



# **Immigrant Engagement in Public Open Space: Strategies for the New Boston**

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## **1. Introduction**

The first immigrants to arrive in Massachusetts brought with them from Europe a clear mental image of what public open space should look like and how it should be used. This was a shared image that reflected their deep connection with the open, pastoral landscapes they left behind in England. In 1634, only four years after they formed Boston's charter, the colonists set aside a parcel of land in the midst of their homes that would embody this ideal. They chose to tax themselves to pay for and maintain it. For nearly four centuries, people who came to see the site as "sacred" and an essential part of the community landscape defended this civic space, which became known as the Boston Common.

The colonists' legacy of land stewardship lives on in Boston and in a host of conservation organizations across the country. But along with this legacy of passionate commitment to environmental stewardship, modern Boston has inherited a deeply held and often exclusive notion of what public open space should look like and how it should be used. In Boston, the pastoral ideal was reinvented over time, culminating in the creation of the city's landmark Emerald Necklace Parks at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, even for the largely European populace at that time, Frederick Law Olmsted's bucolic vision for Boston's "green space" appealed deeply to only a portion of the city's people.<sup>i</sup>

More than a century later, this tension remains, and has been further complicated by continued immigration not only from the "old countries" of Europe, but also from New World countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as from Asia and Africa. The lack of engagement of more recent immigrants in "friends of the park" organizations and other environmental groups of today has led to concerns that while Olmsted's vision continues to resonate with a great many Bostonians it may not resonate with the majority of those who will decide Boston's future.

Today, almost 30% of Boston residents were born outside the United States and of these, nearly half came from Latin America, a quarter from Asia, and almost 10% from Africa. The future of the city's open space system - how much land is set aside, and how that land is designed, maintained, and used - will increasingly depend on the passion and commitment of families and communities who may not see themselves or their interests reflected in the city's public lands.

In this paper, we consider some of the ways in which recent immigrants to Boston connect (and do not connect) to public parks and open spaces. Our goal is two-fold: to explore alternative ways of "seeing" and using parks and open spaces in different communities in the city, as well as to highlight specific strategies, both here and across the country, that successfully engage urban residents born outside the United States. If Boston's civic spaces are to be celebrated in the future as they have been in the past, they must come to reflect the new diversity of Boston's people. Our hope is that these stories

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### **THE NEW BOSTON**

**- Today, almost 30% of Boston residents were born outside of the United States – up from 20% in 1990.**

**- Of these, nearly half came from Latin America, a quarter come from Asia, and almost 10% come from Africa.**

**- About one third of Bostonians speak a language other than English.**

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and models will encourage more culturally resonant uses of parks and other public open spaces, and equip policy makers and environmental organizations to partner more fully with newcomer communities - in Boston and beyond.

## **2. Different Ways of Seeing and Using Parks and Open Spaces**

Any observer of multi-cultural open spaces will soon find patterns in the ways different cultural groups use parks and other public lands. Tim Murphy, manager of **Cochituate State Park** outside of Boston, provides a description of some of the ways that visitors use that space, which is known locally as the “United Nations” of parks. According to Murphy, Latinos tend to congregate along the water’s edge in an area nicknamed “The Riviera.” Muslims use their prayer mats in the afternoons, sometimes in groups and sometimes by themselves. Russians tend to gather in a wooded area far from the crowds and use the park all winter long, while some Asian groups prefer the highlands overlooking the central plain.



*Cochituate State Park in Natick, MA*

Similar trends can be found in literature that details the preferences of park visitors based on ethnic or cultural affiliation. An in-depth study conducted in Los Angeles in the early 1990s reports that Anglo-whites were most likely to use parks as individuals – particularly walking or jogging – and to participate in activities requiring a natural environment. Chinese users tended to focus on the aesthetic as opposed to recreational uses of public open space, while Latinos as a group were most likely to prefer “relaxing stationary activities” in large social gatherings that include children and adults in a family (Loukaitou-Sideris in Rishbeth 2001, c.f., Dwyer and Barro 2000). Some studies distinguish among sub-groups - among Asians, for example, Chinese and Japanese tend to visit parks as individuals or couples, while Koreans prefer groups of three or more (Winter et al 2004). Other studies detail not only preferences but also barriers to parks use. For example, dogs in parks may present a barrier to Muslims, many of whom consider dogs unclean (Sasidharan 2000, Tierney et al 1998). Survey-based studies of this kind are useful in identifying patterns that may be overlooked by parks professionals, and they often provide a basis for changing or improving park facilities. Their disadvantage, however, is that they commonly assign people who are diverse by other standards to large, undifferentiated categories (“Latinos”, “Koreans”, “Muslims”), and they tell us little about the ideals and expectations that underlie these broad trends.

### **Look around Boston**

The following scenes touch upon some of the factors that shape newcomers’ connections to parks and other open spaces in the city and offer a glimpse of the diverse ways in which newcomers to Boston connect to public lands.



*Santero Steve Quintana at Tenean Beach in Dorchester*

Begin with **Tenean Beach** in Mattapan on an early morning in September. Seventy people from Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic stand barefoot on the shore where the Neponset River empties out into the ocean. Dressed in white, they make offerings of honey, molasses, and flowers to African gods and their related saints. They ask Ogun, Yemanya, and other gods to bless the land, the water, and the city, and to withhold storms and problems from their families and from the people of Boston.

