

Symphony *Neighborhood*

the once and future city



It's all about location...

Water, water everywhere...

the evolving body

all the puzzle pieces

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Matthew A. Ciborowski

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PART 1

PART 2

PART 3

PART 4

Location

Processes

History

Future

Having grown up in and around Boston, I am very familiar with many neighborhoods and historical sites around the city. When faced with the decision of what site to study for this semester's class, I wanted to find someplace that interested me but that I had not spent a lot of time – no small task! During last semester, I accidentally discovered this area near Symphony Hall while doing a report on Christian Science Plaza; I got hungry and walked down Huntington Street for some food. What I discovered was a vibrant and varied neighborhood quaintly tucked in between two of Boston's most famous landmarks.



What I have deemed for the time being “Symphony Neighborhood” is a blend of mixes and cultures. The site is bordered on the south by Huntington Street, on the north by The Fens, on the west by Forsyth St., Speare Pl. and Opera Pl, and on the east by Massachusetts Avenue and Westland Avenue. Within the bounds of the neighborhood, sits Boston Symphony Hall, as well as residential buildings, Northeastern University dorms and classrooms, as well as small shops and businesses. Perhaps just as interesting are what sits just across the road boundaries I have picked. Across Huntington is the majority of Northeastern University, as well as New England Conservatory and two MTBA rail lines. To the west, the Museum of Fine Arts, The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Wentworth Institute of Technology. Across Mass Ave sits the Christian Science Plaza, and the intersection of the South End and the Back Bay; and to the north, Olmstead's park system &nd! ash; The Fens. The neighborhood is influenced by many surroundings, as can be seen even without in depth analysis. Symphony Neighborhood is truly a mix of culture, age and style, coming together in a vibrant section of Boston.

There are many mysteries of the site that I feel will reveal themselves over time. The site as it currently sits is very well-developed and well-kept. It will be interesting to find out if there is a neighborhood commission, or if Northeastern takes care of most of the street front property. The history of the site will tell me the answers to many puzzles determining ownership of the blocks. From other classes, I know that The Fens and the MFA developed around the same time. How much of an impact did Olmstead and the museum developers have in the design of the neighborhood? Northeastern has been in the location since the turn of the last century, having

developed out of the YMCA on Huntington Ave across from Symphony Hall 1. When did the school expand across the Green Line, or did the MBTA cut the school in half during an expansion? The location of Symphony Hall is one of great importance in Boston, connecting the main roads from Cambridge and the Back Bay! with those running to Jamaica Plain, Dorchester and Copley Square. How important was this intersection before the establishment of the Symphony? Is it built on original or filled land? And how has this crossroad influenced the development of the site, or has it been the other way around? The transportation issues I think will be vital in the design and growth of the neighborhood over time. Most importantly, what happens on the inside of the neighborhood? It is easy to see development as it occurs on Huntington and Mass Ave, but who lives on Hemingway and Gainsborough Streets? What sort of development happens outside the wandering eye of someone going to the MFA? These issues will be key in fully developing a sense of what this neighborhood is really and truly about – what defines it and how it defines itself.

My site, the small blocks around Symphony Hall, will hopefully have a progressive history. I am excited that these seemingly insignificant blocks can hold links to the past, and answers to the future. This area is a mesh of education, transportation and culture, which has shaped its past and led to an exciting place to live, work and play today.

