

## **Boston's New Urban Ring:**

### An Antidote to Urban Fragmentation

When citizens talk about the problems of American public life, they are usually talking about the problems of our cities. They cite fear of crime, poor schools, expensive housing, and unresponsive government among the city's many undesirable traits. When social critics speak of the problems in cities, they are inclined to add racism, segregation, lack of education, and the absence of economic opportunity and investment capital. But when architects and urban designers speak of urban ills, we often seem to say that the biggest problem facing our public life is that there is not *enough* city; that what we need is more, rather than less, urban life.

What we mean, of course, is not that we wish to thrust the very real problems of today's cities upon that segment of the population that lives outside them, but that the most fertile ground for a rich pluralistic democracy lies in the diverse landscape of the American city. Many architects and urban designers believe that the problems of urban America are not the result of traditional urban phenomena such as racial and ethnic diversity, mixed-use development, and high density land use, but rather that these conditions, when not corrupted by social, cultural, and economic fragmentation, are essential for democracy. Architects and urban designers also mean that the suburbs—much more racially, ethnically, and economically homogeneous than cities—are merely evasions from the pluralistic opportunities afforded by cities. As more and more layers of suburbs have continued to extend outward from our urban centers, (recently they have come to account for more population in the U.S. than cities)<sup>1</sup>, this diversion has become more serious.

The premise of this paper is that clear spatial order and hierarchy are necessary if we are to attain meaningful social, political, and cultural diversity in our cities; and in the space between them and the suburbs. We should not expect that simply because buildings look different from one another, and because the landscape between them seems fractured and uncontrolled, that we are representing the heterogeneity that today is taken in architectural discourse to be synonymous with political pluralism. We are not. Our contemporary urban and suburban landscape is often a homogeneous assemblage of meaningless commercial difference. If we want a heterogeneous landscape capable of representing real differences in culture, politics, and social order, we need, paradoxically, a strong, centered, spatial order that can lend hierarchy to public life. What follows is a proposal to transform the metropolitan area centered on Boston, MA into just such a meaningfully heterogeneous landscape by means of an urban design strategy called the New Urban Ring.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Suburban Century Begins"  
Schneider, William  
*The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1992  
pp. 33-44

The New Urban Ring is a proposal to assemble a ring of space (composed largely of under-used parts of the city such as railroad right-of-ways, turnpike air-rights, some neighborhood streets, bridges, tunnels, bikeways, and even parts of the airport) around the central core of Boston to serve the following purposes: 1) to provide a circumferential transportation system to link the existing radial subway and transit lines between the city center and Route 128; amid the neighborhoods, nearby suburbs, and under-developed industrial land; 2) to provide a continuous boulevard for pedestrians, cyclists, and other citizens to move through, rather than between neighborhoods; 3) to act as a catalyst for urban development in the area between the city and the suburbs, and thereby allow the urbanity of the city to grow to metropolitan dimensions, rather than allow it to continue to wither in the face of competition from edge cities, and suburban sprawl; and 4) to provide a place for civic representation; for public buildings, spaces, and monuments to accrue meaning and express difference by virtue of their relationship to one another. The New Urban Ring is in some important ways a proposal to resist the commercial forces that make our society and its built environment increasingly homogeneous. If we desire that meaningful difference in our society be reflected in the built environment, we must find a way to make difference recognizable. The New Urban Ring is a proposal to establish a shared realm; a datum around Boston that conforms to and reinforces the city's urban morphology. In relation to this "common ground"<sup>2</sup>, differences in ethnicity, race, politics, style, and ideas will be more recognizable, and therefore more meaningful.

Many architectural, social, and political critics, including Richard Sennett<sup>3</sup>, Mike Davis<sup>4</sup>, and Mickey Kaus<sup>5</sup>, among many others, have discussed the ways in which we avoid the social, cultural and political pluralism promised by American cities, and create artificially homogeneous communities instead. They make distinctions between public and private life (Sennett), actual and pseudo-public places (Davis), and "social" versus "civic" spending by the government (Kaus). Sennett and Davis speak to the fact that architecture and urban design are often complicit in this descent into individual isolationism, and the concomitant loss of public life. Kaus attempts to re-define public expenditures in terms of public, rather than individual, good. These critiques rely on making distinctions between economic identity on the one hand, and political or civic identity on the other.

