

Discover



C A M B R I D G E

POCKET PARKS



2024



DISCOVER

CAMBRIDGE

POCKET PARKS

Written & Compiled

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in Cooperation with

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Two years ago, in the fall of 2022, members of the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club met with Ellen Coppinger from the City of Cambridge's Department of Public Works. We were in search of a new project, one that would allow us to discover, document, and celebrate a city-wide green "through line," taking us across all the Cambridge neighborhoods.

With Ellen's support and advice, we decided to focus on what we called "pocket parks." These we roughly defined as small and under one acre, public green spaces with at least one or two places to sit, some plantings and trees, where Cambridge citizens of all ages and interests could pause, breathe, and enjoy a brief respite from city life. Thus, their purpose was primarily, although not exclusively, what the City calls "passive," a miniature natural setting intended for rest, not recreation.

Two years later, this little booklet is the result. It aims to introduce you to Cambridge's "pocket parks." What exactly defines a pocket park, you may well ask? Do they have specific common characteristics? Where are they located in Cambridge? And most importantly, why should we care about them?

Beginnings

As far back as ancient Rome, the value of “rus in urbe”, bringing the country into the city, has been recognized and honored. The world’s famous cities are graced with large, iconic public parks—the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris, Hyde Park in London, Zabeel Park in Dubai, Almada Central in Mexico City. Frederick Law Olmsted, along with his partner Calvert Vaux, created this country’s first big city public park, Central Park in New York (1858), and later, here in Boston, he designed the Emerald Necklace (1878-96), a series of parks ‘strung like jewels’ from Back Bay to Dorchester. The founder of landscape architecture, Olmsted lived in an age of rising industrialization and urbanization. He saw public parks as the “self-preserving instinct of civilization.” ***

Gracious city parks like Central Park were modeled on the expansive park grounds of the country estates of the English landed gentry. Green and luxurious as they were, these city parks were not easily accessible by immigrant families, who had to travel by hot crowded trams and trolleys—and only on weekends—to access the recreational opportunities these large parks were meant to provide.

Requiring large expanses of land, cities found it more challenging to build new parks as industrialization competed for the same spaces. In mid-nineteenth-century London, another public-minded visionary was seeking a very different remedy. Like most old cities, each parish church had its own small cemetery, increasingly overcrowded and a health hazard. Most were closed by the 1850s and fell into disuse and neglect. Garden Club member Liz Goodfellow wrote her master’s thesis in history and theory of architecture on how these ancient London burial grounds became valuable open space. As Liz describes, in the 1880s reformer Octavia Hill advocated to transform abandoned cemeteries into small, green space, easily accessible to the residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. Her work was taken on by London’s Metropolitan Public Gardens Association and close to 130 burial grounds were thus converted, providing “breathing and resting places, for the old, and playgrounds for the young...”

***All direct quotations are from sources listed in Bibliography

After WWII, the heavily bombed cities in England and Germany, combined with the limitations on labor, money, and materials, made the creation of many small parks in place of the rubble affordable and uplifting. Christ Church Greyfriars is a Christopher Wren church (*photo below*), heavily damaged in the Blitz. The ruined nave was turned into a garden, one of the most enchanting green “pockets” in London.



Pocket Parks in the United States

By the mid-1900s, industrialization in the United States had brought a major population shift, as job seekers moved away from the countryside into increasingly overcrowded, unhealthy cities. By far the worst conditions were found in the neighborhoods of the urban poor. In the 1950s, under the U.S. National Housing and Transportation Acts, a national policy of “urban renewal” allocated millions of dollars to raze these “slum” neighborhoods and make way for government, corporate, and high-rise apartment buildings. Boston’s West End is a notorious example. Large highways connecting East Coast cities were built through a city’s heart, demolishing established, often historic, and most often poor, neighborhoods in their wake.

In 1963, Lawrence Halprin published *Cities*, a book that woke up the field of urban development. In his prologue to *Cities*, Halprin writes that “the ultimate purpose of a city in our times is to provide a creative environment for people to live in - ” Cities should support the two kinds of life that is lived within them—public and social, streets, great parks and civic spaces, shopping, [and] the personal, individual, self-oriented life, ... this private life needs space of a different kind ... it needs enclosure and quiet, removal from crowds, and a quality of calm and relaxation ... a city needs both.” Halprin went on to focus his efforts building parks on previously dilapidated sites and under and over freeways, effectively reimagining cities.

Given these new currents, it is not surprising a strong interest in the need and value of neighborhood parks arrived in the United States. In 1967, the American Society of Planning Officials reported these “vest pocket parks were of greatest value in densely populated neighborhoods, where outdoor space is severely limited” and where “large parks are too expensive to develop.” In a survey of residents of Harlem, asked to rank what they liked least about their block, the absence of greenery at 24% was ranked highest, with not enough policemen second, but far behind at 15%.

The small park concept was adapted and promoted beginning in the 1960s, with experiments in Baltimore, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia. But it was in New York City that the potential of “pocket parks” truly took hold, with the creation in 1967 of the iconic Paley Park in midtown Manhattan (see *photo right*) and three small “vest” parks in Harlem.



Since then, not only London, which has an app that guides walkers to the city's many pocket parks, but San Francisco, New York, and Boston all provide websites designating these small parks as such, with descriptions and directions.



Mid-city parks like Paley Park serve just as important a function as those in residential neighborhoods. As Robert Zion, esteemed landscape architect and designer of Paley Park, writes in *Small Urban Spaces*, “The midtown park is for adults—office workers, shoppers, tourists, and passersby. Its purpose is rest—for the officer worker who has finished lunch...for the shopper an opportunity to put down parcels, recline a moment - for the tourist or passerby an opportunity to be refreshed visually by the scale of the place - by the green growth, and hopefully by the quiet - ”

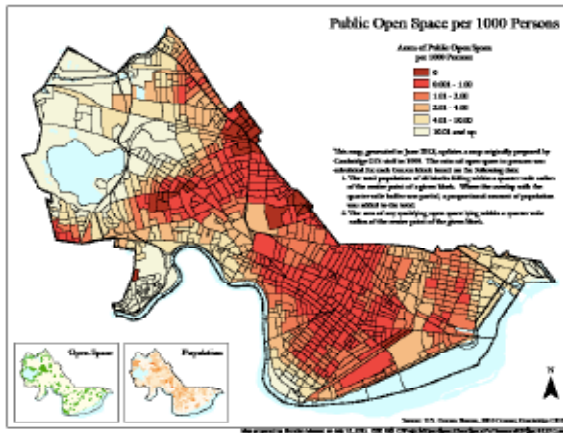
COVID and A New Appreciation

During the COVID epidemic, huge swaths of the country were “locked down.” For months, the only recreational activity deemed safe was walking outside, at a strict 6-foot distance from any companions or passersby. Playgrounds were considered risky, running and biking problematic, and here in Cambridge Mt. Auburn Cemetery closed its gates to the public. Since Olmsted’s time at least, opportunities for outdoor recreation have been recognized as essential for the physical health of urban populations. But it was during COVID that the mental health benefits of green space—trees, plants, the peace that nature brings—were discovered to be just as essential. Access to a park was deemed not just a benefit, but the right of every city dweller.

In her wonderful book *The Well-Gardened Mind, The Restorative Power of Nature* (2020), psychotherapist Sue Stuart-Smith cites the multitude of recent influential studies proving the beneficial impact of nature on the mind, including alleviating symptoms of attention and anxiety disorders, even psychosis. She movingly describes the work of the American psychiatrist Harold Searles, who “observed that patients who had experienced a breakdown would often gaze at trees for hours at a time and find in them ‘a companionship which they were not getting from other human beings.’”



Access to the psychological equanimity nature provides, is, put simply, a matter of justice, of environmental equity. In 2023, the Trust on Public Land reported that predominately non-white neighborhoods in 100 of American’s most populous cities had less park acreage than 43%. The report recommends that everyone live a 10-minute walk from a park, and, in fact, during the COVID lockdown, people who could walk 10 minutes to a park in their neighborhood reported fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression. A research team based in Scotland looked at social and economic disparities in neighborhoods across Europe. The only variable, among shops, public transport, and cultural facilities that showed any effect on equalizing well-being among all income levels was the presence of neighborhood parks, and just ten more trees on a city block was associated with lower levels of mental distress.



