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## **Building Boston's Back Bay: Marriage of Money and Hygiene**

Allan S. Galper

The filling of the Back Bay in Boston was perhaps the greatest achievement in American city planning in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The residential area created by this ambitious urban design project boasts the most complete display of American architecture from the second half of the nineteenth century that still stands today.<sup>2</sup> Much can be learned not only from the district's architecture but from the way in which the waters of the Back Bay were transformed into lots of solid land suitable for houses. Despite some setbacks, this process was a paradigm of joint civic effort on the parts of the state, the city, and private interests. Although the unifying factor may have been maximization of financial profits, a sincere desire to improve the physical and intellectual health of the city brought these disparate interests together as well. These motives dictated a very specific type of plan, which was accompanied by a particular form of

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1. Bainbridge Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay: An Architectural History, 1840-1917 (Cambridge, 1967), p. 2; Bainbridge Bunting, "The Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, XIII (1954): 19-24; Lewis Mumford, Back Bay Boston: The City as a Work of Art (Boston, 1969), pp. 18-35.

2. Walter Muir Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History (Cambridge, 1968), p. 235.

architecture. The French influence which is apparent in both of these aspects of the Back Bay construction reflects the transition then taking place in Boston, as the city began to follow the Parisian model of planning and design, with hopes of becoming the cultural center of the United States, and one of the greatest cities in the world.

Before the turn of the nineteenth century, Boston was nothing more than the Shawmut Peninsula, consisting of 783 acres (about one square mile), and prevented from being an island only by the Neck, a narrow isthmus of land that connected the town to the Roxbury mainland.<sup>3</sup>

Numbering only 18,320 in 1790, the people of Boston did not even inhabit most of the land in their possession,<sup>4</sup> but this quickly changed. The year 1800 saw the beginning of the encroachment of land upon water, or what Walter Muir Whitehill calls "Cutting Down the Hills to Fill the Coves," the great chapter of Boston history that continues to this day.<sup>5</sup> The three hills of the Trimountain, or Tremont, of which only Beacon Hill partly remains today, were carted away to fill in the coves and inlets created by the irregularly-shaped Charles River and Boston Harbor. Starting in 1807, the Mill Pond, originally created by damming the North Cove in 1643 to generate water-power for local mills, was filled in.<sup>6</sup> This process would lead to an even greater undertaking destined to transform the city of Boston.

In 1814, the Boston and Roxbury Mill Corporation decided to construct a granite-faced earthen dam, fifty feet wide and one and a half miles long, from the western corner of the Common to the eastern shore of Brookline, at what was called Sewall's Point (now the site of Kenmore Square).<sup>7</sup> The original

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3. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, p. 5; Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 22; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 19; Mumford, Back Bay Boston, p. 18. The Neck was only 1,000 feet wide at low tide, but it was almost inundated at extreme high tide. See Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 466 (fn. 19).

4. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, p. 71; Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 22-23.

5. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, chapter four.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

7. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, p. 90; Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 33; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 19.

charter allows the corporation to maintain the dam forever, construct a toll road on top of it, and build any necessary structures on or near it.<sup>8</sup> So began the filling in of the Back Bay.<sup>9</sup> A dam was then constructed across Gravelly Point, in Roxbury, joining the mill dam and thus dividing the now-enclosed waters of the Back Bay into two basins. The smaller full basin would collect the tidal flow of the Charles River and then direct the water past the mills constructed on the promontory and into the receiving basin, from where the water would be released back into the Charles River.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1840s, the dams on the Charles had created a serious health hazard. The ebb and flow of the tidal flats left the sewage that was dumped in the basins exposed to the sun and open air. In addition, the Mill Corporation's project did not prove to be as lucrative as originally expected. Textile mills along the Merrimack River and the advent of the steam engine made the Gravelly Point Mills obsolete, and in 1834 the water-power of the incoming tide was greatly diminished by the construction of two sets of embankments and trestles in the shape of a St. Andrew's cross that accommodated the booming railroad traffic that traversed the Back Bay.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in 1850, the state appointed three commissioners to "consider what measures can be taken for the improvement of the said flats or land, so as to make them most valuable to all parties interested therein."<sup>12</sup> A new use for the Back Bay was about to be initiated.

