

## HERTER PARK (8S)

*Soldiers Field Road between Eliot Bridge and the Richard T. Artesani Playground*

### KEY RESOURCES

- Site of Charles River Speedway (1899)
- Publick Theatre island (1959)
- Herter Center (1959)
- Community gardens
- Richard T. Artesani Playground and spray fountain (1962, rebuilt 2000)

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### INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The Charles River Speedway, an oval track and promenade for horse-drawn vehicles, was located within this section of the Basin. Built on the marshes of Brighton between North Beacon Street and Western Avenue, The Speedway encompassed ninety acres, with a shore frontage of two miles. Now named Herter Park in honor of Christian Herter—a former Massachusetts governor, United States secretary of state, and champion of the environment—it is the largest section of open parkland in the Basin.

The park serves as common ground to an ethnically diverse population from nearby neighborhoods. Herter Park is a popular destination for drivers, especially older people, who come to park and enjoy the views. Its large parking lot and open paths make it a prime place to learn inline skating and bicycle riding. Skaters and cyclists begin and end trips through the reservation at this point. Better links to an improved path along Greenough Boulevard (see segment 8N) will make this the best skating loop in the Basin.

One of the most popular activities at Herter Park is family picnicking. On sunny weekends, the demand far exceeds the limited number of picnic tables and seating clusters. Pickup volleyball is the most common activity on the east side of the park; the small-scale open spaces surrounded by trees prevent larger field games from using the space. Other common activities include sunbathing on open grassy areas, fishing, and canoeing from the rental facility. The Artesani Playground at Herter Park has recently undergone a full reconstruction.

Herter Park is the finish line for two of the biggest water sport events in the U.S., the Head of the Charles Regatta and Run of the Charles canoe and kayak race. Smaller special events, such as walkathons and corporate picnics, also take place here. The MDC has deliberately limited the size and number of special events at Herter Park to protect this area for family use.

The creation of the Metropolitan Boston Art Center in the 1950s on a moat-surrounded island was, though a bold vision, at odds with the original concept of the Charles River Reservation as an open-space amenity. The Center housed both a summer theatre and the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA). The Publick Theatre company has staged productions on the island for thirty years, and it continues to entertain hundreds of patrons each summer. The Herter Center, built as a museum, for a time fulfilled that intent as the original home of the ICA, but poor location and low attendance finally closed it. It is used as office and archive space for the Sports Museum of New England.

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**EXISTING CONDITION  
AND ISSUES**

Herter Park accommodates a number of facilities and uses. Poor design leaves some areas of the park underused and others overcrowded. The current maintenance regime is not suited to the use the park experiences. Trash pickup in particular is a problem: barrels are overflowing after heavy weekend use.



The narrow sidewalk along the parkway crosses several entrances to the parking lot and is close to high-speed traffic; it is seldom used. The main pathway through the park is part of the Dr. Paul Dudley White bike path and is shared by all. There are frequent conflicts on the path, especially at the boardwalk in front of the island. Joggers generally have abandoned the paved pathway set back from the shore and have worn dirt paths close to the water.

The boardwalk that crosses the moat is one of the most popular areas of Herter Park for sitting and fishing. It is also one of the worst pinch points in the Basin. People love to fish off the boardwalk or dangle their feet over the side. The boardwalk also carries almost all of the foot and wheeled traffic passing through Herter Park, making it the site of frequent conflicts. The railing facing the moat is in poor condition, with no cross bracing and loosened deck bolts. There is also serious erosion at the bridge approaches.

The boardwalk functions both as a bridge and as a boat landing. In its current form, the landing is only suitable for large craft. It is too high above the water for small boats to tie up. There is insufficient clearance under the boardwalk for canoes or kayaks to reach the moat.

The main parking lot at Herter Park is a vast, undifferentiated expanse of asphalt. It is more than two feet lower than the shore, which reduces its visual impact but creates serious drainage problems. Large puddles form in the lot's low points after a heavy rain. The lot is full only during peak events like the Run of the Charles, the Head of the Charles, and Harvard football games; otherwise, it is rarely more than two-thirds full. Circulation patterns are confusing. There is insufficient distinction between space dedicated to cars and space dedicated to pedestrians.

Although the idea of an island theater remains appealing, the Publick Theatre is largely invisible and suffers from low attendance. Park users on the boardwalk cannot see the island and the moat. Because there is only one access bridge the island is a dead end and feels unsafe. Excessive use of asphalt, the rusted, chipped seating, the broken path lighting, and the wooden utility poles degrade what should be a lovely setting. The steep slope on the south side of the island is littered with fallen branches and is not well maintained. The moat is stagnant, silted in, and choked with branches and leaf litter.



The Publick Theatre has operated on a small budget for years and has not been able to afford adequate storage or rehearsal facilities. Old sets and a group of trailers used for storage mar the appearance of the island.