Green, quiet spaces don’t just benefit individual well-being. Korea has reported studies of MRI brain scans showing that “pleasing natural scenery activated parts of the brain involved in generating empathy.” It seems we are biologically attuned to the natural world, what E.O. Wilson called biophilia, and the natural world puts us in tune with each other. As Stuart-Smith writes, “trees, parks, and gardens work on us imperceptibly, softening our gaze. Everyone shifts a bit closer toward empathy and human connection.”

In 2021, the *Journal Urban Forestry & Urban Greenery* published a paper by Shu Liu and Xinhao Wang entitled “Reexamine the value of urban pocket parks under the impact of COVID-19.” This paper is just one of the many published in an astonishing upsurge of research on pocket parks. According to a world-wide literature review published in China, in just the three years from 2020-23, the number of relevant papers published was 137, nearly equaling the total number of publications on this topic from the previous 43 years combined!

Liu and Wang concluded that “Pocket parks throughout a city can function as ‘green stepping stones’ in the urban green infrastructure system. Because pocket parks require a small size of land, and can use vacant lots or other forgotten and wasted spaces ... they hold an advantage over large parks in having more available sites to maximize proximity to urban populations.” The paper concludes “... the accessibility of urban neighborhoods to urban green space had been considered desirable before the coronavirus outbreak, and now should be considered a necessary lifeline to urban residents’ health and well-being.”

The Pocket Parks of Cambridge

The City of Cambridge departments of Public Works and Community Development have ensured its citizens are well provided with neighborhood playgrounds; playing fields for baseball and soccer; tennis and pickle ball courts; paths and street lanes where we can safely walk and bike. Our city plants an average of 1200 trees a year, and environmentally-friendly pollinator and native plants increasingly grow along our streets.



City maps and directories label playgrounds and playing fields, but there has been no official designation of where we might find a green space that is not primarily intended for active use.

With Ellen Coppinger's invaluable help, the CP&GC committee set out across Cambridge to find them. Naturally we first wanted to consult with 'official' sources as to the definition of a pocket park. To our surprise, there is common agreement that the only basic definition is size: 'small,' and even that is relative. Some descriptions wax more lyrical than others, from "In sum pocket parks' only criterion is scale, in addition to its character as a park "... to "Equally significant to large famous parks, but perhaps more charming, are green escapes, the compact hidden gems and secret oases that are perhaps unknown even to many locals."

Taking inspiration from the simplest definition of all, by the Trust for Public Land, "public park spaces that occupy less than one acre of land," we chose to define Cambridge pocket parks as open public spaces under one acre.

If the basic definition is sparse, then are there common characteristics pocket parks share? Again, not at all. There are multiple differences in the qualities of pocket parks all around the world. So, in addition to size, the Cambridge pocket parks identified here have in common only a place to sit and provide green growth, trees, and plantings of some kind.

But not all small parks are equally successful. In 1980, William H. Whyte, sociologist, urbanist, and author of the best-selling *The Organization Man*, turned his attention to how people behave in cities. His book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* is based on ten years of direct observation of how a city's small, open spaces work or don't work for the people who live there. The findings of his small research group known as the Street Life Project remain as salient as they were 40 years ago.





Sun is important, as is shade, but the most important is places to sit. Choice is more important than comfort: ideally chairs should be moveable so different groupings can be socially comfortable; the old-fashioned park bench with backrest and armrests works fine as long as it is placed in proximity to the trees. In fact, all seating areas should be closer to trees than they usually are, and trees are best planted in groves. “By far the best liked are those affording a good look at the passing scene and the pleasure of being comfortable under a tree while doing so—people feel protected, enclosed and cooler too. Also, water pleases, the look and feel and the sound of it; and “stimulus like sculpture provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other.”



Other useful observations: the idea of “green nature” can be taken to suggest that a patch of lawn will suffice but complexity and variety [of the plantings] are important in terms of nature’s restorative effect.” A sense of enclosure, “the legibility of mini-park as a visually enclosed scene,” is optimal: “a pool of space removed from the flow of traffic ... an outdoor room, human in scale, enclosed and protected, and sheltered from noise.”



But by far the most important quality is not a quality at all.... it is the quantity. Seymour et al. recommended a pocket park in every square block! In 2017, the Trust for Public Lands, the National Recreation and Park Association, and the Urban Land Institute launched “The Ten-Minute Walk” campaign, urging cities across the country to sign a pledge committing to providing safe, equitable access to a high-quality park within a 10-minute walk of home. Over 300 mayors and public leaders across the country have signed that pledge. And Boston is the second major city, after San Francisco, to reach the goal.

To educate ourselves about the pocket parks in Cambridge we first needed to identify and locate them. We found that the current map and booklet on parks in the city did not designate the category of pocket park even though it did identify other aspects of parks.



After meeting Ellen Coppinger and Gary Chan, who were interested in our project and gave us much of their time, we were given a list of all the parks meeting the less than one-acre criteria. If we counted plazas as well, there were approximately 40 that fit the criteria alone. To determine if they were pocket parks, with seating and greenery, our only option was to visit each one. By breaking up into groups we did just that.

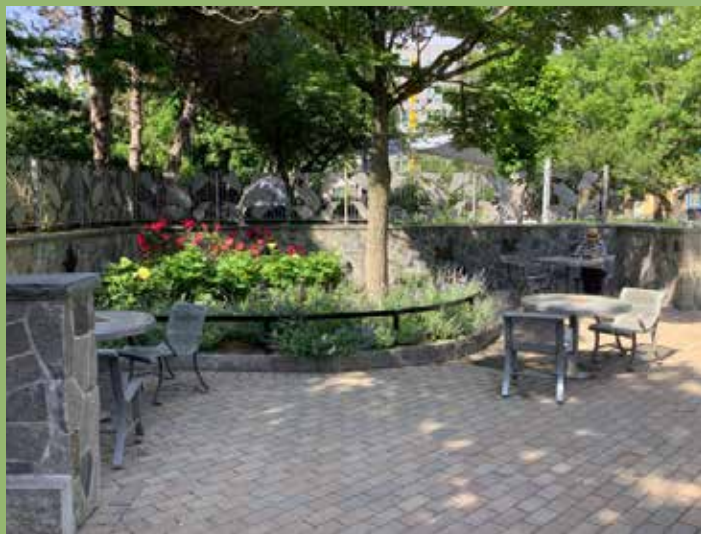
We traveled throughout the City, taking photographs, sitting and experiencing each park to get a sense of it. We wanted to see how the community was using this park and what it felt like being in each park.

We visited parks in East, West, Central, and North Cambridge, attempting to cover the geography of the City. We also wanted to determine how many pocket parks were in each of these neighborhood areas.

A total of 21 pocket parks from the original list of over 40 possibilities were deemed by Ellen and Gary as meeting the criteria of what the City would now officially designate as pocket parks. All 21 are listed under Descriptions, but we chose 13 to highlight, not because they are the best but because they represent an equal distribution in the major sections of the City. They also represent some of the different characteristics that pocket parks can offer.

Thanks to the cooperation and support of the Cambridge Community Development Department, a new section and map, Cambridge Pocket Parks, has been added to the CDD website, Open Space Map Gallery, and is now part of the City's official Map Collections.

***Rob Steck** retired from his role as senior parks designer in the summer of 2024. His work on Cambridge parks, playgrounds, schoolyards, and playing fields has been lauded in the press, receiving awards and acclaim from local and national organizations, including the American Society of Landscape Architects. The Cambridge Plant & Garden Club honors Rob's contribution to the quality of life of the citizens of Cambridge, his commitment to open space, and the beauty of his work.*



For 39 years (1985-2024) I worked as the senior Cambridge parks designer. My role included developing plans, technical specifications, and cost estimates, as well as collaborating with other City staff, outside play and education consultants, and contractors. I believe my close involvement in all stages of the process, from community engagement to design and build oversight, led to more innovative outcomes. Each project should be unique, and I approached each as a custom, one-of-a-kind challenge, as opposed to a formulaic or “cookie cutter” design approach. Despite the different challenges, and sometimes obstacles, I’ve always tried to set a high standard of accessibility, functionality, durability, and beauty with the intent of trying to create a living work of art.

Successful park design stems primarily from letting experienced designers lead the process. Leading includes listening closely to residents, and other city staff, responding to all questions and concerns, and always maintaining a genuine willingness to change design elements at every stage of the process to better meet the needs of the community.

Every park should be a pleasure to experience on different levels. They should have the quality I like to call “rewarding the intimate gaze.” This combines a close look at the textures and colors of plant and stone and wood—with a backdrop of people sitting on a bench and talking, some reading a book, some there every day, some just once a month, all ages—all enjoying. And certainly, the rewarding look at the park from a distance—beautiful.

