



A Meeting of Places: Finding Kenmore Square's Character in its Context

by

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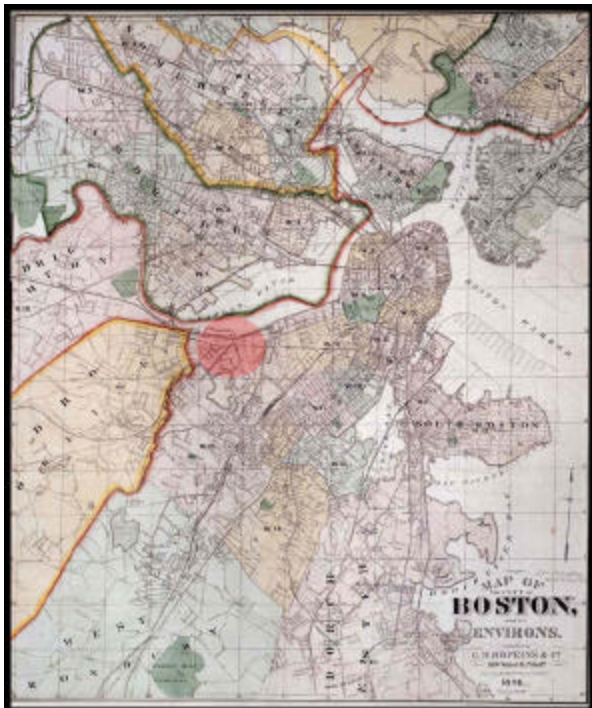


Figure 1. Map of Boston from the 1870s. Shows Kenmore Square's position at the edge of Boston, Cambridge, Brookline and Roxbury.

Kenmore Square sits at the convergence of three major roadways (Beacon Street, Commonwealth Avenue and Brookline Avenue) and three minor streets (Raleigh, Kenmore and Deerfield). It originally rested at the edge of a peninsula west of the city of Boston and north of Brookline, and much of the area now surrounding it was a tidal salt marsh. These two conditions have strongly defined the character and development of the square and will continue to influence it in the future. I have chosen to look at the block of

Kenmore Square on Commonwealth Avenue from Kenmore Street to Brookline Avenue.

This was the site of a major construction project in the last few years, and the new Hotel Commonwealth that is being built embodies Boston University's influence on the square. Other forces besides the University are also competing influences on the square's development. Rather than sitting in the heart of one contiguous area, the square actually sits at the periphery of three distinct communities: Boston University, the

Fenway neighborhood, and the Back Bay area. The square is also not a distinct edge for these communities. It is separated from the neighborhood of Fenway by the suppressed Massachusetts Turnpike and by the industrial/entertainment area around Fenway Park. It is separated from the Back Bay by the double boundary of the Muddy River and the Bowker overpass from Charlesgate to Storrow Drive. These many competing influences, its lack of centrality, and its history as a major node in a traffic network all contribute to the square's sense of confusion and placelessness.

Historical Overview of the Square: Identifying the Forces Shaping the Square

Converging Land and Water

Figure 2 shows the current street pattern (in color) overlaid on the 1851 map of the Back Bay area. The 1851 map shows the Muddy River Basin (already somewhat smaller than it once had been) and Sewall's Point (circled), named for the farm once owned by Judge Sewall¹. The road that spans the river basin was originally the Mill Dam road that connected Beacon Street in

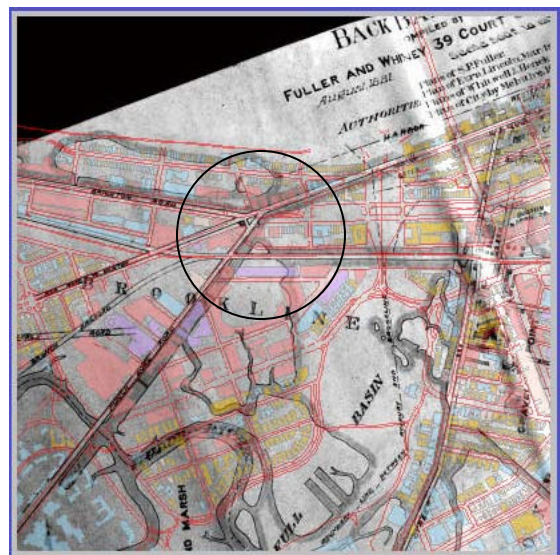


Figure 2. BRA map of current land use and streets over 1851 map of the Back Bay area. Shows the original intersection at Sewall's Point and the filled-in development.