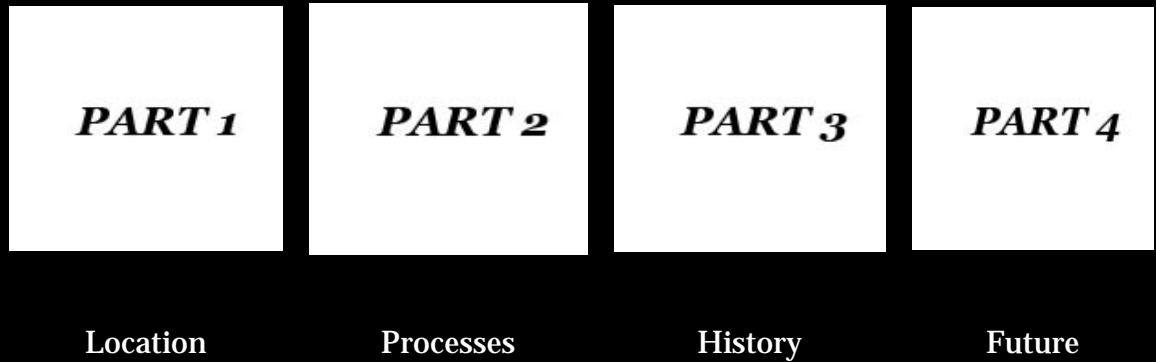
1 “Northeastern History” <<http://www.president.neu.edu/history.html>>

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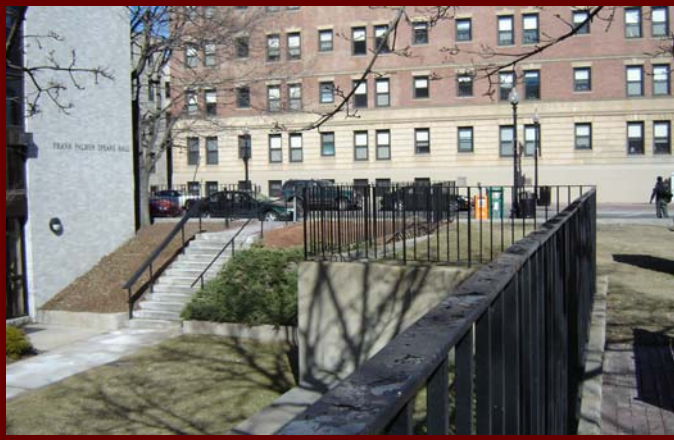
The shaping of the Fenway Cultural District is one that is heavily dependant on natural processes. The neighborhood is bounded by many different uses, and has a physical history that is unique to Boston. As I studied the Symphony Neighborhood, I discovered that the effects of the natural earth on the man-made city are both subtle and influential on the current status of the site. These natural processes occur below and above street level, as well as more than a century into the past.

Earth

The physical history of the Fenway Cultural District is extremely important to the current natural layout of the site. When the Back Bay began to be filled in the mid-1800s, the area between Massachusetts Avenue and Huntington Street sat at the edge of a lagoon towards the west side of Boston. Part of the site lies on a small neck of land jutting into the middle of the bay, near the entrance to the Muddy River, while the rest of the area was at the border of the towns of Boston and Roxbury, underwater. As railroad tracks began to crisscross the Back Bay, creating dams to fill in, the area around the bay became a staging area. My site was near the entrance of the Boston-Providence Railroad to the bay, a major transportation line. Beginning in 1852, this corner of the bay began to be filled in, and roads were laid along the edge of fill – Parker Street on the northwestern edge – but no other development was begun. For the next thirty years, the area was continually filled, leading to a solid piece of land existing between the Muddy River and Massachusetts Avenue (West Chester St.) by 1884. The one exception was a small creek that ran from the Muddy River south through the site, along what is currently Gainsborough Street. That creek was wiped out in the development of the Back Bay Fens by Frederick Law Olmstead, taking almost a decade from 1878. By the time the turn of the century rolled around, the site was completely filled, and buildings were beginning to crop up on haphazardly laid streets, starting with the Children’s Hospital on Huntington. As 1900 began, more large buildings began to anchor the area, with Symphony Hall that year and the Museum of Fine Arts nine years later. Today, topographic maps show the site as completely flat, but from inspection of the area, I know today that that is not exactly the case.