This book celebrates the pocket parks of Cambridge, the small, under an acre green spaces that are scattered throughout our City. The creation of, and care for, these little parks are examples of how far we’ve come in fulfilling our vision for the Cambridge Parks system (articulated in the 2010 *Healthy Parks and Playgrounds Task Force Report* on the City of Cambridge website).

The true beneficiaries of all park design work are the children and residents of all ages, backgrounds, and physical abilities that live, work, and visit Cambridge, and have the opportunity to experience these unique public parks and open spaces.



EAST CAMBRIDGE



Centanni Way

Third Street/Otis Street

Centanni Way is situated in the Bulfinch Square Complex in East Cambridge. The park is a green jewel in the crown of the award-winning restoration of the Bulfinch County Courthouse, a 76-square-foot building originally designed as the Middlesex County Court by architect Charles Bulfinch, and built in stages from 1889 to 1920. In the 1970's the building was in a derelict condition and plans were underway to demolish it and build a parking lot in its place! However, various city agencies (that included the Cambridge Arts) and individuals (most notably Charles Sullivan, director of the Cambridge Historical Commission) fought successfully to save it. In 1980, the city bought the building, leasing it to the non profit Multicultural Arts Center for \$1 a year and securing an \$835,000 Urban Development Action Grant for its renovation.





Graham Gund Architects restored the building to its original magnificence, and the complex is credited with contributing much to the revitalization of East Cambridge. In 1985 Cambridge City Council voted to close off Otis Street between 2nd and 3rd Streets to make way for what became Centanni Way. The beautiful design of the park was by Cambridge firm Carol R. Johnson Associates ... one of the largest U.S. landscape architect firms, and one of the first to be owned by a woman. When the park was opened in 1989, Fred Centanni ... after whom the park was named ... was honored as a lifelong East Cambridge resident and beloved public servant. Later that year, floral and metal garden structures, by sculptor Dimitri Garakaris, were commissioned by the Community Development Department and the Cambridge Arts Council. They now form part of the City's impressive public art collection.

The park space is in the shape of a T. The main section – that forms the stroke of the T – was once the part of Otis Street that runs between 2nd and 3rd Streets. The stem of the T runs from the middle of this section to Thorndike Street. Both are paved with bricks that form wide walkways and inviting sitting areas. The central, courtyard-like brick space ... at the bottom of the tall steps leading to the Registry of Deeds ... has an elaborate design with a wide outer circle near the circumference, and a smaller inner one.

Surrounding this circular area are seven benches. The four opposite the steps are beneath a curved trellis for climbing shrubs. All the green space in the old Otis Street section is bordered by attractive, 19th-century wrought iron fencing, except for two large rectangular flower beds where seasonal flowers such as daffodils, pansies, petunias, and mums provide color and focus. Inside the fencing there is a variety of well-established deciduous trees, a few flowering shrubs, and a good deal of pachysandra (also the two floral sculptures mentioned above).

The stem section of the park's T shape has only a limited amount of iron fencing that is less ornate and is mainly just bordering Thorndike Street. Where the steps go down to the street there is a sturdy pillared structure that covers the bicycle rack. Most of the park area on either side of the bricks is grass with flowering trees. A wider section with benches has six round plant holders with colorful annuals. Unlike the benches in the Otis Street section that are all wooden, the benches in this area of the park are metal.

Altogether in Centanni Way there are 15 benches. It is an inviting place to sit ... sunny in the winter but with plenty of leafy shade in the summer. It is no doubt highly appreciated by the surrounding office workers and nearby residents (most of whom have little green space of their own). It is a popular place for weddings, with the Arts Center providing the venue and the curved arches at the entrances to the park on 2nd and 3rd Streets providing a perfect setting for photographs.



NORTH CAMBRIDGE



Clarendon Avenue Park

Clarendon and Massachusetts Avenues

Clarendon Avenue Park is a small enclosed park located at the intersection of Clarendon and Massachusetts Avenue in North Cambridge. The intimate circular plaza with multiple places for sitting acts as a gateway to the larger playground and recreational space from which it is newly separated by decorative fencing. This magical little park owes its genesis to two major swaths of federal funding which became available to the City of Cambridge during the late seventies and early eighties.





Under Title I of the Housing and Development Act of 1971, the City of Cambridge received funds to support the creation of a number of open spaces: the largest being the Riverside Press Park on Memorial Drive, but also Clarendon Park, which opened in 1980. At the same time, under the aegis of the Cambridge Arts Council, Cambridge became the first city in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to adopt a 1 Percent for Art Ordinance, which designates that no less than 1 percent of cost of public construction projects be allocated for the arts. The first major beneficiary of this giant infusion of federal dollars was the public art installed as the result of construction or enhancement of the Red Line subway stations. But in addition to the Red Line, one of the first artworks commissioned by the Arts Council was the art by Juliet Kepes originally installed in the brick wall of the Clarendon Park.



Kepes' small bronze birds in flight were safely transferred to the stone wall in the 2021 renovation of the Clarendon park and playground. Neighborhood open houses to share plans for improvement had begun in 2019, but due to COVID and other delays, the Cambridge Community Development Department was only able to open the Clarendon Avenue site in 2021. This time, Juliet Kepes' sculptures are joined by another work of art—a delicate, plant-patterned metal fence, created by the artist Bart Shigeru Uchida and commissioned by the Cambridge Arts Council.



The inviting entryway path into the park on Massachusetts Avenue has two benches facing each other that are surrounded in the summer with large clumps of catmint. To the right of this is a grassy knoll and a variety of trees and shrubs. The path leads on to a sunken paved area that has a flower bed with roses and tree peonies, and three metal tables that each have two metal, secured chairs. Beyond this are the two playground areas that are separated and surrounded by the leaf-patterned fence. The focus of the first playground is a large covered sandpit. Both contain some unusual play structures, such as a stack of perforated climbing blocks, a barrel, stepping stones, a water table and multiple park toys. These areas are designed for sitting as well as playing, however, with several benches and surrounding shrubs, trees, and patches of grass.

The park is attractively designed and well maintained. It deserves to be a popular destination for parents with toddlers and those wishing for a peaceful green space to sit in.



EAST CAMBRIDGE



Costa Lopez Taylor Park

71 Charles Street

Costa Lopez Taylor Park in East Cambridge was until the late 1980s, a basketball court and paved space which the City used for dumping dirty snow in the winter. Bordered by Hurley Street to the north Lopez Avenue to the east, and Charles Street to the south, the area was little more than an inner-city dead space.

In the late 1980s, Rob Steck, landscape architect with the City's Community Development Department (CDD), redesigned the area, adding a children's playground and a lovely rising and falling landscape with now mature hickory and pine trees that give definition to new green seating areas.



In 2000, the Beal Companies deeded to the City an adjoining 4500-square-foot parcel of land at Lopez Avenue and Charles Street. What followed was a long and fruitful discussion and collaboration between interested neighbors and the City about how to expand the park with the newly gifted land.

By 2007, the CDD, working with park neighbors, had designed community gardens, improved the children's playground, and expanded passive seating spaces. Lopez Avenue was truncated so as to allow a graceful connection of the Beal-donated property and the existing park. The connection of the new community gardens and the existing Costa Lopez Taylor Park is punctuated with stunning squash and pumpkin sculptures by Roberley Bell. Additional quiet seating spaces are enhanced by beautiful stone work and landscaping. All this is accomplished while still allowing emergency access to Lopez Avenue from Charles Street.

The project was completed in 2008. The combination of what was originally Costa Lopez Taylor Park and the playground with the new community gardens and additional passive green spaces expanded the total park area to 0.7 acres.





While our purpose in this pocket park pamphlet is to highlight our community's stand-alone quiet green spaces, there are a number of spaces in Cambridge that effectively combine active parks and passive ones. Costa Lopez Taylor Park is exemplary because it includes four kinds of spaces: quiet green space, community gardens, a basketball court, and a children's playground.



MIDC CAMBRIDGE



Elm/Hampshire Plaza

On a wintry evening in February 2014, the Community Development Department held the first of two community meetings seeking input into the renovations planned for the small park on the corner of Elm and Hampshire Streets in Mid-Cambridge. The vision for this specific park was presented in the context of the Healthy Parks and Playgrounds Initiative. The task force stressed “different parks for different needs—one size does not fit all!” and the importance of spaces for all ages, allowing for community socializing or simply sitting.



