10-5-2009

Marginal Lands and Suburban Nature: Open Space Planning and the Case of the 1893 Boston Metropolitan Parks Plan

Steven Thomas Moga

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, smoga@smith.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/lss_facpubs

Part of the [Landscape Architecture Commons](#), and the [Urban, Community and Regional Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moga, Steven Thomas, "Marginal Lands and Suburban Nature: Open Space Planning and the Case of the 1893 Boston Metropolitan Parks Plan" (2009). Landscape Studies: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

https://scholarworks.smith.edu/lss_facpubs/4

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Landscape Studies: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu

Marginal Lands and Suburban Nature: Open Space Planning and the Case of the 1893 Boston Metropolitan Parks Plan

Journal of Planning History

8(4) 308–329

© The Author(s) 2009

Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

DOI: 10.1177/1538513209351782

<http://jph.sagepub.com>

Steven T. Moga¹

Abstract

Soon after publication, the 1893 *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report* came to be regarded as a model plan for American cities. Little known to the public today, it is frequently cited by landscape and planning historians as a testament to the vision of “pioneer” landscape architect Charles Eliot and metropolitan planning advocate Sylvester Baxter. However, planning historians have overlooked key aspects of the plan and omitted significant details about the authors’ redevelopment and planning goals. I argue that Eliot and Baxter viewed open space planning as a means of combating slums and establishing a regionwide land use template for future growth.

Keywords

metropolitan parks, open space, Greater Boston, Charles Eliot, Sylvester Baxter

Charles Eliot and Sylvester Baxter combined detailed landscape analysis, conservationist principles, and naturalistic design aesthetics with a regional planning approach in the *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report* of 1893. Soon after publication, it came to be regarded as a model plan for cities and regions around the United States. Little known to the public today, it is frequently cited by landscape and planning historians as a testament to “pioneer” landscape architect Eliot’s unique vision and successful advocacy work.¹ However, historians have tended to overlook several key aspects of Eliot and Baxter’s plan, notably the way in which it differed from other parks plans of the time and how it incorporated concerns about urban growth and spatial structure.² Commonly characterized as an extension of nineteenth-century park planning ideals to the scale of the metropolis, the plan’s contributions to the developing field of urban planning and its continuing relevance for planners interested in sustainable design have been obscured or forgotten.

As such, a new look at this old plan is in order. Rather than viewing Eliot and Baxter’s work through the lens of the parks movement, I analyze the plan in terms of city planning ideals. Specifically, I’m interested in the way in which Baxter and Eliot articulated a vision of the spatial structure of the metropolis rooted in a deep understanding of its landscape characteristics. I argue that the intellectual basis for the plan and the conceptual framework put forth by Baxter and Eliot is best understood when one considers their collaborative effort and shared concerns. This article presents an alternative view of the 1893 *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, drawing on primary

¹Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA

Corresponding Author:

Steven T. Moga, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, City Design and Development Group, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Room 10-485, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139
E-mail: moga@mit.edu

sources to argue that land use control and the authors' concern over the location and effects of unregulated private development on the urban landscape were key factors in the plan's formation, promulgation, and implementation. By reframing the plan, we can see its advantages better, as well as its biases, and potentially draw lessons relevant to our own time.

This article is organized into six parts. It begins with historical background on the development of Boston's suburbs, including the multiple town and city incorporations, municipals splits, and annexations that occurred in the decades prior to the plan. Second, I describe how the plan was developed and how it differs from the parks plans of Frederick Law Olmsted. The third section details Eliot and Baxter's ideas about regional landscape planning as a "template" for future development. That is to say, while the plan may appear to concern only "parks," the authors had broader objectives in mind. The fourth and fifth sections deal with Eliot and Baxter's primary concerns in developing the plan: the possibility that the region might be transformed into one "continuous dense city" and the problems of private development, with Revere Beach as an example. I conclude with a discussion of the plan's lasting impact and its significance for planners and planning historians today.

Boston's Suburbs in Historical Perspective

In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of "streetcar suburbs," the Boston area experienced a fundamental spatial transformation. "Greater Boston" emerged, an area with a population of approximately 888,000 people with only slightly more than half living in the City of Boston. Within this area were twelve cities and twenty-four towns, identified in Baxter and Eliot's report. Historian Sam Bass Warner explains how Boston was transformed:

No period in Boston's history was more dynamic than the prosperous years of the second half of the nineteenth century. One of the most enduring of the many transformations of this era was the rearrangement of the physical form of the city itself. In fifty years it changed from a merchant city of two hundred thousand inhabitants to an industrial metropolis of over a million. In 1850 Boston was a tightly packed seaport; by 1900 it sprawled over a ten-mile radius and contained thirty-one cities and towns.³

By the turn of the twentieth century, the combined population of only three of these newly developed areas, Dorchester, Roxbury, and West Roxbury (formerly independent municipalities annexed to Boston) exceeded the entire 1850 metropolitan total.⁴

Furthermore, as Binford has described, new residential land uses in the suburbs were overlaid on an earlier pattern of sporadic and dispersed development that included fringe artisanal and industrial uses.⁵ It was only during the mid- to late nineteenth century that the suburbs became primarily residential. Real estate speculators converted agricultural or undeveloped land into new residential areas, eventually transforming place, suburban image, and municipal politics alike.

In the 1893 metropolitan parks plan, Baxter described the suburbanization process as one of municipal disintegration and partial reintegration. As small villages, settlements, and "rustic farming hamlets" grew, and railway lines were laid down, several new towns were created, breaking off from existing municipalities. For example, Revere and Winthrop were created out of parts of Chelsea; Melrose, Stoneham, and Everett were carved out of Malden; and, Somerville, Woburn, and Winchester broke away from Charlestown. Baxter explained that reintegration had only been partial, with a few surrounding communities annexed to Boston, giving Boston its

Figure 1. The Boston metropolitan area in 1850 and 1900

Source: Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs*.

odd shape. As such, many of the landscape features Eliot observed either cut across municipal boundaries, were located within different municipalities over time, or both (Figure 1).