### Homogeneity and Heterogeneity

<sup>2</sup> *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families*

Lukas, Anthony J.

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985

<sup>3</sup> *The Fall of Public Man*

Sennett, Richard

New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974

<sup>4</sup> *City of Quartz*

Davis, Mike

London: Verso, an Imprint of New Left Books, 1990

<sup>5</sup> *The End of Equality*

Kaus, Mickey

New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, Inc., 1992

When we look around us at even the most successful of today's urban developments we see commercial culture as the only source of our collective identity. From the waterfront developments of The Rouse Corporation to the "Eisner-ization of America" (to call it "Disney-fication" seems unfair to the real Walt Disney, who had nothing to do with creating the current confusion between fantasy and reality) and the increasingly eerie similarity of experience that one finds in such formerly disparate places as Georgetown (Washington, DC), Harvard Square (Cambridge, MA), Halsted Street (Chicago, IL), and a host of other increasingly "mall-like" new urban districts, where the shops, wares, people, food, habits, and activities of the participants all seem remarkably alike.

This phenomenon is the source of a very real fear about the increasing homogeneity in our society. It is often taken to be the most pressing problem in our rapidly changing culture. We buy the same products; watch the same TV shows; eat the same fast foods; experience the same landscape— indeed, the latent heterogeneity of American society seems to be evaporating despite the fact that the country is composed of more different kinds of people than ever. Meaningful differences between people and places seem to be disappearing in the face of rampant commercialism and burgeoning communication technologies that further minimize the importance and character of actual, rather than virtual, place; the effects of which we have not even begun to understand. But it is in the nature of capitalism to standardize products, increase market share, and reduce difference in the world. We also know that capitalism also widens gaps in income<sup>6</sup>. These are not new observations, but if we are serious about trying to forge prescriptive connections between the form and content of our society in our roles as designers of the built environment, they are not observations that we can afford to ignore.

But by fretting about the physical and spatial results of our economic system, (which the electorate shows no signs whatever of wanting to change), many critics miss the opportunity to resist the cultural and spatial homogenization of our society through non-economic, or civic means.

The idea behind the New Urban Ring suggests that it is not the aforementioned commercial homogeneity that is the problem so much as its opposites: excessive heterogeneity, psychological isolation, lack of meaningful contact with others, and impoverished civic life. This lack of civic commonality threatens us much more than the fact that we will soon all buy everything we own from "The GAP". Because while it is disturbing that we all may one day wear the same tasteful plum colored shirts and khaki pants, it is more disturbing that we may take this to be the total measure of our social worth. Mickey Kaus, the author of a strategy for the renewal of American Liberalism titled, provocatively, *The End of Equality*, advocates many political measures that might replace what he calls "money liberalism" (or government efforts to try to balance private economic fortunes) with "civic liberalism" (a more direct strategy of renewing civic life and civic obligations)<sup>7</sup>, but they are all means by which we

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<sup>6</sup> *The End of Equality*, Chapter 2, pp. 7-16

<sup>7</sup> Kaus describes the failure of what he calls *money liberalism*, or the traditional liberal agenda that "seeks to prevent income differences from corroding social equality by the simple expedient of reducing the incomes

might resist the superficial heterogeneity of capitalism with some elements of a more substantive homogeneity associated with a more cohesive society. A more cohesive society that might, it almost goes without saying, actually see benefits to the community as clearly as we now see benefits to ourselves.

By ceding to commercial culture that which belongs to civic culture, we capitulate to capitalism's homogenizing power over us as undifferentiated consumers. If we continue to describe ourselves politically (on both the left and right) as merely a collection of individual rights, we cease to have any political sense of our interdependence, and the only way in which we interact is through the medium of commerce. Are you a "T-shirt and jeans kind of guy"<sup>8</sup> or are you a citizen; with ideas, character, and an identity that goes beyond the cut of your clothes ?