The park ... which is rectangular but with a pointed end ... has a distinguished look due to the fact that the metal design elements are all painted a bright orange red. These include an ornamental fence, twelve chairs, two round tables, and a bureau bookcase/lending library. The ornamental fence, which borders Hampshire Street and a little bit of Elm Street, is not continuous, and so there is an open feel to the front of the park. On the sides toward the back of the park ... next to neighborhood houses ... there is a high chain-link fence that has been painted black. There are some well-established trees close to this fence, including a row of four tall pine trees, but, although there is some grass, the land around them is quite bare, and there is only one metal rocking chair to sit on in this area. The concrete plaza, which faces Hampshire Street, is an obvious place for community events. It contains nine heavy metal chairs and two tables that are hard to move (and most of them appear to be bolted in place), but there is a low, half circular, sitting wall along the interior perimeter that can seat a number of spectators.

The park does not include a playground, but in order to appeal to as many people as possible there is a climbing carousel for children, a bike rack, and five of the metal chairs are rocking chairs. The asphalt paths curving through the center of the plaza are surrounded by attractive landscaping, which includes standing stones, mature trees, younger flowering trees, shrubs, and several flower beds. It is well kept, and lit, and is obviously well loved by many in the neighborhood.





After the opening of the new “more inviting community space” in September 2015, one of the long-term residents of the neighborhood commented in a flier recommending the area to prospective home buyers,

“I drive by the park every day as I come and go from home. I walk through the park nearly as often, as I make my way out the door on foot. Our little pocket park is like a dear old friend. My wife and daughter like to replenish the lending library found here. Myself, I like to keep the park tidy, frequently picking up any trash I find and depositing it in the bin. City living is many things. We feel fortunate that for us it includes this lovely pocket park so close to home. It’s never looked better. We treasure it.”

MID CAMBRIDGE



Franklin Street Park

495 Franklin Street

Located in the Riverside neighborhood of Cambridge, Franklin Street Park is now a small and inviting passive green space (4,400 sq. feet), transformed in 2003 from an unused and mostly concrete-covered lot.

In 1940 the city took the property for back taxes, and the original 1868 house was demolished. The lot was eventually developed as a park/playground in 1947, but it gradually fell into disrepair and was described as a dark and gloomy space, mostly covered in concrete paving.





In 2002 the Cambridge Community Development Department began much-needed plans to transform the park into a small urban oasis. Hearings with neighbors were held to solicit feedback ... increasing safety, incorporating more natural elements, and adding play areas for children as well as wheelchair accessibility were the expressed goals.

Completed in 2003, the park today is a small serene space with many unique features. The City's landscape designer Rob Steck completely transformed this former all-concrete space. The park now slopes gently to the back of the lot with curving paths and curved planting beds, filled with azaleas and bluebells and low ground cover. There are no right angles. The large mature trees were maintained while all natural materials form the surrounding walls. Improvements were also made to the park's lighting for safety, and the furniture and all areas of the park are wheelchair accessible.



Rob worked with local sculptor/artist Murray Dewart to introduce multiple sculptural elements. The park's design is particularly striking and unique due to the imposing granite entry gate. Complementing the massive stone entrance (Kyrie Gate) are two additional art pieces by Murray Dewart mounted on the back and right sides of the stone walls ... Eye of the Buddha and Bright Morning.





The American Society of Landscape Architects bestowed upon the park its Editors Choice Award ... in part for the incorporation of sculptures in the park's design.

There is also a somewhat mysterious metal dome that seems to rise from the ground at the back of the park. This unique half sphere is intentionally surrounded by fake grass. A small water feature in the park provides cooling spray in the summer months. Both these new features offer safe and kid-friendly play opportunities.

To quote a local Cambridge resident, Franklin Park provides "a space for quiet reflection, reading a book, playing a game or watching a child play --- a space with beautiful plantings, shade and visual interest ...an **urban oasis**."



WEST CAMBRIDGE



Garden Street Glen

229 Garden Street

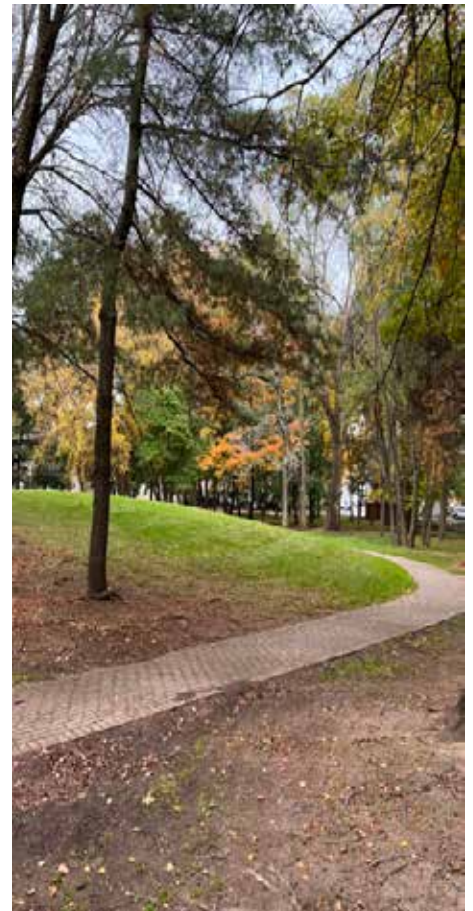
Garden Street Glen was developed from a lot that bordered both the Cambridge City Dump and the tot lot on St. Peter's Field. Not an auspicious start, as prior to St. Peter's Field becoming a recreation field it was a clay pit until 1946, at which time the City took the property by eminent domain. For many years, the area was described as a **"rat-infested area with no trees."**

In the mid-1960s the City developed it as a park, dedicating it to Margaret D. Roethlisberger in 1967. Margaret was long active in civic affairs and after her death, a memorial fund, contributed to by her friends, recognized her work encouraging community betterment. These same community friends, city employees, landscape gardeners, teachers, and neighbors helped to develop this park in Margaret's honor. The park, described as "a testimony to a powerful person and a powerful idea," was founded on the idea of community improvement through cooperative effort. Garden Street Glenn was truly a community effort.



The Glen, as people referred to it, was used as a wonderful neighborhood park resource and retreat for several years, but then in the 1970s suffered from years of neglect as its management in the City was lost between the Recreation Department and the Department of Public Works.

In the 1980s, however, during the design of Danehy Park, the Glen was rejuvenated; it was separated from the 50 acres of Danehy with the understanding that it would provide a quiet, passive space. The very name, Glen, evokes its intention to be a tranquil place.





An important goal of the renovation at Danehy was to integrate art, a goal carried over into Garden Street Glen by using “Floating Stones,” as described by the artist Ed Levine. The intention was to have the stones appear to be “floating in space.”

Garden Street Glen is a perfect example of what the Green Ribbon Open Space Committee wrote of a desired space in their March 2000 report making recommendations to the City for open green space. They wrote:

“We also discussed the effect of park design on the popularity and success of a park. A thoughtful design that includes plantings, public artwork, and shaded pathways can create outdoor “rooms” without requiring substantial space. We strongly advocate including thoughtfully designed passive opportunities whenever and wherever possible.”

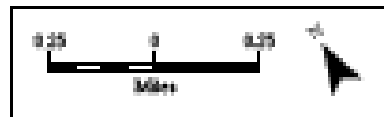
Garden Street Glenn, The Glen, remains a tranquil place, beloved by the neighborhood residents of all ages, which on the face of things may seem difficult to do. Surrounded by playgrounds, basketball courts, and baseball fields at St. Peter’s fields, The Glen is a shady refuge. The surrounding areas, full of sun and ready for sports activity, are juxtaposed with the Glen, where a berm separates it from these parched areas with a virtual arboretum of trees.



Pocket Parks

Cambridge, Massachusetts

November 2004





EAST CAMBRIDGE

Hastings Square

Brookline Street/Henry Street

Hastings Square, also known as Parrow Park, is a lovely pocket park located at the corner of Brookline Street at Henry Street, Cambridge. It consists of 0.7 acres. Edmund Trowbridge Hastings gifted the land to the City of Cambridge in 1857.