Several months prior to the plan's creation, the *Boston Globe* reported on the park activities of Boston's surrounding municipalities, dividing them into two groups: "park cities and towns" versus "cities and towns without parks."⁶ Included in the list of "park cities and towns" were Boston, Malden, Lynn, and Cambridge. In the list of "cities and towns without parks" are Chelsea, Winthrop, Everett, Medford, Wakefield, Arlington, Watertown, Waltham, Hyde Park, Saugus, Swampscott, and Nahant. The *Globe* continued,

Most of the cities and towns without parks are located in what might be termed the field and tree district, in contradistinction to Boston. But they are all growing and *every year one*

or more hundred acres are swallowed by the enlarging municipalities. It is on this very matter that Mr. Eliot . . . suggests that the Legislature of next year should create one general board of commissioners endowed with power to take lands for park purposes in any of the municipalities which compose “greater” Boston.⁷

As he would later describe eloquently and succinctly in the 1893 report, Eliot believed that a detailed understanding of and appreciation for the natural features of the region, in Boston and “the field and tree district” as well as along waterways and seacoasts, could provide the basis for sound planning. Parks could follow riverways, low-lying development could be prevented, and hills could be reserved as forested retreats from the crowded city.

Developing the Plan

By 1893, park construction and open space provision had become a significant part of the physical processes of city building in Boston. Although the Boston Common had colonial roots, most Boston open spaces did not. As the city metamorphosed under the forces of rapid urbanization and industrialization, various observers began to identify open spaces and playgrounds as remedies for urban problems, introducing a wide variety of park proposals. Robert F. Gourlay offered a plan featuring a designed Charles River landscape;⁸ H. W. S. Cleveland argued for a network of roads, avenues, and scenery rather than a large centrally located park; and Robert Morris Copeland and Uriel H. Crocker argued for a metropolitan system.⁹

Of course, the most well-known and prominent landscape designer of the era was Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted expressed his ideas about the relationships of parks and open spaces to city development in a now-famous address to the American Social Science Association at the Lowell Institute in Boston in 1870. In the speech, entitled “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,” Olmsted developed a three-part rationale for parks based on public health, social cohesion, and democratic access. He also spoke directly to the influence of private real estate interests in reshaping the relationship between nature and the built environment under conditions of urban growth and expansion.

It is practically certain that the Boston of today is the mere nucleus of the Boston that is to be. It is practically certain that it is to extend over many miles of country now thoroughly rural in character, in part of which farmers are not laying out roads with a view to shortening the teaming distance between their woodlots and a railway station, being governed in their courses by old property lines, which were first run simply with reference to the equitable division of heritages, and in other parts of which, perhaps, some wild speculators are having streets staked off from plans which they have formed with a rule and pencil in a broker’s office, with a view, chiefly, to the impressions they would make when seen by other speculators on a lithographed map.¹⁰

His observations certainly contributed to the growing awareness of the region’s transformation.

Olmsted had also completed numerous influential projects, including Central Park (1857-1873), Niagara Falls (1879), and Boston’s Emerald Necklace (1875-1892), by the time of the Boston Metropolitan Parks plan. His influence was widely felt, and cities and towns around Boston were no exception—creating their own parks commissions and boards, and building new parks. As Olmsted developed Boston’s Emerald Necklace, parks proponents attracted more

support and the parks movement in Greater Boston continued to grow. In fact, by the 1890s, parks had become such a popular cause that it was claimed that few, if any, people truly opposed them.

No man in his right mind can now be found who harbors [anti-park] opinions of this sort. The park questions with which public-spirited men now concern themselves are, how to secure enough land, how best to adapt it to public use, and how to maintain and administer it most effectively for that end.¹¹

Through publications such as *Garden and Forest*, and in Boston newspapers, enthusiasm for parks ran high.

Olmsted's influence on the metropolitan parks plan was exercised in other ways as well, including through his personal and professional relationship with Charles Eliot. As a young man, Eliot worked as his apprentice; many years later, he joined Olmsted's sons as a partner under the firm's new name of Olmsted, Olmsted, & Eliot. In part because of the connections between the two men, the Boston metropolitan parks plan is often described as a physical extension of Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace to the metropolitan scale. Indeed, Olmsted himself stated so in a letter to his partners in 1893:

Nothing else compares in importance to us with the Boston work, meaning the Metropolitan quite equally with the city work. The two together will be the most important work in our profession now in hand anywhere in the world. . . . In your probable lifetime, Muddy River, Blue Hills, the Fells, Waverly Oaks, Charles River, the Beaches will be points to date from in the history of American Landscape Architecture, as much as Central Park. They will be the opening of new chapters in the art.¹²

Indeed, the plan shared many attributes of the earlier park planning work: the focus on low-lying areas (which can be traced to the work on the Back Bay Fens), the appreciation for scenic beauty and the pastoral landscape, and the notion of a system of multiple, connecting, or linked parks.

However, as Keith Morgan has pointed out, Baxter's contributions have often been overlooked and Eliot's language and approach differed considerably from Olmsted's.¹³

Eliot envisioned a new type of public landscape and used a distinctive vocabulary to articulate a new set of objectives. Whereas Olmsted wrote about green country parks, parkways, and pastoral retreats as places in which modern city dwellers could find spiritual replenishment through passive contemplation of nature, Eliot discussed reservations, trusteeships, and rural landscape preservation that would provide settings for active enjoyment of nature. In contrast to Olmsted's retreat into a private contemplation of nature, Eliot compared scenery or landscape to other advantages of urban culture, especially books and art. While Olmsted's parks were created through design, Eliot's reservations were products of choice, preservation, and improvement.¹⁴

Furthermore, Eliot and Baxter's work differs in several key respects from Olmsted's Emerald Necklace: it greatly expanded the scale of landscape intervention, it introduced metropolitan governance as means of implementing its goals, and it confronted regional trends in land development emphasizing urban planning concerns in a new way (Figures 2 to 5). Eliot and

Figure 2. A scenic stretch of the Neponset River, south of Boston, as depicted in a photograph included in the original plan
Source: *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 1893.