Boston to the roads leading into Brookline from Sewall's Point². After 1830, this point was also connected to downtown Boston via a rail-line. During this first period of

¹ Salzman, Nancy Lurie, *Buildings and Builders*, (Boston, MA: Trustees of Boston University, 1985)

² Miller, Trisha. "The Greening of Community Development: An Analysis of Ecological Restoration and Neighborhood Planning in the Fenway," Masters Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology: June 2001.

development, the square was assigned its first role as a point of convergence and access into Boston.

The creation of the Back Bay Fens was a major influence on the development of the area surrounding Kenmore Square. In 1879, Frederick Law Olmstead joined the Boston Park Commission as an advisory Landscape Architect, and proceeded to design a park that was intended to be accessible to all Boston residents and that would serve as a natural drainage system to supplement the city's sewage and sanitation systems³. The park was an attractive amenity created on what had been "a [106 acre] gulf of mud and water," (as described by Olmstead himself) that the city was able to acquire for \$450⁴. Figure 3 shows Olmstead's design of the Fens in relation to the design of Kenmore Square. The break in his landscaping pattern along Commonwealth Avenue demonstrates the design problems inherent in the shape and function of the square.



Figure 3. Design for the Back Bay Fens by Olmstead. The circled area is Kenmore Square and landscaping of Commonwealth Avenue as it enters the square. This is now the site of the bus station.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

As the city expanded, especially after the fire of 1873, a growing number of residents and cultural institutions relocated to this newly developing section of the city. Around the turn of the century, a great deal of development occurred in the area just north of the square. Mansions, townhouses, and row-houses were knit together to create a physical urban fabric that defines the character of the neighborhoods north and east of the square today.

Figure 4 shows 55 Deerfield Street in the 1980s. This building was originally the Brooks Mansion, designed by Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge in 1900 for Peter Brooks, who had a major impact on Chicago architecture. The building is currently owned by Boston University but was not being used as student housing as late as the 1980s. Figure 5 shows the character of Bay Street at the Deerfield intersection today.



Figure 4. 55 Deerfield Street. The preservation of buildings like the one shown has preserved the character of the neighborhood north of the square.



Figure 5. Bay Street at Deerfield Street. The area just north of Kenmore Square is characterized by mansions, hotels and row-houses constructed at the turn of the century.

Boston University began to exert its influence on the square in the early 20th century. It was able to purchase riverside land at a low price because of height limitations that had been imposed by the original developers (the Riverbank Improvement Association) and

that were promptly removed through a variance. Master plans for the campus were drawn through the 1920s but were interrupted by the 1929 taking of riverfront property by eminent domain for the construction of Storrow Drive⁵. The first main buildings constructed for the campus (755-675 Commonwealth Avenue) were not completed until 1939-1948, but once they were completed, the University began a process of growth and expansion that continues to this day.

Converging Transportation

In the early 20th century, the rise of the automobile, the construction of Fenway Park, and the construction of Boston University's Charles River Campus significantly altered the square's character. Because it was located at a major point of convergence, the square accommodated a significant volume of automobile, streetcar,



Figure 6. Kenmore Square in 1912. View looking toward Downtown Boston from the corner of Beacon and Commonwealth.

and railway traffic. The resultant noise and pollution, as well as the increase mobility the automobile gave the upper classes, spurred the residents of the nearby mansions and townhouses to move out to more attractive areas⁶. By 1915, other uses such as garages and automobile showrooms had begun to dominate the square (Governor's Square at the time) and its immediate surroundings, especially to the west. Around the same time, excavations of the subway station in the square reflected its importance as a

⁵ Saltzman, 76-77.