Because our political discourse is so dominated by discussion of individual rights ( to have abortions, to desecrate the flag, to own and shoot guns, to smoke pot, to not pay taxes, to build on wetlands, etc.) we do not discuss what we would like to have as the common property of the community. Is the promise of America truly "the right to be left alone" (what Isaiah Berlin would call negative liberty)?<sup>9</sup> Or is there an affirmative good that resides in his conception of its opposite, "positive liberty" ? Is the freedom to support something as a society not also a very important freedom ? Finally, is there a way to revise our public life so that it is both accepting the kind of difference that Richard Sennett describes<sup>10</sup>, while at the same time retaining the strength of our shared political will ? If the answer is yes, and if spatial order can be said to play a role in the construction of such public life, then the urban design program of New Urban Ring is a call for such an affirmative step. It holds the possibility to serve as what we might call the footprint of an improved social order.

Various rings for Boston have been conceived by different people at different times along a number of different routes, but they all share a similar animus. They are all responses to what Alex Krieger calls the lack of "rims" to connect the "hub and spoke" structure of the Boston region<sup>11</sup>. This article will describe the history of that spatial

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differences – or, more accurately, *suppressing* the income differences continually generated in a capitalist economy". In its place, he offers *civic liberalism*, which "pursues social equality directly, through government action, rather than by manipulating the unequal distribution of income generated in the capitalist marketplace" . This distinction between money liberalism and civic liberalism holds tremendous opportunities for programming a re-designed landscape for America's cities. *The End of Equality*, p.18

<sup>8</sup> Television Advertisement for *Citibank VISA*, 1995

<sup>9</sup>*Four Essays on Liberty*

Berlin, Isaiah

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969

pp. xxxvii-lxiii (Introduction)

<sup>10</sup> "The Passive Body"

Sennett, Richard

*GSD News, Winter, 1995*

Harvard University Graduate School of Design

p. 28

<sup>11</sup> "Ring Dreaming and Making"

order, its political and social ramifications, and the accompanying transportation strategies that have evolved to serve the region. In keeping with the rationale for the New Urban Ring itself, the essay will first address these issues with respect to the city, then the suburbs, and finally the New Urban Ring.

The New Urban Ring derives its strength from synthesis. It joins the regional scale of transportation planning to the human scale of urban design; it relates the importance of spatial order to political identity; and it focuses its energy on the crucial space between city and suburb; the most vexing segment of the "middle landscape". So to understand the importance of this proposal for Boston, we must first look at the forces that have pulled the region apart and how by weaving it back together, a new metropolis could be born.

### *Boston's Geography: Isolation and In-fill*

The evolution of Boston as a geographical entity is interesting in its own right. What began as a "hilly peninsula, almost completely surrounded by water"<sup>12</sup> has been transformed through landfill over the past three and one half centuries into a much larger, flatter, and more contiguous land mass (**figures 1-7**). One can follow the evolution from the original Shawmut peninsula; to the early town with its active waterfront; to the thickened "neck" connecting the peninsula back to Roxbury; to the enlargement of Charlestown and the beginnings of the long process to in-fill the Back Bay; to the enlargement of East Boston, the completion of the Back Bay, and the construction of Fan Pier; and finally, the completion of the in-fill at Fort Point Channel, Charlestown, and East Boston for what is now Logan Airport. But much of the city's original form came from civic divisions that remain to this day. Charlestown, Cambridge, Brookline and Boston Proper, South Boston, and East Boston, can all trace aspects of their distinctiveness today to the physical separation of their pasts. All of these places existed in Boston's earliest days, but they were more a series of islands than part of a cohesive city. And it was due to their separation that the system of spokes connecting them to the hub of the original Shawmut Peninsula was born. When there were large bodies of water separating these communities, ferries and bridges were the only way to connect them. Over time these initial radial routes from the center of Boston Proper became the primary roads in the adjoining communities as well.

