moody, *Charles River Park Tower*.

61 Lucia, Personal Interview.

62 Gans, *Urban Villagers*, p. 328.

63 Lucia, Personal Interview.



# STATE FORCES, PART II (mid-1900s)

As a result of these government programs, Cambridge Street became “a wilderness, with insignificant commercial buildings on the south side and, similar dreariness, or parking lots on the north.”<sup>64</sup> The inclusion of the Back of the Hill into the Beacon Hill Historic District after 1960 would further reinforce Cambridge Street and Charles Circle as a kind of no-man’s land, a symbolic boundary between the megablock or “campus plan” to the north and the quaint, mixed-use urban character to the south.<sup>65</sup>

The BRA’s 1991 analysis of Charles Circle reminds us of the lasting effects that these state forces had on the area:

Charles Circle is confusing for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists, and it lacks a clear image as a city entrance. Pedestrians are almost unaware of the Esplanade when walking through Charles Circle toward Cambridge Street. The elevated MBTA Red Line rails bisect the Charles Circle urban fabric and blocks views of Cambridge Street.<sup>68</sup>

Fig. 23<sup>66</sup>

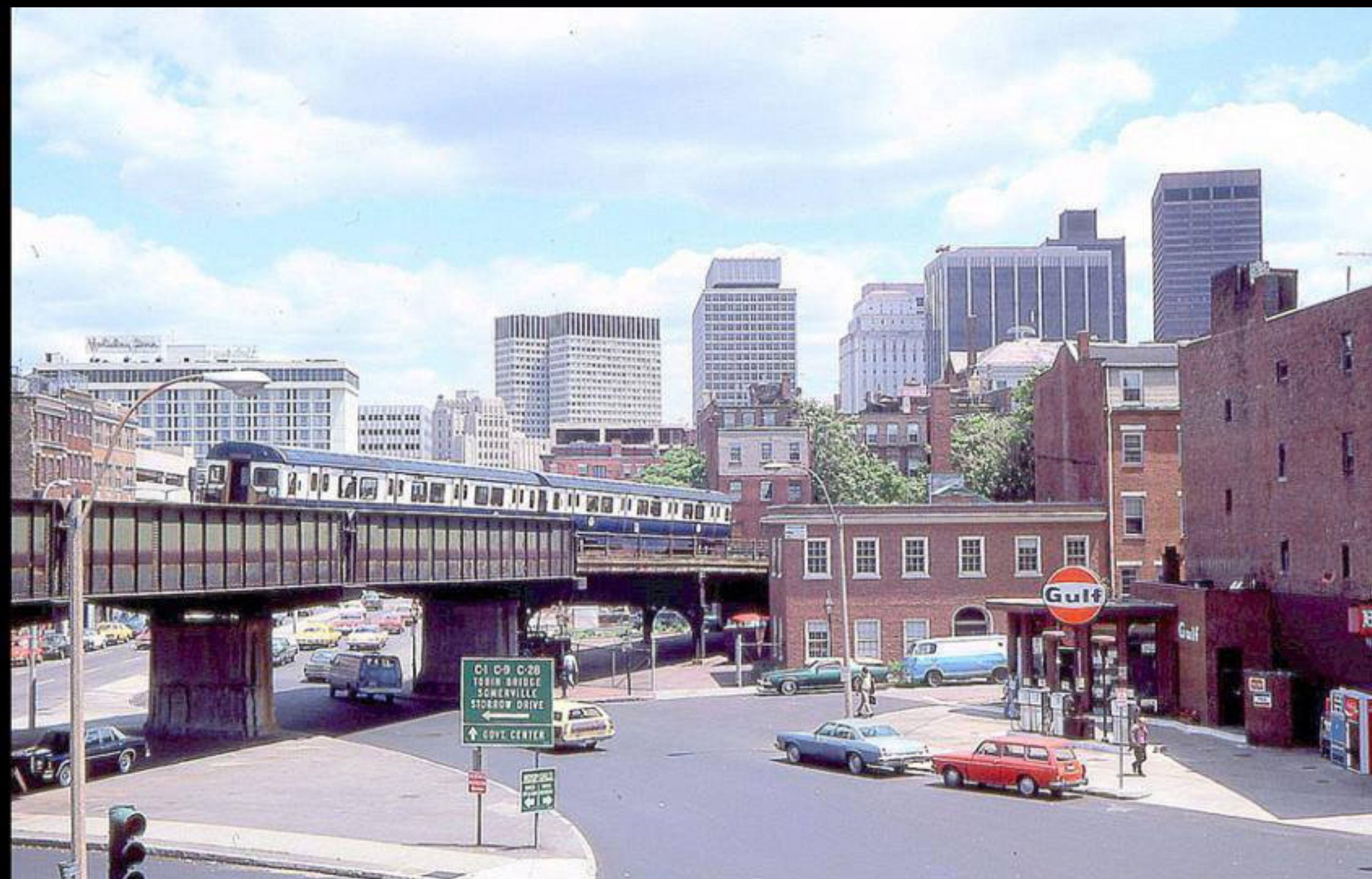


Fig. 24<sup>67</sup>



ETORROW DRIVE RAMPS AND EXITS  
CUT OFF THE ACCESS TO WATER-  
FRONT PLAYGROUND.

Fig. 25<sup>69</sup>



TRAFFIC CIRCULATION CAUSES  
CONFUSION IN CHARLES CIRCLE  
AREA.



INCONVENIENT ACCESS FROM CHARLES  
ETATION TO MASS. GENERAL HOSPITAL,  
BEACON HILL AND CAMBRIDGE STREET.

64 Whitehill, *Beacon Hill*, p. 33.  
65 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Plan*.  
66 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Study*.  
67 Dirty Old Boston, *Charles Circle circa 1978*.  
68 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Plan*, p. 9.  
69 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Study*.



# INSTITUTIONAL FORCES, PART I (early 2000s)

the forces that shape

*Charles Circle*

page 18

As the run-down Charles Circle functioned as a major arrival point for people heading to MGH, it was a long time coming for the institution to establish a proper entrance for itself.<sup>70</sup> After Cambridge Street was widened in the 1920s, MGH bought up many of the buildings on its northern side<sup>71</sup> and had, along with the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary (MEEI), expanded to surround Charles Street Jail over the following decades. By the 1990s, an estimated 75,000 cars crossed the quasi-rotary at Charles Circle each working day.