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### Urban Form & Use in Boston's Central Public Parks

Boston Common and the Boston Public Garden are two adjacent public parks in central Boston that form part of the city's celebrated Emerald Necklace. Boston Common, dating from 1634, is the oldest public park in the country and has a diverse past including use as a cattle grazing ground until 1830, a camp for the British during the Revolutionary War, and a site of public hangings until 1817<sup>1</sup>. The Common is composed of 50 acres of generally unstructured space that integrates a wide array of land uses and interfaces quite openly to the surrounding city. The Boston Public Garden occupies a rectangular plot of land adjacent to the common across Charles Street and was established in 1837 by philanthropist Horace Gray as the first public botanical garden in the USA<sup>2</sup>. The Public Garden's 24 acres of painstakingly manicured landscapes with seasonal flowers and plants is dominated by The Lagoon, a large lake containing Boston's famed Swan Boats. While the parks are often referred to or thought of as a single entity due to their close proximity to each other, the Common and Public Garden are unique and distinct parks that are decidedly varied in character, structure, and function. Together, they form a highly useful and flexible public space that serves to beautify and enhance the urban environment of downtown Boston through natural greenery and broad public accessibility.

Though the shared location of the Common and the Public Garden is their most obvious similarity, the two environments share some other common features. Primarily, the parks are public spaces intended for the use and enjoyment of the people of Boston and the city's visitors.

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<sup>1</sup> "Boston Common." City of Boston. 30 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.cityofboston.gov/FreedomTrail/bostoncommon.asp>>.

<sup>2</sup> "Horace Gray: Father of the Boston Public Garden." Brighton Allston Historical Society. 2001. 1 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.bahistory.org/HoraceGray.html>>.

They are both managed by the Boston Department of Parks and Recreation and were each the first freely, publicly accessible space of their respective type in the US, with Boston Common leading the way as America's first public park and the Public Garden setting the precedent as the nation's first public botanical garden<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, both spaces are predominantly green areas with an abundance of grass and trees which serve as natural refuges from the bustling streets of Boston that surround them. The two parks also feature public seating, bodies of water, and a number of decorative built structures including statues, memorials, fountains, and small monuments (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1: On the left, the western entrance to Boston Public Garden featuring a statue of George Washington on Horseback and blooming seasonal flowers. On the right, public benches and a fountain in the Boston Common below the Massachusetts State House.**

(Sources: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2c/Boston\\_Public\\_Garden\\_2.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2c/Boston_Public_Garden_2.jpg) and <http://www.hms.harvard.edu/dms/images/CommonState.jpg> via Google Image Search).

However, closer investigation of the Boston Common and Public Garden as urban environments reveals that the two parks are far more dissimilar than they are alike. A cursory examination of an aerial map of central Boston highlights some immediate physical differences in size and shape. Boston Common's 50 acres occupy a distinctly nonrectangular plot of land while the Public Garden is slightly less than half the size of the Common at 24 acres and is

<sup>3</sup> "Emerald Necklace." City of Boston. 30 Nov. 2008 < <http://www.cityofboston.gov/parks/emerald/default.asp> >.

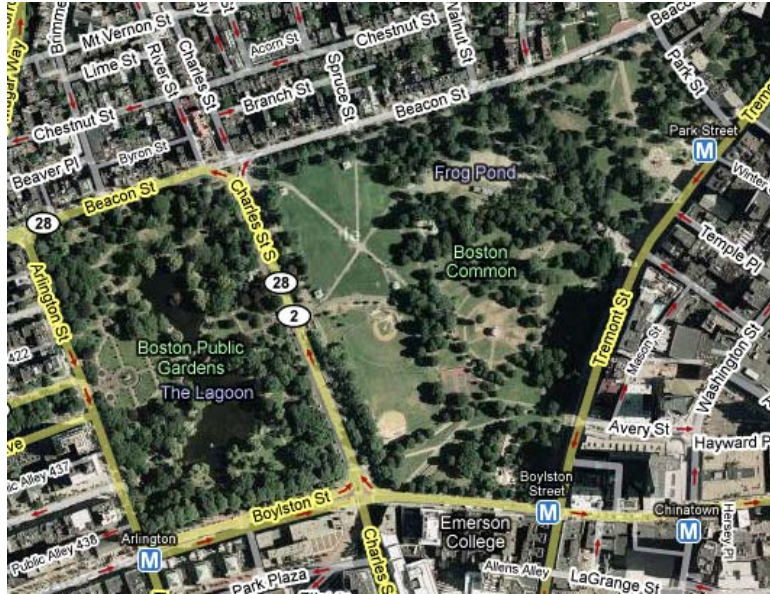
bounded by four streets forming a clear rectangle (**Figure 2**).

While both parks have fencing around their perimeters to some extent, the tall fences and locking gates of the Public Garden feel much more restrictive and confining and clearly serve to separate the park from the rest of the city.

