"Reclaiming Common Ground" laid out a vision now being realized around the world. It links issues often seen as unrelated and as competing for scarce resources—polluted water in Boston Harbor, deteriorating inner-city neighborhoods, and degraded public open space—and designed a solution that addressed all three.

Top Boston Harbor. The vision cited design precedents, including (below) Detention Basin/ Skyline Plaza, Denver and Wastewater treatment and Werribee Farm, Melbourne, Australia.

1984–1986

Reclaiming Common Ground: The Future Shape of Boston

"The Future Shape of the City" Lecture, American Institute of Architects, 1985

"Shaping the City to Nature's Laws," *Boston Globe*, 1985

"The Future Shape of Boston," Boston Atheneum, 1986

The American Planning Tradition, 2000

"If cities are to be healthful, vital and delightful places, they must be considered part of the natural environment. So says Harvard's Anne Whiston Spirn, a pioneer in the field of urban ecology and one of the most acclaimed visionaries to emerge in America this generation."

STEVE CURWOOD, *Boston Globe*, 1985

"Reclaiming Common Ground" opened up a new approach to urban design and planning, one which exploits urban vacant land as a resource and which links community development in inner-city neighborhoods with environmental restoration. Built designs for neighborhood open space were catalysts for community development, which today are beloved local landmarks. This vision helped launch, sustain, and advance public dialogue, which changed the course of Boston's future and laid the foundations for the Shrinking City and Green Infrastructure/CSO movements, which came into vogue 20 years later.

My goal in Reclaiming Common Ground was to demonstrate how the approach advocated in *The Granite Garden* could be applied to an existing city. The work was conducted as a research project and in my landscape architecture studio courses at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. In 1985, the AIA invited me to present this work as one of three lectures, nation-wide, on the future shape of the American city. *The Boston Globe* reviewed it in a feature article, which prompted further public debate. Fifteen years later, the lecture was reprinted as the concluding chapter of a book on *The American Planning Tradition*.

The ideas first proposed here were more fully fleshed out in the West Philadelphia Landscape Project and are now being realized in Philadelphia and other cities, more than 30 years later.

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Water, Neighborhoods, and Public Places

The project's single most important discovery was the correlation between buried floodplains and vacant land. Thirty percent of the land in Boston's Dudley Street neighborhood, once covered by houses, was vacant by 1985, but most of the abandonment was concentrated in the valley bottom, where a stream once formed the boundary between Roxbury and Dorchester. People believed that the vacant land was caused by riots and arson, but my research demonstrated that vacancies on the former floodplain appeared within a few decades of construction.

An important discovery was the strong correlation between the valley bottoms of buried floodplains and vacant land (in orange), shown below in this map of 1985. The discovery led to my proposal for linking inner-city community development with the improvement of regional water quality.

Vacant land on buried floodplain

Damage and abandonment on buried floodplains is a national problem. In the nineteenth century, streams were put in sewers, and now vacant land marks the course of former streams in distressed neighborhoods, where houses were demolished after the ground beneath them subsided due to underground water movement and settling landfill. Such conditions pose a threat to health and safety. My research identified and called attention to this pervasive national problem.

Boston Harbor (Alex MacLean/Landslides)

In 1985, Boston Harbor was polluted by overflows from the city's sewers, which carried a combination of sanitary sewage and stormwater runoff. These combined sewer overflows occurred after heavy rains, when there was too much sewage for treatment plants to handle. At the time, Boston planned to build a massive new sewage treatment plant to solve the problem.

Vacant land on buried floodplain

In 1985, Reclaiming Common Ground demonstrated how vacant land on buried floodplains could be restored as landscape infrastructure designed to carry and detain stormwater, in order to protect property from flooding, to serve as a framework around which to rebuild the community, and to solve the regional water quality problem of combined sewer overflows.

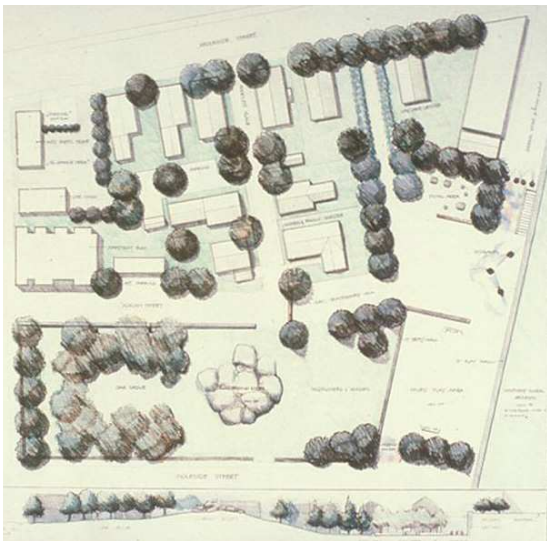
There are precedents for landscape infrastructure to manage stormwater. At the time, this approach was aimed at reducing floods, not combined sewer ovderflows. This plaza in Denver, Colorado, built in the 1970s, was designed as a detention basin to hold water for hours or days after storms in order to reduce flooding in the South Platte River.