Santeria, the worship of the Saints, is an Afro-Cuban religion and one of the fastest-growing religious practices in Boston. In countries like Haiti (where a very similar religious practice is known as Voudon) and Cuba, practitioners hold sacred outdoor rituals to mark significant moments in the life of their families. The occasion of a birth or death may require the outdoor sacrifice of a rooster or a chicken. Such rituals bind these families together. Yet worshipers who immigrate to Boston often find that their new neighbors misunderstand or revile their religious practices. Newcomers who practice Santeria or Voudon acknowledge the power of nature and seek to express their respect for the sea, the land, and the elements on their own terms. By and large, these ceremonies are now held infrequently and covertly. Bold leadership from a local Santero priest was needed to encourage even the first furtive public rituals in Mattapan.

*Where should I practice my religion? Do you want us to go back to our islands and do it there and come back? With Santeria, we don't need a temple. The temple of God is a forest. It is a mountain. It is a river.*

*— Santero Steve Quintana, Jamaica Plain*

In the early afternoon, travel north upstream along the Charles River to Allston. Here, along the banks of the Charles River at **Herter Park**, people gather together from Guatemala, El Salvador, Ecuador and Peru. They barbeque, play soccer, and listen to music. Families celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. Blindfolded children swing at piñatas hanging from trees. Parents, grandparents and children settle in for the day with chairs, blankets and food. Some hang hammocks and nap.



*Herter Park in Allston Brighton. (Photo by Isabel Chenoweth).*

Families gravitate toward **Herter Park** because, for many, the landscape reminds them of home. Extended family gatherings on riverbanks are popular in Central America, and the trees along the shore remind many immigrants of the all-day Sunday picnics they enjoyed in El Salvador or Guatemala.

*I think one of the reasons that that place...is so popular with us, Latinos, is because of the willows. Willows in Guatemala are very common. They grow beside rivers. People like Herter Park because it looks like home.*

*— Guatemalan-American, Allston*

In nearby Brighton, similar energy marks a more mundane space in the midst of the traffic and noise of a busy city street. Many men and some women from South American countries gather at a paved lot for cups of coffee and conversation before and after work. They chat, share news, and exchange tips about available jobs and affordable homes.

The lot on Brighton Avenue has become, for them, a make-shift plaza. In Latin America, urban squares, or “plazas”, located in towns and cities are the centers of gravity of urban life. The plaza is a space for public debate, protest, and cultural expression, as well as a stage for playing out every-day life. In the U.S., the plaza is also a place where Latino immigrants can enjoy an easy connection with people who share the same language and elements of the same culture.

*Latinos prefer open spaces where they can socialize. Because, even now, after so many years, working here, they are still feeling that this is not their home. They are outsiders. Sometimes when people are working hard, two jobs, in English, they need time and space to use their language.*

*– Frequent visitor of Brighton Avenue*

In the late afternoon, head east from Brighton Avenue toward the heart of downtown Boston. At the corner of Shawmut Avenue and Berkeley Street, Chinese gardeners, many bent over with age, harvest squash, long-beans and tomatoes from small but extraordinarily productive rectangular garden plots. Many of the gardeners have worked the same piece of earth since the time they arrived in the U.S. as young men and women and planted the land as squatters. The Chinese gardeners use whatever they can find to build up the sides of their gardens and maximize their growing space, including odd fragments of wood, plastic childproof gates, sticks, and even discarded refrigerator shelves.



*Berkeley Street Community Garden*

For many non-European immigrants, farming is a way of life that stretches back for generations. Urban farming allows immigrants from agricultural backgrounds to use the skills passed down from their ancestors, to gain access to fresh produce they enjoyed in China but that is unavailable in local markets, and to supplement their income. The garden on Berkeley Street also provides a place for Chinese gardeners to reconnect as a community on a daily basis and for periodic potlucks and concerts.

### **Adapting to a New Land**

Different cultures have radically different ways of viewing nature<sup>ii</sup> and open space,<sup>iii</sup> and some of this diversity is apparent in the scenes described above. Cantonese farmers view soil as a precious resource and plant crops in every available growing space. Santeria practitioners see gods and saints in nature and worship them on Boston’s beaches. Men



and women who spent their childhoods in the central plazas of their home towns transform lots and street corners to create similar places in Brighton and Revere.<sup>iv</sup>

Yet within this diversity, clear patterns emerge. Overarching themes run through the scenes and stories we recorded in our research and in the materials we reviewed. These themes reflect the experience of newcomers *adapting to a new land*. Many of Boston's immigrants spend their early years struggling to adapt to a new society in which they feel marginalized by language and cultural differences and at risk due to uncertainties around employment, education, and housing. It is in this context that people use public open spaces to gather in ways that remind them of their home country. In these spaces, they can meet friends and family facing similar challenges and offer one another advice and support.

Like generations of immigrants before them, today's newcomers make use of open space in ways that are familiar. Our research and conversations with immigrants in the city reveal a strong tendency for newcomers to transfer core cultural patterns from home landscapes onto Boston landscapes.

This transference has multiple dimensions. Landscape patterns experienced in home countries affect newcomers' responses to waterways and vegetation, as well as to city streets and neighborhoods. Childhood landscapes, in particular, are known to shape the selection of favorite places (Brierley-Newall 1997). The fine textures and aromas of flowers and plants can foster deep attachments, as can the broad arrangement of open spaces in the midst of larger cityscapes.