As the city grew, however, the watery voids that separated the landmasses began to shrink. A prolonged series of landfill projects began to construct the Boston that we know today. But the system of radial arteries lived on. Moreover, they became even more important than ever as orientation devices, because even as the city became a more contiguous piece of land, its neighborhoods remained quite distinct. They were created at different moments

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Krieger, Alex  
 from *Catalogue #2: The New Urban Ring*  
 Thrush, George, Boston: Northeastern University, 1994, pp.12-16

<sup>12</sup> *Boston: A Topographical History*

Whitehill, Walter Muir  
 Cambridge, MA: Belknap/ Harvard University Press, 1968, p.1

during this evolution of landmass and shoreline, and independently of one another, so they often shared little in the way of orientation, density, and urban morphology. In a 1986 design studio at Harvard's GSD, Mario Gandelsonas directed his students in describing some of this complexity through a series of drawings which are very helpful in making this point about the city's inherent morphological contradictions (**figures 8 and 9**).

So, from a physical standpoint, Boston was conceived as a collection of parts; both with respect to the parts of the city that remain separated from the "hub" by water, such as Charlestown, East Boston, and to a lesser extent, South Boston; and with respect to its internal "islands" of Roxbury, Dorchester, Brookline (politically distinct but virtually surrounded by Boston), and Allston/ Brighton. Landfill has subsequently made whole that which was separated at the start, though it has never fully succeeded in re-connecting the fabric of the region.

### *Parochialism in Politics*

The physical distinctions that describe Boston's neighborhoods and nearby suburbs are reinforced by political ones that mark their ideals and prejudices. The city has had a long history of conflict between local and regional interests. Perhaps the best known, and most easily recognized, is the ongoing friction between catholic voters (traditionally Irish, Democrat, and urban) and their protestant counterparts (traditionally English, Republican, and suburban). This has evolved over time, but what is remarkable is the extent to which one can still describe the area's politics in these terms.

After the great migration of the Irish to Boston in the middle of the nineteenth century, they quickly began to emerge as a political force in the city. In a town that had been politically dominated by protestants since the time of the Puritans, the political rise of the Irish was seen by them as a threat. The result was that since the Protestants continued to control State politics for some time, they sought to limit the power of their urban brethren by limiting the political power of the city. The most powerful tool this repressive arsenal was (and remains) something called "Home Rule", a State law under which the City of Boston (unlike all other cities in the Commonwealth) must gain the approval of the legislature before levying any new taxes<sup>13</sup>. By controlling the city's ability to raise revenue, the Protestant suburbanites limited the potential power of the Catholic Irish. But this mutual animosity also caused Bostonians and their political leaders to resist other, more beneficial regional alliances that might have served the metropolitan area much better than the latent parochialism and separatism that emerged.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley (1874-1958)*  
Beatty, Jack  
New York: Addison -Wesley, 1992  
Chapter 7, p. 263 and p. 269

American politics are filled with ethnic and religious conflicts like these, but in Boston they were particularly destructive to planning and designing the built environment because this conflict between the city and all of its neighbors restrained inter-municipal cooperation and regional planning. Due to its inherently fractured and separated physical character, the area known as "the Boston Region" –which is actually no larger than an average size metropolis–could not be planned like one. So in a place where cooperation between small political entities was essential, there were profound political obstacles to coordinating the physical planning of the city as a whole.

To exacerbate this problem of fragmentation, Boston's policy of annexation was only partially successful, and many nearby municipalities remained politically independent. While Charlestown, Dorchester, Brighton, East Boston, Roxbury, and West Roxbury had all been annexed by the city by 1875<sup>14</sup>; Brookline, Cambridge, Somerville, and Chelsea all remained independent towns. So this maintenance of distinct political units further separated the fates of the region despite the close proximity of all of its residents. Moreover, there is the very real specter of political strategies that sought to divide and conquer, by pitting downtown business interests against those of the neighborhoods. While this is a common enough phenomenon in many American cities, it was made much worse here by what came to be known as "Curleyism"<sup>15</sup>, after five-time mayor James Michael Curley. Curleyism was a method of over-taxing downtown business to the point that it ceased to provide economic growth, as a method for financing an ever growing political patronage system. It was not ultimately a viable approach over the long term, and as a result, the heart of the city, and its neighborhoods viewed themselves as pitted against one another, rather than as having a shared interest in the regions economic vitality. One can trace this divergence of interest from Curley up through to the present day, when recent mayors like Ray Flynn, Kevin White, and John Collins all described the focus of their administrations in terms of either downtown or "the neighborhoods"– but seldom both. The only way that a mayor like Curley would seek any kind of regional political (and hence planning) structure, would be if he could run it. Indeed, during the Depression, he proposed "to assemble 350 representatives of 'religious, educational, labor, industrial commercial, civic and financial organizations' to work with the City Planning Board to create a fifty year plan for Boston. Reviving an idea he had advocated since his first term, he also boldly called for the formation of a 'Greater Boston', a federation of forty-three cities and towns within a fifteen-mile radius of City Hall along the lines of the London County Council"<sup>16</sup>. This did not come to be, as "reaction to the idea from the forty-three cities and towns ranged from amusement to panic". But as Jack Beatty points out, Curley was aware that the politics of fragmentation (even if he benefitted from them electorally) were not good for the citizenry at large. "To appreciate why, we have only to imagine how