Figure 3. Nantasket Beach and Hull, on Boston's south shore
Source: *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 1893.

Figure 4. Cascade near Fells Station, Melrose, as depicted in a photograph included in the original plan
 Source: *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 1893

Figure 5. "The Rocky Shore at Nantasket and Cohasset. Illustrating the consequences of private ownership of a picturesque coast."

Source: *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 1893.

Baxter took advantage of the public's new enthusiasm for parks to advance their plan. They built on that public goodwill to extend the notion of city parks into the realm of suburban natural areas with the intent of producing a comprehensive metropolitan system. They used a keen strategy for getting their own proposal sponsored, adopted, and implemented by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. And until Eliot's tragic early death in 1897, they were heavily involved in its implementation: creating the first metropolitan park system in the United States.

Eliot developed his ideas for metropolitan Boston based on an intensive study of the region's topographical, hydrological, and scenic landscape characteristics. In the 1880s and 1890s, Eliot explored on foot, often alone, the hilltops, streams, and ocean shores of the Boston area.¹⁵ In contrast, Baxter, a journalist from Malden, a suburb north of Boston, brought a more theoretical, even utopian, perspective: he was a strong advocate for metropolitan governance and a follower of the idealistic movement inspired by Edward Bellamy's futuristic novel *Looking Backward*. Together they shared an interest in the physical characteristics of the expanding Boston region and the potential benefits of creating open spaces through state action.

With the 1889 Metropolitan Sewerage Commission as precedent, and debates about other metropolitan initiatives under way, Eliot, Baxter, and their allies began the campaign for metropolitan parks in 1890. Eliot used his position at the Trustees of Public Reservations to organize the campaign; Baxter used his press contacts to promote it. In December 1891, Eliot and the Trustees of Public Reservations called together members of the suburban park commissions to consider petitioning the legislature to enact legislation. The group met at the office of the Boston Park Commission, where they named Eliot the group's secretary. By the end of 1891, several thousand people had signed the petitions.

On March 11, 1892, Eliot attended a joint committee meeting at the legislature, four days later submitting a draft bill to the state Senate. The bill passed both houses of the legislature then was approved by the Governor on June 2, 1892. Baxter became Secretary, Eliot the consulting landscape architect of a new Commission to investigate the question of the need for metropolitan open space. Just seven months later, on January 2, 1893, Baxter and Eliot submitted their reports to the Commission whereupon it was delivered to Legislature.

Published by the Massachusetts state legislature, the plan consists of three main elements: a very brief report from the Commission, Baxter's report as Secretary, and Eliot's report as consulting landscape architect. Richly illustrated, the report includes numerous renderings, photographs, and maps. The plan recommended that a permanent Commission be established with the power to take lands through eminent domain. One million dollars in loan financing was budgeted for the program (Figure 6). Baxter and Eliot's report included detailed descriptions of some of the natural features of the region, but neither the plan nor the proposed legislation listed specific lots or parcels to be purchased. The future decisions of the Commission would determine which specific lands with specific owners would be taken by eminent domain.

A Template for Future Development

In a region that was rapidly expanding in population and land area, Eliot and Baxter saw open space planning as a means of establishing a regionwide land use template, or as Haglund has termed it, an "armature."¹⁶ By undertaking a comprehensive process to identify land and waterways that could serve a *public* purpose, rather than remain in private hands, they extended "parks" planning into the realm of regional land use planning. In an era decades before the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of zoning, they identified state

Figure 6. Detail, map of existing and proposed parks. The Emerald Necklace, shaded green in the original to represent existing parkland, is visible at the top of the image. At bottom, the Blue Hills is shaded brown to represent one of the areas proposed for land acquisition.
 Source: *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 1893.

government use of eminent domain as a means to exerting control over land development patterns. By identifying and purchasing large tracts of land in some places and key parcels in others, such as along waterways, they sought to define the shape, or at least the outlines, of the future development of the region. They imagined that by defining the un-built in advance, they could direct the location, and spatial relationships of, the rapidly developing horizontal spread of Greater Boston in the 1890s.

But the template Eliot and Baxter envisioned was not blank at the start. Many of the waterfronts, hilltops, and shorelines they identified were being used as woodlots, inexpensive housing, slaughterhouses, beachfront hotels, or a myriad of other uses. In many ways, the campaign for metropolitan parks involved *reclaiming* spaces in the city and its rapidly expanding suburbs. The authors were particularly concerned about the improper development of marshes and other low-lying places. They proposed purchase of these lands with government funds in order to remove them from the private market and thereby *prevent* the wrong kinds of development. Often they chose marginal lands: places that were undesirable because they were marshy or flood-prone, land that was undeveloped or associated with industry, or landscapes they regarded as overly commercialized or ruined by poor-quality buildings.

Eliot and Baxter chose these places because they were available, and unlikely to result in much political controversy, but they also chose many of these sites because they envisioned how they could function differently as part of a planned network. Low-lying lands provided the possibility of creating what we now call “riparian corridors” or “greenways.” In this way, Eliot and Baxter sensed opportunity in marginality. Looking at a landscape of polluted creeks and rivers, industrial land, rocky and hilly undeveloped sites, areas of hidden or damaged scenic beauty, and other leftover, unwanted, or interstitial spaces, they envisioned the framework for a new kind of metropolis.