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, MGH employees as well as residents of Beacon Hill and Charles River Park made heavy use of Charles Station.<sup>73</sup> Yet, the open space of Charles Circle was uninviting to anyone not willing to brave the seas of cars, the narrow stairwells and footbridges, or the greasy late night snacks at Buzzy's Famous Roast Beef that was nestled in by the 30-foot wall of the jail.<sup>74</sup><sup>75</sup> Thus began a pattern of institutions working with the surrounding communities, the state and the BRA to set a vision, paying for a large portion of the projects, and hiring private developers to implement the projects.



Fig. 26<sup>76</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Berry, Personal Interview.

<sup>71</sup> "Atlas of the City of Boston."

<sup>72</sup> Duerr, "Access to the River: Rethinking the Role of Storrow Drive." p. 54.

<sup>73</sup> Duerr, "Access to the River: Rethinking the Role of Storrow Drive." p. 62.

<sup>74</sup> Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Study*.

<sup>75</sup> Duerr, "Access to the River: Rethinking the Role of Storrow Drive.", pp. 65-66.

<sup>76</sup> Epsilon Associates, Inc., Elkus-Manfredi, and HDR Engineering, *Charles/MGH Station Draft Environmental Assessment*, p. 1.



# INSTITUTIONAL FORCES, PART I (early 2000s)

A critical first step for MGH to upgrade the image of the area was its transformation of the jail site into two new hospital facilities and a luxury hotel. After the jail went through a period of disinvestment and became riotous and overcrowded in the 1970s, a federal district judge ordered its closure. When it was closed for good in 1991, MGH acquired it from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts through a land swap.<sup>1</sup> MGH initially used the building for storage and while it constructed a proton treatment center on a small section of the site. In 2004 the hospital completed construction of Yawkey Center, a 400,000 square foot ambulatory care building adjacent the jail, and a 700-car parking garage underneath the jail's east wing. Since the jail was listed on both the State and National Registries of Historic Places, its east wing was dismantled stone by stone in order to dig out the parking garage and was reconstructed in the exact same configuration.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 27<sup>80</sup>: Partners bought Buzzy's for \$2.75 million in 2002.<sup>81</sup> Adjusted for inflation, this was equal to half of the assessed value of the jail when it became a historic landmark in 1980<sup>82</sup>, or 1/8<sup>th</sup> of the value of jail purchase in 1991<sup>83</sup>