⁶ Saltzman, 166

node in Boston's transportation infrastructure. The photograph in Figure 6 shows the square as it looked in 1912. The streetcars were a prominent feature, and horse-and-buggies were still competing with the automobiles (present in the background). The photograph emphasizes the wideness of the road surface compared with buildings and walkways. This characteristic contributes to keeping the square from becoming a pedestrian-friendly environment and a place with an identity of its own.

The automobile showrooms contributed significantly to the feel of the square itself.

These car-oriented businesses gathered around the heart of Kenmore Square before moving closer to their suburbanized clientele. Because the buildings were characterized by a large, open floor plan, they were attractive properties to Boston University once the businesses departed. Many of the original façades were

preserved by the University including the façade of the Peerless Automobile Showroom [Figure 7] with the

CITGO sign still preserved on its roof from the time that the CITGO Company occupied the building. A 1983 effort to remove the sign was met by such strong opposition that it continues to be preserved today.



Figure 7. Peerless Automobile Showroom at 660 Beacon Street. The CITGO sign is just visible in the upper left corner.



Figure 8. Fenway Park on game day. Taken from Boston Red Sox website:
http://boston.redsox.mlb.com/NASApp/mlb/bos/ballpark/bos_ballpark_history.jsp

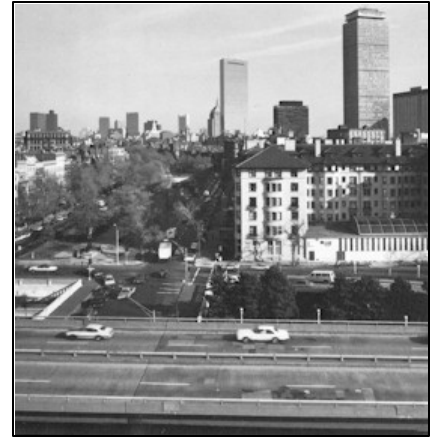
The building of Fenway Park [Figure 8] in 1912 further increased the demands on transportation in the square. Its presence in the square brought enhanced transit connections to downtown Boston, and made created a destination beside a square primarily geared toward movement. The park itself and the industrial land lying between it and Governor's (Kenmore) Square served as a barrier between the automobile-focused activity of the square and the residential neighborhood surrounding it, and it reinforced the sense that Kenmore Square traces the periphery of converging areas and activities.

The character of Kemore Square has also been influenced by the road improvement projects the characterized the middle of the 20th century. The construction of Storrow Drive and the Bowker overpass from Charlesgate separated the square from the water at its margins: the water that had originally defined its location. The Bowker overpass also severed the eastern edge of the square from the Back Bay row houses from which it had grown. Figures 8 and 9 show very clearly the disruption caused by the building of this overpass:

Figure 9 (left). Beacon Street at Charlesgate, 1924.



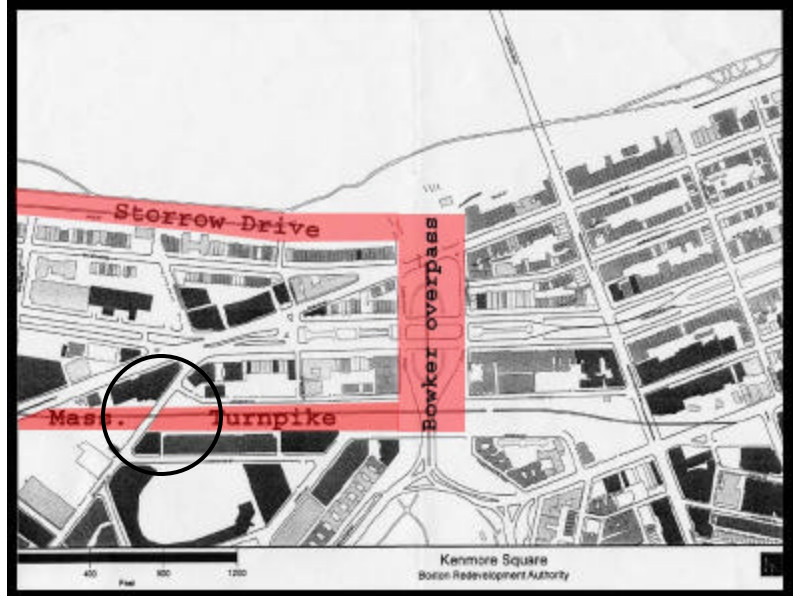
Figure 10 (right). Beacon Street at Charlesgate, 1991.