Many factors pointed to filling in the Back Bay as the wisest solution. Boston experienced a tremendous population explosion in the first half of the nineteenth century. From a small

8. "Final Report of the Commissioners appointed under the Resolves concerning Boston Harbor and Back Bay, approved May third, 1850," *Mass. Senate Document No. 45 (1852)*, pp. 5-9, cited henceforth as *Senate Document No. 45 (1852)*.

9. Although Whitehill, *Boston: A Topographical History*, p. 55, does recount the filling in of marshy flats to erect buildings for ropewalks at the western edge of the Common, in 1794, the Mill Dam construction represents the first significant encroachment of land upon water in the Back Bay.

10. Whitehill, *Boston: A Topographical History*, p. 92; Bunting, *Houses of Boston's Back Bay*, p. 33.

11. Whitehill, *Boston: A Topographical History*, pp. 100-102; Bunting, *Houses of Boston's Back Bay*, p. 33; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 19.

12. *Resolves of the Mass. Senate*, Chapter 111, 1850.

seaport of 24,397 in 1800, and 58,277 in 1825, it grew to become a crowded city of 136,881 by 1850, and 161,429 by 1855.<sup>13</sup> Thus, by mid-century, new space for a residential area was in high demand, but, with the build-up of the Louisburg Square area in the 1840s, all of the peninsula's existing land had been developed. A middle-class migration to the suburbs, or even to the new South End, was impractical, due to the slow transportation of the times.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the Commissioners on Boston Harbor and the Back Bay reported that the "great demand for dwelling-houses in the city of Boston renders the present a favorable time to commence the filling up and sale of [Back Bay] lands."<sup>15</sup> A filled Back Bay, where houses could be built close to the center of Boston, would satisfy the growing need for a new residential area.

A factor which made the filling of the Back Bay a matter of even greater urgency was the extent to which by mid-century the area had become a health menace. In 1849, the Boston Board of Health demanded the filling of the area, and the extent of the problem is starkly revealed by the testimony from 1850:

The Back Bay at this hour is nothing less than a great cesspool, into which is daily deposited all the filth of a large and constantly increasing population. And it is a cesspool of the worst kind, contrived, as it were, for the purpose of contamination, and not of relief; for it is an open one, and therefore exposed continually to the action of the sun and weather, and every west wind sends its pestilential exhalations across the entire city. A greenish scum, many yards wide, stretches along the shores of the basin, as far as the Western Avenue, whilst the surface of the water beyond is seen bubbling, like a cauldron, with the noxious

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 13. Walter H. Kilham, Boston After Bulfinch: An Account of its Architecture, 1800-1900 (Cambridge, 1946), p. 57; Walter Muir Whitehill, in Lewis Mumford and Walter Muir Whitehill, Back Bay Boston: The City as a Work of Art (Boston, 1969), pp. 86-91; Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 9.

14. Mumford, Back Bay Boston, p. 23; Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 362. Bunting points out that the new horsecar, which was relatively slow, did not arrive in Boston until 1853.

15. "Fourth Annual Report of the Commissioners on Boston Harbor and the Back Bay," Mass. Senate Document. No. 16, 1856, p. 2.

gases that are exploding from the corrupting mass below.<sup>16</sup>

Health reasons were therefore a major factor contributing to the decision to fill the Back Bay.

However, the greatest incentive of all seems to have been the money-making potential in filling the Back Bay. All of the interested parties stood to gain from the conversion of useless water to saleable land. Even the Mill Corporation, which had originally dammed the bay in order to profit from its tides, now saw the greater rewards in filling in the area. Indeed, previous land fillings in the city, such as the creation of the new South End in the first half of the century, had reaped significant financial benefits.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the commissioners reported in 1852 that the current use of the Mill Dam was "in conflict with more important interests, public and private."<sup>18</sup> It was clear that few opposed the idea of filling in the Back Bay, and many supported the proposal, particularly due to the possibility for profit that the project generated.

