



"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

"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

**"Shaping the City
to Nature's Laws,"**
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 overflows. 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.



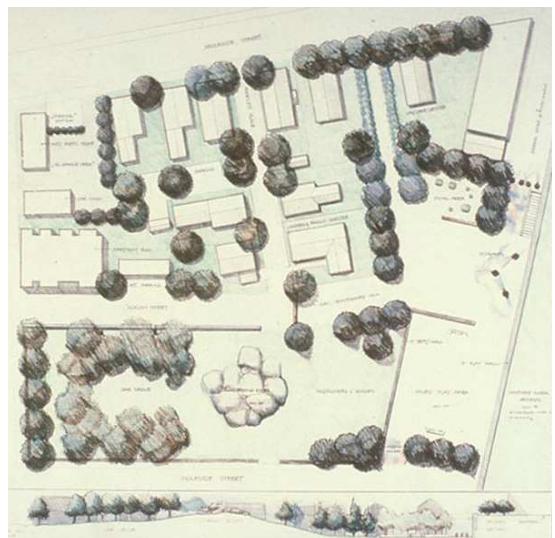
Skyline Plaza, Denver

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

A14 Boston Sunday Globe May 20, 1985

SOME PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO WHAT AILS BOSTON

Fight urban flight with water management? That's the simple solution for some problems routine such as a nation sounds crazy, but Anne Whiston Spirlin's arguments for such an approach seem altogether rational.

To explain her views, she draws on the history of the once-thriving 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 disarray have caused part of the change,

This low marshy area, now vacant, used to be a wetland with a less-attractive but environmental benefit, and the homes built upon it were doubtless plagued by wet baseements, and were of lower quality.

The lesson is clear to Spirlin: when man and society are overextended, 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 rawwater in Boston so it doesn't overwhelm the metropolitan sewer system. Spirlin argues that Boston and Denver, which suffer from restrictive zoning rules and using the stormwater

employs a linked system of pipes, which have to hold stormwater says Spirlin. These must be held for both rainfall and snowmelt.

In Boston, there is stormwater runoff on 90 percent of the city's surface, according to Spirlin's view.

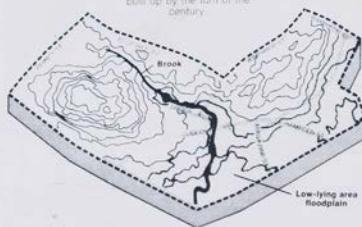
The runoff is set in the Dudley neighborhood linear parks ways through the city beyond.

neighborhood parks may be more desirable than the now devalued, just as Olmsted's enhanced development along the riverway values along the Back Bay have been lost to rise during Boston's along with some face the past.

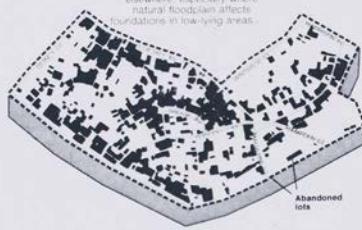
—STEVE CURWOOD

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 in lower-lying areas where natural floodplain affects foundations in low-lying areas.



ANNE SPIRN ON THE CITY, ITS FUTURE

"Something is wrong when sewage from Framingham and Woburn is transported 20 miles to sewage treatment plants in Boston Harbor, thereby concentrating an entire region's sewage in a small basin. Something is seriously wrong when water is imported from a reservoir 60 miles away (Quabbin), whose level has been dropping steadily in recent years, while groundwater sources are permitted to deteriorate with depletion and contamination. These are the threatening processes that are coming and will affect the health of millions of people linked to the metropolitan water and sewer system. Reports of increased cancer incidence and other diseases are early warning of the consequences of disregard for our water resources."

"Boston's inner neighborhoods are crowded with vacant lots (15,000 house lots that total 3000 to 4000 acres) and abandoned buildings and are poorly served by basic public services. The slums of these neighborhoods are irretrievably trashed downtown, but downtown wealth symbolized by gleaming new towers, is clearly visible from the neighborhood, creating social and profoundly disturbing juxtaposition. In the face of unemployment and declining funds for social services, the looting downtown is forcing the city to turn to the neighborhoods that they have not shared in Boston's economic growth."

"In downtown, the boom has been a mixed blessing. Most of the new buildings that have transformed Boston's skyline in the past two decades are designed to be private spaces. Some ostensibly public are in reality guarded enclaves, the richness and costliness of materials lavished on their interior in vivid contrast to the impersonal streets and sidewalks surrounding them."

"Design is a powerful tool to forge consensus for major policy decisions. It can also be a process of spinning out alternative visions of the future Boston, which, in their number and variety, are useful for evaluating what might be likely in various 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 land in Boston 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. How we answer these issues will determine the quality of the future, not just for the next generation, but for many generations to come."

—STEVIE CURWOOD

The Boston Globe

Sunday, May 26, 1985



Globe Staff Photo by FRANK O'BRIEN

Anne Whiston Spirlin: a vision rooted in the past.

PROFILE

Shaping the city to nature's laws

Harvard's Anne Whiston Spirlin 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 as part of the natural environment, Spirlin says. Harvard's Anne Whiston Spirlin, a pioneer in the field of modern urban ecology and one of the most acclaimed urban visionaries to emerge in America this generation, believes that her 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.

Central to Spirlin's solutions is a recognition 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.

