

Node & area descriptions, pp. 2-10

1ST PRELIMINARY TEST IN ORIENTATION CENTRAL BOSTON. NOV 17, 1955

1. Description of tour: with a driver, an auto, and tape recorder, traversed area east of Mass. Ave., between the Charles River & waterfront (Albany Street). First encircled area, then tri-sected it in 2 lines east-west, then north-south at intervals of 4-5 blocks. Occasionally circled and entered smaller areas within & described by the major traverses. Starting at 9:30 a.m., took leave of driver at 2:30 pm (1 hr. for lunch & tape change) and spent 2 more hours walking along 8-10 block tangents, 3 or 4 blocks apart, in "South End", stopping to look more closely at certain parts. Tape clogged as I began walking. Before this, had been using tape for impressions of boundary, change, strength of character, sense of position & direction. (Route to be indicated on map at later date.) The weather was fair, very cold, the latter affecting my concentration while walking.

2. Description of subareas. Subareas which stand out for me are of several types: well-defined physical qualities and sense of organization (incl. boundaries); and strong physical impressions without a sense of plan organization or boundaries; ~~and areas where confusion is in itself an identifying characteristic.~~

a. South End. This, the area of my walks, is the strongest in physical qualities, though I am less sure

of its boundaries than for Back Bay and Beacon Hill. Its buildings are of a consistent ht. (3-4 floors); street-front form (projecting bays {see drawing in PDF of original}); continuous red-brick facades (not many white mortar joints); fenestration pattern and dark wood or stone trim; front-step entry scheme, etc. The area has a strong sense of spatial structure (short, finite streets & residential courts & squares including interesting back courts a la Baldwin Hills w/o garages & drive) and wonderful old trees along or down middle of streets. There is a strong differentiation in its gridiron street system: n-s streets are residential, narrow, lightly-travelled; e-w streets are more commercial, have fewer of the apt. bldgs. mentioned above, and are very heavily-travelled. The latter are each distinctive from the others _ or nearly so __ whereas N-S streets are more alike in ~~large~~ obvious detail, varying in a thousand little ways. As I walked thru this area it seemed like the ideal example of a visible symphony: a theme and constant beat, or rhythm, with a thousand variations within the theme. The stronger variations are expressed in groups of 5-15 houses (for example: {see drawing in PDF of original}) suggesting the periods & different builders involved. Other variations, like brightly-painted doors, individualistic planting, etc. are expressive of the people who live in each house. To me, this is the ideal of urban neighborhoods: an

imposed discipline & order, strong enough to bind together but not so strong as to blot out the individuals' self-expression. I noticed a number of details where the discipline might better have been relaxed in favor of even greater individual participation.

There doesn't seem to be as much edge quality, or line, in South End as in Back Bay, but there is more robustness in shapes & profiles __ this suggests that South End isn't as hoity-toity but is more hot-blooded, human. {see drawing in PDF of original}

The boundaries of South End are characterized by a change from the bugged-out bldg. fronts; greater bulk in free-standing bldgs.; fewer trees; large vacant or waste spaces; and change of color & material of some newer bldgs. The change along street fronts of e-w streets is not so strong, but one can readily look down side sts. & miss the pleasant qualities of the short, finite sts. described above. The boundary of which I am least sure is the west __ how far beyond Mass Ave?

b. Back Bay. which for me has ~~A-B~~ distinct flavors A, B, C, and D. As nearly as I can remember my first description of Back Bay, part A could be described in the same way expect that detail around openings

is not white but dark brown or green wood or grey stone. Backbay A, B, and C have some of the same bugged-out bldg. fronts as in South End, but not as consistent. Commonwealth Ave., or Back Bay B, is chiefly distinguished from ~~B-a~~ A and C by its breadth, no. of trees, and less consistency in red-brick facades. But, in form of bldgs. and continuous facades, and in the suggestive expression of style, it belongs with A or ~~B~~ C. Backbay C, or Newbury St. is a poor man's version of A _ fewer trees, older, more dilapidated, noisier, dirtier. This differentiation disappears near Copley. The Copley Sq. area, or Back Bay D, belongs with the others because of its pretentious styles & monumental bldgs., expressing the Back Bay class status. It is a confusing area in plan and its buildings are not consistent except in use of limestone and in ~~p~~ architectural pretension of one sort or another. There seem to be many jagged, waste spaces outside Copley itself.