What they proposed to develop out of these marginal lands might best be characterized as *suburban nature*. For one, the suburbs were the location of most of the sites subject to the plan. But more importantly, the authors were concerned with the potential problems caused by a patchwork of suburban municipal boundaries that bore no relationship to the direction and flow of rivers and streams, the shape and size of forested woodlands, or the character of coastal areas. They saw “nature” on a greater scale than boundaries of the City of Boston and they worried about the rapid transformation of these suburban towns into urbanized land with little open space. To combat this possibility, they proposed a new governmental commission with metropolitan-wide power to purchase and conserve land, or to develop new parks. Throughout the Greater Boston area, Eliot and Baxter *redefined* properties within the limits of one town or another as belonging to the metropolis, the citizens of Great Boston, as a whole.

Typically, the 1893 metropolitan plan is described in relation to the history of the parks movement, with its attendant concerns about the elitist intent of landscape designers, social control as a goal of park development, and the aesthetics of naturalistic landscape design. Historians have also emphasized the importance of public health concerns, such as air pollution, overcrowding, and the spread of disease, to debates about urban parks. Without question, these concerns, particularly the potential public health benefits of parks, were an important component of the discussions and debates leading up to the plan’s adoption.

In this case, metropolitan park proponents did use the rhetoric of “breathing places” and they expressed concern for improving the living conditions of the poor. Likewise, Eliot and Baxter reference malarial concerns about “miasmas,” and describe water quality problems and other threats to public health. But health, while a significant concern, was not their primary

focus.¹⁷ In other words, the 1893 plan emerged out of the parks movement, but was not wholly of it. With its strong focus on land uses, regional landscape character, and governance issues over multiple jurisdictions, it sought to incorporate public health concerns into a comprehensive package that also included conservation, public access, suburban design, environmental education, and growth management goals.

With the change in scale, the plan also manifested a change in character. The plan explicitly considered the issue of urban population growth and building patterns in relation to the physical features of the land: where housing would be located, how scenery (as Eliot called it) might be affected, and how dense the new Greater Boston should be. It was incredibly ambitious: it imagined a half dozen major open spaces, each the size of Central Park or larger, being conserved or developed at once. It was also a public document and a government plan. In brief, it was a blueprint for the future development of Greater Boston.

“The Continuous Dense City”

Eliot and Baxter sought the endorsement of parks officials from cities and towns around Boston, conservation and open space advocates, and, most important for the success of the plan, state legislators. They answered questions about the potential impact on property values, tapped into the existing political support for and goodwill toward parks (as designed landscapes), argued their points in the press, and linked the parks movement cause with the metropolitan governance solution. They emphasized the uniqueness of the Boston-area landscape, and cited the public value of parks and open space. In doing so, they successfully attracted support for the plan by incorporating multiple rationales for park development that supported and supplemented their primary concerns.

At the core, Eliot and Baxter’s plan was motivated by two concerns: first, that the current pattern of urban development would result in a “continuous dense city” spread over every surface of the landscape; second, that many of the buildings constructed in this new urban pattern would be “cheap,” resulting in new suburban slums and, in some cases, the permanent loss of irreplaceable scenic features.¹⁸ The authors present the need for open space at the metropolitan scale as an issue of regional importance, affecting the overall health of Greater Boston and shaping its future development. Selecting open space for the metropolitan area’s future needs, Eliot writes, requires both an understanding of “the natural or geographical features” of the area and “the manner in which crowded settlement has affected these natural features to the advantage or injury of the population concerned.”¹⁹ As such, Baxter and Eliot were as focused on the built environment as they were with open space. Indeed, the two concerns were intimately linked.

Baxter and Eliot were well aware of Boston’s transformation from a “walking city” into an urbanized region composed of a center city surrounded by streetcar suburbs. Continued population growth through foreign immigration, rural to urban migration, and reproduction of the existing population; new modes of transportation; and a restructured spatial relationship between home and work characterized the new city region of the late nineteenth century. These economic, social, and demographic factors pushed physical development in new directions: outward toward the suburbs and upwards and downwards toward low-lying areas and other marginal lands.

One way Bostonians dealt with the population growth problem was by creating new land. As Seasholes has carefully documented, the longstanding practice of “land making” in Boston expanded in scale during this period, resulting in the creation of two major residential districts within the city: the Back Bay and South End.²⁰ By filling in marshlands and expanding out from

existing wharves, central Boston grew in land area. In this case, out into the Boston harbor and the mudflats of the then-tidal Charles River. But making new land was expensive, and even massive efforts at transforming the natural landscape would not be sufficient to keep up with development pressures.

Eliot specifically was concerned with the location and the density of this new development. He wrote to his childhood friend Governor Russell in December 1890:

Within five miles of Beacon Hill is seated much the largest body of population in Massachusetts. This population is rapidly growing, and as it grows it becomes more and more crowded. The best building-ground is already occupied, and much wet and unhealthy land is being built upon. Within a comparatively few years there will be a continuous dense city between the State House and the Neponset River, the Chestnut Hill Reservoir, the Fresh Pond Reservoir, Medford, and Malden: and if nothing is done to prevent, much of this great city will consist of low-lying and badly drained slums. What provision is being made within this metropolitan district for securing those public open spaces which the experience of all great cities has proved to be essential to the welfare of crowded populations?²¹

Eliot saw the Boston parks as a positive example of how to properly arrange built features and open spaces, but he worried that the suburban municipalities would do little to address the problem. New development pressures strained Boston's uniquely limited topography. With limited available flat, dry land, developers turned to the margins: wet, marshy, and cheap.²²