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<sup>14</sup> *Planning the City Upon the Hill*  
Kennedy, Lawrence W.

Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, p. 53

<sup>15</sup> *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley (1874-1958)*  
Chapter 5, p. 163

<sup>16</sup> *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley (1874-1958)*  
Chapter 7, p. 269

the establishment of a Greater Boston would have affected the two most contentious political issues of recent decades in Massachusetts: race and taxes."<sup>17</sup> These two issues are perfect examples of how politics and urbanism mix; for if problems in both race and taxes can be avoided by moving to another district, and if, as in the Boston area, these other districts are really part of the same geographical metropolis, you have what we might call a geography of avoidance.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Regionalism in Transportation, Infrastructure, and Recreation*

The proposals of regional visionaries like Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles Eliot, Sylvester Baxter, Arthur Shurtleff and the Boston Society of Architects all sought to buck this trend toward fragmentation and parochialism in the metropolitan area. Beginning in 1880, when Olmsted began his consulting for the City of Boston<sup>19</sup>, through the 1890's, Olmsted created what we know as the "Emerald Necklace", or a system of parks and boulevards that served not only to control flood waters and beautify undesirable land, but also to cut across neighborhood boundaries to connect parts of the city that had never been connected before. Though still ultimately incomplete (the transformation of Columbia Road into a landscaped boulevard would be the final strand in the "necklace"), Olmsted's work, under the guise of practical improvements to the municipal infrastructure, was a major success at regionalism, within the confines of Boston's political divisions.

Eliot and Baxter were looking for a much more sweeping kind of metropolitan cooperation at a much larger scale. They argued, according to Alex Krieger, that "Boston and its thirty-eight neighboring communities, had better begin to collaborate on matters such as open space preservation, arterial roads, transportation, sewerage, other public works, and *even social services*."(emphasis added)<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, the scope of this regional vision had no chance to meet with the approval of Boston's more parochial political leaders in its entirety, as they were in no mood to dilute with their suburban brethren the political power they had worked so hard to attain in Boston. But eventually "their campaign led to the establishment of the Metropolitan District Commission"<sup>21</sup>, which continues to serve as the regional protector of the Charles River waterfront, regional recreation facilities, and public parks.

The most important precursors to the regionalism of the New Urban Ring were Arthur Shurtleff and the Boston Society of Architects' (BSA) Committee on Municipal Improvements. The Committee's proposal for an Inner and

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<sup>17</sup> *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley (1874-1958)*  
Chapter 7, p. 270

<sup>18</sup> For an example of how race and taxes affected Boston, (in addition to those supplied in Beatty's excellent book), one need only review the effects of federally mandated school busing on the neighborhoods, racial make-up, and tax-base of the city in the 1970's. For more information on this subject, see *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* by J. Anthony Lukas, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985