c. Beacon Hill. my concept of this area hasn't changed much since the 1st description expect that detail around openings is dark, not white. This area has a definable quality whose strength is somewhere between that of South End & Back Bay. Its diminutive scale & the greater enclosure & finiteness of sts. make it even more pleasant than South End to be in. The sense of boundary is strongest of all, except the Common, because

of the hill, though the line between Beacon Hill A and B is not easy to draw.

– d. Common-Public Garden. same as for 1st description except that it has even more meaning to me now as a memory. {see drawing in PDF of original} As a dismemberment of the office-building skyline, with feathery, ethereal trees at the base, it is now one of my most pleasant pictures of Boston. The shape seems more clear to me now – at least I know the street names bounding it. Functionally-speaking, this area is perhaps my best-known turning point, or orientation reference, since it is at center of convergence of many others.

– e. Huntington. This area, or line, stands out because of a sense of use and associations (art & music shops, theatres & halls, restaurants & night-clubs; Boston's answer to Greenwich Village w/resp. to people seen) and because of a nice, smoky, aged look. Buildings seem to have some consistency of weather-beaten limestone, though form & size variations are great. The age, weatherbeaten aspects, and uses make this area.

f. Office-Retail Core. the picture which first comes to mind of this area is of the profile when seen

from near South Station ___ tall; unreal; white stone; mechanistic & inhuman; cold; absurdly detailed at the tops of infinitely-tall pilasters & columniation. Inside the area, there is no one strong feeling present except lack of sunlight & excessive and confusing signs and color patterns. Building materials, when they can be seen & distinguished from signs, banners, st. furniture, objects in windows, etc., are of white or grey stone & glass. Occasional red-brick buildings, particularly delightful surprises such as the old church on the east end of Wash. St., are the only connecting link to Boston. Plan organization of the area is unclear except the location & direction of Wash. & Tremont. The boundary is unclear, but must be strong because, when seen from South Station, the area has strong contrast of height and feeling of compactness.

– g. Market Area. Was in and out of this area so fast that I have no sense of its extent, boundaries or street plan. I have a distinct impression of 2-story, shed-like structures, with leading docks covered by wood-structured overhangs at 2^D floor level, flat {see drawing in PDF of original} facades & severe rectilinear fenestration. Facades are of red-brick or weathered clapboard.

I would guess the st. pattern is a modified grid:

{see drawing in PDF of original}

In any case, leading sts. seem short & have nice spatial feeling. Trucks and variety of produce give area a very active feeling.

(margin: AAve) h. The Waterfront. This, too, is uncertain in organization of plan and the boundaries other than water. The strongest quality is the sight & smell of the sea & all its accoutrements – boats, ~~type~~ tugs, ships, docks, etc. Warehouses on docks are long, low, flat, abstract elements, not unpleasant in feeling, particularly where there is habitation. Back of Atlantic Ave., however, are large, gross warehouses, factories, & office buildings, stores, etc. Once in a while, in the spaces between these large structures, one sees some groups of very old brick or clapboard structures, often with gabled roofs & bearing commercial signs in simple lettering. These suggest the early beginnings of Boston, as do occasional sculptures & their surrounding bits of grass (Dock Square). There are a lot of jagged spaces here, a thousand street tangents, and construction upheaval everywhere.

i. The Navy Yard – this is a vast complex of grey

warships, towering steel cranes, & drydocks – no sense of boundary, unsure location.