Similarly, Baxter praised Boston's parks, but he warned that the remainder of Boston's regional territory, the "great urban composite" of the metropolitan area, was in danger. He worried that development uniform in character without breaks or interruptions in the urban fabric and without open spaces for public use, would spread across the entire landscape. The result, he feared, would be "miles and miles of thickly settled territory, with practically not a square yard of public ground."²³ Later in the report, he lamented that suburban areas were quickly being covered with "acres and acres of streets and houses where a few years ago were only pastures and woodland."²⁴ He compared the result to a wasteland, an "urban desert."²⁵

Nor were Baxter and Eliot shy about whom to attribute the problem to: real estate speculators were producing this landscape, they explained, and without action by the state it would continue. Interestingly, though, they do not argue that profits on land were part of the problem or that strict limits on the market in land development should be imposed. Rather, they assert that park and open space development has the potential to make real estate *more* valuable, with better development results, while allowing for public access to scenic resources.²⁶

As such, Baxter and Eliot present one of the earliest arguments for comprehensive city planning. Although they do not refer to "city planning" or "urban planning," Baxter advocates putting "modern science and art" into action and Eliot calls for the "scientific planning of open spaces."²⁷ In fact, in language that anticipates Ebenezer Howard, Baxter explains that the ideal city is the combination of "town and country."²⁸

An ideal urban community would combine the advantages of both town and country, and there is an unmistakable tendency to-day in the development of our modern social conditions to bring the country to the town and carry the town to the country. That is, with the

facilities of quick transit, our rural communities are gaining more and more of the advantages that hitherto have been exclusively urban; while, on the other hand, the advantages possessed by the natural life of the country are becoming more and more appreciated by cities, and the latter are gradually shaping themselves accordingly. For instance, this is seen in the vastly increasing esteem in which out-door life and amusements, and the athletic development gained thereby, are held by city people, and the part which great parks and public gardens are assuming in the social economy of our cities.

An ideal city would be one which would take every possible advantage of the natural opportunities of its site, and which would so alternate open spaces with areas occupied by dwellings that it would practically occupy one vast garden. A city planned in this way, beside its frequent great parks and its water-side esplanades, driveways and other reservations, would probably have its houses so arranged around pleasant garden-like open spaces, with such facilities for out-door enjoyment as we have mentioned, that every dwelling would face upon a pleasure ground of some kind.²⁹

In the late nineteenth century, few urban thinkers would describe themselves as urban planners and the notion of a “science” of urban planning would have struck most city dwellers as strange. It is, however, in this unique period when ideas of sanitary engineering, landscape gardening, and municipal arts swirled together, leading to some powerful new conceptions of the city. Although not commonly recognized, Sylvester Baxter was one of the first to articulate how the parks movement could be the basis for comprehensive regional planning and how the city could be conceptualized as part of nature, rather than something separate from it: an idea that urban planners embrace today, often with little awareness of its historical roots.

In contrast, Ebenezer Howard thought of the city as a very different kind of problem. Called “almost without question the most important single work in the history of modern town planning,” Howard’s *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* was originally published in 1898, five years after the Boston metropolitan parks plan.³⁰ Howard’s garden city was to be a town-country blend, but in the form of an entirely new settlement built from the ground up away from big cities and suburbs alike. Howard sought to limit the maximum size of cities and stem, or redirect, the flow of migrants from the countryside to the city. In contrast, Baxter advocated remaking the existing city and suburbs. In the 1893 plan, he articulated a different vision: shaping the developing metropolis itself into a “one vast garden.”³¹ In an era newly focused on sustainability and sustainable cities, Eliot and Baxter’s nineteenth-century approach should serve as a model for conceptualizing urban nature. Furthermore, while “nature” in the suburbs has often been reduced to the front lawn, exclusively residential zoning, or curved streets, the ideas of Eliot and Baxter offer historical precedent for “new” thinking about cities and natural processes.

The Wrong Kind of Development

Eliot and Baxter envisioned their activities primarily as preventative, but they did not shy away from recommending remedial action when necessary. Eliot and Baxter looked with disdain on the places produced by the private market where the working class and lower middle class lived. They saw new neighborhoods defined by a profusion of densely arranged houses along five-cent streetcar lines. They feared this type of development would spread across the landscape in the same way it had transformed Roxbury, Dorchester, and Somerville. They were especially

concerned about the way in which economic incentives and land pressures led private speculators to convert flood-prone areas along creeks, streams, rivers, and marshes into built-up, urbanized territory. In contrast to what they observed around them, they envisioned a future city of well-sited and properly constructed urban housing interconnected with natural features: an admirable goal.

Baxter takes care, in his section of the report, to describe model housing arrangements and other prototypes. He rejects the notion of suburbanizing the poor to improve the city, a policy approach debated at the time. The suburbs, he argued, were already being overdeveloped, lacking in open spaces, and thus would fail to remedy the problems of poverty and overcrowding without a comprehensive solution to metropolitan problems.³² In this manner, Baxter asserts the paramount importance of the regional open space for future planning.

Overly commercialized and privatized areas also elicited concern. At Revere Beach, the only such example cited by name in the plan, the authors suggest that the area's natural beauty and potential as a site for public recreation have been compromised by poorly conceived private construction. At Revere, Eliot had observed a beach well suited to swimming, strolling, and other public uses.