Skyline Plaza, Denver

There are also precedents for landscape-based wastewater treatment. This wetland in Melbourne, Australia was constructed as both a bird sanctuary and as part of one of the city's sewage treatment facilities.

Werribee Farm. Melbourne, Australia

My 1985 landscape architecture studio at Harvard proposed a strategic landscape infrastructure as a frame for rebuilding housing on the largely vacant "Dudley Triangle," much of which lies on the buried floodplain. They presented their ideas at a public meeting amidst heated debate. The studio alerted the community to the danger of rebuilding on the buried floodplain. The award-winning housing project, built in the late 1980s, incorporated the students' proposals, thereby averting future disaster.



Student design, 1985

SOME PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO WHAT AILS BOSTON

Fight urban blight with water management?

In the single-solution for single-problem routine such a notion sounds crazy, but Anne Whiston Spirn's arguments for such an approach seem altogether rational.

To explain her views, she draws on the history of the Dudley street neighborhood of Boston that straddles the border of Dorchester and Roxbury.

Totally built upon at the turn of the century, the area is now over 30 percent vacant. Social and economic distress have caused part of the change.

This low, marshy area, now vacant, was the last to be developed. It was a less attractive location environmentally, and the homes built upon it were doubtlessly plagued by wet basements, ... and were of lower quality."

The lesson is clear to Spirn: "When this area is rebuilt and repopulated, most of the land now will be built upon again. Some of it should remain open."

□

One way to cut the demand for sewage treatment is to slow down the rainwater in Boston so its doesn't overwhelm the metropolitan sewage treatment system. Spirn urges that Boston ... and Denver, which ... ter with restrictive ... ng roofs, plazas and ... ssing the stormwatter ...

... employs a linked sys... parks, which have ... to hold stormwater ... says Spirn. "These ... managed for both re... l control."

... town Boston, there is ... formwater runoff on ... e – an opportunity to ... that, in Spirn's view, ... Thus, naturally wet ... in the Dudley neigh... become linear parks ... r ways through the ... d beyond.

... neighborhood parks ... make more desirable ... t of the now decas... ion, just as Olmsted's ... e enhanced develop... k Bay and Fenway ... values along the Ja... Back Bay have been ... st to rise during Bos... e, along with some ... face the parkland. ... – STEVE CURWOOD

Misused wetland promotes urban decay

Area topography
The Dudley street area, first built on the high terrain, was totally built up by the turn of the century.

Abandoned housing lots
Higher land is still occupied, while extensive abandonment occurs elsewhere especially where natural floodplain affects foundations in low-lying areas.

ANNE SPIRN ON THE CITY, ITS FUTURE

"Something is wrong when sewage from Framingham and Walpole is transported 20 miles to sewage-treatment plants in Boston Harbor, thereby concentrating an entire region's sewage into a small basin. Something is wrong when water is imported from a reservoir 60 miles away (Quabbin), whose level has been falling, slowly, but inexorably, while groundwater resources within the very same region are permitted to deteriorate (with depletion and contamination). These are life-threatening problems that in coming years will affect the health of millions of people linked to the metropolitan water and sewer system. Reports of increased cancer in communities like Woburn are an early warning of the consequences of disregard for our water resources."

□

"Boston's inner neighborhoods are riddled with vacant lands (15,000 house lots that total 3000 to 4000 acres) and abandoned buildings and are poorly served by basic public services. The state of these neighborhoods is invisible from downtown, but downtown wealth, symbolized by gleaming new towers, is clearly visible from the neighborhoods, providing a stark and profoundly disturbing juxtaposition. In the face of unemployment and declining funds for social services, the looming downtown towers are a daily reminder to the neighborhoods that they have not shared in Boston's economic growth.