<sup>19</sup> *Planning the City Upon the Hill*, p. 90-93

<sup>20</sup> "Ring Dreaming and Making", p.13

<sup>21</sup> "Ring Dreaming and Making", p.13

Outer Boulevard was remarkably like today's proposed New Urban Ring (**figure 10**). It consisted of circumferential (or ring-like) boulevards that would cross municipal, class, and racial boundaries. Shurtleff's analytical drawings of both existing and proposed radial and circumferential routes throughout the region offers the evidence that such boulevards were necessary then, and remain so today (**figures 11-12**). To reinforce the similarity of conditions which support the need for the New Urban Ring (in any of its variants) today, refer to the images of the contemporary city with overlays of the BSA's 1907 plan, its 1994 plan, and the author's alignments of the New Urban Ring (**figures 13-15**). While they are all different, each alignment takes advantage of the same latent morphology in the region, and each connects radial routes through circumferential connections. Each of these urban boulevards has the added regionalizing effect of crossing economic, ethnic, class, and racial boundaries.

Perhaps the most profound regionalization of Boston's transportation planning and infrastructure came in the 1970's under the leadership of Fred Salvucci, then Governor Michael S. Dukakis' Secretary of Transportation. This is important because it is the regional scale of transportation infrastructure that can serve as the armature for the regionalized urbanism of the New Urban Ring. He certainly benefitted from the previous administrations decision (with his encouragement) to abandon the so-called "Inner-Belt" expressway that would have so fractured Boston's physical landscape as to make it nearly irreparable (**figures 16-18**). But Salvucci inherited a Metropolitan Transit Authority whose range was limited to fourteen municipalities, and as such had little regional impact. He left with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority serving seventy-eight cities and towns, and extending far out into suburban Boston. The key to his overall regionalization efforts was the Boston Transportation Planning Review, of 1974, which ultimately led to many important improvements in this area. The most critical improvements were the extension of the Red Line subway route; the Orange Line extension/Southwest Corridor Park; the purchase of commuter rail lines to the north and south of the city from the Boston-Maine, and Conrail, respectively; and finally, most influentially, the depression of the Central Artery and the construction of the Third Harbor Tunnel .<sup>22</sup>

#### *Suburbanization: Politics Redux*

The regionalization of the Boston area's transportation infrastructure made the entire region much more accessible (**figure 19**). It became possible to commute between the city center and the more distant suburbs. There were even steps taken toward making "inter-modal" stations, such as those at Quincy and Alewife that offered automobile commuters the chance to exchange their cars for public transit while still well outside of the city. The resuscitated transportation network also took the concerns of inner-city pedestrians to heart for the first time since the advent of the large scale highway systems after World War Two. Special attention was given to the

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<sup>22</sup> from an interview with Claire Barrett,  
former Member of MBTA Board of Directors, 8/22/95

quality of stations, and in the case of the Southwest Corridor Park, an entirely new pedestrian sequence was created alongside the new Orange Line.

But there remained an aspect of even these enlightened transportation planning efforts that continued to segregate the region. For even as the area's radial connection between inner city and suburb were being strengthened, the circumferential connections through the often under-developed "middle-landscape" of nearby suburbs and disenfranchised urban neighborhoods were being ignored. The interests of the suburban commuters to downtown were being served at the expense of the even greater needs of the residents of these residents of the space "in-between". So it became clear that some sort of ring, or belt, or loop was needed; something that approximated the scale and connectivity of the Inner-Belt, but that served instead as more of a urban development generator; much as Route 128 had for the suburbs a generation earlier.

#### *The New Urban Ring: An Antidote to Urban Fragmentation*

So the mission of the New Urban Ring is a complex one. It is to resist the latent parochialism of the Boston region from both a political and bureaucratic standpoint and to take advantage of the opportunities for regionalism. The intersection of these goals could create the physical landscape in which a new kind of politics, one that political writer E.J. Dionne calls the need for a strong political middle <sup>23</sup>; a political movement that could harness that great deal about which Americans *do not* disagree. This will not be easy. As Dionne notes, "conservatives and liberals are suspicious of an ethic of the 'public good' for very different reasons. Conservatives who dislike government see the revival of a civic politics as a way of invoking old language to justify modern big government. Liberals, fearful of too much talk about virtue and community, fear that civic talk will mean the creation of a homogeneous community. When liberals hear talk about 'the common good', they often think of Jerry Falwell"<sup>24</sup>. Mickey Kaus, another astute observer of the contemporary political scene, is more specific in his description of exactly how we might physically achieve this "common good". His "civic liberalism" is a program for required national service, national health care, the draft, public day care, and civic celebrations; all as a means of encouraging the racial and class mixing that traditional "money liberalism" has failed so miserably to produce.<sup>25</sup>