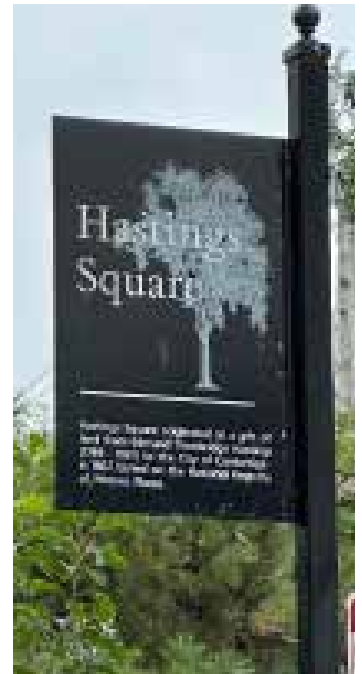
Hastings Square lies within the Hastings Square Historic District, which is listed in the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. The residential properties that abut the park are among some of the finest examples of Queen Anne architecture in the City. These properties were built between 1869 and 1891. The Queen Anne shingle-style house at 302 Brookline Avenue was built in 1887 by Rand & Taylor and the Queen Anne house at 75 Henry Street was designed by Hartwell and Richardson in 1892.



The first park plan is shown in the Atlas of 1894, which shows a 100' by 300' square with a 4' wide concrete sidewalk on the park perimeter. Bordering the sidewalk was a post-and-rail fence. The interior path system divided the park into four equal areas.

A subsequent design plan for the park was submitted in 1898 but was not implemented. In 1901 a revised plan was prepared, proposing walks, plantings, and new fence locations. Wide entrances were designed at each of the four corners of the park. The outstanding characteristic of the 1901 design plan was the massive border of shrubbery surrounding the square, affording seclusion to those sitting on the benches or walking through the square.

Today the park highlights its lovely four equal areas, as defined by intersecting paths forming an X, as well as a wide perennial garden lining Brookline Street, with a mix of bulbs and new and mature trees. There are benches and lighting within the park along with a water bubbler and a water bowl for dogs. The park is accessible on all four sides and has concrete post-and-rail fencing. It is well maintained and new trees are being planted, with the more mature trees being well maintained.





Hastings Square is a community favorite. Here one can sun bathe, walk the dog, practice yoga, tight-rope walk between the trees, picnic, have a birthday party, meet up with friends, and play catch or frisbee. With its well-maintained pathways, vibrant perennial garden, mature trees, and inviting benches, Hastings Square Park offers a peaceful haven for individuals and community seeking a respite or quiet spot to read, take time to oneself, or commune with nature. It is simply a delightful spot.

WEST CAMBRIDGE



Hawthorn Park

Hawthorn & Mt. Auburn

The pocket park at lower Hawthorn (now called Memorial Drive) and Mt. Auburn streets was in an area once called Windmill Hill, a small drumlin near the Charles River. In the 17th century it was the site of a windmill and a boat landing. That part of Hawthorn Street was then called Bath Street, as this early Cambridge road led to a safe bathing place on the river. The imprint of the curve of late 18th-century Bath Street is still evident as a path that forms the south edge of the pocket park. All of this land was part of the Thomas Brattle estate.





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At some point this became City of Cambridge land, which the City deeded to the Commonwealth DCR in 1923. Even so, it has been maintained by the Cambridge DPW for decades. One might call it a City of Cambridge “non-park.” To the DPW staff who have mowed and mulched it, it was called “Dog Park”: not an official name, nor an official park.

The park is a triangular space, less than an acre of grass, with mature canopy trees (oaks, maples, London planes) a cobblestone-bordered planting bed, and two wooden benches. Until 2020 there were only invasive plants and trash trees in the planting bed. The benches were used by dealers to make drug drops. It certainly wasn't a place where Cambridge neighbors stopped for a moment of reflection or respite.





In 2020 Dawn and Jim Dentzer moved into the house next to the park. Dawn is a serious gardener and a nature educator. She wanted to see this rough and tumble triangle become a serene pocket park. Dawn and her neighbors asked DPW garden designer Ellen Coppinger for help. Ellen and Dawn worked together to create a simple garden plan. In 2021 the DPW crew removed the invasives and added new soil to the beds. The City's arborists planted ten small native trees (crabapples, redbuds, and viburnums). Dawn bought native pollinator perennials, got others from neighbors and friends, and happily accepted more plants from DPW. Because Dawn lived next door, she could and did water the garden every day. This was especially essential in 2022, a year of extreme drought. In 2023 Dawn and a DPW intern painted the chain link fencing black. Every fall the DPW provides bulbs for Dawn to plant. By 2021 there were both admiral and monarch butterflies in the garden. The presence of the monarchs was short-lived. Like many Cambridge gardeners, Dawn struggles with an active rabbit population who love to eat her milkweed plants. Other perennials include: veronica, blue flag, wild bergamot, foxglove, iris, asters, penstemon, mountain mint, New York ironweed, and Appalachian sedge. Most of these plants are native to Massachusetts.

Today, in 2024, the garden is three years old. The new trees are filling out and in June and July the many native perennials are in full bloom. It's a quiet verdant corner, a wonderful pocket of a park. It still needs an official name and a City of Cambridge park sign.

WEST CAMBRIDGE



Lowell School Park

283 Mt. Auburn Street

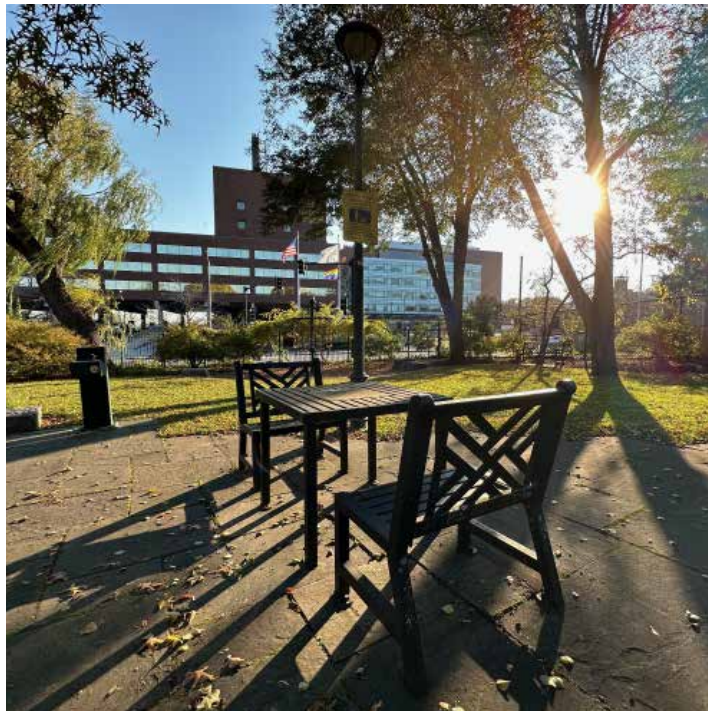
Lowell School Park, named for poet James Russell Lowell (1819-1891), is located at 283 Mt. Auburn St. Cambridge, MA at the intersection of Lowell Street. It sits adjacent to the old Lowell School Building located at 25 Lowell Street. The Lowell School is the only surviving wood-frame school building in the city, built in 1883. It is a two-story structure with a hip roof, clapboard siding and a brick foundation. It was designed by local architect James Fogerty with the assistance of his son George Fogerty.



In 1922 the City procured 22,816 square feet of land adjacent to the Lowell School for playground purposes, much to the chagrin of the neighbors. Efforts to close the school were made in the early 1930s, but it continued to serve varied populations until the early 1970s. Closure of the school and lease to the New School and the Cambridge Art Association in 1978 did not affect the operations of the playground, which continued in use.

In 2003 the Community Development Department sponsored a redesign to create Lowell School Park. Features of the park included a lush, green lawn area, a hard surface area with two basketball backstops, tables and chairs, benches, shaded seating, a children's climbing structure, and an artwork element/sculpture sponsored by the City's Percent-for-Art Ordinance.

The sculpture piece is called "Salmones Salari (The Great Leaper)" by Andreas von Huene, 2004. Andreas often features fish and other animals in his work and one can admire the beautiful salmon fishes at the top and bottom of the circular fountain/water sculpture which allows the water to flow through the fish. A ledge ,which surrounds the circular water feature, allows for sitting.





Nestled in the heart of Cambridge, Lowell School Park is a charming oasis that invites locals and visitors alike, to escape the hustle and bustle of the city. It is an ideal destination for a leisurely stroll amidst the calm of the great outdoors.

Though modest in size, it boasts a tranquil atmosphere ideal for those seeking a retreat for relaxation or recreation. Here one can play, picnic, sun bathe, lunch with friends, play a board game or basketball, read, enjoy nature, paint, and gather together. There is a lovely perennial side garden on the far side of the fence on Mt. Auburn Street, where color abounds. The park is accessible by car (off-street parking is available), bus, or on foot.