The connection between the square and the rest of the city has been physically and visually severed.

The construction of the Massachusetts Turnpike along the old train route also served to detach the square from its surroundings. Figure 11 illustrates the way in which the three roadways act as boundaries to Kenmore Square. The Bowker acts more as a

psychological barrier than physical as it is possible to pass under it at street level on Beacon Street and Commonwealth Avenue. The Massachusetts Turnpike, however, acts as a very real physical boundary that is only bridged at the Brookline Avenue connector. This lack of pedestrian access between Kenmore



Square and Fenway Park is an important aspect of discussions over future development at Kenmore Square.

Figure 11. Kenmore Square is cut off from its surroundings by Storrow Drive, the Bowker overpass, and the Massachusetts Turnpike. The circled area is Brookline Avenue, the only connection across the Massachusetts Turnpike from Kenmore Square.

Present and Future Conditions of Kenmore Square: Forces in Action

From this historical overview, four primary forces shaping the square are apparent.

1. The **geography** of the area has generated a pattern of different areas converging at a location peripheral to all of them. It has also necessitated that much of the area be developed on infill land. The square's current proximity to the Charles and Muddy Rivers also influences its development.
2. The importance of the square as a **transportation** corridor has had a significant impact not only on the functioning of the square as a place, but also on the design and use of its buildings.
3. The **Fenway Park** and the adjacent Fenway neighborhood are important sources of pressure on development in and around the square.
4. **Boston University** has played and will continue to play a pivotal role in the square's development.



Figure 12. The Hotel Commonwealth. Located on Commonwealth Avenue and developed by the Great Bay Holdings Company with Boston University as a limited partner.



Figure 13. The Rathskeller at 526-528 Commonwealth Avenue. A punk-rock icon demolished for the hotel's construction.

Boston University has played an increasingly important role in shaping the character of Kenmore Square. In the last 10 to 20 years especially, the University has been the primary influence behind the changing character of the square. It provides a reliable population of residents in the square on a year-round basis, and as it has expanded, it has greatly increased its ownership of Kenmore Square property. Figures 14 through 17 show the expansion of the campus as the University has gradually acquired more property in Kenmore Square. Figure 18 shows the concentrated population of students and parking around the square in 1970, a concentration that has increased with the conversion of the Howard Johnson motel on Commonwealth Avenue into dormitories.

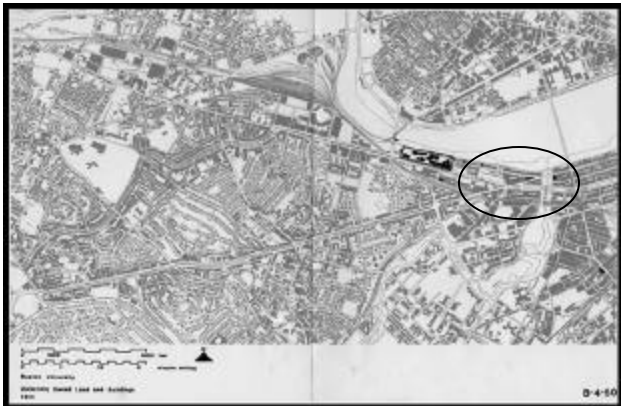


Figure 14. Boston University property ownership ca. 1950. University-owned property is marked in black.