Protected from the full brunt of the Atlantic Ocean's waves by the presence of the island-peninsula Nahant, a low natural dune with a gentle downward slope had formed at the Revere shoreline. In 1875, the narrow-gauge Boston, Revere Beach, and Lynn railroad line was built atop the dune and on both sides one could find an assortment of shops, hotels, and residences.³³ As of October 1891, Revere's beachfront included hotels and cafes, several small bathhouses, stores selling candy and offering photos, and a few dwellings. Hotels and cafes were clustered around the area known as Crescent Beach, near the south end of the beachfront, and featured a variety of colorful railroad-related and other names including: William J. Kingman's Café, Hotel Cleveland, The Strathmore, Railroad Café, The Sleeper's Café, Crowley Hotel, St. Charles Café, and Randall Hotel. In the 1893 plan, Eliot wrote:

The present condition of this fine beach is a disgrace. Two railroads and a highway have been built upon [Revere Beach], without regard to either the safety and convenience of the public, or the development of the highest real estate values. The railroads cared only for a location which would enable them to use the beach as an attraction to draw passengers. No account was taken of the fact that swarms of people must induce a demand for buildings, and so the buildings have had to find sites where best they could, generally between the highway and the sea. A thorough reformation is called for here in the interest, not only of the general public, but also of the beach proprietors and the treasury of Revere.³⁴

Eliot proposed a complete redevelopment of the site, with the existing buildings at Revere to be demolished to allow for the proper alignment of urban development in relation to the shoreline.

After adoption of the metropolitan parks bill, Revere Beach was purchased by the state, the railroad was relocated several hundred feet inland, and a new beachfront boulevard was constructed with the stipulation that the only new structures to be built on the seaward side would be public pavilions. By 1905 the process was complete; the result was the first public beach in the United States.

Revere was not the only site where the authors saw inappropriate development, but elsewhere in the plan the authors tread lightly over the question of government seizure of developed areas. Nevertheless, a closer look at some of the potential sites recommended by Eliot indicates that they were frequently occupied by industrial and other uses. Eliot hints at this condition in his

discussion of the proper orientation of buildings along waterfronts: they should face the water, rather than turn their backs to it.³⁵ As such, he implies that buildings facing the “wrong” way should be replaced with new development.

Eliot divided his recommendations for lands to purchase into three areas: the rock hills, the ponds and streams, and the bay and the sea. While the rock hills were relatively undeveloped, the ponds and streams were becoming more developed (but with land still available). About the Charles River, he writes:

Moreover the percentage of the remaining frontage occupied by costly structures is very small. Most of the marginal proprietors are still at liberty to do what they choose with their own. It must be evident to them that the use of the river for shipping purposes is almost at an end . . . the question arises whether the most profit will in the end be reaped by offering the river lands to the builders of factories and slums, or by drawing to the builders of good private and apartment houses.³⁶

A review of historic maps shows that many of the areas identified did include factories, housing, and other uses, especially along the Mystic, Charles, and Neponset rivers. Haglund has carefully documented existing land uses along the Charles prior to adoption of the plan, including abattoirs and warehouses.³⁷ An examination of historic Sanborn maps reveals industrial developments in Malden, Chelsea, and Everett to the north and Dorchester and Milton to the south.³⁸

After Eliot's death, his father published his son's speaking notes from a metropolitan parks campaign meeting, which included this statement:

Here is a rapidly growing metropolis planted by the sea, and yet possessed of no portion of the sea-front except what Boston has provided at City Point. Here is a city interwoven with tidal marshes and controlling none of them; so that the way is open for the construction upon them of cheap buildings for the housing of the lowest poor and nastiest trades. Here is a district possessed of a charming river already much resorted to for pleasure, the banks of which are continually in danger of spoliation at the hands of their private owners. Here is a community which must have pure drinking water, which yet up to this time has failed to secure even one water basin from the danger of pollution.

Eliot and Baxter repeatedly made such claims, in the text of the report, as well as in public and private attempts to promote it: they identify “cheap lands” and “low-priced houses in the suburban districts” as a growing problem (Figures 7 and 8). In the outlying areas, they worried about the subdivision of land and platting of streets and lots.

Westward again, beyond the deep-cut valley of Saugus River, the next great body of high-lands contains many fine parts, such as the rough hills in northern Saugus, the bold frontal elevations which overlook the great marshes, the charming hollow of Swain's Pond and the pretty valleys of the brooks which flow towards Pranker's Pond. It is to be hoped that the real-estate dealers, who will soon be cutting up this region, and the townships which will include it in their limits, will unite upon a sensible scheme of development by which the courses of the brooks and the highest rocks will be secured to the public, thus insuring the perpetual continuance of that picturesque attractiveness which is sure to lead population into this region before long. Such laying out of lands for sale as has been done here has been done badly.³⁹

Figure 7. The wrong kind of development. In this case, hotels and boardinghouses at the shoreline in Revere, Massachusetts
Source: American Memory, Library of Congress.

Figure 8. Pre-1893 development along the shoreline in Revere, Massachusetts
Source: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map.

In today's terms we might describe these wide-ranging concerns in a variety of specialized terms, or with reference to the multiple mechanisms, regulatory approaches, codes, and legal standards that have developed. In Baxter and Eliot's era, however, little to no regulation existed

to address the multiple interrelated questions of suburban community design: protection of open space, public access provisions, land subdivision review, architectural review, or environmental impacts review.

During this same period, in the growing streetcar suburbs, a new housing type known as a three-decker or a triple-decker became widespread. It provided inexpensive, medium-density, multifamily housing that could be constructed without regulatory review. The triple-decker usually filled most of the lot, allowing for minimal open space; it was simple in its architectural style, with little exterior adornment; and, it was boxy in form. Baxter complained about apartment houses that were constructed anywhere “a five cent street car or steam railway fare” prevailed, a characterization that certainly would include triple-deckers as well as other forms of inexpensive housing including duplexes, small houses, and cottages.⁴⁰ To Baxter and Eliot, the possibility of a suburban landscape covered with densely developed, poorly sited, cheaply constructed, and unplanned housing was a major concern; they hoped better planning through open space, and to a lesser extent the promotion of ideal courtyard apartment types, would help combat the problem.