But the program and alignment for Boston's New Urban Ring is designed specifically to make a place for Kaus and Dionne's vision of a renewed public sphere. Of course it must also serve as the kind of infrastructure that can create jobs, provide transportation, and play other more prosaic roles in contemporary life. In addition, it should serve as an especially safe place in the city, where travel through previously unwelcoming neighborhoods would

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<sup>23</sup> *Why Americans Hate Politics*  
Dionne, E. J.  
New York: Touchstone , 1991  
Chapter 13,pp.329-355

<sup>24</sup> *Why Americans Hate Politics*, p.333

<sup>25</sup> *The End of Equality*, Chapter 2, pp. 7-16

now be possible. Perhaps most importantly, it would allow for the representation of Boston's rich (and parochial) character along a regional route. As discussed earlier, the commercial, or artificial, heterogeneity of haphazard development patterns could be replaced by a heavily structured public sequence where key sites would have tremendous opportunities for real civic, rather than commercial, meaning. Physical homogeneity could make cultural and political heterogeneity possible.

### *Urban Design Strategies*

In order for all of these opportunities to find their way into the real experience of the city, however, different ring typologies would have to be developed to accommodate the widely varied spatial conditions found in the Boston area. There would be three basic cross-sectional typologies. One would be a single, complex boulevard, along the lines of Vienna's *Ringstrasse*, that would include dedicated lanes for rapid transit, ample pedestrian paths, and controlled vehicular lanes (**figure 20**). The second would be a two, or even three, road system of parallel streets that would allow the separation of truck service and automobile traffic from the transit and pedestrian based central boulevard. Such a system would create the possibility of two-sided building types like supermarkets which could sit directly on the street front on the central boulevard, while retaining ample parking access from one of the secondary circumferential streets. Finally, in some of the tighter existing conditions, the Ring might continue with only *allées* of trees and building set-back and height regulations to help transform existing streets into parts of the New Urban Ring.

Another way that the ring could be apprehended is as an episodic series of nodes, rather than as a continuous spatial corridor. In this configuration, the character and definition of the nodes, (presumably at key transportation transfer points), would be especially important. In either case however, the Ring could perform a critical role in the spatial orientation of both visitors and residents alike, helping to form a mental map of one's surroundings; something which has always been notoriously difficult in Boston— even for long time residents. By making constant reference to a single center (the downtown core, or center of the Ring), both the physical and political structure of the city are reinforced.

Building regulations would, of course, depend on the selection of either the continuous or episodic structure for the Ring (and there is no reason why both could not be employed along different portions of the Ring). For the continuous type, building set-backs, height limitations, and colonnade dimensions would be part of the visual guidelines used to inform development along the alignment. This type of urban design strategy would work best with a surface transportation system, such as a trolley or dedicated bus line, because its visibility along the route would be important for maintaining the Ring's "continuity". While the episodic, node-based Ring would rely more on landmarks, towers, and other identifiable elements visible from a great distance, and as such would be able to work with a subway type transportation system, because the stations would occur at the specified nodes and their route beyond the nodes would be of less importance.

*A Case Study: Melnea Cass Boulevard*

If it is true that the fragmentation that occurs between Boston's prosperous downtown and its affluent suburbs is both physical and cultural; and that the introduction of a measure of civic homogeneity could actually bring about more meaningful difference in our society; then the true test of the New Urban Ring is its ability to reconstitute some part of a fragmented community into something that is at once more internally cohesive, and a stronger part of a greater whole. The proposal shown here is an urban design plan for Melnea Cass Boulevard (**figures 21 and 22**). Melnea Cass Boulevard is a particularly opportune section of Boston in which to examine the potential influence of the New Urban Ring idea. It is already something more than a mere local street as it was constructed on the alignment of what was intended to be a raised cross-town expressway called "the Inner Belt". When public opposition and changing attitudes about transportation halted the highway's construction in 1971, the destructive swath of preparatory demolition had already occurred; and Melnea Cass Boulevard was left as a wide, tree-lined surface route through one of the city's most disenfranchised districts. Sitting between the neighborhoods of Roxbury and the South End, Melnea Cass already has the elements of continuity and imageability that will be essential in the creation of the New Urban Ring. It has intimations of the scale necessary to transform the city. But it lacks many things as well. It lacks manufacturing, retail, civic, and housing of the sort that makes neighborhoods.

