The Landscape of Home

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If you live in the Boston area and you're not from around here, you receive frequent reminders of your nonbelonging. You can grow into this place only so far, and then you hit the limit. I'm fine with that. Being an interesting place to live as an outsider is part of what makes Boston not like other places. I'm already from somewhere else—Chicago, a bigger and rougher city, but also more welcoming to people from elsewhere—and it feels to me as if the brisk stiff-arm of Boston localism sets me up at just the right distance: close enough to appreciate the city's idiosyncrasies, yet far enough to sustain a little healthy observational detachment.

But if you live anywhere long enough, even as an outsider, the way of life there and the lay of the land itself will sink into you. In matters of place and selfhood, as in so many other things, who you are creeps up on you. Years and then decades go by in which you vaguely assume that there's a you who you're going to

be when you grow up, and then you realize that you have been grown up for a while and this is you, pretty much for keeps.

I grew up as a person of the grid, the rectilinear layout imposed on the cities and countryside of the Midwest. I navigated by familiar right angles even when far afield from my home turf, and my experience of city life was arranged on the grid of Chicago like morning glories growing on a trellis. At the corner of 72nd and Oglesby a dog in a yard lay in wait to hurl itself against the chain-link fence and scare the daylights out of me on my way to the public library; at 43rd and Vincennes was the Checkerboard Lounge, where I learned to love my hometown music; I made at least two serious mistakes at 59th and Stony Island, and only undeserved dumb luck saved me each time. Leaving the grid, whether to ramble in the rundown reaches of Jackson Park or in the medieval cities of Europe, felt like an adventure — exciting but disorienting.

But I am a person of the grid no longer. Life in New England and especially in Boston, where straight lines are in short supply, has reversed my polarities. My new normal is the dense tangle of short, curving streets converging raggedly on a "square" with no 90-degree angles, a layout often likened to cow paths but perhaps more reminiscent of rabbit warrens. The trains of my branch of the Green Line, the D, weave through greenery that yields irregular strobe-glimpses of wooden back porches and brick façades, bent snatches of streetscape, scenes out of Miyazaki's dreamlike anime fantasies.

What feels strange to me now is to find myself on a long straightaway, like the tedium of Route 9 as it carries you away from the city toward Route 128. Even the orderly angles of the Back Bay feel a little too regular. The me I've become, the me Boston has shaped, wants to scrunch up any such foursquare arrangement, to make it satisfying by throwing in some hooked

lines and messy nodes that reward the eye even as they tangle the flow of movement.

Not far from my house in Brookline, just on the other side of Route 9, stands the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, the former house and office of America's greatest landscape architect. The parks of my childhood and young adulthood—Jackson Park in Chicago, Prospect Park and Central Park in New York—all bear his signature. Olmsted, who in my estimation rivals J. S. Bach when it comes to leaving the world a permanently better place than he found it, did more than anyone else to create the green breaks in the grid in which I had my adventures beyond the rectilinear, back when I was a person of the grid. And it was Olmsted, no friend of straight lines, who codified the principles that inform my adopted home ground: the beauty of a landscape is rooted not only in the sense of purpose that shaped it but also in the quality of surprise it offers even to a visitor who knows it well.

Purpose and surprise describes the seductive rise and fall of the garden and yard around Olmsted's house, a miniature landscape that feels far larger and calls out for repeated visits in different light and weather. The same goes for Boston's curiously shaped lots, dead ends, and obtuse angles, and for the ideal landscape without straight lines that's imprinted so deeply on me that it's now part of who I am.

As I've settled into life here, I've found myself wanting to take a hand in maintaining this landscape, especially the parts of it closest to home. Recently, for instance, I served as a citizen member of a design review committee planning the renovation of the park at the end of my street. Like having my kids in the nearby public school, doing my bit to help the Parks and Recreation

Commission fix up our well-used, well-loved park has given me a fresh appreciation of public life at the face-to-face level of the neighborhood.

Renovating the park, tucked away on a compact site between the D Line tracks and the backs of low-rise apartment buildings lining Beacon Street, struck me as a pretty straightforward proposition. It's not broken; it's just a little too broken-in. So, I figured, we should just plan to do the obvious things — put new equipment in the playground, regrade the field to solve flooding problems, resurface the basketball and tennis courts, maybe put in a loop path — and be sure not to do anything stupid, like cutting down trees or messing up the lovely grass slope that attracts sunbathers and sledders. We'd be done in no time, right?

Not so fast. The public meetings to discuss the design offered a primer in the dynamics that give a community its inner life. Parents with older kids didn't want the same things as parents with little kids. No matter how sensitive the dog people and skateboarders were to the positions of non–dog people or non-skaters, they couldn't quite accept that the special facilities they wanted would make the park less pleasant for everyone else. Abutters prioritized peace and quiet, especially after dark, which tended to pit them against skaters, basketball players, proponents of erecting a covered pavilion, and teenagers in general.