Moreover, it should be noted that Boston now possessed the capital necessary for a project of such a grand scale. Its already bustling maritime industry greatly expanded in the first half of the nineteenth century, as evidenced both by its traffic of tonnage and passengers.<sup>19</sup> Much of this increased capital was invested in Boston's growing railroad concerns, and it was this new industry more than any other that transformed the city into a thriving metropolis. Boston was ready to show that it was no longer a provincial New England town, and the creation of the Back Bay was intended to achieve that goal.

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16. Excerpts from health reports in appendix of "Report of the Committee on the Petition of David Sears and Others in Respect to the Drainage of the Back Bay," City of Boston Document No. 14 (1850), pp. 10-12.

17. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 363; Kilham, Boston After Bulfinch, p. 62.

18. Senate Document No. 45 (1852), p. 15.

19. Mumford, Back Bay Boston, p. 18; Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, p. 86; Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 10-11. Bunting lists Suffolk County's manufacturing output at \$6,500,000 in 1800. It had quadrupled by 1840, and soared another fifty percent in 1850, to a total of \$45,000,000.

The major factor that led to the monumental and uniform character of the Back Bay as it appears today was the State's decision to consolidate its hold on the project, while working with and not against the other owners of land in the Back Bay region. Citing a colonial ordinance from 1641, the state commissioners claimed that any property "below the ordinary line of riparian ownership belongs to the state in fee."<sup>20</sup> This meant that any land at the low-tide mark (or one hundred rods below the high-water mark) fell under the jurisdiction of the state. As most of the Back Bay was considerably deeper than this, the state laid claim to much of the area in question. To settle disputing claims by others, the Tripartite Agreement of 1856 was worked out between the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the City of Boston, and the Boston and Roxbury Mill Corporation, the principal land owner.<sup>21</sup> Although the Commonwealth had to grant certain tracts of land to the city, and especially to the Mill Corporation, in order to insure compliance with its planning guidelines, the result would be a civic project of impressive uniformity, as private interests would have to "conform to a plan of streets required by the state commissioners."<sup>22</sup> At last, filling was scheduled to begin in September of 1857.

Having already built on the hills that remained in Boston, the state was forced to look beyond the city limits to find fill for its Back Bay operation. With the advent of the steam shovel and the railroad, it was possible to bring earth from the sand-hills and gravel pits of Needham, nine miles to the west.<sup>23</sup> Twenty-five times in twenty-four hours, trains of thirty-five cars from the Charles River Railroad Company would make their way across the flats, depositing fill to a depth of twenty feet, and eventually creating 580 acres of land in a little over thirty years. The fill

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20. Senate Document No. 45 (1852), p. 4; "Report of the Committee Appointed under the Resolves of 1856, chapter 76, in Relation to Lands in the Back Bay, with accompanying documents. Also, the Fifth Annual Report of the Commissioners on the Back Bay," Mass. Senate Document No. 17 (1857), cited henceforth as "Lands in Back Bay."

21. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, p. 151; Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 44 and 364; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 20.

22. "Lands in Back Bay," p. 3.

23. "Ballou's Pictorial," May 21, 1859, quoted in Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, pp. 152-154; Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 365-366.

had reached Clarendon Street by 1860, Exeter Street by 1870, and Kenmore Square by 1890.<sup>24</sup> The district defined as the residential Back Bay in this article had taken shape by 1880: that area bounded by the Public Garden in the east, the Charles River in the north, Olmsted's Fenway Park in the west, and the train tracks of the Boston and Albany Railroad in the south.<sup>25</sup> This region's final layout was shaped by the two main concerns which had inspired filling the bay in the first place — its money-making potential and its nuisance as a health hazard.