3. Description of centers: as in my first description, before tours begun, centers stand out for their activity contrast more than for any other single reason. However, some are so breathtaking in a visual sense – i.e., in strong visual contrast to what has gone before – that the sense of activity comes later. This is true of a large square in South End bisected by Wash. St.; Copley Square, and Dock Square. The latter is less obvious: I always saw it (3 or 4 times) after proceeding through the unpleasant, commercial streets, Washington or Cambridge; it came as a strong sense of relief from a distasteful emotional experience. The other 2 of these 3 had powerful spatial contrast with surrounding area, plus other qualities of visual interest.

a. South {–Franklin Sq.} End square & park. this large, rectangular space is delightful for its size __ large enough to have a park-like sense of retreat, small enough to “read” all 4 sides in terms of definite building heights, materials etc. It has a measurability & depth-reference in the raised el of Washington St., which also gives a nice integration of quiet with noise, activity with passivity. The large, widespread trees are of a wonderful form _ delicate branches vs. heavy trunks. Strong activity is sensed along

all sides & Wash. St. – people, vehicles, etc. Buildings, taller & flatter than surrounding areas, have the area-qualities of color, material, fenestration patterns, etc.

– b. Copley Square. Less strong as a unit of bldgs. and common space, Copley offers an interesting juxtaposition of architectural dissimilarities, each clearly set off from the others: the church, the library, the Sheraton-Plaza, and the other side of many, smaller and continuous shops & agencies. Heavy traffic on all 4 sides & diagonally, plus pedestrians, are a keynote. Copley is pretentious (Public Library); ridiculously-fun (church); and snobbish (hotel, fine shops). It is grey or weather-beaten-brown.

– c. Dock Square. Dock Square is not a well-enclosed space, but there is openness contrast, setting off a nice Early-American brick structure, now used for commercial Purposes on lower floors. In front, in a little grassy Island is a sculpture of Adams, Revere, or someone of our heroes. This ~~area~~ center, throwing one back into the past after the garish, modern experience of Wash. St., has a wonderful impact – simple, rooted in deeper values, etc.
{see drawing in PDF of original}

d. Park- Tremont. the visual impact of this point is not marked because of long previews of the church and the dominating & all pervading – impression of the park. This is simply an activity core-people & vehicles, subway entrance, etc. – where one's pulse quickens with the crowd.

{margin: nodes?} e. Mass Station. ditto, without any visual interest.

{margin: 19 (in circle) “} f. Symphony Hall. ditto, with only interest coming from Symph. Hall itself and the long view up Huntington & sense of Copley Sq. at its end.

{margin: 14} g. Traffic Circle at Longfellow Bridge. the pulse quickens, but only with dread & confusion – which turn to take ?

h. Jordan-Filene. ditto above, but visual & sensual interest is in displays & in people.

i. South Station. this point has a strong and unpleasant visual impact, mostly of pavement & the endless South Station bldg. This also inspires dread – all the people are hidden behind warlike armor on 4 wheels.

j. The Market Area. included here because I don't know extent of this area. I can feel the ht. of an

{margin: unbounded nodes (circled)} intensity peak, but don't know its gradients.

{see drawing in PDF of original}

4. Recognition places & structure. The lowest-order recognition ~~place~~ ~~is~~ element is a point which can only be identified with a prior experience but from which only vague notion of positions w/resp to Central Position and no sense of directions (other than sun) are possible. Such are the natures of

- a.) Dock Square; b.) facades photographed for Kevin's classes; c.) the Market Area; d.) So. Station; e) the Clock Tower; e.) John Hancock (up close); and f.) a sculpture south of Boylston ~~;-g-)~~

In most of these cases, I have experienced them and remembered them because of a distinct emotional impact they made; few, if any were approached and viewed continuously from far to near; none occur along lines of travel I normally use while in Boston.

