Lookin’ Good, Feelin’ Good
THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHARLES CIRCLE

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ABSTRACT

Mentioning Charles Circle – at the foot of the Longfellow Bridge and the intersection of Charles and Cambridge Streets – stirs mixed feelings in anyone familiar with the traffic circle. Owned almost entirely by the Metropolitan District Commission, the land falls outside the city of Boston’s jurisdiction which its neglected appearance attests. A confluence of local initiatives, federal programs, large-scale institutional development, and numerous private projects has ignited a process of transformation which will undoubtedly modify Charles Circle’s future physical and functional nature. An important intersection for anyone entering Boston’s downtown, the location has become a testing ground for a new city vision which aims to marry aesthetic “values” with functionality. These aesthetic “values” are not always expressed explicitly but the combination of actions taking place seems to hint at an institutional context which favors a Boston grounded in its own history and unique identity.

Other forces have given way to the current vision-driven forces, on the one hand. On the other, many forces continue to influence Charles Circle directly or through the legacy of past interventions. Relevant forces can be categorized into ongoing vehicles of change and specific one-time initiatives. Forces which can be attributed to particular historic moments are government interventions and new land uses around the circle. Ongoing forces include the natural landscape, transportation, institutional presences, and demographics.

In the past, three government actions have significantly shaped Charles Circle: the displacement of the red light district by Mayor Josiah Quincy in the eighteenth century, the widening of Charles Street and especially Cambridge Street in the 1920s, and the destruction of the West End. In each case, government action altered the pace of future development around Charles Circle. Quincy’s policy suddenly made the South Slope of Beacon Hill as well as the West End more appealing for residential development. The widening of Cambridge Street enhanced the edge-like feeling of that street which still acts as a border. The destruction of the West End disenfranchised the North Slope of Beacon Hill from a closely-knit community and oriented future social interactions in that neighborhood towards the South Slope of Beacon Hill. Each of these three government interventions can be associated with new or denser land use near Charles Circle.

Historic moments (and only a few are mentioned above) have left visible marks while other forces have affected change incrementally. Among the ongoing forces, the natural landscape consists of two dominant features at Charles Circle. First, the site is located at the foot of Beacon Hill which rises relatively steeply to the south of Cambridge Street. Second, the Charles River has remained a constant factor even though the actual river banks have been moved further away from the circle as a result of landfill activities. Charles Circle’s location near the water made it a viable site for a bridge as soon as technology permitted. The site’s role in the urban and regional transportation network has been a constant factor. Apart from being an interchange, the location is home to institutions which have attracted activity. Most notably Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) has amassed more and more land abutting Charles Circle and Cambridge Street since it was chartered in 1811. In addition to institutional forces, demographic changes continue to determine transformations at the circle. Several communities with strong identities have persistently influenced their urban spaces.
Today, the residential community seems to be articulating a civic vision which has a place within the institutional framework governing an open planning process. MGH articulates its priorities in the same context. While significant research informs the solutions being suggested to improve the functionality of Charles Circle, the driving paradigm seems to be an institutional vision – both civic and corporate – which emphasizes “lookin’ good” over “feelin’ good” and may, therefore, not produce a reality which resembles the initial vision.
Charles Circle does not impress a lasting memory on visitors or drivers passing through the traffic interchange. As a vital node in the local and regional transit system, many commuters and area residents, however, traverse the space on a regular basis. Recently, four major developments have attracted attention to Charles Circle. Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) has started constructing additional buildings on its extensive campus which will dominate the streetscape of Cambridge Street from Charles Circle to North Anderson Street. The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) has finalized its plans to rehabilitate the Charles-MGH rapid transit station. With significant input from the Beacon Hill community, the City of Boston has implemented plans with state funding to improve Cambridge Street. And finally, private developers have invested in projects of various scales along the entire length of Cambridge Street from Charles Circle to Government Center. The following discussion will focus on Charles Circle and a portion of the surrounding neighborhoods shown in Figure 1. The first, most significant portion of the paper will discuss the forces which have shaped the current configuration of Charles Circle. The second half of the paper will analyze the current context in the light of the historic trajectory which only represents a selection of historical events. In describing the current state of affairs, the goal is to provide information and to sketch the future of the space which seems to have found a place in the limelight. This analysis will argue that a strong vision has been superimposed on the multitude of forces which have determined what Charles Circle is today. Several possible physical and functional consequences crystallize from the idea that “vision” holds the key to the future of Charles Circle, though not in the way the “visionaries” might expect.