Motivated by a desire to maximize financial profits, the Commonwealth adopted a plan that divided the newly-created land into as many house lots as possible. This emphasis is evident from the very beginning, when the commissioners advised that just as state lands in Maine had been sold for a profit, money could be made from Commonwealth property "now lying under water."<sup>26</sup> Additionally, such restrictions as the one which did not allow more than one-third of the new land to be set aside for public use, exemplified the attitude taken towards the Back Bay as a money-making matter.<sup>27</sup> It is also interesting to note that many of the design proposals that the Commonwealth rejected recommended keeping significant portions of the Back Bay under water, and had failed to maximize the number of lots that could be sold for a profit.<sup>28</sup>

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24. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, p. 158; Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 366-367; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 20; Mumford, Back Bay Boston, p. 23. A set of fifteen blueprints preserved in the Boston Public Library and prepared by Fuller and Whitney, Back Bay engineers, shows the development of the Back Bay fill at ten year intervals, from 1814 to 1881.

25. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, p. 159; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 21; Mumford, Back Bay Boston, p. 19.

26. "Lands in Back Bay," p. 3.

27. "First Report of the Commissioners on Boston Harbor and the Back Bay, under Resolves of 1852, chapter 79," Mass. Senate Document No. 62 (1855).

28. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 387 and 389. Robert Gourlay's plan, which only minimally filled in the Bay for dwelling houses, is discussed in Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, pp. 146-149. For David Sears' plan, which included a 75 acre lake, see Whitehill, pp. 149-150. George Snelling's 1859 proposal, including a basin of water 700 feet wide as a substitute for Commonwealth Avenue, is described by Whitehill, p. 156.



In the early stages of the Back Bay development, the form of building construction — tall, narrow, and flat-faced — was a product of the central capitalizing goal described above. Back Bay lots were widened only after 1860, when the district had already been established as a fashionable neighborhood and developers knew that their land would draw high bids at the public auctions.<sup>29</sup> The financial rewards were indeed significant. The sale of filled lands from 1860 to 1879 alone, brought the Commonwealth a net profit of \$3,442,205. Private landowners reaped tremendous benefits as well. Bainbridge Bunting's account of a lot at the corner of Commonwealth Avenue and Arlington Street, where the land and building values increased 665 and 243 percent respectively between 1858 and 1910, is illustrative of the great wealth enjoyed by those who invested in the new region.<sup>30</sup>

A second factor, however, seems to have worked against this money-making goal. Because the Back Bay had become so harmful to the city's residents, the authorities wanted the new land to insure the good health of the people — both physically (with broad avenues and green spaces) and intellectually (with cultural and academic institutions). This attitude was evident in the earliest discussions of a new layout for the Back Bay. For example, in 1852, the commissioners reported that the receiving basin should be filled so "as to secure upon the premises a healthy and thrifty population and business . . . forever to prevent this territory from becoming the abode of filth and disease."<sup>31</sup> This was certainly a reaction to the unsanitary conditions that had previously prevailed there. Similarly, three years later, a Back Bay commission was instructed to "enhance the value of the Commonwealth's lands as may be needful to prevent that vast level area from becoming hereafter the seat of narrow and filthy streets and of an overcrowded population."<sup>32</sup> This commitment to never allow the new Back Bay to return to its previous state of

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29. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 93-95; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 24, fn. 11.

30. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 368-370.

31. Senate Document No. 45 (1852), p. 17.

32. "Second Annual Report of the Commissioners on Boston Harbor and the Back Bay, under Resolves of 1852, chapter 79," Mass. Senate Document No. 62 (1855), pp. 23-24.

unhealthiness produced an urban space dedicated to the well-being of the people.

This conviction was so strong as to warrant significant financial sacrifices on the part of the Commonwealth. Of the lands filled in, eight percent (which would have given the state an additional \$833,500 had they been sold as private lots) were given to public institutions, and forty-three percent were devoted to streets and parks.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in 1857, after hearing the testimony of Arthur Gilman (who is credited with developing the plan that was later adopted), the commission decided to increase the width of the central avenue (now known as Commonwealth Avenue) from 120 to 200 feet, with houses set back twenty feet on each side, creating an impressive and monumental promenade.<sup>34</sup> To insure that private landowners complied with this plan, the state had to grant twelve acres of its property in the Full Basin to the Boston Water-Power Company, a subsidiary of the Mill Corporation.<sup>35</sup> This financial sacrifice was also motivated by "health" reasons, as this new thoroughfare would have in its center "three or four continuous rows of trees . . . ample for walks and seats secure from the interference of carriages . . . and would confer a lasting and permanent benefit upon the public by providing a broad and ornamental avenue connecting the Common and public garden in Boston with the picturesque and pleasing suburban territory."<sup>36</sup> Using the Back Bay development to improve the health of the city environment was ever a key objective of the rejected proposals of Gourlay, Sears, and Snelling, who stressed the salubrious effect of air that passes over open waters.<sup>37</sup>