The Herter Center is a modernist structure with an external steel skeleton and plate-glass windows. It bridges the moat at the second floor and is accessible from both the island and the park. Added elements—including the solar panels, a storage shed on the east side, excessive asphalt, and the unattractive underside of the bridge with its utility lines—mar the clean appearance of this building. The center is used as office and archive space for the off-site New England Sports Museum, a use with no programmatic relation to the island or the reservation. Offices and small bathrooms are located on the ground floor. A large upstairs room is used as archival space. The building is difficult to heat and has been retrofitted with solar panels in an effort to address this problem. With its compelling design, location, and splendid views, Herter Center represents a unique opportunity for renewed public use.

The two community gardens in the reservation are west of the island. One garden is poorly sited, crowds the edge of the moat, and takes up valuable land near the river. This public garden has a more cluttered

appearance than some, such as those in the Southwest Corridor Park. New fences that should have given a sense of order and coherence to the site were not set back sufficiently to allow for a landscaped edge

along public paths. Screening the visual clutter of garden sheds and equipment should be a priority. The gardening activity helps to animate this part of Herter Park, and provides a degree of public safety.

Along the shore zone east of the island, massive willow trees, some of them partially fallen, provide wonderful opportunities for play and relaxation. The added maintenance these uses create for these weak-wooded trees is worth it, although they are reaching the end of their lives. The open fields here are used intensively for volleyball and other informal uses. These broad expanses of lawn close to the river are prone to flooding in spring. The fringe of unkempt vegetation along much of the shore screens the river from view. Park furniture consists of aggregate benches and tables in clusters. They are intensively used despite their poor condition.



The shore zone west of the island does not have the drainage problems of the east area. A hodgepodge of elements dominates the landscape. Too many paths come too close to the shore and enhance erosion. Visually intrusive power lines surface in the parking lot and run on wooden utility poles to the landing and island, where they return below ground. Transformers and utilitarian streetlights are suspended from these poles. Numerous benches on the east side are in poor condition. The thick granite block armoring the banks has fallen apart in many places and needs to be reset or removed in favor of a different shoreline treatment.



## GOALS

- Support and encourage the diversity of users.
- Maintain the rich mix of activities made possible by the flexible design of Herter Park. Avoid single-use facilities that are unrelated to the park setting.
- Unify the disparate park elements into a coherent whole with the river landscape prevailing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve the drainage of the eastern half of Herter Park. Improve surface runoff by cutting drainage swales to the shore or burying perforated drainage pipes in the field to conduct water to the river. Raise and crown the paths and parking lots to allow proper drainage. A more effective and expensive approach would be to use clean fill to raise the entire eastern section of the park by a couple of feet, laying perforated drain lines. This approach would sacrifice existing trees and require replanting and resurfacing of the entire area.
- Crown and improve the drainage of the three small parking lots when they require resurfacing. Provide additional parking in the westernmost lot.
- Redesign the main parking lot to break up its size and improve drainage. The parkland between the lot and the river should be gently bermed to screen the massive lot. Add landscaping to improve the lot's appearance, provide shade, and divide it into areas for flexible uses (see below). While this would reduce the number of available parking spaces, special event and weekend parking on Soldiers Field Road would more than compensate during periods of peak use. Simplify the confusing and redundant entry drives. Provide short-term parking facing the river for people who wish to sit and look at the Charles without leaving their cars. Accommodate long-term parking further back from the river.



A DETAIL OF THE CONCEPTUAL DESIGN FOR HERTER PARK, WHICH WOULD SIMPLIFY SOME OF THE PATHS ALONG THE RIVER. THE PHOTO BELOW SHOWS THE EXISTING CONDITIONS.



- Eliminate extraneous paths, especially east of the island. Move paths back from the shoreline to prevent erosion. Create separate, parallel pathways for foot and wheeled traffic to reduce conflicts among users. Install ramps and yield signs at all curb cuts along the parkway path to accommodate bicycle traffic.
- Maintain the open, pastoral character of Herter Park with open lawn running down to the edge of the water. Introduce visual variety by carefully placing shrubs and trees to frame views. Expand the palette of plants, and add a limited number of new evergreens. Modulate the alignment of trees along the water to a more curving and naturalistic form. Preserve the distinctive willow trees in Herter Park and plant new willows to replace those that are dying. Discourage the use of cherry trees, which are out of character with the park.
- Construct additional family picnic spots and provide a few dedicated trashcans for barbecue coals. Preserve the small-scale open spaces suitable for volleyball and other informal uses but not for large field sports.

- Permit skateboarders and stunt bikers, displaced by the reconstruction of the playground, to take over a portion of the parking lot during certain times of the week. Skateboarders offer great entertainment to park visitors and their activities should be supported in appropriate locations. Because it would intrude on the reservation, a permanent skateboard park is not recommended here. Inline skaters could use the parking lot as a dance area, and in the winter the area could be flooded and used as an outdoor ice-skating rink. Special construction would be needed to support an outdoor ice rink. Volunteers, or The Skating Club of Boston in partnership with the MDC, could take responsibility for the rink operation and rental concession.