And during our deliberations I was repeatedly reminded just how important parks are to the very young and to the old. This natural alliance of the park's heaviest daily users wielded a combination of practical and moral authority that was usually potent enough to carry the day against all comers. Nobody wants to be seen as steamrolling preschoolers and grandparents.

I was also reminded that I'm kind of intolerant in my views about the purpose and form of public meetings. I see them as ex-

ercises in horse-trading pluralism in which participants choose their objectives and then drive toward them, bargaining whenever those interests come into conflict with others'. So I grew impatient when some people treated the committee's open meetings as occasions to philosophize, speculate, indulge fantasies of personal heroism, wax nostalgic, decry the downfall of all that was once good, identify nefarious conspiracies, or make off-topic suggestions about how to improve the world.

But I came to see that my impatience was misplaced. There was value in all that apparent digression. Longtime residents reminiscing about long-ago concerts or long-ago-removed play equipment showed me how the park figures in local routines and traditions that give shape to lives. While I was inclined in principle to dismiss overprotective parents' and fearful abutters' gripes, I learned to listen to thoughtful speakers who could locate the point where their own worries touched legitimate questions of public concern. I could even discern a useful purpose in rambling stand-up monologues about what's wrong with people today or what some terrible kids did to the neighbors' entryway. It was all part of the process of a community explaining to itself not only why it cared about its park but what it cared about, period.

We got to the finish line eventually, agreeing on a reasonable plan, comprehensive but not too fancy, that addressed the needs of most of the park's many different kinds of users. Our shared objective was a satisfying landscape, an essential amenity and quality-of-life issue, especially in a nose-to-screen age that encourages us to retreat from public space and the public life it makes possible. While our elected representatives in Washington seem to be going out of their way to make it harder to identify with the abstraction of national identity, it still feels easy and

natural to belong to a neighborhood, a school district, a city—this city. The park belongs to the community, but it's just as true that a community takes shape on the frame of the park.

Living in Boston, arriving at middle age as my kids grew into and then out of the park- and playground-intensive years that push a family into heavy use of public space, has made me intensely aware of how important good feng shui can be to one's quality of life. Much of this city just feels right to me: proportional, human-scaled, pleasingly irregular, densely layered with my own and others' lived experience. That's never more apparent than when I return home from traveling in China. I feel as if I'm coming back to a country estate or to a college campus between terms, a green and peaceful retreat where change happens in measured, carefully considered ways. It's probably not the first image that comes to mind when you think of Boston, but a little time in China could well alter your view.

Each time I've been in China, the impression of dynamic forward movement has been stronger. Cities are growing so fast and by such heroic leaps and bounds that even longtime residents can get disoriented. A government employee whose work takes him all over Anhui province told me, "If you work in the office for a couple of months, when you go out in the cities everything's different. I went to pick up my wife at the train station in my own hometown, and I couldn't find it."

Even second- and third-tier provincial cities like Huangshi and Lu'an—the Worcesters and Springfields of China—boast brand-new airports that put dowdy, dingy Logan to shame; massively transformative highway projects that make the Big Dig look like overpriced cosmetic surgery; bullet-train service that makes Amtrak's Acela look like a musket ball fired underwater;

and forests of new high-rises, going up thirty and fifty at a time, that make even the most hotly debated development in Boston seem modest by comparison.

The toll taken by that growth is equally apparent. All those construction projects add clouds of grit to the pollution pouring out of all the new cars on all those new roads and out of the coal-burning plants that provide power to the growing cities. The air's bad, the water's worse, and cityscapes are harsh studies in shades of gray.

When I get back from China I no longer take for granted the lush greenery along the D Line, or that I can walk with my kids down our street past trees, yards, and lawns to a park with a playground in it. Other newly appreciated daily pleasures: you can take a deep breath and not cough; you can drink tap water; you can swim without undue worry in various bodies of water around the region. If the Charles River, which most locals still regard as toxic, flowed through Wuhan or Chengdu, it would draw swimmers in daily packs — not just kids (in the rare moments when they weren't in school or studying) but also hardy senior citizens who would perform slow tai chi movements and slap their limbs to promote circulation before plunging in.

Some of the dramatic contrasts between Boston and Chinese cities can be chalked up to differences in wealth and function. Boston is a relatively rich postindustrial metropolis, a service and research center with its factory era mostly in its past; the cities of China are industrial centers, still relatively poor even as they fill the world's orders for manufactured goods while absorbing a folk migration of world-historical scale from rural hinterlands.

But some of the differences also have to do with civic culture, another aspect of life here for which I gain fresh appreciation each time I return from China. Michael Rawson, a historian at

Brooklyn College and the author of *Eden on the Charles: The Making of Boston*, put it this way: "It's always hard to say that there's a particular culture in one city that's had continuity over centuries, but it's more possible to say it of Boston. It's a place where the search for environmental permanence was born, at least for America, versus just tearing things down. Boston led the charge in developing an appreciation of historical land and historical buildings."