The Commonwealth wished to use the Back Bay project to improve the intellectual welfare of the people as well. From the beginning, money received from the sale of Back Bay lands was deposited into the Bay Lands Fund. Half was used to maintain the newly-created state property, while the other half

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33. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 64 and 368; and Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," pp. 22 and 24 (fn. 9).

34. "Lands in Back Bay," p. 13.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

37. See fn. 28 above.

was parcelled out to the following academic institutions: fifty percent was put into the Massachusetts School Fund, twenty percent was given to Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, twelve percent was donated to Tufts College, and the remaining eighteen percent was divided equally among Williams College, Amherst College, and Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham.<sup>38</sup> As a prerequisite for receiving these contributions, the state required most of these schools to provide scholarships for students. Thus, in a very direct way, the filling of the Back Bay worked to insure the health of the population's mind.

This goal was fulfilled on an even larger scale by the establishment of the Back Bay as the cultural center of the city, especially though the creation of Copley Square. First, in 1861, the state granted a block of land on Berkeley Street to two institutions: the Boston Society of Natural History, which soon thereafter built a three-story museum that now houses Bonwit Teller's clothing store, and the then-recently incorporated Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which erected the Rogers Building on the remainder of the block.<sup>39</sup> Private interests took the state's lead, and in 1870 the Boston Water-Power Company granted a plot of land to the Museum of Fine Arts, at the corner of Dartmouth Street and St. James Avenue. This Victorian Gothic building was soon (in 1877) flanked by H. H. Richardson's Trinity Church on one side, and (in 1895) by McKim, Mead and White's Public Library on the other. This handsome public space, known first as Art Square, then Copley Square, had become the religious and intellectual center of Boston. With the additional presence of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Harvard Medical School in the area, and the migration of more than ten church congregations from downtown Boston to the Back Bay by the end of the century, the new district had done everything to physically, intellectually, and spiritually insure that it would never harm its residents' health again.<sup>40</sup>

However, the incomplete nature of Copley Square and the abandonment of other park ideas for the area suggest that the

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38. Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, chapter 154 (1859).

39. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, p. 169; Whitehill, Back Bay Boston, pp. 87-88.

40. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, pp. 164-169; Whitehill, Back Bay Boston, p. 87.

money-making incentive to use as much of the new land as possible for house lots may have superseded the Commonwealth's commitment to construct a healthful environment. Indeed, a plan for the Back Bay area in 1861 shows three squares of land set aside to be green parks. None of these plots were used for this original purpose. The first, situated at the north end of Exeter Street, facing the Charles River, was to remain open to the water, but it must have been eliminated in 1870 when Exeter Street was narrowed to compensate the Commonwealth for salable land lost due to the widening of Dartmouth Street.<sup>41</sup> The second plot, along Berkeley Street, became a museum and school, and the third square, St. James Park, was allocated to the Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>42</sup>

It was then only an accident that Copley Square developed into a public space. Originally slated for development like any other part of the Back Bay, it haphazardly took shape due to the presence of Huntington Avenue, which awkwardly jutted out at an angle in relation to the surrounding grid of streets. The two triangular plots of land created on either side of this wide avenue were bought by the city and left open as public spaces, in 1883 and 1885.<sup>43</sup> Proposals were submitted in an attempt to solve the oddity of a main street diagonally bisecting a public park, and it took until 1969 to finally "square" up the area.<sup>44</sup> This irresponsible planning on the part of the Commonwealth led to an urban space that was unable to realize its potential monumentality, a problem that still has repercussions today, as the weak north side of commonplace stores and office buildings fails to sufficiently pull together the four sides of Copley Square.<sup>45</sup>

The money-making incentive seems to have overridden the desire for a healthy environment to such an extent that even the decision to appropriate land for public use may have been backed by a quest for financial gains. For example, the state

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41. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 380.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 378.

43. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, pp. 171-172; Kilham, Boston After Bulfinch, p. 62; Mumford, Back Bay Boston, p. 58.

44. Mumford, Back Bay Boston, pp. 142-145.

45. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Boston Architecture, 1637-1954 (New York, 1954), p. 17.

commissioners reported in 1863 that the land on Newbury Street opposite the block granted to the Museum of Natural History and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology had doubled in value.<sup>46</sup> The Boston Water-Power Company's donation of land to the Museum of Fine Arts in 1870 may therefore have been motivated more by commercial than cultural concerns. Additionally, the plan for broad and monumental streets may just have been a ploy to maximize profits, as land values were significantly higher along Commonwealth Avenue than on the narrower streets parallel to it.<sup>47</sup> These conflicting factors produced a paradoxical attitude that was present from the start, as the committee appointed in 1856 reported that it is a "matter of utmost moment that a good system of streets, avenues, and public squares shall be adopted in order to make the territory as attractive as possible, and induce persons about to build houses to select lots in this locality."<sup>48</sup> Whether or not the profit-making goal was more of a determining factor than the quest for a healthy environment, the Back Bay's public lands were adversely affected.

The significance with which planners viewed the new Back Bay is evident from the French-inspired design they chose for the area, and the French style of architecture that became prevalent in the district's formative years of development. The Back Bay represents a distinct break from Boston's previous civic projects which had always followed the English model. Beginning with Charles Bulfinch's Tontine Crescent on Franklin Street in 1793, and continuing with Pemberton Square in 1826, Louisburg Square in 1835, and finally the New South End in 1853, the Boston planning tradition was rooted in Georgian London.<sup>49</sup> A rigid gridiron plan of streets, with no clear focus, and occasional isolated parks encircled by houses, characterized these plans. The

46. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 394; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 22.

47. Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 24, fn. 11. The Eighth Annual Report of the Harbor and Land Commission (1886) states that at the private auctions conducted by the Commonwealth between 1860 and 1879, the minimum prices were fixed at \$1.37 per square foot on Marlborough and Newbury Streets, and \$2.25 on Commonwealth Avenue.

48. "Lands in Back Bay," p. 12.

49. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 65-67; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," pp. 23-24.

French-inspired design for the Back Bay embodied a very different set of stylistic principles. Boston employed the Parisian model with hopes of becoming the cultural center of the United States, if not of the world.

To this end, the commissioners accepted the plan that architect Arthur Gilman submitted in 1856. The proposal's broad streets, axial quality, and park-like Commonwealth Avenue were strikingly similar to the monumental Parisian boulevards constructed by Baron George Haussmann between 1853 and 1869.<sup>50</sup> This type of design views streets as great outdoor corridors lined by walls of harmonious buildings, focusing the pedestrian's gaze and creating an impressive urban space (see figure one, below).



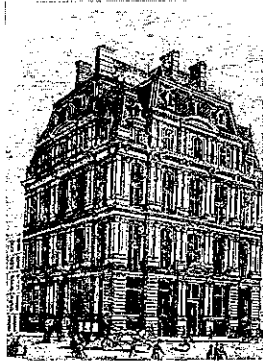
*Figure One*

By adopting this plan, the Back Bay planners wished to elevate Boston to the level of the great cities of the world, as can be seen from the following proposal, referring to Commonwealth Avenue:

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 50. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 15, 67-68; Bunting, "Plan of the Back Bay Area in Boston," p. 24; Mumford, Back Bay Boston, p. 19; Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, p. 86.

It is believed that an ornamental avenue of this character, of equal length and width, with stately dwelling-houses upon each side, connecting the public parks in the center of a busy city with the attractive and quiet, although populous country in the neighborhood, is a thing not possible of construction elsewhere in the world; and those places where something of the same kind already exists, have been rendered famous in consequence.<sup>51</sup>

This subtle yet apparent reference to Paris at the end of the commissioners' statement is indicative of the Commonwealth's desire to use the Back Bay and its French plan, to create a new Boston that would be a center of higher civilization.