Fig. 28<sup>84</sup>

MGH, which soon combined with another institution to form Partners Healthcare, decided the old jail could be adaptively reused as a hotel in order to generate commercial income and improve conditions in Charles Circle. A hotel's transient population would also allow the hospital future flexibility with the site. Partners selected Carpenter and Co. as its private developer and felt that "Carpenter's proposal for a high end hotel would enhance the mix of hotel offerings in the area, improve the feel of the hospital entrance, and add positive energy to the surrounding community."<sup>85</sup> Partners maintained infinite ownership but established a 75-year ground lease to collect rent and part of the hotel's revenue. Construction on the 300-room Liberty Hotel began in 2005. Carpenter took great care to maintain much of the historical authenticity of the jail. A 15-story tower that housed the rooms necessary to make the restoration worthwhile replaced part of the jail's north wing.<sup>86</sup> Much like the jail had after it opened in 1851, the Liberty Hotel immediately won awards and international recognition upon its opening in 2007. Sadly, the iconic Buzzy's had to be purchased and demolished, along with the jail wall, to make room for a plaza that would allow clear access to Yawkey and the hotel.<sup>87</sup>

78 Berry, Personal Interview.

79 Reiche, "Analyzing the Alignment of Incentives, Control, and Economics in Development Agreements between Private Developers and Mission-Driven Institutions," p. 36.

80 Pattinson, Berry, and Diana, "The Charles Street Jail Story," p. 18.

81 Palmer Jr., "MGH Devours Buzzy's Fabulous Hub Eatery to Make Way for Development."

82 Assessed value was \$2,529,600. Boston Landmarks Commission, *Report of the Boston Landmarks Commission on the Potential Designation of the Suffolk County Jail as a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as Amended.*

83 \$16 million in 1992. Reiche, "Analyzing the Alignment of Incentives, Control, and Economics in Development Agreements between Private Developers and Mission-Driven Institutions," p. 24.

84 Oshineye, "Liberty Hotel."

85 Reiche, "Analyzing the Alignment of Incentives, Control, and Economics in Development Agreements between Private Developers and Mission-Driven Institutions," p. 26.

86 Ibid.

87 Palmer Jr., "MGH Devours Buzzy's Fabulous Hub Eatery to Make Way for Development."



# INSTITUTIONAL FORCES, PART I (early 2000s)

While the jail and the hospital had opened up to Charles Circle, Charles Station and the streetscape below were still a sight for sore eyes. Partners gave a substantial sum of money to remedy this.<sup>88</sup> It collaborated with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (which ran the station), the MDC (which owned the roads), and the City of Boston to modernize the intersection. The coalition agreed to build “a new station at an enlarged Cambridge Street Island with at-grade access.”<sup>89</sup> This negated the need for harrowing footbridges and provided accessibility compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The existing 1932 platform was preserved and restored but consulting architects designed a transparent glass structure to encase the elevators and escalators in order to improve sightlines and open out to the surrounding landscape. Sensible improvements to vehicular circulation and sidewalks—including more generous sidewalk space, shorter crosswalk distances, and red brick paving in the historic spirit of Beacon Hill—created quick, easy access to the up-and-coming tourist area on Charles Street and “a direct, barrier-free link to the hospital campus.”<sup>90</sup>