- Develop a proper stage, possibly covered, and storage facility for Publick Theatre props and sets. Remove the existing storage containers as soon as an alternative facility has been found.
- Expand programming at the island amphitheater to include music and outdoor films. Allow other performing groups to share the space when the Publick Theatre is not actively using it.
- Explore opportunities for a rich horticultural display on the island and the possibility that a volunteer organization could plant and maintain it. Such a display should be compatible with the theatre and the potentially large crowds it may draw in the future.

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- Clear and grub the shoreline shrubs surrounding the island and replace them with low, ornamental, water-loving plants. This sort of planting would reveal the island and the moat. Dredge the moat and encourage water circulation by means of a fountain. Replace the boardwalk with a gently arched bridge to provide access to the moat for canoes and kayaks.
- Move the public landing slightly upriver to allow State Police and private boats continued use.

- Make the island more accessible by adding an additional pedestrian bridge. Appropriately designed lockable gates at entrances would control access at night and protect the island landscape.

- Provide public programming in the Herter Center that takes direct advantage of the river setting and theater space and benefits park users. Future use should be self-supporting and contribute to the structure's restoration and upkeep. Possible uses include an environmental education program or an MDC Park Ranger station. Park Rangers could lead nature walks to restored areas in Herter West and Hell's Half Acre, working with visiting classes on environmental issues. A part-time educational and special events coordinator could handle outreach to public schools and manage public events at Herter Center.

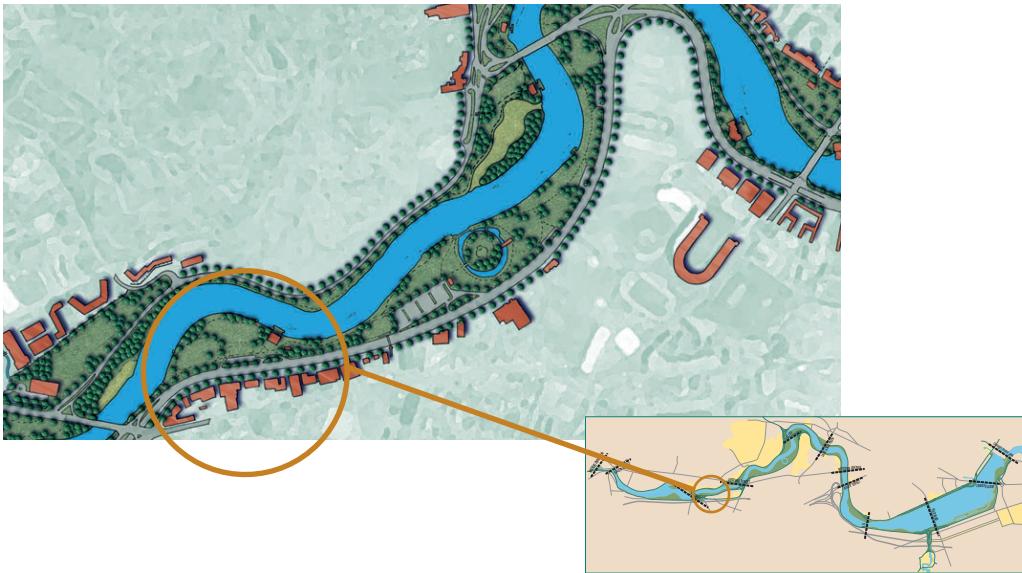
The park facilities must be available for public functions.

Allow occasional private uses to generate income within guidelines set by the MDC. A cafe featuring river views could be located in a portion of the building.



- Consider establishing a multiuse "parkhouse" between the large parking lot and the island to house a number of greatly needed park amenities including a food concession, public phone, and public restrooms. The parkhouse could also house a maintenance facility for the island and community gardens, general storage for the park, and a ticket booth for the theater. The existing Herter Center building would not be appropriate for these uses because of its layout and location.

- Move the community gardens back from the edge of the Charles and permit them to expand toward Soldiers Field Road.** Provide a tool shed, water supply, and a restroom in association with the proposed parkhouse. Enclose the gardens with an attractive fence set back from the path edge to allow ornamental plantings along the outside. Plaques on the fence could help interpret the garden for children. The gardens might provide educational garden plots for the public in conjunction with Herter Center programs.
- Reset the existing granite armoring with a deeper footing on a gentler slope in order to maintain an open turf edge down to the shore and to prevent erosion.** This will require grubbing out the shrubs and grading back the steep shore slope in places. Supplement the existing pebble beaches with additional coarse stone for stabilization and better launch sites for canoes and kayaks.



## HERTER PARK WEST (8S)

*Soldiers Field Road between the Richard T. Artesani Playground and the Arsenal Street Bridge*

### KEY RESOURCES

- Site of Charles River Speedway (1899)
- Speedway headquarters and maintenance yard (1899)
- Arsenal Street Bridge (1925)
- Henderson Boathouse, Northeastern University (1989)

### INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The Speedway, a 1.75-mile broad walk and race track for horse-drawn carriages, was completed in 1899, drawing crowds for three decades. Part of the Speedway has long since been replaced by Soldiers Field Road, but the Speedway headquarters building remains at the intersection of Soldiers Field Road and Western Avenue. Designed by the firm of Stickney and Austin and completed in 1899, this structure is currently used by the