*A typical Latin American plaza.*

The plaza is a good example of these patterns of transfer because it is an open space archetype that is recreated not only in particular types of social gatherings, but also in the deeply felt nostalgia that attracts people to urban spaces that they recognize. One example comes from a Filipino community in San Francisco. The city's earliest immigrants came from towns and cities designed by Spanish colonialists. Members of this community came to recognize the practical and symbolic significance of a park located near the center of their neighborhood that they have since claimed as a Filipino plaza.<sup>v</sup> Likewise in Boston, we found that Haitian immigrants who grew up spending Sunday afternoons in Port au Prince's central "place"<sup>vi</sup>, which is framed by the Palais National, often congregate in the Boston Common directly in front of the State House.

Spontaneous uses of public open space, particularly those that sidestep formal processes, are also common in newcomer communities. As the leader of one community garden with many immigrant members told us, "If you ask people to come to a meeting with parks authorities to talk about how to get access to green space resources, they are not going to come. They would sooner find an abandoned lot and plant their peppers there." Some undocumented immigrants are unwilling to put themselves at risk by attending community meetings where names are typically recorded. One open space planner for the

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**IMMIGRANTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP IN AUSTRALIA**

**Australia's national government leads the way among government environmental agencies seeking to understand and meet the needs of immigrants. The message from the top - Australia's Minister of the Environment Bob Debus - is that the Australian National Park system can no longer be managed only in accordance with principles and philosophies that are specific to the Anglo-Australian majority. Debus has commissioned a series of studies to help the National Park Service understand how best to recognize the cultural values of specific immigrant communities. They seek first to understand, and then to change the structures and culture of park management to be more inviting and engaging to Vietnamese and other Australian immigrants. (c.f. Thomas 2002)**

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City of Boston has found that in order to ensure a democratic process, it has been necessary to go door-to-door with an interpreter, so that immigrants can voice their opinions without having to appear at a meeting or supply their names.

In addition to fears associated with being deported, many newcomers fear that their ways will be rejected. That is why people like Santero Steve Quintana work hard to bring the traditional spiritual practices of thousands of newcomers into the light along riverbanks, on beaches, and in the city's other greenspaces.

The economic use of open space is another important pattern in immigrant communities. A look around Boston will find community gardens nestled in densely populated, largely immigrant neighborhoods, providing residents with inexpensive, healthy food. As we see in the **Berkeley Street Gardens**, the impulse to plant can be strong among people from agrarian backgrounds, and the vegetables, fruits, herbs, and other plants they choose tend to reflect their homelands.

Newcomers with agricultural backgrounds often arrive with an interest and commitment to this work, as well as particular skills they hope to make use of in the United States. In response, programs on local, regional, and national scales have recently emerged to support urban immigrants in commercial enterprises through agricultural and business training, land acquisition, and market development. For example, immigrants from West Africa who participate in Tufts University's New Entry Sustainable Farming Project in Dracut will soon bring their products to outdoor farmer's markets in Boston and sell them in open spaces in the city.

Different groups of newcomers are always arriving, bringing new habits and perspectives from different parts of the world. Over time they modify, reinvent, and create new options for the next generation. Although our purpose was not to determine which groups retain these practices for longer periods or across generations, it is clear that some patterns exist. For example, the Latino preference for visiting parks with their extended families applies to both recent immigrants and second generation Hispanic-Americans (Chavez 2003). On the other hand, Latinos who are U.S. citizens are twice as likely to visit a natural area as those lacking citizenship (Tierney 1998).

### **3. Engaging Immigrant Communities**

Staff and supporters of community-based environmental organizations in Boston have long been aware of some of the patterns we have described above. Many are committed to engaging immigrant communities and remaining flexible enough to meet people from different cultures on their own terms. To them, the stories in this paper are familiar ones.



To date, however, less work has been done by local, regional, and national environmental organizations to understand how newcomers from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa conceptualize and connect to nature and public lands. In large part, this is because – unlike the education, health care, or arts and culture sectors – the land conservation movement has viewed its constituency as the natural environment. It has solicited membership and funding largely from people of wealth or political influence who embrace the Olmstedian vision. Consequently, the movement has not engaged a wide diversity of people and cultures in its work, nor has it developed cultural competence.

Other sectors, including the medical field, have made greater progress toward culturally-sensitive learning and communication. For example, doctors at the Boston Medical Center now work with medical anthropologists to identify local healing traditions that are in practice in Boston today.<sup>vii</sup> These physicians are becoming familiar with minority health practices and are beginning to see how these practices connect to culturally-based religions and spiritual traditions. They understand that in order to serve patients, particularly in large immigrant communities, they must develop deeper cultural competencies.

In recent years, national environmental nonprofits have become aware that their message may be increasingly irrelevant to a changing America. Conservation leader Peter Forbes reports a shift in the way land trusts and other conservation organizations across the country see the relationship between land and people – and particularly people of color.

*Even in the traditional conservation community people know that they could double their work [and] there would still be a cultural tidal wave coming that is going to blow them away. If they don't cross the dividing line, their world is going to come tumbling down.*

*– Peter Forbes, Center for Whole Communities*

Increasingly, national environmental organizations are investing resources in cities. For example, the Trust for Public Land has established its Parks for People Program in six metropolitan areas; and the Sierra Club has environmental justice initiatives in at least five states.