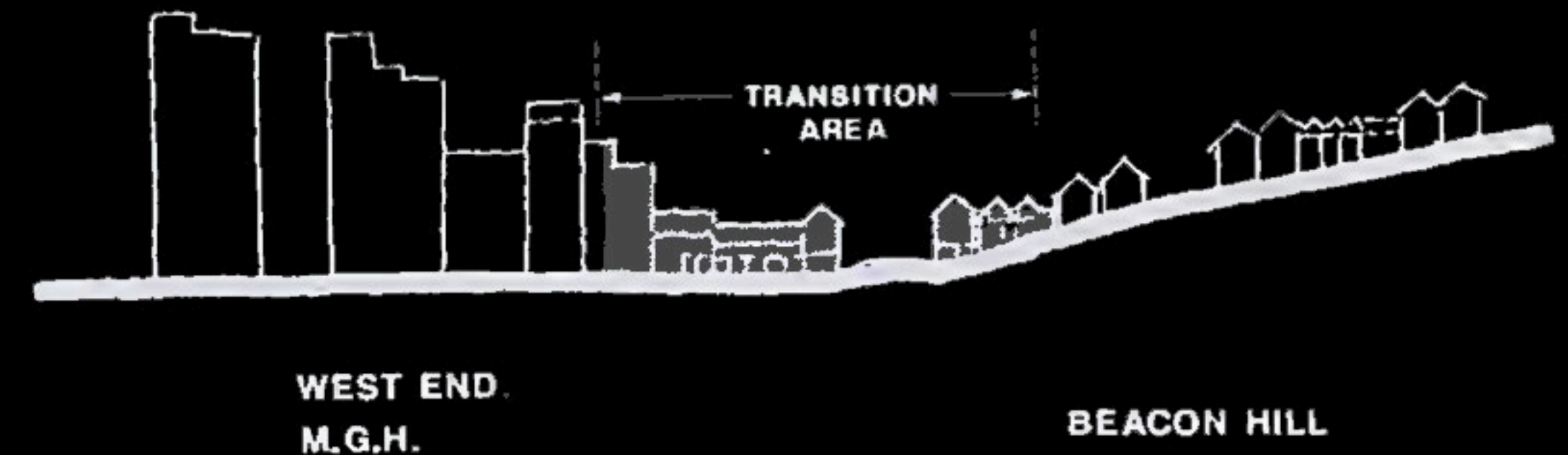


Fig. 30<sup>92</sup>

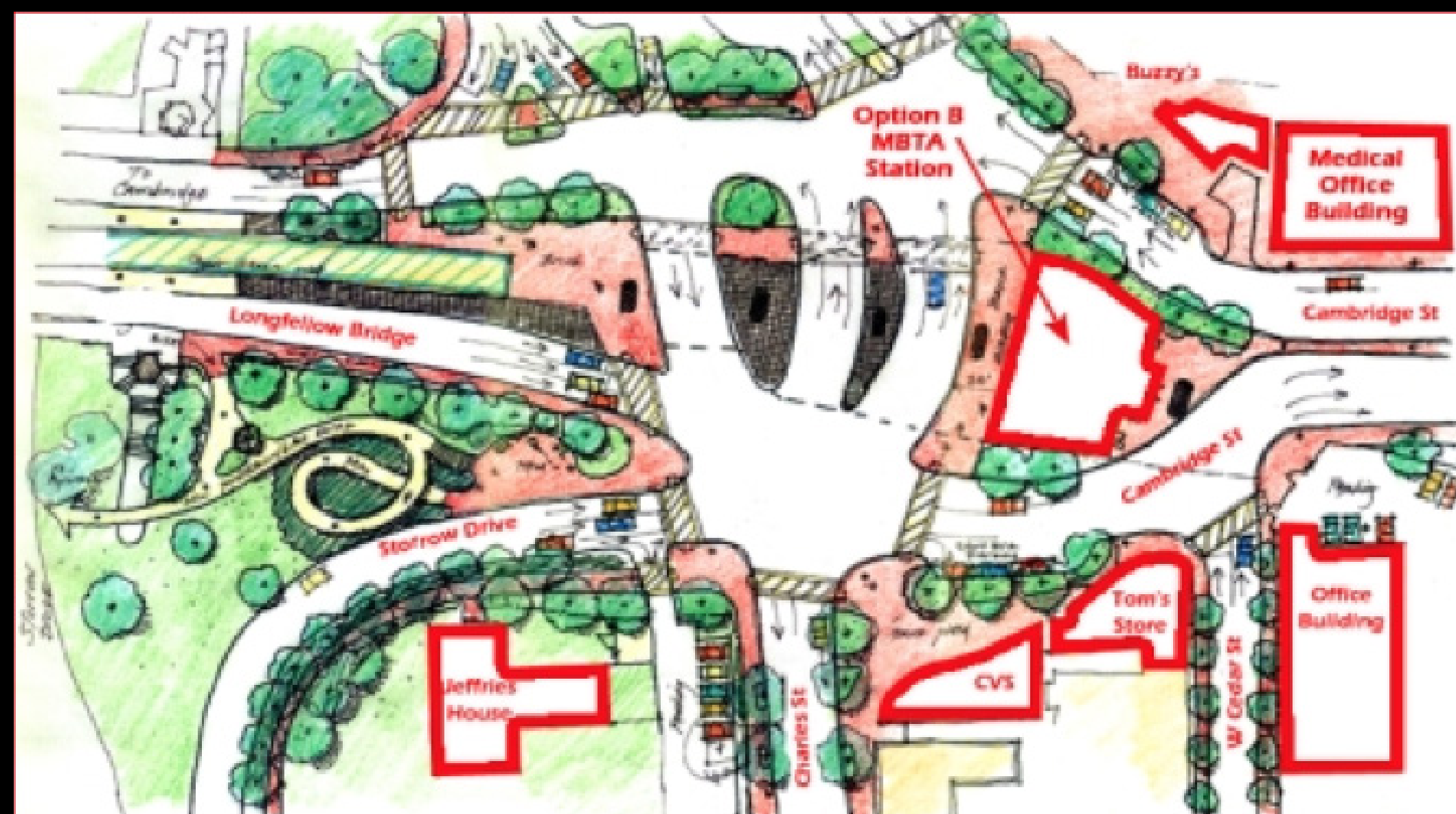


Fig. 29<sup>91</sup>

With more active buildings throughout the circle and a greatly improved pedestrian experience, today MGH is now in control of its front door and has created public space out of an area whose sole purpose was to funnel vehicular traffic. MGH and the BRA have also begun to successfully stitch together the urban fabric of the Back of the Hill and the West End with intricate infill improvements along Cambridge Street. However, the less fortunate West Ender of the 1950s has long been forgotten. As the urban character of Beacon Hill has begun to seep north into the hospital superblock, so too has its costs and prestige. This is endemic of the gentrification of recent downtown renovations. Life is improving in Charles Circle, but typically only for “luxury travelers,” hospital workers, and residents who can afford to live in the area. When the Liberty Hotel joined Starwood Hotels in 2011<sup>94</sup>, for example, affordable rates became a thing of the past.

88 Berry, Personal Interview.

89 Epsilon Associates, Inc., Elkus-Manfredi, and HDR Engineering, *Charles/MGH Station Draft Environmental Assessment*.

90 Elkus/Manfredi Architects Ltd. and HDR, *Charles/MGH Red Line Station Design Summary Report*.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

92 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Study*.

93 Reardon, Personal Interview.



# INSTITUTIONAL FORCES, PART II (mid-2000s)

the forces that shape

*Charles Circle*

page 21

Charles Circle, despite its newfound charm, is still a mess. Institutional expansion will continue as the predominant motivator in shaping it up. The implications for its future are a mixture of blessings and curses. It will become more beautiful and pedestrian-friendly. However, it will become increasingly congested, increasingly mono-functional and increasingly disconnected from the river unless public-private partnerships can expand their scope to embrace the park and significantly alter the role of Storrow Drive.