Alternatively, the Common –

particularly on the Tremont Street side – interfaces with the city in an incredibly seamless manner and does not employ closing and locking gates like the Public Garden. On the inside, the Public Garden features heavily manicured and well-tended landscaping such as intricate flower and vegetation arrangements that change regularly with season, while the green space of the Common is mainly open grassy area and footpaths surrounded by many trees (**Figure 2**).

Deeper into the parks, the marked differences in the style of walking paths between the parks becomes increasingly evident. The footpaths in the Common facilitate point to point travel across the park by cutting across shortest and most sensible paths from a transportation viewpoint, while the winding paths of the Public Garden meander in away that is not particularly conducive to arriving at a particular destination but is perfect for an idle and careless stroll through the park. The parks also have a notably different character of land use, with the Common featuring land allocated specifically to recreational activities such as playing fields, tennis courts,



**Figure 2: An aerial map of the two parks showing their spatial locations and differing shapes. The Common also has much more open space as well as playing fields and tennis courts.**  
Source: Google Maps (<http://maps.google.com>)



**Figure 3: A food vendor in Boston Common.**

(Source:

[http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2313/1693692560\\_a6f389365a.jpg](http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2313/1693692560_a6f389365a.jpg) via Google Image Search)

and the Frog Pond with ice skating in the winter and wading in the summer. During the warmer months while children of all ages run about and play sports, families picnic throughout the park and food carts and vendors abound along walkways and at the park's entrances (**Figure**

**3**). This pattern of diverse land use continues

even below ground and out of immediate sight

with a large parking garage situated beneath the

west side of the park and the Park Street subway station dominating the Common's subterranean

northeast region. Contrastingly, the land in the Public Garden is devoted mainly to intricate

landscaping and lends itself to an observational visit rather than a participatory visit. This

differing land use allocation highlights the manner in which the Common's pastoral atmosphere

emphasizes practicality and open recreational use while the layout of the Public Garden suggests

a tempered elegance and sophistication with a clear emphasis on ornamentation and design.

This examination of land use also reflects a number of inherent urban design values present in the development and maintenance of these two public parks. The Boston Common is a true public space that is managed in a "hands-off" manner which results in a highly participatory public park. The value of placing little restriction on public use and activities is clear in the management of the Common, and its varied land use and lack of strict regulation encourage visitors to involve themselves and dynamically interact with their environment. Furthermore, its use as the site of many public demonstrations, protests, speeches, and rallies extols the ideals of political and civic freedom of expression, fitting for the public park of the city that played host to



many significant events of the American Revolutionary War. Meanwhile, the Public Garden provides a stark contrast to this mentality by promoting ideals of extensive control and order, emphasized by the scrupulous micromanagement of the urban landscape (**Figure 4**). This thorough maintenance of the seasonal vegetation underscores the careful integration of natural forces such as weather and seasons into park design and showcases the elegance and beauty of the natural environment even in the midst of a crowded urban center. The Public Garden creates a tranquil and serene urban sanctuary enforced by a “look but don’t touch” character that focuses on regulation of activity and public use. Both parks pay tribute to the design value of preservation of historical space, evident through the abundance of plaques, statues, and monuments that adorn each park. Similarly, they both stand as testaments to the ideals of public space as an urban necessity and the integration of natural spaces within dense urban environments.



**Figure 4: The beautifully elegant landscaping and flower arrangements of the Public Garden.**  
Sources: <http://i15.photobucket.com/albums/a351/britishgrenadier/First%20Of%20the%20Month%20Images/boston-public-gardens.jpg> and [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3a/Boston\\_Public\\_Garden\\_panorama.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3a/Boston_Public_Garden_panorama.jpg) via Google Image Search

These design factors and the resulting built form strongly influence the way people use and interact with Boston Common and the Public Garden. For example, the Public Garden uses signage to send a clear signal to visitors about what sorts of actions and behaviors are appropriate, or more specifically what behaviors are discouraged and prohibited. Entrance signs

to the park clearly stipulate that bikes, pets, skating, playing sports, and other recreational activities are prohibited in the Garden, unlike the Common which lends itself strongly to participatory activities such as sports and picnics through the presence of land specifically devoted to playing fields, courts, and open areas without restricted use. Furthermore, the Public Garden uses fences and barriers to restrict access to sections of landscaped land and control hours of park use while the Common integrates much more naturally with the surrounding urban environment and silently invites passersby from the street to its grassy fields (**Figure 5**). Due to the structure of the walking paths mentioned earlier, few people seem to use the Public Garden as a thoroughfare as the winding footpaths and restricted hours prevent rapid point-to-point access. Meanwhile, the Common lends itself to be used as a path and many people at all times of day and night can be seen cutting through the Common for quicker access to their respective destinations. These parks serve as a strong example of the power of urban design and built form to encourage and discourage certain kinds of activities and affect the manner in which people interact with their environments.



