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“Reforming Boston”

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REFORMING BOSTON

Re-evaluating the Big Dig in the wake of tragedy

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Following the deluge of weeping walls in the

Central Artery tunnel in 2005 and last year's fatal tragedy of falling ceiling panels in the Ted Williams, the Big Dig appears to be in deep trouble. At this low moment in the project's history — and as a way of thinking beyond the mess — it may be opportune to reflect on the very real achievements the project has already made and what lies ahead.

The Big Dig has already accomplished what it was designed to do. Interstate 90 links Logan Airport and the South Boston Seaport to downtown Boston, to the rest of the Commonwealth, and beyond. Interstate 93, in the form of the old viaduct that cut its way through the city, is gone at last, replaced by subterranean tunnels allowing the city above to be reunited with its waterfront after a 50-year hiatus. Each of these achievements is of transformational importance to the economic and social well-being of the city, not as luxury but as necessity in an environment in which cities and regions are pitted against each other in the competition for investment and skilled professionals.

Since the completion of the project, traffic flow in the system has increased 62 percent while at the same time, overall volume increased by 24 percent. The investment in buildings directly attributable to the improvements in the infrastructure at the beginning of 2006 amounts to



\$7 billion in private investment; almost 8,000 new housing units — of which 1,000 are affordable; 10 million square feet of office and retail space; 2,600 hotel rooms; and over 40,000 jobs. This is unremitting good news for the city, which is strapped for cash, desperate for an expanded tax base, and scrambling to remain internationally competitive. And whatever the quibbles about the design of the parks, the Greenway itself will be an outstanding new asset for Boston.

This success story is not just bland boosterism. The numbers, from the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority's *2006 Economic Impacts Report*, are real, better than predicted, and likely to be better yet in the coming decade.

I confess to having been involved in the project as chief architect on the Central Artery from 1989 through 1992, the preliminary-design phase for the project. "Architecture," in that context, encompassed all the bits you would see. The engineers did all the work you would not see. The whole design and construction management team at that time amounted to something like 1,000 people — of whom 45 were architects, landscape architects, or urban designers.

Even today, a lingering gaze on the successful bits evokes, at least in my breast, a thrill of promises fulfilled. The four ventilation

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buildings that are the breathing machines for I-90 are the best of the publicly visible, civic infrastructure. Vent Building 7 (VB-7) in East Boston is the noblest and least compromised of all; VB-5 on Summer Street — conceived in good faith but mugged in construction — is less than it might have been, while VB-1, on Fort Point Channel, has been a pleasant surprise, especially when viewed between the knot of viaducts and catenaries as one speeds east-bound before diving into the tunnel.

That mess of ramps too, is a pleasant surprise. The not-so-simple convergence of the two interstates on the southern edge of the city is exacerbated by their plunge into their respective tunnels, one under the city, the other under South Boston and the harbor. No model was large enough, no video simulation extravagant enough, to convey the Piranesi-like quality of columns, viaducts, boat-walls, and portals in just three dimensions, never mind the fourth.

There is, as well, a satisfaction in having created well-planned, naturally lit, quietly elegant maintenance workshops on D Street — originally intended to be a joined-at-the-hip sibling to the now somewhat banal Operations Control Center (OCC) overlooking the open section of the Ted Williams Tunnel. While the Maintenance Building survived the separation on its new site, the OCC lost an essential vitality and never recovered.

The architecture of I-93, conceived in the same spirit, never attained greatness. Its ventilation buildings are at best unexceptional and at worst something of a dog's dinner. VB-4 at the Haymarket never really had a chance. A five-part program was developed out of a political deal, united (briefly) in conceptual design, reconceived and divided in final design among three different designer teams, and constructed under three separate contracts. What building could survive such abuse and maintain its integrity?

And I regret to say, aware that I may be in a minority of one, that even the famed bridge that has now risen to iconic status is in my view as awkward as the process from which it was spawned. The engineering is astounding of course, and the finesse with which Christian Menn developed the original concept could not have been more assured. But it was asked to carry too much — which is what makes the Zakim the widest cable-stay bridge in the world, as if that were an accolade to urbanism. Architecturally, the bow-legged towers are out of scale and the Bunker Hill obelisk top too cheap a reference to really achieve dignity — a bit like a clip-on bow tie.

Now to the dark side.

The tunnels have always been a disaster, metaphorically and aesthetically, and now, regrettably, in reality. The first hint of trouble appeared in conceptual design. One of the few virtues of the old green viaduct perched above the city was that you could see out and know where you were. The tunnels, as brilliant an engineering idea as they were and are, are missing that one critical ingredient — a sense of place, of direction, and of progress. All the topographical markers that one normally relies on for giving a sense of direction (such as the Custom House tower and the harbor) are gone. Driving into the tunnels is like entering a world of sensory deprivation. Architects and artists produced designs and models for the graphic treatment of tunnel walls to restore in some measure that missing locational fix. Graphic themes, abstract themes, naturalistic and representational themes, in muted colors no less, were all nixed by the Federal Highway Administration as being “unsafe” in that they were “distracting to the motorist.” The argument that such unrelieved blandness was in itself a danger to the motorist was thought not to hold water, so to speak.

All this discussion of architectural design of course pales in comparison to the death of Milena Del Valle following the collapse of a tunnel ceiling panel. The personal tragedy of the family and the ensuing institutional and contractual debacle that has befallen the Turnpike and its consultants have heaped infamy upon

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dishonor in the public perception of the project. It is at this darkest moment that we need to remind ourselves of the rationale for undertaking this enterprise in the first place.

Our memories are perhaps as impoverished as our imaginations. Just as it was hard to imagine the Greenway prior to the removal of the elevated highway, there are now people working in the city who have never known and could not visualize the old Central Artery. And many of those who did know it have already forgotten what a grim and unforgiving monster it was that kept us from our waterfront. Had it not been for the disastrous falling ceiling panel and the subsequent repair schedule, many of us could barely recall the former isolation of South Boston and the tangled drive to the airport.

Boston is often characterized as the most European of American cities. Apart from the obvious connotations of brick sidewalks and row houses, the most profound similarity is in the aging infrastructure that this city shares with cities as diverse as Oslo, Barcelona, and Genoa. These cities are trying to make themselves attractive places in which to live and work, just as we are. Foreign architects and planners have been watching Boston's progress with interest for years. The only analogue I know of in 20th-century American history of a vision as technologically, socially, and economically transformative is the Tennessee Valley Authority project, which brought electricity, education, employment, and hope to the rural poor. The Central Artery does not match the TVA project in physical scale, but to our city and the region it is no less important. With mixed success, the architecture is an attempt to reflect that importance.

As tragic as the death of an individual is, the greater political tragedy occasioned by the falling of the ceiling panel is the loss of trust in public work — that is, if we continue to allow that to be the case. While serious investigative work is clearly warranted, it is the organizational and institutional issues that need to be examined, clear of cynicism and sniping from the sidelines. For years, our political leaders have tried to shake this project off as the unwanted love-child of irresponsible spendthrifts. The plain fact of the matter is that as a city and a state we have executed something as remarkable as it was necessary. There are problems left to be solved on this great urban project, but unless we are resolved to wallow in the slough of despond, it is also high time to be getting on to the next investment in the city and our future. ■

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