1 Please refer also to the timeline provided as an appendix for an overview of the transformation of Charles Circle.
A Historic Trajectory

When the first colonists populated Shawmut Peninsula in 1625, the north slope of Beacon Hill\(^2\) and the West End were not included in or even contiguous with the primary settlement. By 1645, a significant portion of Trimountain’s northern slopes and the flats on the Charles River had been subdivided into “rural pasture lots”.\(^3\) The north slope of Beacon Hill belonged to four owners who used the land for grazing livestock\(^4\) and the West End carried the name “New Fields.”\(^5\) Pastures remained the dominating land use until the first quarter of the eighteenth century for two major reasons: Far from the harbor’s commercial districts, the location was not suitable for merchants and craftsmen. Wealthier families were “put off” by the swampy flats and windswept inclines of the north slope until other forces would make the vicinity more palatable for them.\(^6\)

The 1722 Bonner map shows how little settlement\(^7\) had taken root on the north slope and the Charles River banks in the West End since the first colonists had arrived one hundred years earlier. By 1733, the Bonner map shows Cambridge Street leading to the waterfront and curving to the south and continuing on along the Charles River.\(^8\) Cambridge Street became the primary road in the area but it had no destination.\(^9\)

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\(^1\) Beacon Hill or Sentry Hill at the time was the central slope of the Trimountain which constituted the Shawmut peninsula. The “beacon” was erected on Sentry Hill in 1634-35. See Bartlett, Cynthia C. Images of America: Beacon Hill (Dover, New Hampshire: Arcadia, 1996), p. 6.
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 23.
\(^6\) Ibid., p. 23.
\(^7\) There were only approximately 60 houses in the area. See Bartlett, p. 6.
\(^8\) Forbes and Cummings, p. 1.
\(^9\) Ibid.
As Boston’s older neighborhoods like the North End grew denser, the open land of the West End became attractive for middle- and high-income families who desired larger residences. By 1740, real estate had become more valuable for residential development than for farming.\textsuperscript{10} The days of princely pastures were numbered and would segue into a period of frantic construction and development on the south slope of Beacon Hill and in the West End.

While the flat West End around present-day Bowdoin Square was well suited for new residences,\textsuperscript{11} other uses were attracted to the steep north slope of Beacon Hill, like a 1,000-foot ropewalk was constructed on Myrtle Street. New commercial activity spawned a higher density of wooden houses on the north slope of Beacon Hill, which developed into a predominantly African American community.\textsuperscript{12} The 1733 Bonner map already hints at a denser street network between present-day Joy and Cedar Streets. Closer to the river, the city’s red light district – dubbed “Mount Whoredom” – flourished.\textsuperscript{13}

During the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the burgeoning real estate market in the West End and the south slope of Beacon Hill was bolstered by two key events. The first occurred on November 23, 1793 when the West Boston Bridge was opened.\textsuperscript{14} The second was the opening of the new State House in 1798.\textsuperscript{15} With the new bridge, Cambridge Street became an important regional traffic artery directly connecting Boston to Cambridge and the towns beyond. And the intersection at the bridge became a key transportation hub in the city. The second event was the decision to site the new State House on Beacon Hill which would attract real estate development.

In 1792, the governor of Massachusetts John Hancock ratified the incorporation of the West Boston Bridge Corporation, a business venture initiated by six “gentlemen speculators.”\textsuperscript{16} The General Court stipulated many specifications for the construction of the second bridge across the Charles River. The bridge would have to be at least 40 feet wide, include a 30-foot

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] Fisher and Hughes, eds., p. 22
\item[12] Bartlett, p. 8.
\item[15] Ibid., p. 59.
\end{footnotes}
drawbridge for ships and be equipped with lighting and railings. The final bridge costing approximately 23,000 pounds was opened on November 23, 1793. The entire connection was 7,189.5 feet including the bridge’s 3,483-foot span and the 3,344-foot causeway. By comparison, the Charles River Bridge from 1786 spanned only 1,503 feet. The Cambridge Chronicle praised the bridge as the “greatest master-piece of mechanical ingenuity, that was ever executed in this country.” The wonderful bridge shortened the trip from Boston to Cambridge from 8 miles to 2.25 miles.