Eden on the Charles traces the rise in the nineteenth century of a set of related impulses: to control the destruction of land and buildings in the course of business as usual, to create a viable relationship between the city and nature, to determine whether amenities such as clean water are a privilege or a right. It's not a story of tree-hugging idealism. Rather, it's one of nature-themed political and cultural contests between Brahmins and immigrants, Boston proper and surrounding communities, private profit-makers and defenders of the public interest.

The result, Rawson told me, is that in nineteenth-century Boston there developed a lasting new civic priority: "to manage inevitable and wanton change and to balance it with what's already here." It became an important value that passed from elite culture into general circulation, marking a major change in American urbanism. "Up until then," said Rawson, "all of America had expected permanent change and not much else."

Rawson helped me understand why Boston seems old and well preserved in comparison to Chinese cities that are much older, some of them well over a thousand years older, but feel as if they were built with slipshod haste within living memory. If Boston sometimes feels poky when compared to them, it also feels more humane. That's not just because American society in general is more affluent. Boston's quality of comparatively slow, thoughtful continuity with its own past also has roots in a dis-

tinctive civic culture. That culture can be contentious and frustrating, its inbuilt obstructionist impulse drives developers crazy, and it doesn't always produce the right result (the example of Government Center leaps to mind), but I've come to appreciate it more and more as a crucial element of a livable city.

And I have come to appreciate, on both aesthetic and anthropological grounds, the sometimes bizarre ways in which the people of this city actually move through their landscape. One of the distinctive local traits that first struck me when I moved here sixteen years ago was the curious variety of gaits on display. Back then I lived in Huron Village in Cambridge, and I got used to seeing certain characters. There were, for example, the Lean and Hungry Tiny Steps People, a gaunt couple who had apparently made a study of running and concluded that six-inch strides were the key to efficient exercise. There was Witness Protection Man, who carried a big stick and wore shades and a parka, no matter what the weather, and appeared to stiffen into some kind of lock-kneed imminent-threat mode whenever an oncoming stranger drew near. And there was the Rabbit Man of Cambridge, who walked at a terrific pace in the bike lane with an air of barely suppressed desperation, his upper body drastically levered forward from the hips. The Rabbit Man ate carrots and lettuce leaves while on the move, and a sort of hush seemed to travel with him. I'd feel the encroaching stillness and turn to spot him cresting a rise on the avenue, approaching like a prophesied event.

There was further peculiarity on two wheels, and on three—recumbent tricyclists, often with forked beard fluttering in the wind, who pedaled and hand-signaled with an air of ergonomic superiority. And on four, of course: drivers shouted empty threats or perhaps cries of distress as they swerved and lurched, tried to time the green light with a bold rush along the right-hand

curb, and counter-honked plaintively to register outrage at having been honked at by other, equally inept drivers. The drivers crashed into each other a lot, and it was hard to tell whether they were trying to avoid bikers and pedestrians or trying to run them down. The daily spectacle was quietly astonishing. To run along Huron Avenue and around Fresh Pond was to catch a glimpse of what a massive nerve-gas attack might look like in its early stages.

After a few years I moved across the river, where I encountered a new form: the Green Line Mock Panic. This is the dreamy, ground-skimming faux-sprint that a would-be T rider will employ to cross a busy street to get to a train already at the stop. It's not really a sprint at all, since to throw yourself headlong into traffic is even foolhardier in Boston than it would be elsewhere in America. The Green Line Mock Panic, rather, is a kind of mime show in which you accelerate negligibly from walking speed while performing a slow-motion parody of running all-out. You thereby put approaching drivers on the defensive and exert moral leverage on the train's operator. Given your ostensible willingness to risk all, what kind of savage would close the doors and leave you behind?

I got used to all this variation on the theme of getting from here to there, and I came to regard it as an expression of certain local cultural tendencies: the Yankee tradition of tinkering to improve on conventional ways of doing things; independence from standard definitions of looking silly that prevail everywhere else but here; and, of course, sheer cussedness.

I didn't think it had anything to do with me. I wasn't from here. I got around the normal way, just as I spoke standard American English without quaint regional flourishes. But a couple of years ago, after a run with a friend, the friend said, "You ever notice that you run with your elbows out, like you were protecting your

food in prison?" No, I hadn't, but it confirmed something my wife had told me not long before: "You know how you talk about the way people run in Cambridge? Well, you kind of run funny, too."

It's entirely possible that living here has done something to the way I run. Or maybe I always had within me the latent possibility of developing an odd gait, which drew me, subconsciously, to Boston, where I'd fit in when the oddness blossomed. Well, it has apparently blossomed, and perhaps it even allows me some partial access to a sense of belonging. You live around here and you run funny? Hey, so don't I.