EAST CAMBRIDGE



Triangle Park

First Street & Edwin Land Blvd.

At this writing, Triangle Park is the newest pocket park in Cambridge, and one of the most innovative. Built in the past year on three quarters of an acre of “leftover” land surrounded by traffic (donated by Alexandria Real Estate Equities, a major Kendall Square developer), Triangle Park is already functioning as a cool green urban oasis.

The park was designed by Stoss Landscape Urbanism (which has also designed a second urban green space, the nearby Binney Street Park currently under construction), and includes nearly 400 newly planted trees, including a “Miyawaki-style” micro-forest. A Miyawaki forest is a type of urban forest that plants native plant species very close together so they compete for sunlight and water, causing them to grow quickly and densely, rapidly boosting biodiversity and climate resilience. Cambridge’s first “Miyawaki Forest” is planted in Danehy Park, the first to be established in the entire Northeast.



Here in Triangle Park the micro-forest is planted on an elevated berm, which provides both visual and aural protection from busy Land Boulevard. An outdoor stage is buffered from Binney Street by a grassy sloped lawn. The third side of the triangle is open to an urban retail/restaurant block. Within this protected area, well-designed seating walls, tables, and chairs make for an inviting passive park.

In line with the City's Urban Forest Master Plan, the elevated berm is planted with a variety of trees including shagbark hickory, black oak, and hackberry, along with a great variety of ground cover. On the inner side of the berm, there are terraced areas of grasses, bounded by long stone benches. To the north are more tree varieties, including American hornbeam, American smoke tree, and arborvitae. The southern tip of the triangle features an unusual swale which includes dawn redwoods, birch, and other varieties, and is designed to absorb storm water. The central plaza features multi-stem river birch and Kentucky coffee trees, planted within alternating paces of black and white gravel.





Triangle Park and the design team led by STOSS Landscape Urbanism were recognized by the Boston Society of Landscape Architects (BSLA) with a 2024 BSLA Honor Award in the General Design category.

In its first year, this urban “forest” already appears dense and welcoming, and over time should add significant canopy to this very dense area of Cambridge.

NORTH CAMBRIDGE



Trolley Square Park

Cameron Ave & Massachusetts Ave

The green spaces at the corners of Mass. Ave and Cameron Ave. are actually two pocket parks—Trolley Square Park and Attorney George W. Spartichino Park. Together, they form a waypoint for bikes and pedestrians before crossing Massachusetts Avenue, and also a connecting link for two major area bike paths: the Alewife Linear Park and the Somerville Community Path, both created over the Red Line from Davis Square to Alewife.





Spartichino Park is a small, green triangle with benches, plantings, and an appropriately placed Blue Bike rack. Trolley Square Park, directly across Cameron Avenue is an oasis of small, quiet seating clusters combining landscaping for housing built on the site of the former MBTA Trolley Yard, outdoor dining space for the adjoining café, and public space abutting the bike path.

Trolley Square Park occupies the site of the electric trolley bus house built in 1979, which itself replaced the original street car house built in 1874. In 2006 this facility was moved to another site. The area was in need of housing, and many residents felt a need for additional green space as part of the area revival. The housing development went through many stages, including checking the trolley property for possible contaminants which were not found.

The housing that was subsequently built (Trolley Square Apartments) was designed for mixed-income and mixed-use and included retail space. While the Spartichino Park across Cameron Avenue was an extension of the bike paths, the new Trolley Square Park feels like its own park with trees, plantings, a flower garden, benches, and tables with mixed levels of seating, all creating a restful atmosphere. One can even order food and drink from the adjacent small restaurant.



This important sense of enclosure in Trolley Square Park is enhanced by a 28-foot-long curvilinear sculpture, “Water Wall,” created by artist Nancy Selvage. Cambridge Arts Public Art program, which commissioned the sculpture in 2007, describes it as “evoking waves and the play of light,” and by using layers of perforated steel, it “shelters visitors from the noisy intersection and animates the streetscape.”

Combined with the Spartichino Park, what might have been a mere bike intersection became a peaceful urban oasis.

MID CAMBRIDGE



Quincy Square Park

Intersection of Quincy Street,
Harvard Street, and Mass. Ave.

“It’s 8:00 am on Saturday. I just walked past Quincy Square and it was shining like a jewel ... and the patterns of the various structures of the trees were absolutely wonderful. It was so unexpected to find this park to be such a continuing joy ...”

In 1997, after five years of planning and community outreach and with some unexpected funding, Quincy Square became a charming pocket park, described as “a garden oasis.” Being described as a garden oasis was a significant challenge to achieve because, before its pocket park status, Quincy Square fronted a gas station.

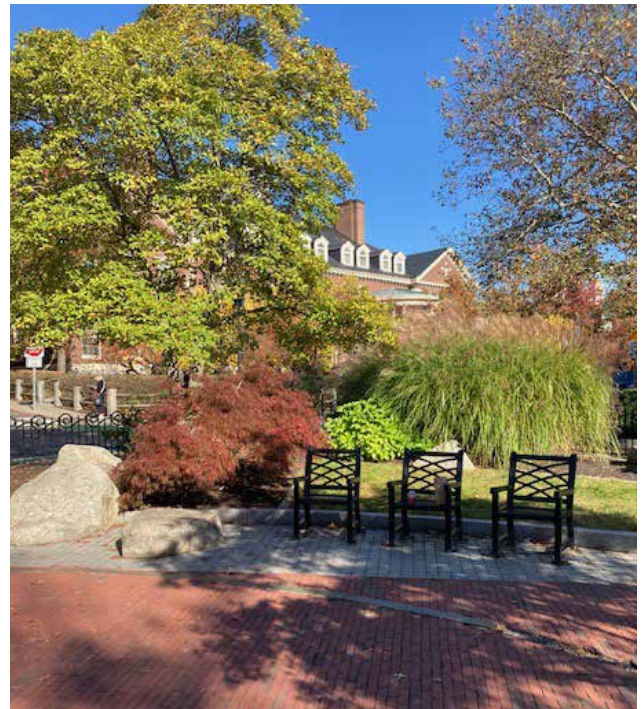


The square is named for Josiah Quincy, who was president of Harvard College, a member of the Massachusetts Senate, speaker of the House of Representatives, and as mayor of Boston. He was known for modernizing government and instituting urban renewal. Quincy Square Park is a fitting example of urban renewal.

The renovation of the park was considered quite a change from its history as a gas station, the location having been described as “very unfriendly to pedestrians—a sea of asphalt—with shoals of white stripes.”

Placed at the intersection(s) of Massachusetts Avenue and Harvard, Quincy and Bow streets, the high density of traffic surrounding the space made design of the park a challenge. Required sewer work through the space further complicated and delayed the project but also helped to fund it.

One of the major goals of the design was for the park to be a gateway to both Harvard Square and Harvard Yard. It provides a meeting point or a resting spot, for the many pedestrians who pass through here, away from all the traffic on these three busy, main streets heading into and out of Harvard Square.



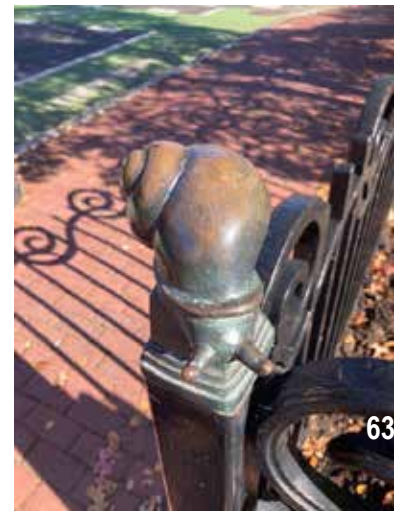
Improving pedestrian traffic through this space was prioritized and artfully considered. Landscape architect Craig Halvorson collaborated with artist David Phillips to create “a spiral foot-print”. Curved brick walls and moon-shaped crescents of granite were combined to create the spiral, a design inspired by the chambered nautilus and the concept of the golden mean or ratio. The Greek spiral proportioning system was used to design Greek temples and employed by many architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Being aware of this in the design, you will see many curves in the space, including the spirals built into the fencing along the road and snails cast in bronze serving as finials. It was said of the design, “it’s hard to say where art stops and the landscape architecture picks up.”



Although Quincy Square is at the center of three of the busiest streets in Cambridge, surrounded by traffic, there is a quiet, peacefulness in the space. It is a perfect space to perch and watch all the comings and goings without being a part of it.