With the completion of the West Boston Bridge, Cambridge Street became an important thoroughfare overnight and commercial activity prospered. It also changed the nature of the West End to the north of Cambridge Street:

The bridge proved a boon to the future of Boston but a mixed blessing to the West End. Its Boston approach began at Bowdoin Square in front of the Bulfinch homestead and ran along Cambridge Street, making that tree-shaded thoroughfare the main artery of travel to and from Cambridge. This disturbed the tranquility of the region and hastened the filling in of the Mill Pond, which in turn reduced the social distinction of the West End.”

(Charles Bulfinch saw the potential created by the bridge and initiated the construction of a new street across the land he had bought with a group of investors on the south slope of Beacon Hill. With old materials from the bridge, Bulfinch filled more land and laid down a new street, which would become Charles Street, connecting Pleasant Street south of the Common to the West Boston Bridge.

For some time prior to his investment on Beacon Hill, Charles Bulfinch, the well-respected citizen and dilettante architect, had envisioned the hilly land adjacent to the commons as a “princely residential district.” Increased economic activity in the West End and the commercial growth along Cambridge Street as well as the uncomfortable density in the central city helped him make an argument for the construction of the new State House on the highest point in the city. By moving the seat of government, rural fields were rapidly transformed into

17 Freeman, p. 24.  
18 Whitehill, p. 49.  
19 Freeman, p. 33.  
20 Freeman, p. 45.  
21 Whitehill, p. 52.  
22 In a letter to the West Boston Bridge Corporation on July 5, 1804, Bulfinch wrote: “I intend to immediately carry a street on the Eastern line of my flats to the Bridge, & as fast as the Season will allow to fill out an extent of nearly 300 feet.” Freeman, pp. 49-50.  
an urban neighborhood. In a joint venture called the Mount Vernon Proprietors, Bulfinch cooperated with several business partners to buy 18 acres of land bounded by Beacon, Myrtle, Joy Streets and Cambridge Bay. In 1799, the developers began leveling the south slope of Beacon Hill to make way for development. The land fill was used to create Charles Street and create the flat of Beacon Hill where many stables were sited.  

While houses were being constructed on “this sunny crest above the Common,” the north slope remained a place of “violence and disorder.” The south and the north slope were separated by Pinckney Street which effectively served as a back entrance to the fashionable single-family homes fronting on Mount Vernon Street. The intentionally designed barrier was successful and “the North Slope Village with its steep, dark streets remained in isolated contrast to the sunny, orderly southern side.” The adjacent photograph of Pinckney Street in 1928 shows the line separating the dense north slope which extends to the right of the image. The two residential neighborhoods would develop entirely separately for much of the nineteenth century, “The North Slope, an area bounded today by Pinckney, Cambridge, Joy, and Charles Streets, developed almost entirely independently from the South Slope and was more or less and extension of the West End.”  

While the housing stock on the south slope was characterized by a very coherent architectural style, the wooden and brick single-family structures on the north slope were

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26 Kirker, p. 149.
27 Bartlett, p. 7.
haphazardly replaced with row houses to accommodate a growing population.\textsuperscript{28} At the same moment, Mayor Josiah Quincy (1823-1828) shut down the red light district on the riverfront improving the surroundings of the north slope after which the neighborhood became more desirable and more densely populated.\textsuperscript{29}

The most significant in-migration consisted of African Americans. The north slope housed the highest concentration of African Americans in Boston prior to the civil war. Approximately 2,000 African Americans lived between Belknap Street (Joy Street today) and Charles Street.\textsuperscript{30} \textsuperscript{31} \textsuperscript{32} The neighborhood became the center of a vibrant community whose heart was the African American Meeting House (1806), the first African American church in the United States.\textsuperscript{33} The importance of the community institutions attracted such a large population that the housing stock was occupied far above capacity.\textsuperscript{34} Oliver Warner summarizes a census report by Curtis from 1855:

> Overcrowded living quarters were the principal breeding ground of epidemic diseases, unless city officials took steps to prohibit the ‘inhabitation of cellars’ and ‘crowded apartments,’ and until better housing at reduced rents was provided for the laboring classes, the ‘deeply deadly shade of statistics’ would remain ‘as a monument to past indifference and a ‘warning lesson for present and future action.’