*Figure Two*

It should be noted, however, that the use of a French blueprint was not a completely new phenomenon for the planners in 1856. Roots of this type of layout for the Back Bay can be traced as far back as 1824, when a proposal for development of the area depicting wide tree-lined avenues was published in a local history book.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, a final attempt by the city of Boston to sell the lands of the Public Garden in 1850 shows the area divided into house lots, with three new streets between Beacon and Boylston that greatly resemble Marlborough Street,

51. "Lands in Back Bay," p. 15.

52. Whitehill, Boston: A Topographical History, pp. 142-145.

Commonwealth Avenue, and Newbury Street.<sup>53</sup> Other proposals, such as that of David Sears, which was discussed earlier, include plans for an impressive central boulevard that predate Gilman's idea for Commonwealth Avenue. Thus, although a good deal of French influence is evident in the plan adopted for the Back Bay, its impact on the project was evident even before Napoleon III began his vast civic improvements.

Boston's desire to reach new heights, and its hope to do so by adopting Parisian styles, is not only evident from the design of the Back Bay, but from other civic developments occurring in mid-nineteenth century Boston as well. The fact that many buildings are said to have burned in the great fire of November 9, 1872 due to the prevalence of wooden mansard roofs, indicates the extensive use of French styles in buildings at the time.<sup>54</sup> The first edifice in Boston to have a mansard roof was the Deacon mansion, built on Washington Street in 1848 from designs by a Paris architect.<sup>55</sup> A dozen years later, the most important public buildings had been embellished with French designs. The new City Hall on School Street and the Post Office building on Milk Street, both built around 1862, displayed column pavilions of superimposed orders much like those in the Tuileries and the new Louvre, in Paris.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, in his competition drawings for the Free City Hospital, built in the French manner in 1861, the Boston architect Gridley J. F. Bryant explained that he had chosen "the modern style of Renaissance architecture," since it "stands confessedly at the head of all the forms of modern secular architecture in the chief capitals of the world."<sup>57</sup> This use of the French style to transform Boston into one of the great cities of the world was certainly adopted by Arthur Gilman as well,

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53. "Report of the Joint Committee on Public Lands in relation to the Public Garden, July 1850." Between Beacon and Boylston, the plan depicts two parallel streets 100 feet wide, and one central avenue, divided into a double street, with each part fifty feet wide, with a seventy-five foot wide park down the middle, containing a fountain and trees.

54. Kilham, Boston After Bulfinch, p. 72.

55. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 79-80; Kilham, Boston After Bulfinch, p. 65.

56. Kilham, Boston After Bulfinch, pp. 65 and 68.

57. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 64.



mastermind of the Back Bay's plan and architect for the French designs of the new City Hall and the Boston Equitable Building, which was constructed on Milk Street in 1872 (see figure two, on page 74).<sup>58</sup>

The artistic and cultural connections between Boston and Paris are even more evident in a number of other ways. Students of architecture frequently travelled from Boston to study in Paris, a trend begun by Henry Hobson Richardson, who entered an atelier at the Ecole des Beaux Arts after graduating from Harvard in 1860.<sup>59</sup> It is even more telling that Boston architect William Ware, when asked in 1865 to head the first architectural school in the United States, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, brought Eugene Letang from the Ecole des Beaux Arts to teach architectural design.<sup>60</sup> The significance that Boston placed upon the French style can also be seen from the fact that Ware's partner, Henry van Brunt, translated the *Discourses* by Viollet-le-Duc between 1863 and 1872. Additionally, French painting was collected, taught, and popularized in Boston, in part due to the presence of William Morris Hunt, who frequently visited the city after 1856 and took up permanent residence there in 1862.<sup>61</sup> The Back Bay was thus only one example, albeit a grand example, of the many French artistic influences that Bostonians adopted in an attempt to establish their city as one of the cultural centers of the world.