#### **4. Strategies for the New Boston**

For many environmental organizations and public agencies, the idea of developing the internal capacity to learn about different cultural perspectives and deeply engage immigrant communities is daunting. Parks departments and environmental organizations

are understandably concerned about the costs of developing a culturally competent staff, as well as the potential difficulty of finding relevant cultural information.

At the same time, virtually all of Boston's open spaces serve multi-cultural communities, and neighborhood demographics – particularly in areas with a high proportion of renters – are constantly in flux. In light of such realities, park designers and managers resist the idea of creating new parks based on the specific needs and interests of a particular group that may or may not exist in the neighborhood in the future.

What follows is a discussion of a number of challenges and responses to park design and management for a multicultural city. Some strategies integrate multiple cultural perspectives, some reflect a specific culture and invite others to participate, and others are flexible and hold the potential for ongoing adaptation.

The strategies fall into three general categories: strategies for park design, strategies for park management, and strategies for park programming.

### **Strategies for Park Design**

#### **DRAW ON UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN**

Some design elements seem to hold broad cross-cultural appeal. In fact, architectural and environmental theorists such as Christopher Alexander have suggested that certain elements of design resonate across all human societies and can be considered universal. Whenever possible, such principles should be incorporated into park design.

The concept of a loop appears to have resonance among people from diverse backgrounds. Whether walking or running in a park, or climbing to the top of an artificial structure, the idea of coming full circle and ending where you began resonates with many of the people we interviewed, especially people from Chinese, Afro-Caribbean, and Anglo backgrounds. Proximity to water, while strongest for the Latino groups we spoke with, was also a significant draw for people with Haitian, Asian, and other cultural ties. According to neighborhood organizers who have experience finding common ground in Boston neighborhoods, the impulse to protect and care for the largest, oldest neighborhood trees is also shared by people from many different cultural backgrounds.

#### **INCORPORATE NATURAL ELEMENTS THAT ECHO HOME PATTERNS**

We have described the deep connection many Latino immigrants have to **Herter Park** along the banks of the Charles River in Allston. While many elements contribute to this affinity, one of them is the landscape itself. In focus groups and interviews, many of Boston's recent immigrants expressed a profound sense of loss related to separation from their physical homeland. They longed for the rivers, mountains, plazas, and farmland that

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#### **STRATEGIES FOR PARK DESIGN**

- **Draw on universal principles of design**
  - **Incorporate natural elements that echo home patterns**
  - **Accommodate particular user groups**
  - **Leave room for adaptation**
-

had once sustained them and many felt alienated by New England's cold weather and short growing season. These newcomers sought out places that in some way resembled the landscapes they had left behind. Contrary to what many in the environmental field assume, the desire for connection to land is strong even among people struggling to meet their basic needs.

For this reason, parks that evoke or incorporate elements from immigrants' home countries can have a powerful draw (Rishbeth 2001). Such spaces need not be designed solely for a particular population but can incorporate elements with special cultural resonance.

For example the **Chumleigh Gardens at Burgess Park** in London intentionally help immigrants connect with their homelands by making use of plants and landscapes that are culturally linked to particular groups of immigrants. Park designers chose bamboo for its resonance with Malaysians and they planted stunted vegetation along a steep cliff in order to emphasize its similarity to the Bosnian coastline. Their aim was to evoke the look, feel, and even aroma of landscapes beloved of specific immigrant populations.

#### **ACCOMMODATE PARTICULAR USER GROUPS**

The following two examples demonstrate that it is not always necessary to invest large amounts of time or money to accommodate specific cultural uses of a public open space.

**The Forsyth St. Garden** in New York City is designed, maintained, and managed by community gardeners from places as diverse as China, Italy, and the Dominican Republic. When they designed the space, this eclectic group of gardeners chose to set aside a special area to attract birds. They planted the space with native shrubs, which began to attract not only wild birds but also a daily, early morning contingent of Chinese men. These men gathered in the bird garden bringing with them beautiful songbirds in fancy bamboo cages. The songbirds, known as Hua Mei birds, are a type of fighting thrush from the forests of southern China. The community gardeners were delighted at this unexpected use of the space and at the revival of a dying cultural practice. To help accommodate the bird cages, the gardeners sunk poles with hooks into the ground so the Chinese men could hang the cages. The gardeners continue to protect this section of the garden in order to honor the men and their songbirds.



*"Casita" in Holyoke, MA.*

Meanwhile, community organizers in East Harlem and the South Bronx have constructed "casitas" on vacant land that had long plagued the neighborhoods with illegal dumping and other crime. These pre-industrial 8 foot by 10 foot wooden houses are home-built shacks surrounded by tenement buildings and painted in bright shades of coral, turquoise, and yellow. Barely big enough for a table, the casitas are deeply symbolic gathering places for Latino immigrants. In East Harlem and the South Bronx, they quickly became

centers for community activism and celebrations – places to come together for meetings, music, and speeches.

In some cases, it is appropriate to build parks that do not weave multiple cultural themes together but rather seek to recreate a foreign landscape or park type in total. Under the right circumstances, parks that clearly and unapologetically express a particular non-European landscape ideal can be welcoming to people from any cultural background. At their best, parks that reflect a single culture become a stabilizing and unifying force for the newcomer community while providing others with opportunities for cultural learning and exchange that enriches all.