The unsanitary living conditions were in stark contrast to the sophisticated living standards prevalent on the south slope of Beacon Hill and also the residential West End.\textsuperscript{35} \textsuperscript{36} The north slope truly became an “environment within an environment.”\textsuperscript{37}

The north slope had no room for expansion as it was bounded by busy Cambridge Street which had been widened in 1851 by the city of Boston.\textsuperscript{38} And with the construction of two major institutions on Cambridge Street, the north slope would remain isolated on its western side.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Forbes and Cummings, p. 1, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{32} Whitehill, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{33} Bartlett, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{34} Levesque, p.440.
\textsuperscript{35} Fisher and Hughes, eds., p. 24.
\textsuperscript{36} O’Connor, pp. 65-66.
\textsuperscript{37} Levesque, p. 440.
\textsuperscript{38} Freeman, p. 44.
and forge closer connections with the West End on its eastern side. In 1811, the Massachusetts Legislature granted a charter for the incorporation of Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) which became the first hospital in the entire New England region. The trustees of the hospital acquired four acres of land called Prince’s Pastures north of Cambridge Street on the Charles River. Charles Bulfinch designed the hospital’s main building which still stands within the compound of MGH. The first patient was admitted to the hospital on September 3, 1821. A very different institution, the Charles Street or Suffolk County Jail, was completed according to designs by Gridley J.F. Bryant in 1851.

With three important institutions situated at the intersection of Charles and Cambridge Streets, the location becomes a destination in itself. Fashionable and working class neighborhoods shared common thoroughfares which became a disorderly mix of activity. In the 1916 Book of Boston, Charles Street is said to have “showed its hopeless disadvantages, becoming as it did long ago, a great teaming thoroughfare circling the foot of Beacon Hill from one part of the city to another” such that “the increasing disadvantages of Charles Street outweighed even these advantages of water and view.”

During the 1840s and 1850, Boston was overwhelmed by an influx of Irish immigrants who were succeeded by Italians, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Albanians, Lithuanians from the 1880s to the 1920s. These European and predominantly Jewish immigrants replace the African Americans moving to other neighborhoods. The African American Meeting House was converted into a synagogue and the orthodox Vilna Shul was constructed. Population pressures lead to the construction of more walkup tenement buildings. More affluent citizens moved to the Back Bay and the South End and not to the north slope or the West End.

The growing urban and regional population necessitated common and later mass transit which would lastingly transform Charles Circle. The Hancock Free Bridge Corporation, which took over the West Boston Bridge Corporation in 1846, embodied the spirit of the new era

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40 Whitehill, p. 347.
42 Fisher and Hughes, eds., p. 25-26.
43 Bartlett, p. 8.
44 Forbes and Cummings, p. 4-5.
determined by harsh inequities among urban citizens.\textsuperscript{46} After struggling with the financial burdens inherited from the West Boston Bridge Corp., the Hancock Free Bridge Corp. was able to leave the bridge to the City of Cambridge in 1858. The public body would thereafter be responsible for maintaining the bridge and no more tolls would be charged.\textsuperscript{47}

The Hancock Free Bridge Corporation improved the bridge (a practically new bridge opened in 1854) which had to accommodate the regional transportation systems. At first stagecoach and then omnibus services operated across the bridge. The omnibuses were horse-drawn were longer vehicles with more seating and had doors on both ends.\textsuperscript{48} Expensive and unsafe, the omnibuses were quickly succeeded by horse-drawn rail cars or horse cars which ran on tracks. On March 26, 1856, the first horse cars began operating from Central Square in Cambridge across the West Boston Bridge to Bowdoin Square.\textsuperscript{49, 50}

Even though the new horse cars were praised by the population and the press, the system reached capacity quickly. Other cities had responded to the transportation crisis by implementing expensive cable car networks, however, engineers were weary of using the technology in Boston’s difficult terrain and climate. The Rapid Transit Commission spearheaded the use of electric trolley cars which replaced the horse cars in the late nineteenth century. On February 16, 1889, the first electric streetcars traveled across the West Boston Bridge.\textsuperscript{51}