The details built into this “golden mean” design show the care taken with the design. The curves in the planting beds and hardscape, the snails on the fence with an intricate, curved design, small, curved lines through the hardscape using varied materials, and a sculpture showing the spiral of a Nautilus.



Two large oak trees flank the main entrance with magnolias further in the park. A sycamore tree elegantly stands alone against the building. The large trees are surrounded by flowering perennials and shrubs.

During a short visit there, two individuals, at different times, were meditating in the park; so, although some of the curved plantings have not survived the original design, leaving it a bit more exposed, park goers still come to meditate and rest in this small oasis.

WEST CAMBRIDGE

Winthrop Square Park

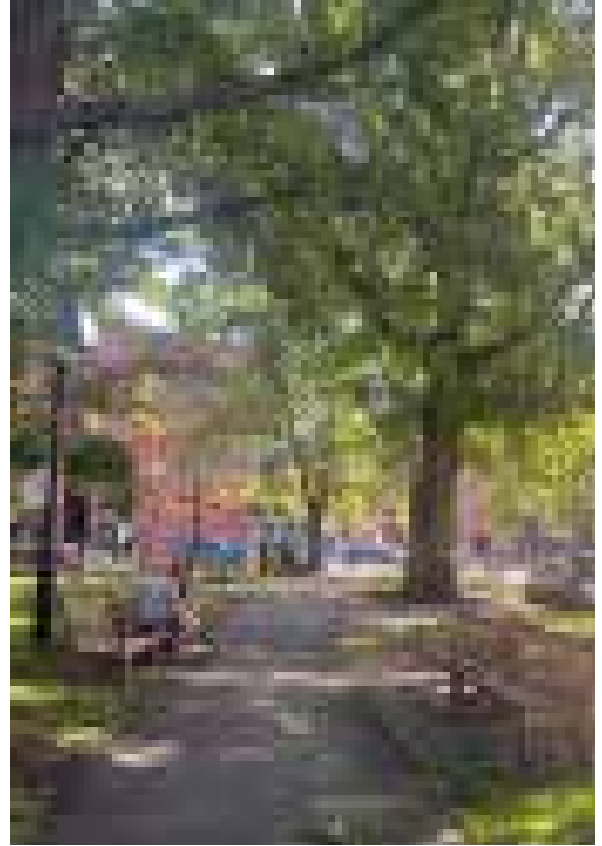
83 Winthrop Street

Winthrop Square Park, located at 83 Winthrop Street in Cambridge, with its green grass, benches, and pathways, sits in the middle of busy Harvard Square. It is an historic park that started out as a house lot assigned back in 1630 to Sir Richard Saltonstall, an English colonist. Despite receiving a land grant of over 500 acres, Saltonstall decided to leave Newtowne, also known as Cambridge, because of the harsh winters. He returned to England in 1631 without ever occupying the lot, never to return to Cambridge.

In 1635, records indicate that the house lot became the site of the town market. The marketplace was an important part of town life. The mansion of an early governor was on the east side and the town jail was on the west side. The use of the square as a town market continued until 1812, when a town market building was erected at a close-by location. It is to be noted that with the completion of bridges to Boston in 1793 and 1809, trade was eventually drawn away to villages in Cambridgeport and East Cambridge.

Into the 1820s Old Cambridge slowly began to transform itself into the historic center of the town. In 1834, residents petitioned for a permanent enclosure of the park and Winthrop Square Park was formally dedicated as a public park. It was likely named after Professor John Winthrop, an eminent mathematician and astronomer who lived nearby.

The initial layout of the park, with its diagonal paths, elm trees, and granite post-and-rail fence, was maintained until 1896. At that time, Cambridge hired Frederick Law Olmsted's firm to design a small park at the site which featured a semi-circular path and a fence, open only to Boylston Street, creating a landscaped garden designed for quiet reflection rather than an open common for through passage. A gardener was initially assigned to maintain the plantings but the level of care needed could not be sustained and the park declined. By the 1970s, Winthrop Square Park was enclosed by a chain link fence and suffered from neglect.



A plan to restore the park was implemented in 1985 and completed in 1987. A lane of traffic from JFK Street was recaptured to restore the earlier dimensions of the park.

Currently, the Winthrop Square Park Trust, a not-for-profit corporation, oversees a vigorous maintenance program with an endowment that enables it to continue to care for the park for the enjoyment of visitors.

The park itself is relatively small but well designed, featuring a blend of green spaces, walking paths, and seating areas. Upon entering, visitors are greeted by a canopy of mature trees that provide shade and a sense of tranquility. The pathways meander through carefully landscaped gardens, showcasing seasonal blooms and plantings.

Winthrop Square Park offers several seating options for visitors to relax and unwind. Benches are strategically placed throughout the park, providing comfortable spots to read a book, enjoy a coffee, or simply people watch. The park's open layout also accommodates various recreational activities such as picnicking, music, yoga, or leisurely strolls.

Throughout the year, Winthrop Square Park hosts a variety of community events and gatherings. These may include seasonal festivals, outdoor concerts, or public art exhibitions. Such events contribute to the park's role as a social hub within the neighborhood, fostering a sense of community and engagement among residents.

Adjacent to the park, visitors will find an array of local amenities, including cafes, restaurants, and boutique shops. This proximity allows park-goers to easily grab a bite to eat or explore the surrounding area before or after their visit to Winthrop Square Park.



MORE

Pocket Parks



Brattle Square South

One can sit in this busy square alone or with friends. In addition to tables and chairs, trees, plants and walls protecting one from the traffic, there are very large sculptures. According to Art Outdoors, the towering brick monument, entitled Gateway to Knowledge, by artist Ann Weaver Norton, has been in Brattle Street Square since 1983. The monument's two pillars are meant to represent knowledge and education. In 2022 and 2023, sculptures by Bob Smith of Minimum Wage Art were added to Brattle Street Square.



Charles Park

50 Edward H. Land Boulevard

Charles Park was originally created as part of the East Cambridge Riverfront Plan responsible for the CambridgeSide Galleria. The park's winding paths, shaded by many trees, plentiful benches, and old-fashioned park lamps, provide a peaceful oasis for MIT Kendall Square and East Cambridge residents and a green respite for tired mall shoppers.



Longfellow Park

5 Longfellow Park

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's children donated the land of Longfellow Park to the City of Cambridge as a memorial to their father. With its lush plantings and trees, and many places to sit view the Charles River, the serenity of this park makes it one of the most treasured places in Cambridge to rest and enjoy nature.



Market Street Park

90 Bristol Street

This quintessential neighborhood park, tucked into the corner of Market and Bristol streets, offers places to sit under shady trees, a landscaped plaza, and a playground for children. In one small space, Market Street Park offers residents of all ages peace, quiet and a place to play.

New Riverside Neighborhood Park Intersection, Memorial Drive and Western Avenue

This little park was created in 2010 as the result of an agreement among the City of Cambridge, Harvard University, and the Riverside neighborhood. With many sitting areas, a water feature, careful landscaping, pathways, and an open grassy area, the park testifies to the value of citizen participation and enlightened institutional cooperation.



Squirrel Brand Park Broadway and Boardman streets

When the owner of the Squirrel Brand Company died, the future of the building and the community garden along Broadway was uncertain. Neighbors lobbied to save the community garden and in 2002, when Just A Start redeveloped the building for affordable housing, the City of Cambridge bought the land and divided it into a small park and community garden. Still graced with the iconic pink climbing rose draped over the archway designed by Bart Uchida and fabricator Tom Whitney, Squirrel Brand Park preserves the green respite of peace and quiet so necessary in this busy part of the City.



Velucci Park Corner of Cambridge Street and RR Tracks

This minute jewel tucked along the busy thoroughfare of Cambridge Street, close to Millers River Apartments, was originally designed by Carol Johnson Associates as part of the Cambridge Street project many years ago. The small open space is surrounded by beautiful white birch trees shading the benches that circle the park. More recently, the family of Peter A. Velluci, Sr. dedicated a small memorial stone in front of the flower bed.



McMath Park 97 Pemberton Street

McMath Park adjoins the McMath Community Garden and a nearby tennis court. Across the street is a tot lot and a large sports field. Amidst all this activity, the little park offers a peaceful place to rest, read, or visit with neighbors. Its mature trees shade benches and tables; paths circle small open grassy spaces; and bushes and other plantings provide the green boundaries that define the space.



Fully integrate pocket park importance and goals into the open space plan.