"Even downtown, the boom has been a mixed blessing. Most of the new buildings that have transformed Boston's skyline in the past two decades have consisted of private projects in a vacuum of public vision. Rather than contributing to the public realm, they have often disregarded or degraded it, creating dark, windy canyons and barren plazas. Some, ostensibly public, are in reality guarded enclaves, the richness and costliness of materials lavished on their interior in vivid contrast to the impoverished streets and sidewalks surrounding them."

□

"Design is a powerful tool to forge consensus for major public investment. Design can be a process of spinning out alternative visions of the future Boston, which, in their number and variety, pose a means of evaluating what the city might be like under diverse scenarios. Without a concrete description of the future city, it is not only difficult to evaluate alternatives, it is next to impossible to agree on their merits."

□

"The cumulative impact of sewer reconstruction, economic growth and the redevelopment of vacant lands within the city will have a profound impact on the future shape of Boston. It is for us to decide, before it is too late, whether they shape the city by design or by default. For how we resolve these issues will determine the quality of the future, not just for the next generation, but for many generations to come."

– STEVE CURWOOD

The Boston Globe
Sunday, May 26, 1985

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY FRANK O'BRIEN

Anne Whiston Spirn: a vision rooted in the past.

PROFILE

Shaping the city to nature's laws

Harvard's Anne Whiston Spirn has breathed new life into urban landscape architecture

By Steve Curwood
Globe Staff

If cities are to be healthful, vital and delightful places, they must be considered a part of the natural environment. So says Harvard's Anne Whiston Spirn, a pioneer in the field of modern urban ecology and one of the most acclaimed urban visionaries to emerge in America this generation.

Central to Spirn's solutions to a variety of urban ills is her view that nature does not end at a city's edge. City dwellers, she says, are just as dependent as country folk on natural forces that supply air and water and support life. When the potency of those cycles is ignored, she says, modern cities court ecological disaster.

By example, she notes that Boston, after a century of ignoring ecological planning, now gags on its sewage, allows more ugly open space downtown and suffers abandonment in its poor neighborhoods.

Piecemeal approaches to such problems are not only prohibitively expensive, they are usually doomed to ultimate failure, Spirn says. On the other hand, she argues, by keeping natural systems in mind, such diverse and seemingly intractable problems as water and sewage overload, ugliness and decay can be alleviated.

Solutions proposed

Her solutions, she says, "harness the forces of nature, rather than squander energy in trying to overcome them." To detain storm water and prevent sewage system overloads, for example, she recommends the strategic placement of parkland. To make downtown open space more pleasing, she advises planning public space as the framework for private development. To reclaim abused vacant land, she urges the use of composted sewage sludge to make new topsoil.

For these changes to work politically, she urges neighborhood decision-making linked to metropolitan-area coordination.

While there is much new in the scientific content of Spirn's approach, her vision is rooted in the past. The ancient Greeks and Persians built great cities in harmony with the forces of nature. More recently, Frederick Law Olmsted in the

SPIRN, Page A14

... niers, who has worked ... ighborhood projects to ... ed land. ... me a bridge for a num... cking on related issues ... ach other before. ... She ... rating the primary of ... ture as an approach to ... d. It's fallen into seconi... ary place in most redevelopities and planning ... really, really should be ... uch for setting the con... velopment. Boston is a ... because of that ap... The past was used by ... sted."

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... wife of Gov. Michael S. ... firm "a superb designer ... sitivity to urban prob... ...rials also have become ... 's vision. "I so enjoyed ... ik last year that she in... g a number of officials ... ent when she spoke at ... Library last month (to ... l lecture of the Boston ... ters)," said Kenneth ... ...ste commissioner of ... le commonwealth. ... ortant for the state to ... ut issues that are larg... ...ness ... one of the dis... that people don't talk ... beyond the environ... ...ities, of specific pro...

Spirn got into landscape architecture by accident. She was a graduate student in art history at the University of Pennsylvania when she heard about landscape architecture, took a course and then changed her field of study to become a student of McHarg. Later, when she shared a design practice with him, she became frustrated at the lack of up-to-date information about urban ecology.

"Everybody would say there just isn't research on that," she recalled in a recent interview. So she began to find out just how much was known.

What she thought would be a one-year project turned into a five-year one as she correlated the work of hydrologists, architects, historians, ecologists and those in other disciplines for a book that would be understandable to the general public.

In her book, Spirn argues that city planners too often act as if pavement and buildings can erase the forces that created the topography, including streams, beds and flood plains, and that tall buildings do not affect air quality.

When nature is ignored and abused in cities, it retaliates in countless ways, says Spirn.