The electric streetcars proved cost-effective but placed the aging structure under considerable strain because of their weight. As early as 1890, plans to expand and improve the bridge had been authorized. Engineers went on an extensive fact-finding mission.\textsuperscript{52} The final bridge designed by architect Edmund M. Wheelwright and a large team was authorized by President McKinley on March 29, 1900.\textsuperscript{53} The bridge was completed by August 1906 and dedicated as the Cambridge Bridge\textsuperscript{54} on July 31, 1907.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{46} Freeman, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{47} Signs were posted saying, “FREE BRIDGES! From and after this day, Saturday, January 30, 1858, the WEST BOSTON and CANAL BRIDGES will become free public avenues forever!” See Freeman, pp. 90-91.
\textsuperscript{48} Freeman, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{49} Freeman, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{50} George M. Sanborn, \textit{A Chronicle of the Boston Transit System} (State Transportation Library, 1993), p. iv.
\textsuperscript{51} Freeman, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{52} Freeman, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{53} Freeman, p. 98, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{54} The bridge was renamed the Longfellow Bridge after the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1927.
Like the horse cars before it, the electric trolley system reaches maximum capacity quickly. The Longfellow Bridge had been designed for an overhead or subway-type rapid transit system.\textsuperscript{56} Even while the bridge was being completed, the city of Cambridge and the Boston Elevated Railway Company\textsuperscript{57} began negotiating the construction of a Cambridge subway which would connect to Boston over the Longfellow Bridge. The city wanted many stops and commuters from outlying towns wanted an express connection. Finally, the parties agreed on two stops between Boston and Harvard Square.\textsuperscript{58} The bridge had been designed for rapid transit because the Charles River bed consists of solid granite and would have been impossible to blast.\textsuperscript{59} In 1909, the Cambridge subway line was opened but it was not connected to the Boston’s subway until the Beacon Hill tunnel was completed by the Boston Transit Commission in 1912.\textsuperscript{60}

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\caption{1907, photograph of Longfellow Bridge showing right of way for rapid transit.}
\end{figure}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55}Freeman, p. 109, p. 111.
\item \textsuperscript{56}Freeman, p. 113.
\item \textsuperscript{57}An 1894 act for a subway and an elevated railway establishes the Boston Transit Commission which creates the Boston Elevated Railway Company.
\item \textsuperscript{58}Brian J. Cuday, \textit{Change at Park Street Under: The Story of Boston’s Subways} (Brattleboro, Vermont: Stephen Greene Press, 1972), p. 41.
\item \textsuperscript{59}According to George Sanborn, Transportation Librarian, State Transportation Library, October 18, 2002.
\item \textsuperscript{60}Boston Transit Commission, \textit{Eighteenth Annual Report}, June 30, 1912, pp. 31-34.
\end{itemize}
elevated line constructed by the Boston Elevated Railway Company connected the tunnel to the right of way in the center of the bridge. On March 23, 1912, the “Cambridge Connector” or “Cambridge Main Street Subway” made its virgin trip from Park Street via Kendall and Central Squares to Harvard. The 3.2 miles of rapid transit cost $11,750,000 but reduced travel time from 25 minutes to 8 minutes.\textsuperscript{61} \textsuperscript{62} \textsuperscript{63}

\textbf{Figure 5:} Flyer from the Boston Elevated Railway Company for the opening of the Cambridge subway.

Not until 1932 was an actual stop built at the foot of the Longfellow bridge. On July 27, 1931, the Boston Elevated Railway’s journal, Co-Operation, reported that a contract had been agreed upon for the construction of the new stop at the intersection of Charles and Cambridge Streets. The new station was planned for a traffic island at the center of the intersection which would be accessible from an underground tunnel (“sub-passageway”) under the whole width of the traffic intersection. An oval-shaped landscaped area would surround the “handsome two-story stone structure with steel frame.”\textsuperscript{64} Construction was funded through the Public Works Administration and supervised by the State Department of Public Utilities. The station was officially opened on Saturday, February 27, 1932, with much fanfare.\textsuperscript{65} Finally, MGH, the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, the Suffolk County Jail and the newly developed river esplanade (which is discussed in more detail below) had become accessible by rapid transit. When the station was opened a bus line which had been operating from Bowdoin Square to

\textsuperscript{61} Sanborn, pp. 3-5.  
\textsuperscript{62} Cuday, p. 42.  
\textsuperscript{63} Boston Elevated Railway, \textit{50 Years of Unified Transportation in Metropolitan Boston} (1938), pp. 66-70.  
\textsuperscript{64} Boston Elevated Railway, “Charles Street Station under Construction,” \textit{Co-Operation}, Vol. 10, No. 8, August 1931.  
Figure 6:
The transformation of the Charles-MGH T-stop from 1930 to 2002.
Kendall Square in Cambridge was discontinued. After a 20-year interruption, Charles Circle had again become a central traffic node in the transportation network connecting the neighborhood to Cambridge and the rest of Boston.