A New Kind of Metropolis

Charles Eliot and Sylvester Baxter’s *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report* of 1893 advocated the “scientific planning of open spaces” with the idealistic goal of producing a harmonious combination of “town and country.”⁴¹ Together, the landscape architect and journalist observed that the development pressures of the late nineteenth century were altering the landscape in new ways. Unlike many of their colleagues in the parks movement, however, they sought something more ambitious than simply “breathing spaces.” And while they were greatly concerned with the conservation of natural “beauty” and “scenic” landscapes, they were equally interested in the places where buildings would be constructed.

Eliot and Baxter hoped that among the many benefits of metropolitan parks, the living conditions of the poor would improve and public health problems related to low-lying areas would abate (Figure 9). While rooted in the parks movement and landscape aesthetics of the period, the authors were not particularly interested in promoting social control to ensure the quiescence of the lower classes. In fact, they saw parks as means to prevent or reclaim marginal spaces to take advantage of their potential natural, scenic, health, and public access benefits. They sought out marginal lands for the purposes of suburban nature and metropolitan growth management.

Eliot and Baxter defined the problem of open space planning in relation to what they observed as a trend toward a “continuous dense city” spreading across the terrain of the Boston region. They advocated the designation and creation of open space as a remedy and state purchase as the mechanism for achieving it. As such, they sought to intervene in the broader realm of regional land use patterns in an increasingly decentralized and dispersed metropolitan area. The new “urban composite” that they identified was at least half suburban in population and more than half suburban in land area.

They also did not express much concern for where development would go if the restrictions they proposed in the form of government purchase of private land were adopted. They simply did not discuss what we might identify today as potential consequences: that taking dozens of square miles of land off the market and encouraging open space in development in a time of population growth might lead to *more* overcrowding, development of taller buildings, or the spread of more horizontal city, extending further out from the center.⁴² In an era of minimal regulation of the real estate market, perhaps they did not consider the question of where growth might go.

Figure 9. Revere Beach as it appears today, on a crowded summer day. The beach pavilions and other features were recently reconstructed according to historic preservation standards. The federal government has designated the site a National Historic Landmark.

Note: Photo by the author, July 9, 2006.

Nevertheless, the omission seems notable in light of their other concerns about the quality and location of development.

Eliot and Baxter sought to *prevent* the wrong kinds of development: buildings constructed on marshland or tidal flats, buildings that blocked public access, or buildings that faced away from the water. They worried about “cheap” and “ugly” buildings. They also sought to *undo* what they perceived to be one of the worst cases of bad development: Revere Beach. Their proposal led to the successful redevelopment of waterways and open spaces around metropolitan Boston.

Whether it was redeveloping Revere, “inventing” the Charles River, or imagining the region as a “vast garden,” Baxter and Eliot’s work continued to influence municipal engineers, landscape architects, and city planners for decades after adoption.⁴³ Never fully implemented, and eclipsed by other concerns, particularly road and highway construction, the plan can be considered only a partial success over the long run. Particularly since World War II, the parks have suffered from neglect and lost some of their appeal. Nevertheless, the metropolitan parks template remains a visible part of the region and the plan stands as a landmark achievement in regional planning. Quietly, it continues to inspire planners. In his autobiography, Ian McHarg wrote:

I have been described as the inventor of ecological planning, the incorporation of natural science within the planning process. Yet Charles Eliot, son of Harvard’s president, a landscape

architect at Harvard, preceded me by half a century. . . . He invented a new and vastly more comprehensive planning method than any pre-existing, but it was not emulated.⁴⁴

Much the same might be said about Baxter, who is regarded as a fairly obscure figure in planning history today. New research on his planning ideas, particularly his role in the promotion and development of early metropolitan governance efforts, is needed.

From the perspective of planning historiography, or the history of plans, the metro parks plan has been eclipsed by the McMillan Plan for Washington, D.C. (1902), and Burnham's Plan for Chicago (1909). Baxter and Eliot's innovative approach to regional planning, in an era decades before "city planning" became an established field, has been forgotten. From the perspective of planning education, one may observe that the plan is infrequently taught, while every master's student learns about Howard's Garden City. But for its relevance to current concerns about ecological planning and sustainable city-regions, and as an alternative perspective to the "town-country" question and historical antecedent to the field of city planning, it is one historic plan that deserves greater prominence and new scholarly attention.

Author's Note

I wish to thank Lawrence J. Vale, Sam Bass Warner, Anne Whiston Spirn, William B. Meyer, Karl Haglund, James C. O'Connell, and Leigh Graham for their support, questions, and insightful suggestions. In addition, the detailed comments of the two anonymous reviewers were especially helpful in preparing this article for publication.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes

1. Charles Birnbaum and Robin Karson, eds., *Pioneers of American Landscape Design* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).
2. Many historians have analyzed the report and its place in landscape and planning history. See, e.g., Norman T. Newton, *Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971); Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Jon Peterson, *The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840-1917* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Jon Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Cynthia Zaitzevsky, *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Boston Park System* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982). Geoffrey T. Blodgett, *The Gentle Reformers: Massachusetts Democrats in the Cleveland Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966); M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983); Matthew Dalbey, *Regional Visionaries and Metropolitan Boosters: Decentralization, Regional Planning, and Parkways during the Interwar Years* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2002); Mona Domosh, *Invented Cities: The Creation of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century New York and Boston* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Karl Haglund, *Inventing the Charles River* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Keith Morgan, "Eliot, Charles