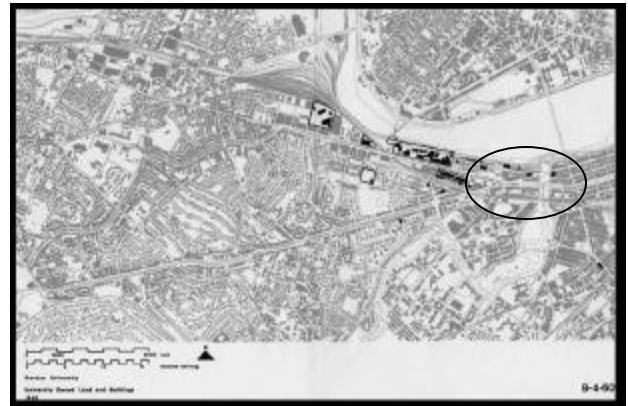


Figure 15. Boston University property ownership ca. 1960. University-owned property is marked in black.

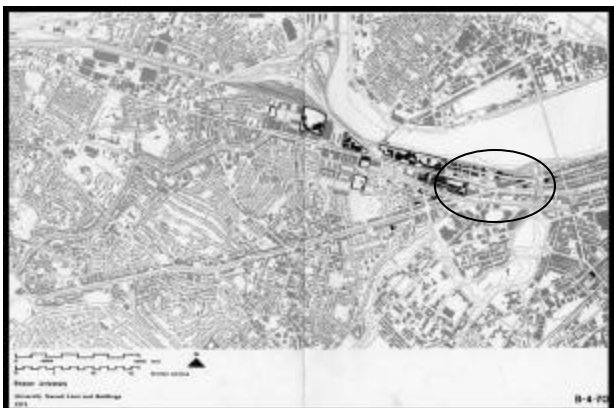


Figure 16. Boston University property ownership ca. 1970. University-owned property is marked in black.



Figure 17. Boston University property ownership ca. 2002. University-owned property is marked in black.



Figure 18. Boston University residences ca. 1970. The concentration is around Kenmore Square. This may have pressured the University to develop there.

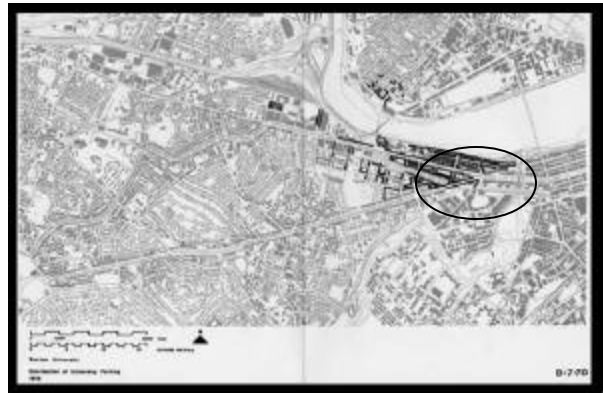


Figure 19. Boston University parking ca. 1970. Parking continues to be an important concern for the square.

Through the Hotel Commonwealth project [Figure 12], the University replaced half of the block between Kenmore Street and Brookline Avenue. The site had formerly housed the Rathskellar [Figure 13], a legendary punk rock club affectionately known as “The Rat.” Also demolished for the hotel was a building with a late-night eatery that catered to the student and club-going population. Interestingly, not all businesses displaced by the hotel were removed from the square. The Giacomo and Rondi Salon was relocated on the other side of Commonwealth Avenue and apparently became more upscale⁷.

It is the express purpose of the hotel developers (and Boston University) to transform Kenmore Square into a seedy hangout and traffic corridor to a relatively upscale, pedestrian-friendly *place*. To this end, the hotel project will be complemented by a process to redesign the square’s street system to make it more pedestrian-friendly. While no construction has been completed toward this goal, the plans include widening the sidewalks, coloring the crosswalks, and transforming the bus terminal into “a glass

⁷ Anecdotal information obtained through Fox Ritchay, who formerly worked in the square, and George Proakis, an active resident of the Fenway neighborhood and graduate of DUSP.

and steel arched canopy surrounded by new trees and pedestrian walkways.”⁸ The Hotel explicitly sees itself as creating a destination within the square⁹.