While rapid transit became a reality, vehicular traffic was also increasing. In response to higher traffic volumes, Cambridge Street and Charles Street were widened in the mid-1920s. Façades of buildings were destroyed to make room for wider traffic lanes on Charles Street.

![Figure 7: Widening of Cambridge Street in 1926.](image)

Cambridge Street, in particular, became an extremely wide street as the above photograph shows. With the trolleys gone from the street, only the occasional blue line train heading to the Eliot Shops near Harvard Square used the tracks on the street. The cars would come out of a tunnel on Cambridge Street late at night, travel over the bridge and join the red line tracks at Kendall Station. After 1952, these trips were no longer necessary because the Orient Heights Shops were opened. In a report on the historical significance of the north slope of Beacon Hill, Cambridge Street is described in the following manner:

Through the widening of this major artery, leading from Bowdoin Square to the Longfellow Bridge, and the obliteration of the West End by action of The Boston City Planning Board in the 1950s, Cambridge Street had become a wilderness, with insignificant commercial buildings on the south side and, similar dreariness, or parking lots on the north. There are two notable exceptions, however. Two of the finest buildings in Boston stand on the north side of Cambridge Street, corner of Lynde Street, the first Harrison Gray Otis House and West Church. (Forbes and Cummings, p.33)

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67 Forbes and Cummins, p.23.
68 Sanborn, p. 17.
The street which had been designed as a twelve-foot highway in 1647 had been transformed into a traffic artery channeling regional and local traffic.  

MGH seems to have taken advantage of the changes taking place on Cambridge Street by buying up property along the street adjacent to the Suffolk County Jail. The 1898 Bromley map shows the hospital owning almost no property along Cambridge. By 1928 however, the majority of the plots between Anderson and Garden on the north side of Cambridge Street are under MGH’s ownership.

While MGH was encroaching on the intersection, the Charles River embankment was filled moving the circle away from its waterfront location. In 1881, the Charles River Embankment Company developed ideas for a recreational area along the esplanade in Cambridge. Landscape architect Charles Eliot working in the Olmstead Firm developed a park system which would follow the entire length of the Charles River. The regional initiative which Eliot instigated came under the guidance of the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC, 1919). The key element for the plan was a dam which would keep the water level within the basin stable. Citizens concerns for their health were allayed through an extensive engineering analysis. On October 20, 1908, the dam was shut for the first time. The first waterfront development to take place was the Charlesbank park in the West End. Next, the Boston embankment which extended from the Longfellow Bridge to Fenway Park was built from 1906 to 1910. In 1928, the embankment was widened and the straight seawall was made irregular to counteract choppy waters. Embankment Road stretched the length of the park system. Funded by the widow of James Storrow, the esplanade was named Storrow Memorial Embankment.

Urban renewal would have significant consequences for Charles Circle. The 1949 Housing Act pushed the city to designate insalubrious neighborhoods and mark them for rehabilitation which in its first incarnation meant complete destruction followed by reconstruction. The raising of the West End would play an important role in galvanizing an unprecedented bond between the north and south slopes of Beacon Hill. At the same time, the

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69 Bartlett, p. 33.
70 G.W.Bromley and Co., Atlas of the City of Boston, Boston Proper and Back Bay, 1898 and 1928.
71 The Metropolitan Park Commission had been founded in 1889 and became the MDC in 1911.
72 The Charles River rose and fell nearly ten feet from high tide to low tide, leaving the river bottom exposed causing an awful smell which was compounded by pollution. The currents caused by the tides were also dangerous. See Max Hall, The Charles: The People’s River (Boston: David R. Godine, 1986), pp. 35-38.
73 Ibid., pp. 39-52.
city invested in public infrastructure and began plans for the central artery and other highways which would change the nature of the intersection of Charles and Cambridge Streets.