Fig. 31<sup>94</sup>: Moody, *Charles Circle Pedestrian Bridge*





# INSTITUTIONAL FORCES, PART II (mid-2000s)



Fig. 32<sup>95</sup>

Despite recent upgrades that knocked some sense into the rotary design, Charles Circle is still a hotbed of vehicle congestion.<sup>96</sup> Pressures from hospitals and the city to accommodate as many vehicles as possible will only continue to exacerbate this. Ongoing construction adjacent to the intersection can be attributed to the \$300 million Longfellow Bridge Rehabilitation Project, part of a Statewide program prompted by the scare of Minnesota's fatal bridge collapse in 2007. Using a combination of historic and modern materials, construction crews are strengthening the bridge to function in its glorious 1907 form for many years to come.<sup>97</sup> The project reduces the amount of lanes bound for Cambridge from two to one, donating the extra space to pedestrians and bike lanes.<sup>98</sup> However, it will maintain the two inbound lanes that widen to three at Charles Circle.<sup>99</sup> MassDOT claims that this is necessary given the complexity of the intersection, yet there have been no official traffic studies of the circle that would confirm its impact. Local residents have observed that the majority of traffic flows in from Storrow Drive, not the bridge.<sup>100</sup> Thus, continuing to accommodate three lanes of traffic from the bridge will not help mitigate the real problem and the standstill patterns of bikes, pedestrians and cars will not change anytime soon. As MGH employs the greatest number of people in Boston save the city itself, this will remain the doorstep interchange of the city unless traffic is substantially decreased along Storrow Drive.