The **Seattle Chinese Garden (Xi Hua Yuan)** in Seattle, Washington and the **Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Garden** in Vancouver, British Columbia are both examples. When it is finished, the **Seattle Chinese Garden** will be the largest Chinese garden outside of China built using techniques and equipment that have not changed in a thousand years. The garden was designed in collaboration with Chongqing, Seattle's sister city in China. Its classical design balances the four essential elements of a Chinese garden: water, rocks, plants and traditional Chinese architecture. Once completed, the garden will reflect the Sichuan Province landscape. The pavilions, teahouse, courtyards and large lake will create the experience of being in China without leaving Seattle.

Similarly, in 1985 **Sun Yat-Sen Garden** was assembled by Chinese craftsmen using traditional tools and thousands of building materials that were shipped over sea from China. Both the Seattle and Vancouver Chinese gardens are intended not only to recognize and develop Chinese culture in their respective cities but also to invite the wider public in to learn about and appreciate this ancient Chinese art form.

In some cases, parks become “cultural containers” that reflect not only the original culture but also the melding of the old culture with the new to create something that speaks specifically to the immigrant experience. Such a container has the potential to anchor particular immigrant neighborhoods that might otherwise be more transient.

#### **LEAVE ROOM FOR ADAPTATION**

According to one open space advocate who works with immigrant communities in Boston's Chinatown, immigrants do not need highly “coded” and programmed parks, but rather flexible public spaces that defy homogenization and encourage adaptation. The following are examples of parks and gardens that have been shaped and/or adapted by people from different cultures. Rather than being designed for or by a particular group, these parks are flexible enough for culturally-specific uses to emerge.

Vacant lots and other low-profile spaces tend to attract immigrants who wish to use open space in creative, culturally resonant ways. **Berkeley Street Community Garden** in the South End, once a vacant lot and later used by Chinese-American squatters seeking an

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**One focus group participant described Boston Chinatown where she played as a child in the 1950s. “We turned every space into open space, although it was not always safe because we usually played on the street.” She described softball as she played it as a child in Chinatown’s vacant lots and on the street. Lampposts and hunks of concrete served as make-shift bases for the children’s play. Reflecting on her childhood playground she says, “In your heart you know you want some defined open space – that would be more pleasant. But at the same time you don’t want to lose the relational part, the informal and unstructured part that lets people come together and nourishes them.”**

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unobtrusive spot to garden, is one example that has already been mentioned. **The Village of Arts and Humanities** in Philadelphia, where scrap materials are used to create community art, is another.

Community gardens generally present opportunities for users to shape and define public space in ways that reflect their culture. **Garden “6-B”** in New York City contains an ad-hoc wooden structure built over time by Polish immigrants. Adding wood bit by bit, the builders have made their creation taller than many of the surrounding buildings. Meanwhile Puerto Ricans in Holyoke, Massachusetts began creating community gardens through a grass-roots organization called *Nuestras Raices*. They went on to build a plaza, community center, restaurant, and greenhouse to strengthen their connection to gardening and to traditional Puerto Rican foods.

In a low-income Mexican American barrio in Santa Fe, New Mexico lies a public park known locally as “**Sanchez Park**.” Sanchez is the large extended family that has laid claim to this park and made it safe for the entire neighborhood. Sanchez family members have made their mark on the space by painting beautiful murals in the park that reflect their experiences in Mexico and in the American barrio. They keep the park clean and in good condition. In a neighborhood where families generally do not feel comfortable with their children crossing the street to visit a friend, the Sanchez family has created a space within the barrio that is safe (Derr 2002).

### **Strategies for Park Management**

#### **ADAPT THE CULTURE OF PARK MANAGEMENT**

The culture of a park is set by people, policies, and implicit as well as explicit signals. The diversity of park staff, the linguistic abilities of park rangers, signage, the food that is available, and the historical or scientific information highlighted in a park all send messages about who the park is for and whose values and history the park is there to protect and celebrate.

Perhaps most important are the signals sent by park staff. Managers of Disney’s Magic Kingdom recognize the power of people to influence visitor experience at their theme park. Disney trains every employee, from parking attendants to top executives, on how to make guests – including the 23 percent of visitors who come from outside the United States – feel welcome and comfortable. Employees who speak a language other than English identify themselves for guests with a gold badge and a flag indicating their country of origin. The response to these efforts from visitors from around the world is legendary (Shuit, 2004).

In some cases, park managers on the state and local level also make diverse park users feel welcome in parks. Managers of **Lake Cochituate State Park** in the town of Natick

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#### **STRATEGIES FOR PARK MANAGEMENT**

**- Adapt the culture of park management**

**- Examine park rules**

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outside of Boston cultivate the reputation of that park as the “United Nations” of Massachusetts state parks. A leader of the Abenaki tribe, which has held powwows at Cochituate State Park for several years, reports the following:

*The people who run Lake Cochituate State Park are great. When we first went to the Park Rangers there about a powwow, they were thrilled. They were more than happy to help us. When we needed a generator, they supplied it. They welcomed us. The powwow is backed by the town. It is backed by the Parks Department. I cannot say enough good things about that place.*

Multi-ethnic park staff can send a powerful signal to immigrants that a park is for them. Culturally homogeneous, monolingual park staff can lead people to feel isolated and out of place. One black park user in Chicago reflects on the experience of visiting parks in the Lake District outside of Chicago, “...I wandered lonely as a black face in a sea of white. A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease; dread...” (Pollard in Rishbeth 2001).