- (1859-1897) landscape architect,” in *Pioneers of American Landscape Design*, ed. Charles Birnbaum and Robin Karson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000); and Francesco Dal Co, “From Parks to the Region: Progressive Ideology and the Reform of the American City,” in *The American City: From the Civil War to the New Deal*, ed. Giorgio Ciucci, Francesco Dal Co, Mario Manieri-Elia, and Manfredo Tafuri (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979).
3. Sam Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston 1870- 1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and MIT Press, 1962), 1.
 4. Sam Bass Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs*. See also Jacob Wegmann, *What Happened to the Three-Decker?* (MIT Master of City Planning thesis, 2006).
 5. Henry Binford, “Boston’s Early Residential Suburbs,” in *Two Centuries of American Planning*, ed. Daniel Schaffer (London: Mansell, 1988).
 6. “Time Is Ripe,” *Boston Daily Globe*, October 5, 1891, 8.
 7. “Time Is Ripe,” 8 (emphasis added).
 8. Alex Krieger, “Past Futures: Boston—Visionary Plans and Practical Visions,” (1989) *Places* 5, no. 3: 56-71.
 9. In 1872, Copeland published *The Most Beautiful City in America: Essay and Plan for the Improvement of Boston*. He recommended that parks be developed in the newly annexed areas of the city (Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*, 140). See also Anne Whiston Spirn, “Reclaiming Common Ground: Water, Neighborhoods, and Public Places,” in *The American Planning Tradition: Culture and Policy*, ed. Robert Fishman (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000).
 10. Frederick Law Olmsted, “Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns,” address to the American Social Science Association in 1870, republished in Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, *The City Reader*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 304.
 11. *Garden and Forest*, February 10, 1892, 62.
 12. Frederick Law Olmsted, letter to his partners, Biltmore, NC, October 28, 1893, Frederick Law Olmsted Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC. The letter is cited by Keith N. Morgan, “Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect: An Introduction to His Life and Work,” *Arnoldia*, Summer (1999): 13.
 13. Morgan describes Baxter’s role as “seminal,” in “Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect,” 6.
 14. Morgan, “Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect,” 13-15.
 15. Charles W. Eliot, *Charles Eliot Landscape Architect*, with an Introduction by Keith N. Morgan (1902; repr., Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).
 16. Haglund, *Inventing the Charles River*, 118.
 17. Malaria mystified experts of the period, who thought its transmission was somehow related to lowland “miasmas.” As such, ideas about landscape and health were intertwined. Park planning was closely tied to issues of sanitation, civil engineering, securing a safe drinking water supply, and management of swampland.
 18. Regarding conservation and metropolitan parks, see Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*, 146. He writes, “The ideology of the public park had evolved from tenuous beginnings to embrace the Progressive conservation movement: though physically distant from them, metropolitan park systems had become conceptually related to the Adirondacks and the national parks.”
 19. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 83.
 20. Nancy S. Seasholes, *Gaining Ground: A History of Landmaking in Boston* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
 21. Eliot, *Charles Eliot Landscape Architect*.
 22. The author wishes to thank Prof. William B. Meyer of Colgate University for his suggestions related to the marginality and availability of lowlands and highlands during the nineteenth century. Special thanks also to James C. O’Connell for his suggestions. For greater detail, see Meyer, “A City (Partly)

- On a Hill: Terrain and Land Use in Pre-Twentieth Century Boston,” conference paper, and “Shaping Greater Boston: Metropolitan Parks and Parkways, 1893-2003,” conference paper, “Remaking Boston: The City and Environmental Change Over the Centuries,” Massachusetts Historical Society, May 4-6, 2006.
23. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 5.
 24. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 9.
 25. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 11.
 26. Property values were discussed at the second legislative hearing on the bill. The *Boston Herald* reported this exchange: “Mr. Francis K. Dweeter of Stoneham appeared not exactly as remonstrant, for he believed that something should be done, but he opposed the taking of too much land out of the limits of his town. He represented a large amount of taxable property in Stoneham, and hoped too much power in this direction would not be given to such a commission, as might be established. Mr. Baxter asked Mr. Sweeter, as representing the Langwood Hotel property, if it would not be a great benefit to that property to have a permanent public reservation established in the Middlesex Fells in its neighborhood, and also if permanently pleasant approaches from various directions in the way of drives would not enhance its value. Mr. Sweeter acknowledged that it would, and also, in response to questions by Mr. Baxter said that it would be a benefit to the property in the neighborhood if Spot Pond could be restored to its former aspect and once more filled with water. Mr. Baxter said such measures as were proposed would be likely to bring about such desired results.” (“Metropolitan Parks: Second Hearing on the Question at State House,” *Boston Herald*, February 15, 1893, 10.)
 27. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 91.
 28. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 71-72.
 29. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 72.
 30. Peter Hall et al., eds., *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform by Ebenezer Howard* (repr., London: Routledge, 2003), 1.
 31. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 72.
 32. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 9.
 33. National Park Service, National Historic Landmark Nomination, Revere Beach Reservation. Prepared by Keith D. Morgan, December 18, 2000; see also Sanborn maps, 1891.
 34. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 108.
 35. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 90-91.
 36. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 102.
 37. Haglund, *Inventing the Charles River*.
 38. Sanborn fire insurance maps, 1890-1892.
 39. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 93.
 40. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 71.
 41. Massachusetts, *Boston Metropolitan Parks Report*, 91 and 71-72.
 42. The plan identified thousands of acres for potential purchase, but included little in the way of quantification. O’Connell provides one accounting of the total land area, based on what was acquired by the Metropolitan Park Commission: “Remarkably, the metropolitan vision that Eliot and Baxter championed in 1893 was realized within less than a decade. By 1900, the Metropolitan Park Commission had acquired 9,177 acres of reservations, 13 miles of oceanfront, 56 miles of riverbanks, and built seven parkways. The \$6.5 million price tag was a bargain” (p. 7).
 43. Haglund, *Inventing the Charles River*.
 44. Morgan includes this quote in his article “Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect,” 16. The original source is Ian McHarg, *A Quest for Life: An Autobiography* (New York: John Wiley, 1996), 82.

Bio

Steven T. Moga is a PhD candidate in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His research interests include the history of the built environment, slums, public housing, historic preservation, and cultural landscapes.