The Proposal shown here is an example of how the physical needs of the community, the urban design character of the New Urban Ring, and the possibility for meaningful difference within the region can be accomplished in a specific place. This is not an example of "planning" alone, nor is the content of the buildings shown developed enough to be called "architecture"; rather it is an attempt to bridge the gap between the scope, power and influence of large scale planning, and the representational power of architecture and urban design.

The buildings and spaces represented here are quite simple. The most critical elements are linear buildings to act as containers and definers of the "ring" boulevard. They serve a variety of functions: apartment blocks with retail at the bottom; the office portions of manufacturing, light industrial, and large retail operations; schools, recreation centers, and office space. Next, there are the transportation nodes along the New Urban Ring. Each is marked by a kiosk and tower, which would be lit at night so as to further orient citizens from large distances. There is also a major civic building located at the "gateway to Roxbury" at the corner of Washington Street and Melnea Cass Boulevard, across the street from an existing park, and connected to a new transit station. (**figures 23 and 24**). The experience of the continuity of the New Urban Ring can be seen in the northbound view along the boulevard itself (**figures 25 and 26**). At the proposal's southern end, there is a large parking structure to help transfer automobile traffic onto the New Urban Ring's transit system. But this "kit of parts" is designed to be woven into the adjoining neighborhoods of a variety of types, so that the physical gaps that currently separate so many of Boston's neighborhoods and nearby suburbs can be repaired over time.

### *Regional Master Plan*

This proposal for Melnea Cass Boulevard is but one of many such proposals that could be spawned by the New Urban Ring. The idea has tremendous power because it need not, (and indeed could not and should not), be implemented all at one time. Instead it can serve as the backbone of a regional "master plan" that would encourage development in the Boston region that would be integrated, progressive, and morphologically appropriate, without being unnecessarily nostalgic in the process. Using the New Urban Ring as a regional "master plan" would do more for maintaining the oft-cited and presumably much-loved "character" of Boston than any collection of historical stylistic guidelines.

Such a plan could have a major impact on many important projects that are being considered right now. The location of a "megaplex"<sup>26</sup>, either as a whole, or more preferably, as a series of parts connected by the New Urban Ring is one example, but there are several others. There are tremendous development opportunities along the Conrail railroad right-of-way in Cambridge and Somerville; vast tracts around Sullivan Square; large portions of Charlestown's waterfront that are now underutilized; Central Square in East Boston has the potential to be one of the city's most beautiful; and all the way from South Boston to Roxbury, there is un-used or under-used land looking for a vision of how it might all work together.

### *The Future*

A 1989 state transportation study reviewed circumferential transit. In 1994, Harvard, MIT, and *The Boston Globe* convened The Boston Conference on "the accessible region" at which a national jury admonished the city and state to get together and "build the Urban Ring"<sup>27</sup>, and in 1996, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) will commission a study of the idea. But the power of this fundamentally urban design proposal must not be allowed to dissolve into merely a question of ridership estimates based on current conditions.

The New Urban Ring is a proposal that could repair and re-make the region by re-connecting its citizens, ideas, beliefs, and activities into a greater whole. But it will not happen merely because designers think it is a formally attractive idea.. Citizens must be persuaded that there is more to American life than pure individualism; more than separatism and commerce. If we desire a heterogeneous public life in place of the commercial homogeneity that we currently endure, the space between Boston's downtown core and its nearby suburbs offers the perfect place to try to build it. We need not build it all at once. But we need to start.

### ***Bibliography***

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<sup>26</sup> a combination of a large convention facility and a domed football stadium currently under review by the Massachusetts State Legislature

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