Already in 1928, the Metropolitan District Commission had recommended the construction of a highway on the Charles River embankment. With more cars on the roads, the state legislature approved the construction of a larger road in 1949. While the highway certainly provided through drivers with a pleasant view, the flats of Beacon Hill adjacent to the Longfellow Bridge and the entire Back Bay were separated from the parks on the embankment which had been widened again to make room for the highway. The regional Storrow Drive Highway funneled a much higher volume of traffic through Charles Circle which became an even busier interchange.

What Storrow Drive did to lay the groundwork for the site’s traffic horrors, the demolition of the West End did for the future community living near it. Since the passing of the 1949 Housing Act, Boston had been looking for a suitable renewal project which would tap into the massive flow of federal funds. In 1950 Boston’s City Planning Board drafted its first report which identified the West End as a “high priority” area. It took more than ten year to move from a planning stage to the actual demolition and forced 3,075 families to move by 1962.

The destruction of the West End changed the composition of an enormous urban neighborhood (48 acres) whose inhabitants had close ties with the residents living on the north slope of Beacon Hill who also left the area hollowing out the Vilna Shul’s and the Synagogue’s congregations. This almost empathetic reaction on the part of the north slope community proves that Eugene Rostow was right when he wrote:

We really know very little about what we have done and what we are doing as we tear down and rebuild our cities – what we are doing, that is, to people and neighborhoods and to the nearly biological relations of men to their neighbors and neighborhoods.

With the West End gone, a new bond seems to have emerged between the south and north slopes of Beacon Hill which are perceived as one neighborhood by most Bostonians today. The backlash of the West End’s destruction took the form of conservation which led to the creation of the Beacon Hill Historic District in 1955 which encompassed the South Slope of the Beacon Hill

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74 Ibid., p. 60.
75 Smith, pp. 11-13.
76 Smith, p. 15.
77 Bartlett, p. 8.
78 Forbes and Cummings, p. 6.
neighborhood. In 1963, the Historic District was enlarged to include the north slope of the Hill. The Black Heritage Trail was also founded in the 1960s. Historic preservation has ensured that the visual connections between the north and south slopes have become stronger. While any nineteenth century resident would be shocked at lumping the buildings on Mount Vernon Street into the same category as the buildings on Phillips Street, a contemporary visitor perceives the entire Hill as a valuable “historic” area. And given that the two closest districts are Government Center and the new West End, the north and south feel like the unified neighborhood which the hot real estate market has encouraged.

**Institutions and Civic Forces at Work**

In order to discuss Charles Circle’s present and future, the historical trajectory traced in the previous discussion could be distilled into five predominant functions accumulated at Charles Circle over time:

- The circle is a **local and regional traffic and transportation hub**.
- The uses surrounding Charles Circle like the Esplanade, MGH and Mass Eye and Ear Infirmary provide reasons for people to make Charles Circle a final **destination**.
- The **cohesive residential community** – Beacon Hill – has a strong feeling of civic responsibility.
- Cambridge Street feels like a **border or an edge** in the urban fabric.
- Charles Circle is an **indecipherable and almost invisible center** of high-density residential and institutional uses.

The host of private and public development taking place at Charles Circle today addresses all of the circle’s functions in a coherent vision which originates within an institutional context dominated by the civic awareness of the community and the presence of MGH. The paper has caricatured this vision as the notion of “lookin’ good” and juxtaposed it with “feelin’ good.” The goal of proposing this dichotomy is not to discredit the long and extensive participatory planning process to which hundreds of individuals have contributed. Rather, it is an attempt to project how the current vision will affect the future of Charles Circle by analyzing physical improvements (“lookin’ good”) and social and economic factors (“feelin’ good”) separately.

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79 Bartlett, p. 8.
Thereby, the focus of current interventions may be revealed and other forces uncovered which may reinforce or hinder the overall vision which encompasses broad goals.

The scope of this paper cannot capture the breadth of current development taking place at Charles Circle and on Cambridge Street but it attempts to cover key characteristics. In 1995, MGH acquired the Suffolk County Jail from the state of Massachusetts. The hospital had been encroaching on the building for many years and now one institution has swallowed the other. After significant protests from conservationists, the Jail was designated a landmark and is protected from destruction. The hospital will develop a 305-bed hotel and an underground garage on the site (developers are dismantling and reconstructing an entire wing of the jail to dig the garage). Adjacent to the new hotel, a 40,000 square foot ambulatory care center has been approved and is under construction. The 11-story building is setting the pace for different uses on Cambridge Street whose north side had been dominated by parking lots and vacant parcels.