The **Boston Nature Center** in Mattapan has experienced the benefits of recruiting and hiring a diverse staff. Every parent who walks through the door to drop off their child for summer camp is immediately put at ease because there is someone who speaks their language and shares elements of their culture. The diversity of the staff is the most frequently cited feature that parents mention when they describe their positive experience with the camp program.

In addition to personnel, park signage sends messages about who a park is for and whose history and values are reflected in it. **Independence National Historical Park** in Philadelphia houses the Liberty Bell and is a designated national landmark. Yet a survey of people living in the largely minority communities adjacent to the park revealed that most Latinos, African Americans, and other ethnic minorities felt little or no ownership of the park in their midst. One African American from a surrounding neighborhood said, “...the area is for tourists. It is a white area, the intention is for white people to see the bell. It is not important for African Americans visiting, it’s not for African Americans.” (Taplin 2002).

Managers of **Independence National Historic Park** sought to change the signals sent to those communities by creating a new set of park markers. They learned about, mapped, and marked places that have cultural and historic significance for three local ethnic communities (Taplin 2002).



## **EXAMINE PARK RULES**

Park rules often prevent immigrants from using parks in ways they would like. For example, rules prohibiting cooking and eating in public disproportionately affect people for whom sharing meals in public is the cultural norm. For Dominicans in Brooklyn, outdoor cooking is a fundamental part of community life. On summer weekends, every outdoor space is claimed by a hibachi grill. Until the managers of **Prospect Park** became concerned about fire risks, the space was widely used by Dominicans for this purpose. Now, Dominicans are fined for outdoor cooking, which they do furtively if at all.

Another example of the power of park rules comes from a small park in New York City's Chinatown. The space is heavily used year-round by old and young alike from the Chinese community. Potholes dot the park, and the play area is considered by park officials to be dangerous, but neighbors have adapted to the space and feel at home there. The New York City Parks Department is prepared to invest in what it considers to be necessary park improvements. Yet members of the Chinese community who use the park are concerned that the improvements will be at odds with their cultural uses and adaptations. They fear public investment will be accompanied by increased claim and ownership in the space by government agencies. Specifically, they fear that new rules and "sign-up" requirements will prevent them from using the park as they wish for activities such as majong, pick-up basketball games, and small-scale Chinese business activity.

Rules governing park play can also present a barrier to immigrants wishing to use a public open space for activities or events. For example, to many Bostonians a game of soccer is comprised of a team of children roughly the same age outfitted with matching uniforms playing another team of children roughly the same age outfitted with similarly matching uniforms. Games are timed, there are agreed upon rules, and one game follows the next so that everyone gets a chance to play.

On the surface, it seems reasonable to set park rules that require everyone who plays soccer on public fields to adhere to the same schedule, structure, and rules of play. Demand for limited playing fields is high, and an advance application process appears to be the fairest solution.

But for many immigrants, and in particular for many Latino families, soccer is an all-day, multigenerational affair with food and family. Games are spur-of-the-moment, and the size of the field changes depending on the size and ages of the group. People will play, rest, eat, and play again throughout a day. Sometimes tacos are sold along the edge of the field. Children and parents and grandparents mix. These kinds of social events are part of the glue that holds the community together.

Yet time slots for many sports fields in the city are allotted months in advance using a system that favors formal organized leagues. Fees and advance permits are required for all who would like to use playing fields owned and maintained by the State. Those who

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***"In my culture, people don't plan anything in advance for the summertime. They would never think in the winter to sign up for a spot on a field in the summer. They decide on the same day what they are going to do – that they would like to play soccer or baseball. This is a highly programmed culture where this kind of spontaneity is excluded."***

**Gloria Villegas Cordova,  
Director of Education, Boston  
Nature Center**

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wish to use a City-owned playing field must submit a two-page form by February 1<sup>st</sup> if they wish to use the field in August. Users must pay a \$25 fee in advance, and league games have priority over practices and pick-up games.

**Cochituate State Park** takes a different approach. People reserve certain areas of the park for special events on a day-of, first-come first-served basis. At the height of the summer season, people arrive early in the morning to reserve their space. They need not speak or write in English or organize for their event in advance. In addition, there are no fees charged to use the space.

### **Strategies for Park Programming**

#### **GET THE WORD OUT**

Appropriate signage, brochures, guided walks with translators, and announcements on immigrant radio stations and newspapers can help get the word out about open spaces and how people can use them, care for them, and shape them. Some environmental groups have found that new technology for simultaneous translation in meetings is surprisingly affordable.

Over the many years of work with community gardeners, the Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN) has found that Anglo traditions of notices and meetings do not work for everyone. Leaders at BNAN have found that among some Puerto Rican and Chinese groups, for example, meetings must be publicized by word of mouth. Gatherings involving Cape Verdean gardeners living in Dudley Square must happen on Sundays after worship, because so many people in this community work at night, sleep during the day, and attend church services on Sundays.

BNAN has developed informal knowledge through partnerships with organizations that seek to serve and represent particular immigrant communities. Boston area environmental organizations that have developed partnerships with economic development organizations, community arts organizations, communities of faith, and immigrant and refugee service organizations are generally more effective than others at crossing linguistic and cultural barriers and meeting immigrants on their own terms.