For 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. Spirlin says. On the other hand, she argues, by keep-

ing 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 Spirlin'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 SPINN, Page A14

Spirlin got into landscape architecture by accident. She was a graduate student in art history at the University of Pennsylvania when she took a course in landscape architecture, took a course, and then changed her field of study to become a student of McHarg. Later, when she was working for McHarg, he asked her to help him write a book on the ecology of Boston. 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 little there was.

What she thought would be a one-year project turned into a five-year one as she correlated the work of hydrologists, archeologists, historians, ecologists and those in other disciplines for a book that would be published in 1973.

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

She also argues that cities need to work with natural forces in the city to create both beauty and utility. Not only was Boston's Fenway-Riverway-Jamaica Plain area designed for aesthetics, but it was also designed to solve a serious problem that threatened to strip out the whole Back Bay, especially on hot, humid summer days.

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-Jamaica Plain area designed for aesthetics, but it was also designed to solve a serious problem that threatened to strip out the whole Back Bay, especially on hot, humid summer days.

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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.

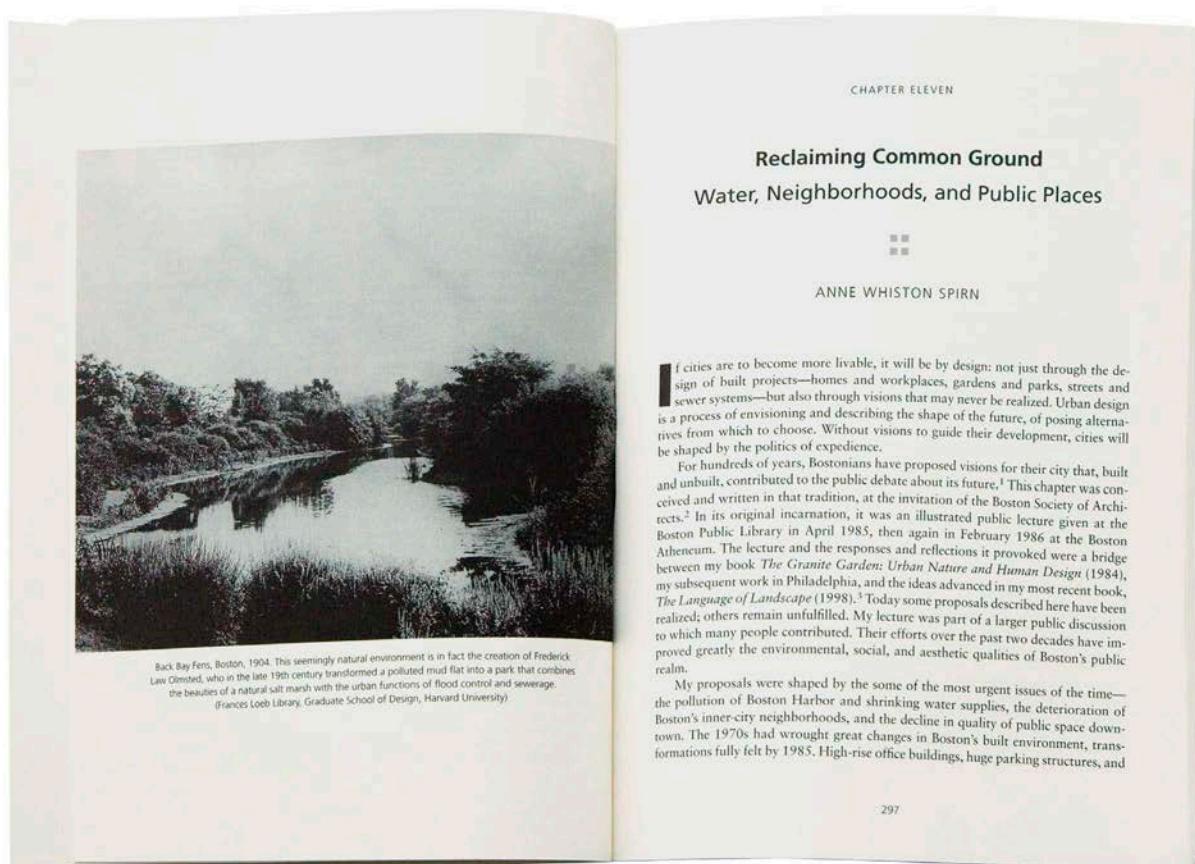


Students present their designs

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 new environmental education center. Investment in good design paid off.



Cooper's Place: After



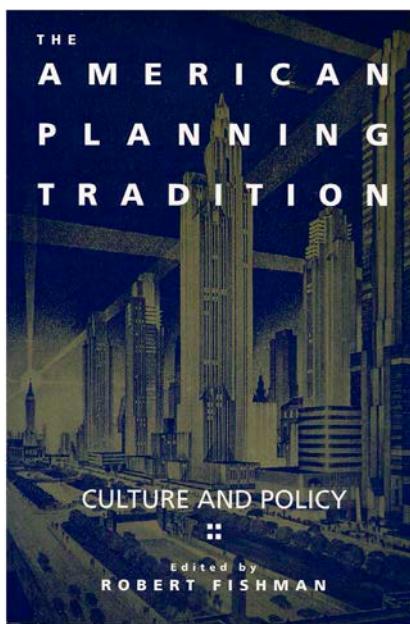
Back Bay Fens, Boston, 1904. This seemingly natural environment is in fact the creation of Frederick Law Olmsted, who in the late 19th century transformed a polluted mud flat into a park that combines the beauties of a natural salt marsh with the urban functions of flood control and sewerage. (Frances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

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 Atheneum. 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.