The next player poised to rework the surrounding edges of Charles Circle is the hospital campus' junior institution, the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. Now that MGH has done its part in the restoration of Charles Circle and is concentrating its expansion eastward, the intersection has been primed for MEEI to answer with its own upgrades. Since the charitable institution's modest 1824 beginnings as a small building on Charles Street it has grown into seven disconnected facilities surrounding Charles Circle that are bounded on all sides by either roads or MGH property. To replace outdated facilities and accommodate expected growth<sup>101</sup>, it has proposed several infill developments. These include a new four-story administrative building over the surface parking next to its own historic hotel conversion, the John Jeffries House, and the replacement of its 1896 building sandwiched between Cambridge Street and Yawkey Center with a modern 10-story building. Both projects intend to complement the design of surrounding buildings as well as provide for an active pedestrian experience at the ground level.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, this infill will further drive up land values in Charles Circle and continue to solidify its mono-functionality as an institutional and luxury traffic hub. Without incentives for "mom and pop" businesses or affordable housing, the caliber of new retail will cater to a high traffic volume of hospital workers, transient people and consumers of luxury goods, such as those that frequent the boutique shops at Charles Street, the stylish cocktail lounges at the Liberty, and the pricy, ready-made meals at the Whole Foods market nearby. With MEEI rounding out the street level activation of Charles Circle, there will be no options for those seeking another Buzzy's. Nor will there be a market demand for a neighborhood Buzzy's, as the only residents who will live nearby are those who inhabit the upper crust.