In order to evaluate whether the Hotel will be successful in this aim requires a revisiting of the forces listed above. Because of its relationship to the two rivers, the square is susceptible to both flooding and sinkage (the process by which wood pilings rot as a water table falls and cause a building to sink into the ground). Plans are currently underway to improve the Muddy River through dredging and eventually reconnect the Fens to Charlesgate and the Charles River Basin in a useable manner. Figure 20 shows the plans for dredging the Muddy River, and Figure 21 shows the plans of the Charles River Conservancy to eventually connect the



Figure 20. The plans showing the area of the Muddy River currently being dredged. Plans for the area are intended to make aesthetic and functional improvements that will help to mitigate flooding.

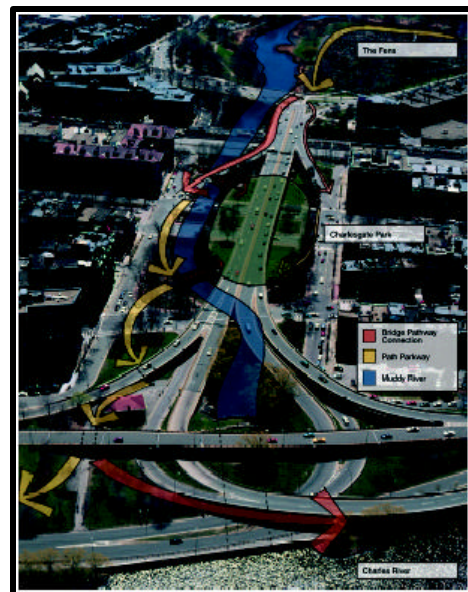


Figure 21. The plans from the Charles River Conservancy showing a potential pathway leading from the Fens to the Charles River. Taken from the Master Plan.

⁸ Rosenwald, Michael. “A Grand Idea Gets Done,” *Boston Globe*, November 3, 2001; taken from <http://www.hotelcommonwealth.com/news/pr2.html>.

⁹ Interview with Frank Keefe from <http://www.hotelcommonwealth.com/news/pr5.html>.

Fens and the Charles River through pathways along the Muddy River. Part of the second plan depends on the reconstruction of the Bowker overpass in the next decade¹⁰.

These improvements to the river basins could greatly enhance property values in the surrounding area, thus contributing to the effort to gentrify the Kenmore Square area. Because these plans do not involve the destruction of the roadways and are more concerned with creating a pathway along the roadway rather than reconnecting the urban area that the Bowker overpass cuts through, they do not signal a return to the strong influence the Back Bay expansion at one time exerted over Kenmore Square.



Figure 22. Massachusetts Turnpike and Commuter Rail; view from Brookline Ave. Air rights could be a major influence on the square.



Figure 23. Subway entrance on north side of Kenmore Square. Access to the bus station is provided below ground.



Figure 24. Bus terminal at Kenmore Square. Buses line up into the street sending diesel exhaust and sometimes pedestrians into the street.

The nature of the square as a transportation corridor is not likely to be changed entirely by the street design planned in conjunction with the hotel. Part of the appeal of Kenmore Square is its accessibility by multiple modes of transportation, and moving or

¹⁰ Charles River Conservancy, Master Plan. <http://www.charlesriverconservancy.org>.

removing the bus station would already reduce its pedestrian accessibility. So while the design may improve the pedestrian experience of the square, it is unlikely to encourage the privilege pedestrians enjoy in places like Harvard Square, which does not function as a traffic thoroughway. A renovated bus terminal will not reduce the bus traffic nor the pollution they bring with them to the square. Plans to construct an urban ring of transit connections between existing arterials would eventually include Kenmore Square as well, and this would create additional traffic and demands on its street system.