In 2023, the City of Cambridge updated the open space plan with ‘Our Parks, Our Plan: Parks and Open Space Plan 2023-2030.’ The updated plan differentiates between active and passive activities and speaks about spaces where citizens can “spend time alone.” Regarding one goal it goes on to say, “Not every park space makes sense to activate all the time. Part of the benefit of parks is the opportunity for quiet retreat or a calm space.”

In the map of Cambridge parks, pocket parks have not been differentiated or highlighted; we heard from the city that the focus was on active, playful parks. We would like more attention paid to these incredibly valuable and important spaces we are calling pocket parks. Nature, however experienced, is important to health and well-being in a way that has been documented and reported in many scientific journals and taken to heart in many major cities, including New York and Boston. We want Cambridge to join them.

Utilize more tiny, dilapidated spaces in Cambridge to create pocket parks.

Goal B of the open space plan states, “Explore feasibility of pocket parks and similar small spaces through right-of-way-recapture.” We cannot emphasize enough the importance of parks within each community. When we developed a listing of the 21 parks that we determined to be pocket parks, as we highlighted in this pamphlet, we noticed holes in the city where no such park exists. Central Square and Mid-Cambridge are particularly bereft of pocket parks. Since there is a city initiative to put vacant lots in Central Square to use, we encourage using some of these spaces to build new pocket parks. Affordable housing is, of course, listed as a priority for any available space, but small parks can be incorporated into the design of affordable housing projects. The open space plan goes on to state, “we can also look at land we already own and how we can use it better.” The integration of pocket parks within new developments would benefit the health of the community living nearby, achieving two goals at once.

Sign the pledge to make Cambridge a 10-minute walk to a park city.

The open space plan describes the results of a survey that revealed that most people go to a park by walking or biking, an indication that location to one's own home is important. The plan also states, "even small pockets of nature can be beneficial," - a sentiment we agree with wholeheartedly.

One goal of the open space plan is to improve accessibility to open space and make open space more equitable throughout the City. We, therefore, recommend the City sign the Trust for Public Land's 10-minute walk commitment. The Trust for Public Land shows disparities in access to the outdoors. As previously stated, they found neighborhoods that are the most populous had "access to an average of 43 percent less park acreage than predominantly white neighborhoods." The Trust urges all cities to sign a pledge to ensure all residents have a park within 10 minutes of their homes, and the importance of nature, of any kind, to health and well-being. We encourage the City of Cambridge to sign this pledge as Boston has already done.

Care for the existing trees and plantings and plant both new trees and more diversified green shrubbery and native plants.

An important goal of the open space plan is to continue to implement the City's Urban Forest Master Plan and to focus on planting more trees in low-canopy neighborhoods. We recommend the City first evaluate the health of the trees in these small pocket parks to inform itself on which trees grow in stressful situations, and thus to be guided on which species are the best to plant in low-canopy neighborhoods. The Urban Forest Master Plan also aims to plant more trees and to keep existing trees healthy as a critical respite from heat and air pollution. In addition to these environmental and equity considerations, trees and other plantings should be selected and placed to consciously increase the sense of enclosure, to enhance the peaceful state of mind that close plantings of different greenery brings, and to provide a barrier from noise. Chairs, benches, and low walls, should be strategically placed to accommodate both solitude and neighborliness. We also strongly encourage the use of water—small waterfalls, fountains, pools—be considered as part of new installations.





Respect the design of and artwork within existing pocket parks and those yet to be built.

Another goal of the open space plan is to “Bring creativity, arts, and culture to parks and public spaces.” It goes on to say, “City law requires that one percent of construction costs for City park projects go towards public art.” We encourage the use of these funds in even the smallest of spaces, close to neighborhoods that would appreciate and respect them. We commend the work of Cambridge Arts, which is responsible for so much of our City’s beautiful art work, and especially the care taken by the Council to ensure that the artists engage with the community and are sensitive to the character of the location.

Utilize these small parks for educational purposes

Data shows the importance of the connection between humans and nature; these small parks could be used to help educate the community on the species of trees planted in them.

A goal of the open space plan is to “highlight opportunities for learning and community building.” By providing information about the trees in these small spaces, such as labeling tree species or providing QR codes in the park to reference plant species, communities could learn more about the different species of trees that are so valuable to the City’s overall health. Experiencing the trees up close instead of from afar along with knowing what each tree species is and the benefits it provides, may bring a new appreciation for the intent of the Urban Forest Master Plan and why the city’s significant investment in each community is so important.

The parks with an abundance of tree species, such as Garden Street Glen, could be used as an educational center for the surrounding community and schools.

Find community stewardship to monitor and report on maintenance to ensure the space is kept clean and safe.

A citizen, City, or dual task force could be created to be the “boots on the ground” and give recommendations for improvements that could be made to existing parks. The Cambridge Plant & Garden Club, having scoured all the parks, could provide individual park recommendations if desired.

Further education about Commonwealth Connect could allow citizens to report maintenance needs or other issues within their neighborhood parks. Signage could help communicate the importance of neighborhood monitoring.

The open space plan also talks about establishing volunteer stewardship opportunities in landscape areas as well as an “adopt a bed” program. Again, our club would welcome a discussion about how we might participate in these stewardship efforts.

In making these recommendations, the pocket park committee members are speaking only for ourselves. We do not represent the City of Cambridge, nor the full membership of the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club. We feel, however, secure in the applicability of our recommendations, first because of the support and guidance we have received from leaders in the City’s Department of Public Works and Community Development Department, and secondly, because almost all our recommendations have already been made in the City of Cambridge’s Open Space Plan 2023-2030.

We specifically want to thank Ellen Coppinger from the Department of Public Works, and Gary Chan, Brendan Monroe and Rob Steck from the Community Development Department. From the Cambridge Historical Commission, we are grateful to Sarah Burks who made available historical records of the parks referenced here. Thanks also to Alyssa Pacy from the Cambridge Public Libraries Cambridge Room, for her time and technical support in accessing the digital databases of the Historic Cambridge Newspaper Collection and the Boston Globe.

We have had the benefit of the leadership and support of Kate Thompson, co-chair of the Garden History & Design Committee, of which our committee is a part. Finally, two years ago, the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club initiated what became an official Policy Order advocating for Open Space, voted on and approved at the June 14, 2022, meeting of the Cambridge City Council. Thus, in advocating for pocket parks, we believe we are only affirming the stated values of our City and our club.



CONCLUSION

While we traveled around Cambridge experiencing each park, we saw how wonderful these spaces were intended to be when first designed. We could also look at the large trees and thank the foresight of those who planted all the unique species for future enjoyment. We got a sense of how the surrounding community utilized these spaces and saw people meditating, sitting and talking, parents with children, or simply sitting and enjoying a bit of quiet in this busy city. These spaces are valued.

We saw, and see, the potential of these spaces and hope the city will continue to value these parks as they commit to implementing the open space plan. Some of these parks feel a bit left behind, designed with great exuberance and intention but now show wear and tear. We see the bones of these great designs and hope the city will invest to maintain them at their best. Without a clear demonstration that it is cared for, a space often falls to undesirable use, the community then feeling it would be better off without that space. Each year some of these spaces should be prioritized, not for rebuild but for renewal.

In the recent CityView Newsletter, there is a letter from the City Manager explaining the priorities for the recent budget. Although small parks are never mentioned, we think that they intersect with many of the issues put forward, such as, climate resilience with a focus on the preservation and revitalization of public spaces. Making sure these spaces are well maintained and welcoming is critical. In addition, the importance placed on trees in abating the effects of climate change should be applied to these tiny spaces.





Other priorities of the budget are Vision Zero and equity. We live in a community dedicated to making the streets safer for all. Safety and equity are two great reasons why Cambridge should sign the pledge to ensure there is park space within a 10-minute walk for all citizens. Given the grand ideas for some of the larger parks, we would like more emphasis to be placed on the smaller parks in existence and those yet to be created from current dilapidated sites. It was clear that emphasis had been placed on locating these little gems in certain areas of the City and it should be a priority to make park access equitable. The whole “invention” of the pocket park was from the need for park space with limited land availability. Triangle Park is a great example of utilizing a previously neglected space between busy streets. We hope the city will use that great success to springboard the development of more small spaces around in the communities that need them most. Nature is healing, no matter how small, especially for those growing up in the city who never experience anything other than pavement. The City should be dedicated to ensuring all communities have a space to experience nature, no matter how small.

We live in a great city and are lucky to have a budget that allows for creative solutions. We encourage the City to include present and future pocket parks in thinking about the success and investment of each community.

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