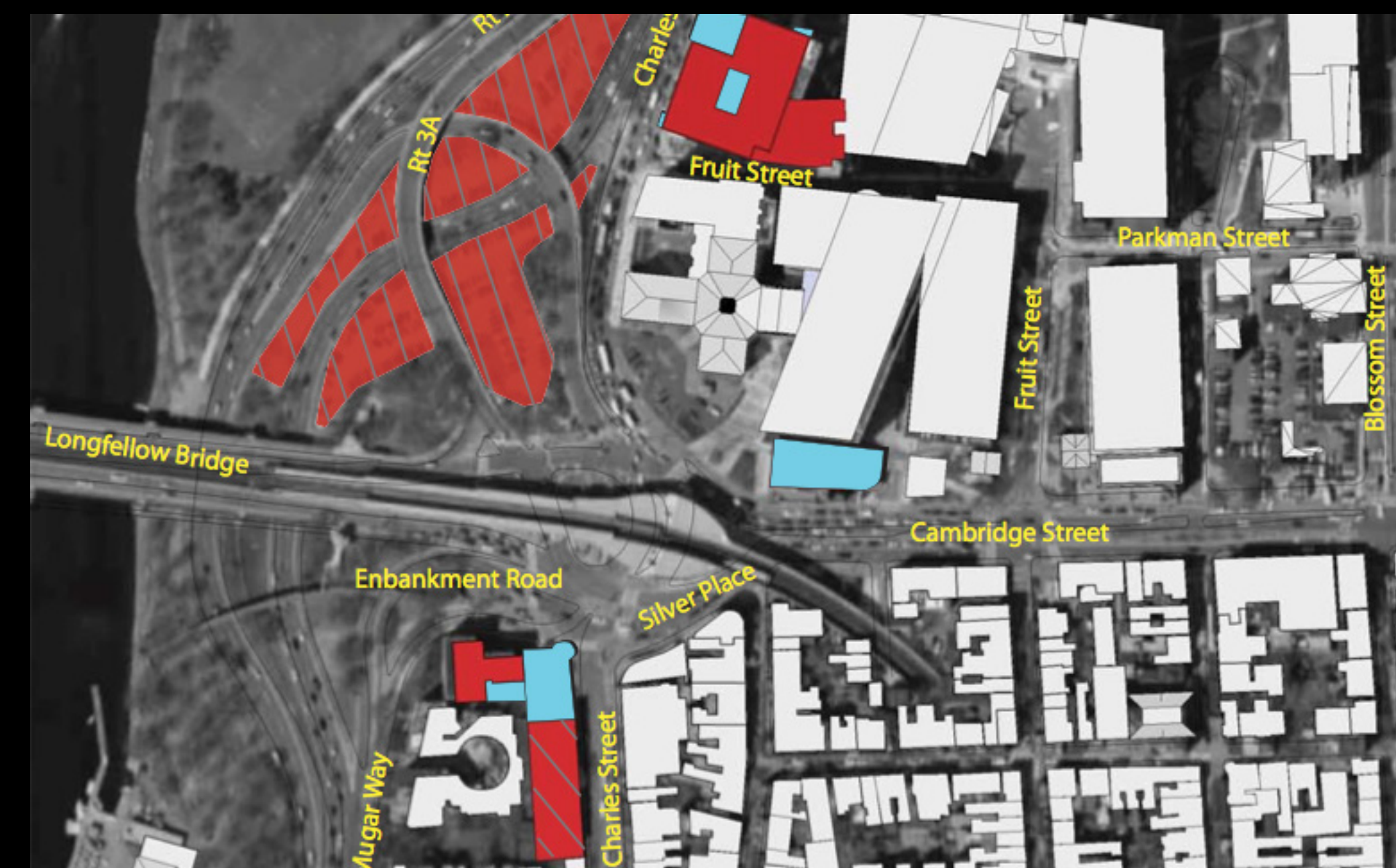


Fig. 33<sup>103</sup>: MEEI Master Plan. Red is existing properties, Blue represents proposed infill projects.

95 Flaherty, *The Longfellow Bridge Has Been under Construction through the Winter*.

96 Parker, "Bridge's One-Way Traffic Plan Draws Objections."

97 21 and 2014, "On Longfellow Bridge, Old Techniques Pose New Challenges - The Boston Globe."

98 Parker, "Bridge's One-Way Traffic Plan Draws Objections."

99 Moskowitz, "Longfellow Loses Outbound Car Lane in New Design."

100 Cord Taylor, "Traffic Crisis at Charles Circle."

101 Epsilon Associates, Inc., "Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary Institutional Master Plan Notification Form/ Project Notification Form.", p. 16.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid., p. 2-2



# INSTITUTIONAL FORCES, PART II (mid-2000s)

Perhaps somewhat hopeful is MEEI's plan for the 10 acres of concrete and parked cars between Charles Circle and Charlesbank. In 2014 MEEI secured legislation to establish a 99-year lease with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR—the new state agency in charge of parks and parkways) in order to convert its main surface parking lots, situated underneath the viaducts connecting Charles Circle to Storrow Drive, into a park and a 1065-car underground parking garage.<sup>104</sup> This measure will also allow it to build a 240,000 square foot expansion to its 15-story headquarter building behind the Liberty Hotel, which would require modification to Charles Street.<sup>105</sup> Much like MGH's plans to upgrade Charles Circle, this plan had been in the works for a very long time. The BRA's 1991 Plan for Cambridge Street states this quite plainly: "Eventually replace the surface parking lots owned by the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary on the Esplanade with parkland as part of a comprehensive transportation plan for the institutions."<sup>106</sup> Despite fears that MEEI's private park and the necessary realignment of Storrow Drive will push Charlesbank and the river even further away from Charles Circle and the city, the influential Esplanade Association and other community stakeholders were consulted in drafting the 2014 legislation and seem pleased with it.<sup>107</sup> Additional parkland will also be created if Storrow can be relocated under only one arch of the Longfellow Bridge. Many details need to be worked out in order to ensure the success of this project, and much creativity is needed in order to improve upon the "awkward and unsightly" pedestrian overpasses between Charles Circle and the park.<sup>108</sup> With Storrow in its current configuration, there barely a clue of the park or the river from the ground level of Charles Circle.