The other transportation factor that could significantly influence development of the square is the issue of air rights over the Massachusetts Turnpike. This issue is also tied



Figure 25. View to Fenway Park from behind Hotel Commonwealth. This is approximately the location of a proposed air-rights development and footbridge.

to the Fenway Park and neighborhood's influence on the development of Kenmore Square. The Fenway CDC currently considers the square to be within its jurisdiction. Boston University, through its ownership of property and proximity to the square, also sees the square as a development opportunity.

Although the two organizations have some overlapping interests, they diverge on the

issue of air-rights development. While the Fenway CDC is in discussions with parties interested in developing on the air rights over the Turnpike including a footbridge between Kenmore Square and Fenway Park, Boston University is resistant to this idea because the footbridge would enter the square behind the Hotel Commonwealth.

Figure 25 shows the view to Fenway behind the Hotel. This conflict embodies the

collision of different forces seeking to claim the square. Fenway Park and the adjacent nightclubs justly claim the Square as their access point to the city. The University, however, seeks to create a gateway to its Charles River Campus that reflects the values and vision of the institution. A number of forces will likely come into play to determine the square's future in the face of this conflict.

First, the Kenmore/Fenway district is the entertainment center of the city: it is a major attraction for young adults looking for a night out in town with its congregation of bars and nightclubs. Few spots exist that are as suited to this purpose as Fenway. The industrial corridor along the highway is not suitable for residential uses and the industry has left. It is accessible to transportation via Kenmore Square, and the residents live peaceably with the nightly revelry that accompanies those uses. Its presence in the neighborhood is the result of a delicate balance of forces that could easily be overturned. The addition of a footbridge would make the area more accessible to Kenmore Square, but such a bridge would also bring the bars and clubs in more direct conflict with Boston University. It is likely that the presence of the ballpark in the neighborhood would be a strong enough force that the clubs would be protected from the encroachment of BU, which might be hesitant about locating residences or classrooms so near to Fenway Park. Pressure from the University on the other side of the Turnpike would likely keep the clubs and bars from spilling over into Kenmore Square.

Second, the Red Sox are interested in having a larger stadium. The Fenway CDC successfully opposed a move to build a larger stadium on a lot adjacent to the current

ballpark, and have guaranteed that a new park will not be built in the Fenway neighborhood¹¹. This restriction leaves the Red Sox with two options: renovate the old park or build a new park in a different neighborhood. The primary weakness with the park's current location (that would not be solved by building a new park anyway) is the limited access and limited parking in the area. The Red Sox management is strongly supportive of the move to build over the Turnpike and increase access to Kenmore Square. If the team decided to move away from the Fenway neighborhood (not judged likely), this would tip the balance in the area away from entertainment uses towards residential and institutional uses. If Boston University were to control the land of the Park and the nightclubs, it could be better able to create a sense of place within the square because the square would begin to be the center of a single area rather than the edge of many separate areas.

Third, the University is at a natural disadvantage trying to create a compelling destination in a space that has been so thoroughly dedicated to movement throughout its history. A streetscape that improves pedestrian mobility will not change the traffic patterns or geometry of the square. Central Square's streetscape does not change the fact the Massachusetts Avenue becomes a thoroughfare for trucks at that point nor does it change the linear character of the 'square'. Also, much of the visual confusion at Kenmore Square comes from the historical processes that shaped it. The abrupt change in building type east of Kenmore Street and south of Beacon cannot easily be altered. The buildings are not seedy, only different. The mortuary on the eastern corner

¹¹ *The Future of Fenway Park*, 15.279 Managerial Communication Final Report, prepared by Group One and Company, May 2002. Also, George Proakis interview.

of Beacon and Commonwealth [Figure 26] is out of scale with the rest of the square [Figure 27], and marks the change to the landscaped corridor of Commonwealth Avenue leading to the Fens and into downtown. The remnants of historical processes still lend the square its character as a place of confusion and movement.



Figure 26. Mortuary at Beacon and Commonwealth, view from close-up.