The plan of the Back Bay demanded a very specific type of architecture. Although Bainbridge Bunting identifies many influences in Back Bay building — from Ruskinian Gothic to Queen Anne to the Romanesque — he shows that early buildings, from 1857 to 1869, were consistently of a French type, a design Bunting terms the "French Academic."<sup>62</sup> This style of architecture is characterized by several features.<sup>63</sup> The most obvious of these

58. Kilham, Boston After Bulfinch, p. 69.

59. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, p. 76.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 78; Kilham, Boston After Bulfinch, p. 79.

61. Bunting, Houses of Boston's Back Bay, pp. 81-82.

62. *Ibid.*, chapters six and seven. For the French influence, see chapter five. The later styles are discussed in chapters six and seven.

63. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-91.

is the mansard roof, first appearing at 122 Beacon Street in 1857. Another requirement of this style is a symmetrically organized facade. The ornamentation on this facade is distributed around areas of structural importance, such as door and window openings, on the main cornice, on levels of the various floors, and on the basement, and is therefore architectonic in nature. The main entrance is usually protected by a porch or vestibule and flanked by classical post and lintel forms, or freestanding columns. The treatment of windows was also distinctly different from the Boston tradition, as unaccented openings, flush with the facade and framed by outside shutters, gave way to windows set off from the plane of the building by Renaissance-style stonework. Indeed, the French influence on the Back Bay's early architecture can most directly be seen in the facade of 22-30 Marlborough St., built in 1863. The uniformity of arches, fenestration, and cornice height is incredibly reminiscent of contemporary work outside Paris, at the Hospice des Incurables of Ivry, designed by Theodore Labrousse between 1862 and 1865.<sup>64</sup> The architectural trends in the first dozen years of Back Bay development were thus rooted in mid-nineteenth century French designs and motifs.

The "French Academic" was the style most compatible with the Gilman plan for the Back Bay. By creating harmonious blocks of buildings, this architectural style places less emphasis on the individual houses, and sees them instead as mere walls of the more emphasized street-corridor. The uniformity desired for such an environment was mainly created by maintaining consecutive cornice and roof heights. A prime example is a Beacon Street block of twenty-seven houses built over a period of seven years, where the cornice line changes but four times.<sup>65</sup> Other ways of establishing uniformity were through the use of either an identical or integrated design for a group of consecutive buildings, building in pairs, and maintaining symmetrical facades, even in narrow lots.<sup>66</sup> This view of the house as but one component of the greater streetscape emphasizes the manner in which the architecture of the Back Bay was greatly molded by the district's urban design. Even the buildings' interior plans, shaped by the

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64. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-85.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-113.

need to conform to the narrow lots assigned by the commissioners, are products of the district's distinctive lay-out.<sup>67</sup>

Additional uniformities were established by the plan and then incorporated into the building design. The Back Bay's ubiquitous low front steps, usually requiring no more than six risers to top the basement level, owe their short height to the fact that the cellars in the buildings could not descend too many feet below the line of the original Mill Dam without encountering significant drainage problems.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, the Gilman plan's uniform character was maintained through the design of sixteen-foot alleyways in the rear of the Back Bay houses.<sup>69</sup> By keeping service entrances behind the buildings, the side facing the street was kept free of disharmonious openings that would have disrupted the continuity of the walls lining the street-corridor.

It therefore seems that the Second Empire style was the type of architecture most compatible with the urban design adopted for the Back Bay. Both artistic forms were heavily influenced by contemporary work in France, as Bostonians wished to use the Back Bay's Parisian roots as part of a greater scheme to raise their city to world-class status as a cultural center. Although the desire for financial profit may have over-matched the quest to improve the physical, cultural, and intellectual health of the city's inhabitants, the evolution of the Back Bay as a major component of the city was characterized by the farsighted planning of the Commonwealth's commissioners, eventually resulting in Frederick Law Olmsted's "emerald necklace" park system, and a residential Back Bay district that still rings true to the environment desired by Arthur Gilman almost 140 years after the adoption of his plan.

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67. *Ibid.*, pp. 130-133 and 136-139.

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 392.