**Figure 5: A view of a large entrance to the Boston Common on Tremont Street. Note the lack of fences, gates, or large physical barriers that prevent access to the Common or isolate the park**

**from the surrounding streets. Also, there is an abundance of public seating in the form of concrete benches**

Source: Google Maps Street View (<http://maps.google.com>)

However, the way in which visitors use these parks is also influenced by a handful of non-design factors that are a result of social cues and the physical environment. For example, the weather is a highly influential factor in the use of the parks, as both spaces are used heavily in the summer while usage appears to drop off steeply during winter, especially on days characterized by cold temperatures or high precipitation (**Figure 6**). Boston is well-known for its inhospitable climate during much of the year, and the significant decrease in usage during colder months raises the question of how effective an outdoor public space can truly be in a city with such unforgiving weather. The time of day also plays a large role in the usage of the parks as many more people are present in these spaces during the daytime. The Public Gardens are closed during the night and Boston Common seems to be used mainly as a thoroughfare for people passing through to other destinations or as a sleeping area for some of the local homeless population. Social factors also contribute to differing use of the parks in the sense that visitors tend to follow the status quo and mimic the behavior of others, so the social norms of each environment are self-propagating. For example, on a nice summer day at the Common, the open fields abound with people tossing footballs and Frisbees, running children, and picnicking families. In contrast, visitors to the Public Garden can be observed strolling through the gardens in a control and collected way, taking photographs of the arrangements, and observing the splendor of the built landscape. Consequently, even young children or new visitors to the park who may be unaware of actual regulations or signage governing official use of these spaces tend to pick up on the behavioral cues of the surrounding visitors and follow the same pattern of behavior. These subtle but omnipresent non-design factors remind an observer that even the

strongest tools of urban design and planning cannot result in absolute control and influence over a dynamic urban environment.



**Figure 6: Images of the Boston Common during winter; the park is empty and quite unwelcoming compared to its inviting and pleasant atmosphere in better weather.**

Sources: <http://www.erh.noaa.gov/nerfc/photos/1-23-05BostonCommon.jpg> and [http://photos.igougo.com/images/p137690-Boston-Boston\\_Common.jpg](http://photos.igougo.com/images/p137690-Boston-Boston_Common.jpg) via Google Image Search

The combination of Boston Common and the Boston Public Garden forms a wonderful juxtaposition of two dissimilar but complementary environments. The Public Garden provides a beautiful and elegant environment in which visitors can stand back and observe the meticulously detailed landscaping in an extensively manicured environment. It is for enjoyment of observation rather than participation, and the gardens reflect the values of control, moderation, and firm regulation. Indeed, maintaining the beauty and elegance of the Public Garden would be nearly impossible if people used it for playing sports, public demonstrations, and other recreational activities. Contrastingly, Boston Common lacks the splendor and grace of the Public Garden but is a much more flexible space for people to use for whatever purposes they see fit: recreational, political, civic, entertainment, food, play, relaxation, and more (**Figure 7**). Together, they form a highly useful public space that allows visitors to take advantage of the recreational activities and diverse land use afford by the Common while enjoying the austerity and refinement of the Public Garden. As a result of their differing purposes, evaluating which of the two environments is



better depends completely on intended use. For a group of teenagers looking to play a game of soccer or Frisbee, Boston Common is certainly the more desirable space because these types of activities are permitted and accommodated through the presence of playing fields and large open areas.

For a couple seeking a serene and romantic stroll through a gorgeous and

calm environment, the Public Garden is the preferred location. Either park is perfect for a picnic or a walk with friends, but it is the combination of the two within such close proximity to each other that makes for such an exceptionally successful and effective public space.

The success of Boston Common and the Boston Public Garden as neighboring parks in an urban center powerfully demonstrates the ability of public green spaces to dramatically improve the character of a city. Just as New York City's Central Park is an essential part of the Manhattan grid, residents of Boston would find the notion of their city without its two beloved central parks inconceivable. The tranquility and gracefully crafted beauty of the Public Gardens marvelously complements the anything-goes character of the Common which creates a uniquely multipurpose environment. And while the parks contrast each other sharply in urban use, built form, and general character, they both embody a variety of urban design values and together create an indispensable resource for the people of Boston. If history serves as a reliable example, these two parks will continue to serve the city of Boston for years to come as highly useful and welcoming public spaces that give a much-needed breath of life to the tired lungs of a dense city.



**Figure 7: A protest against US immigration policy in Boston Common. This type of demonstration would almost certainly not take place in the comparatively tranquil Public Garden.**

Source: [http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/gallery/041006\\_immigration\\_rally\\_boston\\_common/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/gallery/041006_immigration_rally_boston_common/) via Google Image Search