"Ignoring the natural cycle of water leads to drinking water shortages, poisoned water supplies and toilet paper on the beaches.

"Failure to consider air mechanics has resulted in tall buildings that change surface winds – sometimes trapping exhaust fumes that add to air pollution, at other times creating harsh winds on plazas.

Ignoring real neighborhood needs can result in projects that are built without constituencies to maintain them. In working with her students, for example, she asks them to spend a night with a family in the Roxbury neighborhood where they are designing a park to get a sense of their needs and values.

Ignoring active earthquake faults means cities run the risk of sharing the fates of San Francisco in 1906 and Managua in 1972. Yet, Boston, which suffered major quakes in the 1700s, today does not require earthquake-resistant construction.

"The potential hazard is particularly great in cities like Boston and Charleston, S.C., where the risk of earthquakes is unrecognized and unplanned for," Spirn warns.

But when humans work in concert with natural forces in the city, they can create both beauty and utility. Not only was Boston's Fenway/Riverway/Jamaicaway area designed for aesthetics, but Olmsted devised it to handle a sewage problem that threatened to stink out the whole Back Bay, especially on hot, humid summer days.

As an added bonus, Boston got a transportation corridor for trains and carriages that remains a lovely approach to the city.

Somewhere, writes Spirn, "a visionary may persuade his or her city to take on the challenge of managing the entire natural urban environment. The reasons are compelling. At issue is not just the creation of a more secure, more beautiful, more efficient and cost-effective city, but survival itself."

This 1985 article in *The Boston Globe* hailed my proposals for the future shape of Boston as pioneering and visionary. Three decades later, many of these ideas are being implemented in Philadelphia and other cities.

Cooper's Place

My 1984 landscape architecture studio at Harvard's Graduate School of Design studied the open space potential of Boston's vacant urban land. Designing Cooper's Place Community Garden in Roxbury introduced the students to the residents and the neighborhood. The challenge was to design a meeting place adjacent to the garden and to propose a use for this vacant lot.