Given that even the most motivated environmental organizations are unlikely to be able to hire a staff that reflects the diversity of the New Boston, or to develop the capacity for in-depth ethnographic research, such networks and partnerships are particularly important.

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#### **STRATEGIES FOR PARK PROGRAMMING**

- Get the word out
  - Encourage people to come together for cultural celebrations
- 



*Boston Natural Areas Network Community Garden*



Multicultural “Wake Up the Earth” Festival in Jamaica Plain.

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**At the Village of Arts and Humanities, places are imbued with deep meaning.**

**The ceremonial center is where young people celebrate their rites of passage.**

**The meditation garden is where inner-city residents seek and find peacefulness and become centered.**

**The tree farm is where the community nurtures the fruits of the Earth.**

**Not only is the land transformed, the peoples’ sense of place and belonging are transformed...**

**Shelterforce 2000**

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#### **STRATEGIES FOR ACCESSING DEEPER CULTURAL FRAMEWORKS**

- Look beyond conventional research methods
  - Use a three-dimensional modeling process
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#### **ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO COME TOGETHER FOR CULTURAL CELEBRATIONS**

In many cases, immigrants from a particular country or area of the world are scattered throughout Boston and lack an appropriate venue or occasion to come together as a community. Outdoor cultural festivals can provide immigrant communities with opportunities to join together and express their cultural traditions. Efforts to foster cultural gatherings in specific city parks can lead to a demonstrable year-round increase in the number of immigrants who feel comfortable using that park.

In Boston, cultural festivals attract thousands of people from throughout the region. The Buddhist-inspired **Lantern Festival at Forest Hills Cemetery** in Jamaica Plain includes a program of music and dance and remembers lost loved ones. People write messages on paper shades of simple wooden lanterns, which they light at dusk and release onto a lake and into the spirit world. Japanese “big drum” boats travel down the **Charles River** during the **Dragon Boat Festival**. **Lion Dance** takes place in **Chinatown** during August Moon Festival. A number of large cultural festivals, including a **Caribbean Carnival** and a **Puerto Rican Festival**, take place at **Franklin Park**. **Wake Up the Earth Festival** along the **Southwest Corridor Park** is a multicultural event that brings people from different countries and backgrounds to celebrate May Day and the beginning of spring.

Community participatory arts in parks can provide not only a mechanism for cultural expression but also a method for the reclamation of vacant and unproductive land in urban centers.

Participatory community arts thrive at the **Village of Arts and Humanities** in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where neighbors work together to create new urban parks and gardens. Led by Chinese-American artist Lily Yeh, tens of thousands of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds have been drawn to participate. Residents use broken pieces of pottery and multiple cultural visions to create a mosaic of sculpture, paintings, and gardens. Lily Yeh says, “At the Village of Arts and Humanities, my work aims to reconnect people, to comfort, and to heal.” Her process runs counter to that of traditional architects and planners. There is no feasibility study or formal planning and the work is defined by what people have to offer. The process is iterative so that plans can be adjusted over time as it becomes clear what works and what matters to people in real life.

#### **Strategies for Accessing Deeper Cultural Frameworks**

##### **LOOK BEYOND CONVENTIONAL RESEARCH METHODS**

As many in the medical sector have discovered, it may not be enough to diversify staff and accommodate isolated cultural preferences. In order to form authentic partnerships and ensure that immigrants’ perspectives are respected, it may be necessary for

environmental organizations to explore the deeper cultural frameworks that lie behind community habits and preferences.



*Wildflowers VisionBuilding process in Boston Chinatown*

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***"This experience brought good memories of my childhood days and I learned by listening to others. In America, I have lost so much of my identity. The U.S.A. is not a backwards country, but being a minority in the U.S. makes me realize how much racism I experience. Building this model inspired me to make my voice heard. I learned that it takes a lot of cooperation and negotiation to put all of our ideas together. It is challenging. But I realized that if we work together we have so much creativity! There is no limit to what we can build together as a community."***

**Participant in Wildflowers  
Process in Boston Chinatown**

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This deeper understanding can be critical to people working with cultural groups that are comprised largely of people who are new to the U.S. and who may be more culturally isolated. It is also useful in starting conversations with immigrant groups at the other end of the tenure spectrum – those whose younger generations are caught between the old order and the new, and whose surviving traditions may be fragmented.

Immigrant communities cannot shape open spaces for culturally-specific uses if they have lost touch with or cannot express core traditions. Methods exist to help make implicit values, needs, and perspectives more explicit and open for further reflection.

Gaining insight into a complex community, problem, or process of change can require strategies beyond conventional research methods. Ethnography is recognized as a powerful way to step inside the culture of an organization or community and explore multiple points of view. Social anthropologists are increasingly working with philanthropic organizations, such as the Ford Foundation, and with non-profit organizations to more deeply understand community dynamics (Ford Foundation 2004).

#### **USE A THREE-DIMENSIONAL MODELING PROCESS**

The Wildflowers Institute in San Francisco has developed a nonverbal methodology that allows individuals and communities to access and rediscover deeply held cultural values. Through a three-dimensional modeling process called "VisionBuilding," community members construct a symbolic representation of their family and community that can be applied to a spectrum of planning processes. Using blocks, figurines, and other objects, participants bypass the usual modes of oral communication and express the inner dynamics of their organization or community. The visual "language" helps participants liberate themselves from political and ideological constraints that might otherwise make certain topics too sensitive to be discussed (Liu 2002).