Fig. 34<sup>109</sup>

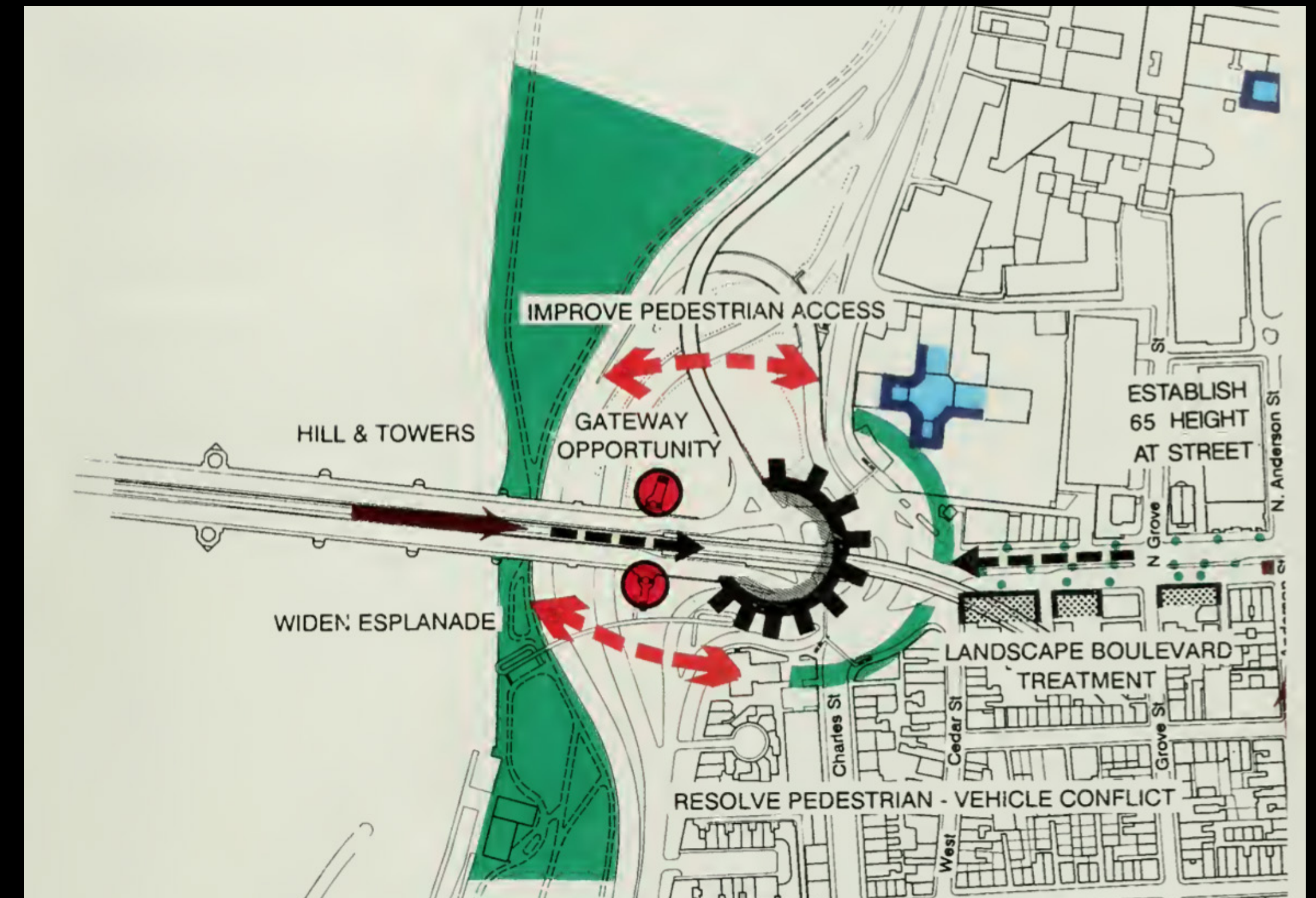


Fig. 35<sup>110</sup>

To prevent further division between Charles Circle and its park, and to alleviate traffic congestion, public-private partnerships must widen their concept of Charles Circle as not just a gateway to Boston, but as a gateway to the river. Funding must target a new design for Storrow Drive, such as depressing it, or the Esplanade Association's proposal to downgrade it to a tree lined parkway. Alternatively, or complementarily, funding must target much simpler alternatives to the long, complicated overpasses that people use to cross over the speedway. A direct exit to the park from the eastern end of the train platform may work brilliantly to this end. But like many public-private efforts, these too could be a long time coming. And by that point, new forces may be shifting the transportation paradigm. By 2050, the resurgence of multimodal transportation could have led to the decline of automobile. Technological advancements in home health could have led to the decline of the hospital superblock. Loosened banking regulations could lead to an even graver global financial crash than in 2008 and therefore reduce spending on luxury goods and public works. Environmental forces could even render the Esplanade into a completely different form or use. The specific destiny of Charles Circle is unclear but there is one thing we can know for certain: it will always be tied to the mobility needs of Boston and its people.

104 Herman and Mohl, "New Law Gives Boost to Mass. Eye and Ear."  
105 Murphy, "More Open Space Is Now On the Way | Beacon Hill Times."  
106 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Plan*.

107 Herman and Mohl, "New Law Gives Boost to Mass. Eye and Ear."  
108 Berg, *Cultural Landscape Report: The Esplanade Boston, Massachusetts.*, p. 54.  
109 "Beacon Hill Neighbors Receptive to Mass. Eye & Ear Expansion."  
110 Boston Redevelopment Authority, *Cambridge Street Plan.*, p. 16.



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the forces that shape

**Charles Circle**

page 25

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