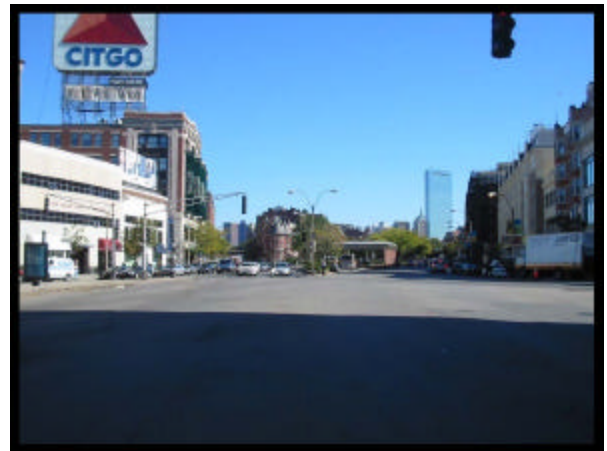


Figure 27. View from western edge of Kenmore Square looking toward the mortuary. It is clearly of a different scale and building type than the other buildings in the square.

Conclusions

Because Boston University is currently the primary force acting on Kenmore Square, especially in terms of developing its physical form, the square is likely to grow more uniform in its character and building type. This in conjunction with the proposed changes to the street layout will most likely generate higher volumes of pedestrian traffic in the square and could potentially attract more upscale retail to the area. The hotel's vision is explicitly one of gentrification: "with the rejuvenation of the place... new cobbled and brick streets will appear... the bus station... will be happily erased... new

condos will be erected, and... a new gentrification process will evolve.”¹² This process of gentrification combined with the Muddy River improvements could also work to the disadvantage of the surrounding area. One of the major issues facing the Fenway neighborhood is the availability of affordable housing within a context of competition from students. Forty-seven percent of families in the Fenway neighborhood live below poverty-level and need low-cost housing ¹³. The University’s location in a low-rent area with access to bars, clubs, and transportation are part of its appeal to college students. Without those conditions, campus expansion and student housing are likely to become more expensive. Additionally, the jarring presence of the Turnpike, Fenway Park, the street-level Green Line train (in front of Boston University), and the Bowker overpass all contribute to the square’s marginalization in ways that the University is unlikely to change. The University runs the risk that in trying to control the forces influencing the square’s development it could stifle Kenmore Square’s natural character as a hub of excitement, entertainment, and above all, movement.

¹² <http://www.hotelcommonwealth.com/news/pr4.html>

¹³ <http://www.fenwaycdc.org/aboutus/neighborhood.html>

Image References

- Figure 1: Map of Boston ca. 1878, from *Mapping Boston*, ed. Alex Krieger and David Cobb, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.
- Figure 2: Composite Map from Boston Atlas:
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- Figure 3: Map of Olmstead's design of the Fens, from *Mapping Boston*
- Figure 4: 55 Deerfield Street, ca.1980s. From Salzman, Nancy Lurie. *Buildings and Builders*, Boston, MA: Trustees of Boston University, 1985.
- Figure 5: Photograph taken by author, 2002.
- Figure 6: Kenmore Square, ca. 1912. Taken from website:
<http://hometown.aol.com/mhasson/KenmoreSq.html>
- Figure 7: 660 Beacon Street. From *Buildings and Builders*.
- Figure 8: Fenway Park on game day. Taken from Boston Red Sox website:
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- Figure 9: From Miller, Trisha. *The Greening of Community Development: An Analysis of Ecological Restoration and Neighborhood Planning in the Fenway*, DUSP Masters Thesis, 2001.
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- Figure 15: BU Land Ownership 1960 Ibid.
- Figure 16: BU Land Ownership 1970 Ibid.
- Figure 17: Composite created by author from photographs of campus map, 2002.
- Figure 18: BU Residences 1970, *University-Community Tension and Urban Campus Form*.
- Figure 19: BU Parking 1970, Ibid.
- Figure 20: Muddy River Dredging Map. From website:
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