*The models are effective because they bypass our usual modes of oral expression and uncover implicit premises or postulates that motivate behavior. The models become a visual language composed of symbols that represent what goes on in an organization or community and what is important to the people. Creating these symbols in a model allows implicit assumptions and patterns to become visible and accessible – not only to the model builder, but also to those who view the model. In this way, the model acts both as mirror from which we can reflect on our own group dynamics more clearly, and*

*as a lens for others to see us and our dynamics more clearly.  
(The Wildflowers Institute; Liu 2002).*

Community leaders, youth, and artists in Boston's Chinatown participated in a VisionBuilding process and found they were able to express themselves with a depth and openness that had not previously been possible, despite the fact that in many cases the participants were colleagues who interacted on a weekly basis.

## **5. Summary**

The center of gravity of our city is shifting to reflect a new Boston. Minorities have become the majority, and immigrants of color will have an ever more significant voice. Seventeenth century immigrants gave us the Boston Common and a passionate conservation ethic. Twenty-first century immigrants should have the freedom to make their own mark on Boston's landscape, not as visitors or assimilationists, but as individuals with rich cultures and historical relationships to land that should be understood and honored by all.

Beloved historic landscapes can continue to hold a place in the city, but environmental organizations must also make room for other cultural values. This is how we will know we are making progress: new voices will be heard in the conversation; people from every background will develop a strong sense of ownership and "sense of place" in their city; and public agencies and environmental organizations will be nimble and responsive - they will listen, learn, and adapt to the needs and interests of diverse constituencies.

If Boston does not learn how to reflect all its people in its parks, and if we choose to define Olmsted's legacy so narrowly that no room remains for the visions of newcomers, then that legacy will eventually be lost. We believe the new Boston has room enough for all.

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<sup>i</sup> A recent article looking at recreation in Boston at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century found that working-class immigrants largely rejected Olmsted's ideas about the purposes of public open space (Van Damme 2004).

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, Selin (1999), Flint and Murphy (2001), Thomas (2002).

<sup>iii</sup> See, for example, Derr (2002), Low (2000), Low and Lawrence-Zuniga (2003).

<sup>iv</sup> We recognize that culture is not uniform and that these ideas may be variously held across a community. As one Haitian historian reminded us, "Haitians of different classes and levels of education have different views of the environment. Both in Haiti and the United States. My ideas are probably close to your own." Socio-demographic factors everywhere shape patterns of parks use. The principal aim of this project is to underline the diversity and relevance of cultural perspectives, however.

<sup>v</sup> Canlas (2000).

<sup>vi</sup> The Champs de Mars.

<sup>vii</sup> Boston Medical Center (BMC), in particular, is well known for its pioneering efforts in social medicine. According to Linda Barnes, a medical anthropologist and doctor at the BMC, the BMC is developing an integrative approach to medical care that takes into account minority health practices and recognizes their connection to culturally based religious and spiritual traditions.

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## **Appendix**

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

Research for this project was conducted from September to December 2004 and included a) an initial literature review, b) interviews with parks professionals and members of environmental organizations, as well as with professionals in other sectors, c) interviews and focus groups with newcomers in several of Boston's immigrant communities, d) observation of selected parks and open spaces in Boston, and e) investigation of VisionBuilding, an innovative process for exploring the cultural ideas and beliefs of immigrants (in this case around public open space).

An initial literature review included writing by anthropologists and cultural geographers that describes concepts of nature as well as ideas about public open space and their cross-cultural variations. We also considered National Parks and National Forest Service literature that addresses patterns across cultural and ethnic lines in the U.S.

A national search yielded examples, both in Boston and around the country, of places and initiatives that successfully engage immigrants in public open space, as well as barriers to the engagement of newcomers, some of which are described in the text of this paper.

We conducted interviews with leaders from environmental organizations, as well as from community organizations that primarily serve immigrant populations in Boston. We also interviewed park managers and designers. In addition, we interviewed doctors and traditional healers in Boston who are working to develop culturally responsive models for the medical sector.

The "Look around Boston" section of this paper describes real scenes, and the individuals described are real people (although many of their names have been changed or omitted). Our research in Boston's neighborhoods was intended to be diagnostic, not exhaustive. We decided early on to focus on three broad community groups: the Haitian community, the Chinese community, and different sectors of Boston's Latino community. We conducted focus group interviews with roughly 50 people whom we contacted through

respected leaders in their community. We interviewed some of these leaders as well, including religious and spiritual leaders. Specifically in Chinatown, we heard back from a group of local leaders who used VisionBuilding models to describe their vision for public open space in Chinatown.

***Research note:** While the focus of this project is primarily on cultural ideas and perspectives, we recognize that many factors affect patterns of use and engagement in public open space in addition to culture, including socio-demographic factors (e.g., age, level of education, income), geographic factors (e.g., proximity of open spaces to residential communities), safety, and design (how well the park attracts, orients, and engages the visitor).*

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Ashley Graves Lanfer is a researcher at the Barr Foundation. She directed the Boston Parks 2004 campaign and managed the Heart of the City project. Madeleine Taylor is a social anthropologist and co-author of *Network Power for Philanthropy and Nonprofits*. Together, Ashley and Madeleine managed the Barr Foundation's Environmental Stewardship Initiative.