Buzzy’s, famous throughout the city, had already been bought out of bankruptcy by a high-tech entrepreneur when the hospital demolished it in 2002. The restaurant did not coincide with the vision for the new hotel, “There is an aesthetic to Buzzy’s that would be very attractive, but apparently [Friedman, the hotel developer] would like a different aesthetic.” The neighborhood’s attachment is manifested by the “Ode to Buzzy’s” written by a previous resident of Beacon Hill.

While people somehow managed to navigate the traffic circle to reach Buzzy’s, the new hotel development does not rely on the power of people’s noses. Ever since overhead walkways were constructed for the T-stop in 1961, pedestrians have been completely removed from the circle in theory. There are no paths to guide them across the intersection and those visitors who are unaware that the T-stop is a throughway do not dare beyond the mouth of Charles Street. The new design for the Charles-MGH T-stop will completely transform the circle and once again lower the entrance of the stop to grade level. The result of an extensive participatory design process, the new station will open the circle visually and physically while accommodating the heavy traffic flows.

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80 The destruction of the restaurant resembles the destruction of another institution at the east end of Cambridge Street in the 1960s. Joe and Nemo’s hot dog store was destroyed as part of the West End urban renewal project.
The station appropriately reacts to the modern development on its northern side and the historic architecture of Beacon Hill. It will be well lit and transparent. Activity on the southern side of Cambridge Street which is mostly comprised of local pedestrians will probably be facilitated.\(^{83}\) And more pedestrians from the hospital and Charles Street may begin to venture down Cambridge Street. Currently, Cambridge Street feels like the edge of a residential compound which may become less rigid with increased activity from the hospital.

\(^{83}\) Saturday night is the exception because several pubs attract more people.
While the neighborhood embraces these improvements, a large community of homeless people will be displaced as a result. The abject spaces under the T-stop, by the bridge and in the nooks off Cambridge Street will be gone and the homeless people will most likely be forced to move. Much of the land under the T-station belongs to the MDC causing many city services to stay away from the site. With more cooperation between various levels of government, the homeless community will be forced to move elsewhere without the services they need. The city has gone from ignoring them to forcibly pushing them out of a relatively safe living space.

And not only the homeless community, those residents living on the Hill who need affordable retail will soon no longer be able to look to Cambridge Street. Even neighborhood stores which have survived on Charles Street have a boutique feeling to them and the current vision for Cambridge Street projects the same type of retail. However, a street which is “urban on one side and suburban on the other”\textsuperscript{84} may not lend itself to this type of retail development. And it remains questionable whether brick sidewalks will provide the necessary incentive for more upscale commercial development.

While the community and MGH may have little control over the exact type of commercial development, together they are setting a very specific stage which may not accommodate all the uses which will be drawn to the street. As a result, some stores may remain vacant and others will survive in a mismatched physical context. In the old Joe and Nemo’s hot dog stand near Scollay Square, the proprietors displayed the following sign:

\begin{center}
\begin{quote}
There’s a time for champagne and a time for Coca-Cola
There’s a time for true love and a time for lust
There’s a time for haute cuisine and a time for Joe and Nemo.
\end{quote}
\end{center}


There may no longer be a time for “Joe and Nemo” or “Buzzy’s” around Charles Circle. MGH’s priorities and the collective vision from a strong-minded community have opted for champagne. And, Charles Circle – a space which had slipped the minds of many Bostonians and government agencies – has been claimed once more.

\textsuperscript{84} Peter Thomson, former President of the Beacon Hill Civic Association.
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*Business Employees/ Owners*

Antonio’s, Pizzetta Pizzeria, Grampy’s Gulf Gas Station, Harvard Gardens, New Crepe Store, Hospital Employee

*Community Members*

Peter Thomson, Active Member and Former President of the Beacon Hill Civic Association

*MBTA and HDR (Engineering Firm working on T-Station)*

Mary Ainsley, Construction Design Department, MBTA

Barbara Boylan, Director of Design, MBTA

Conrad Misak, Department of Planning and Schedules, MBTA

David Peters, Engineer with HDR

George Sanborn, Transportation Librarian, MBTA

Maureen Shirkus, Red Line Chief, MBTA