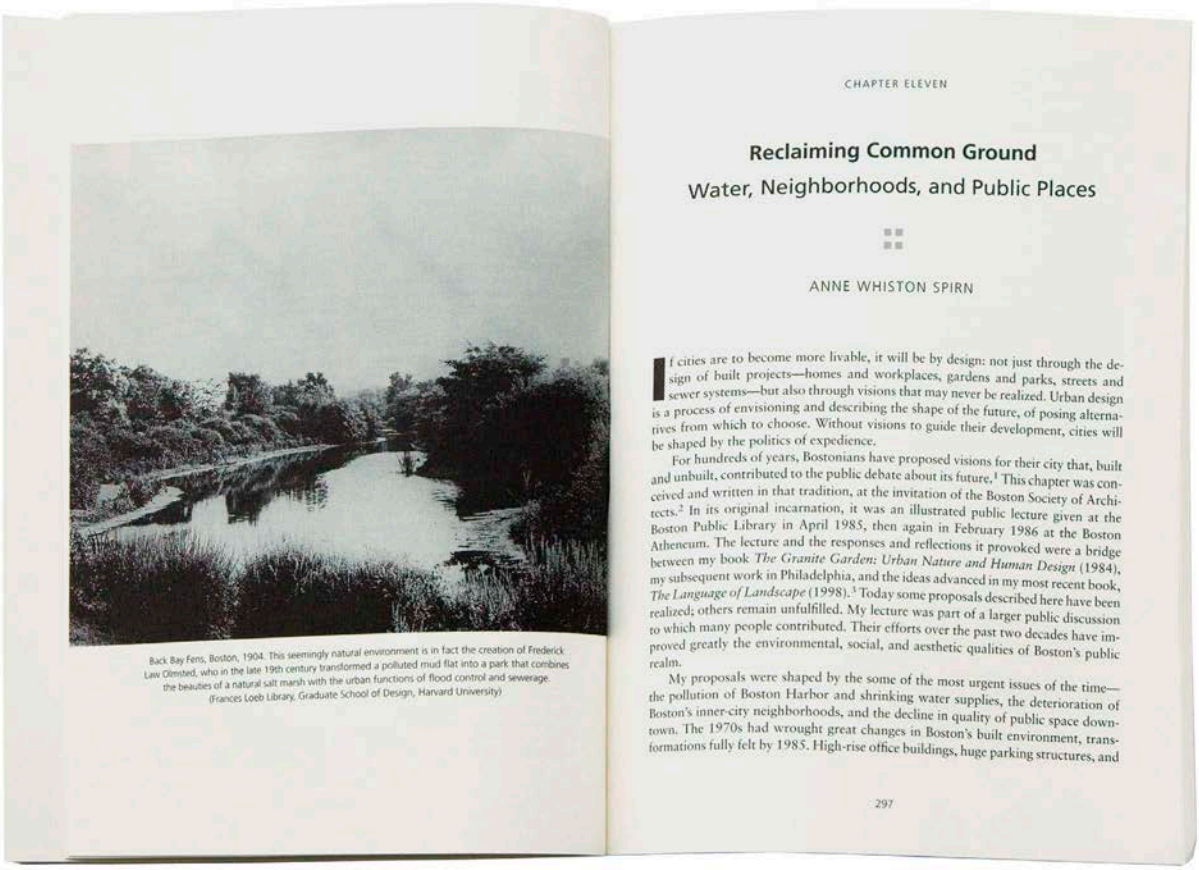
Cooper's Place: Before

Each student designed a version of the garden and presented their design to the gardeners. The design chosen by the gardeners for construction was inspired by their favorite Boston open space, the Fenway Rose Garden, with its white trellises. The garden was built by unemployed youth enrolled in a landscape management program at Roxbury Community College, as part of their on-the-job training.

Students present their designs

Cooper's Place quickly became a neighborhood landmark and was a catalyst for other improvements to properties around it. There have been weddings there and many important community events. The striking design has played an important role in the garden's success. Three decades later, it continues to thrive and is now the site of a newenvironmental education center. Investment in good design paid off.

Cooper's Place: After



Back Bay Fens, Boston, 1904. This seemingly natural environment is in fact the creation of Frederick Law Olmsted, who in the late 19th century transformed a polluted mud flat into a park that combines the beauties of a natural salt marsh with the urban functions of flood control and sewerage.
(Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Reclaiming Common Ground
Water, Neighborhoods, and Public Places

ANNE WHISTON SPIRN

If cities are to become more livable, it will be by design: not just through the design of built projects—homes and workplaces, gardens and parks, streets and sewer systems—but also through visions that may never be realized. Urban design is a process of envisioning and describing the shape of the future, of posing alternatives from which to choose. Without visions to guide their development, cities will be shaped by the politics of expedience.

For hundreds of years, Bostonians have proposed visions for their city that, built and unbuilt, contributed to the public debate about its future.[1] This chapter was conceived and written in that tradition, at the invitation of the Boston Society of Architects.[2] In its original incarnation, it was an illustrated public lecture given at the Boston Public Library in April 1985, then again in February 1986 at the Boston Athenæum. The lecture and the responses and reflections it provoked were a bridge between my book *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (1984), my subsequent work in Philadelphia, and the ideas advanced in my most recent book, *The Language of Landscape* (1998).[3] Today some proposals described here have been realized; others remain unfulfilled. My lecture was part of a larger public discussion to which many people contributed. Their efforts over the past two decades have improved greatly the environmental, social, and aesthetic qualities of Boston's public realm.

My proposals were shaped by the some of the most urgent issues of the time—the pollution of Boston Harbor and shrinking water supplies, the deterioration of Boston's inner-city neighborhoods, and the decline in quality of public space downtown. The 1970s had wrought great changes in Boston's built environment, transformations fully felt by 1985. High-rise office buildings, huge parking structures, and

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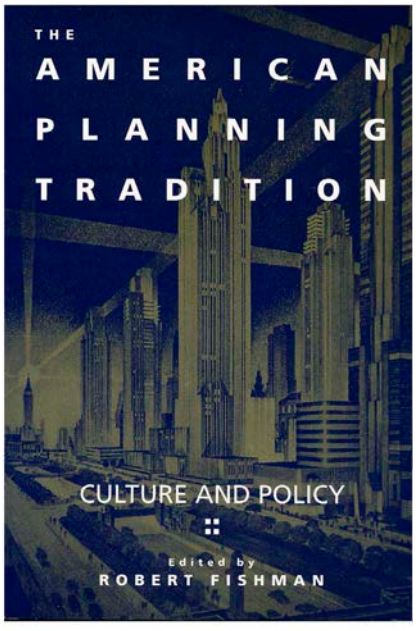

My lecture was published in 2000, accompanied by reflections on the political barriers to the acceptance of the ideas. By then, I had been working for 13 years on similar design proposals in Philadelphia, where they are now being implemented.