The next-higher order of element is a point giving identity & direction (implying location or position because direction is ~~more~~ dependent on it except in the case of a known line). This is flow order because

it is staccato, discontinuous, & may be overlooked more easily in travel. In some cases (e.g. Washington) a series of such points is capable of giving direction and specific location along a line which is otherwise weak and directionless. These points, with their directional clues are as follows:

- a.) Traffic circle at Longfellow Bridge – sight of Beacon Hill
- b.) Shell – relative position of Longfellow Bridge

- c.) Louisburg Sq. direction of slope on 2 ends of rectangle.
- d.) State House. rel. position of Beacon St. & Common
- e.) Church at Park-Tremont. slope of Park St. & Beacon Hill.
- f.) Church on Wash. Memorized side (rt. side going east) of Washington St.
- g.) Radio Shack. ditto (left side, going east.)
- h.) Jordan-Filene. rel. position of the 2 stores (Filene's east of Jordan's).
- i.) Small Square between Shawmut & Tremont in South End – sight of Tremont street cars vs. Shawmut (less commercial)
- j.) Oval square. on Mass Ave – slight slope up toward Symphony Hall.
- k.) Symphony Hall. underpass on Huntington, difference in side & front facades of Hall.
- l.) Mass. Station. sign on Mass. Ave., shed opening on Boylston.
- m.) Mass. Ave – Commonwealth. ~~underpass of Commonwealth~~ slope up to Harvard Bridge, sense of Common at the end of Commonwealth.

Another order of recognition element is the line, recognized as a line without a sense of specific location along the line, nor having a sense of where either direction leads. Most of these, for me, require knowledge of context; i.e., what general area of Boston am I operating within. This suggests that their recognition stems from contrast ~~rather~~ and rate of change with

respect to surrounding areas of known quality. These include Tremont (in South End); Shawmut; Albany (in South End); Washington Street (where no elevated superhighway east of the core. The latter is not a matter of local contrast, however; it is the only such elevated structure in Boston. Having several legs and curving amorphously, it is an uncertain line, as against, for example, Washington Street.

Such † uncertain lines are brought closer to the category of a universally-identifiable by having a sense of direction. This can come from a view of known end goals – but if these aren't completely obvious, the line is still weak (e.g. Tremont St.). Or from a memorized sequence of known points on the line (as against a general street or line quality). Or from a known sequence of differences from one side of the line to the other (e.g. Albany St., development on north, vacant spaces on south). Or, as a corollary of the last 2, the relation of the line to an area of known and visible structure (Wash. & Shawmut as related to the South End park). Or from slope.

A line may have unmistakable general quality, without directional or specific-locational sense, even if the general area context is not known – (e.g., Wash. St. with elevated structure). This type A line may

have strong directional sense to compensate ~~&~~ somewhat for weaker line quality or differentiation. This would include Columbus Ave. (view of State House & relation of skewed streets); {see drawing in PDF of original} St. Botolph St. and other paralleling & across the tracks, (with footbridges between, Botolph being a dead end for N-S streets); Atlantic Ave. (relation to water); Cambridge St. (relation to Beacon Hill); and Beacon St. (view of Charles River).

A certain and directional line may ~~have~~ give a sense of specific locations on the line. This comes from ~~triangulation with~~ relation to points not on the line; memorized location of known points on the line; relative position from 2 known end goals; and relation of the line ~~to a~~ and position to an area of known and visible structure (e.g., anywhere along streets bounding the Common).

An area of identity, which gives also a sense of direction (implying ~~the~~ sense of position of at least a general nature) from any position within it (requiring substantial visibility of the whole unless tremendous memory exercise has developed an infinite system of known points) is of the highest recognition order. This

is due to its immediacy (as against a line which requires some traverse to est. direction); its ease of “interception” of movement (e.g. {see drawing in PDF of original})

This strength of value, of course, depends on the recognition value of the area itself and the manner in which direction is sensed. The Common, unmistakable as a visual experience, is less clear than my 2 smaller areas of identity with respect to direction.: the slope goes up to Park and Beacon. The smaller areas have differentiated sides (not easily discernible from middle of the Common) and a penetrating line (Huntington Ave., Washington elevated).