When walking through the Fenway Cultural District, the first thing that one notices about the land is how flat it is. Over the course of 10 blocks on the sidewalk, you seem to only go up and down to step into the street, or a hole. But closer inspection of the back roads leads to a very different conclusion. On Huntington Ave., many businesses are located in basements, and on back roads, many houses have entrances with steps down. Furthermore, on almost every street, the alleys between rows of houses dip down about eight to ten feet as it reaches the center of the block. The first inclination here would be to say that each block was built by excavating for basements, but then not filling in back around them, leaving the bottommost levels exposed. Yet, with the consistency that this is done throughout the neighborhood, I draw a different hypothesis. I feel that the land, lying so low originally, had homes built directly on fill, without regard to how they might settle. When the automobile was introduced and widely used, roads around Boston were paved over to accommodate this, and I am sure this neighborhood was no exception. Because of this increased usage of the roadways, the city may have decided to build them up higher than originally existed to allow for better drainage, flood control and fill settling. This leads to an area where the roads were higher than the base of buildings, allowing the fronts to be buried and create stoops, and the back basements to be left open to the center of alleys. There are a few major exceptions to this theory throughout the neighborhood: Symphony Hall and the MFA are built at grade, most likely because they lay on major roads and were major projects with exceptional care taken to them. Also, on Huntington Avenue dips as the rail line emerges from underneath the street, obviously to make the train's climb less severe, but leads to the basements of buildings being exposed in the front. Right along Huntington, Speare Hall (a Northeastern building) is set down into a hole about twelve feet deep, as compared to the sidewalk. Unfortunately, this seemingly obvious example of my theory is reputed, as that is the site of the old Opera House, and the hole is a cutout of the former building's foundation. Speare Hall was placed at the bottom of the foundation to set it back from such a busy street in a unique way. This arrangement of street and land in the area leads to difficult to navigate alleyways, steeply graded parking lots, and plenty of uneven surfaces to trip and fall onto the pavement and dirt.





The ground surface throughout my neighborhood is predominately pavement, but the small areas of grass and dirt tell us a lot about the site. Along the edge of the Fens, the houses have a small bit of dirt and trees planted between them and the street. These are obviously large, old trees, yet their roots stick out of the ground in small humps from time to time. Elsewhere within the neighborhood, the small tree pits and front yards contain a similar arrangement of roots. This tells me that the soil here is simply not thick enough to support these trees going downwards a long way, or that something lies beneath them. On Symphony Street, we have the Symphony Neighborhood Garden, a small cutout of land littered with trash and withering plants. But the most intriguing portion of the garden is the fact that it sits on top of a thick concrete layer, at least when bordered by the street. The topsoil is placed on top of this, and then the plants grown. I feel that this must be due to the former presence of a building on the site, and the concrete I see at street level may very well be part of the original foundation. If the soil elsewhere is not thick enough to support old trees, then why cover it up for this garden? Having found no evidence of toxins in the soil, I feel that this must have been a preexisting condition that the gardeners found when coming to the site. The overall impression of the earth in this neighborhood is that most of it is covered by pavement, but small spots exist for growth. Ironically, the earth in Symphony Neighborhood all covers water, the driving force behind the natural shape of the area.

Water

The most prominent natural feature of the Fenway Cultural District is its namesake that runs along the north side: The Fens. Built as part of a contiguous park throughout Boston by Frederick Law Olmsted in the 1880s, The Fens were meant to serve as a tidal river to help control the Charles, while providing a pleasant and walkable park. Today, with the tides no longer affecting the area, the Fens simply provide an area of recreation and aesthetics for those who border or visit it (taken mostly from *The Granite Garden* 146-150). This waterway has a lot of influence on my site, as buildings along the edge of the park are bigger and with more windows than those on the interior streets. It is also evident that these buildings are older, built after the park's circumference road was established. The view from these homes lends itself to suburbia, or even similar sites in Newton or Brookline – there are no skyscrapers in view and houses are set back off the

street. Yet, this park is separated from the neighborhood by a four lane parkway with few crosswalks, so I am unsure as to how many people use the Fens, even given the lack of open space throughout the neighborhood.

The streets of my site are configured as such that many of them escape direct sunlight throughout most of the day. On the last day I visited, it had snowed overnight, but was bright and warm when I walked the streets around 3:00 PM. One thing I noticed is that the west side of Gainsborough and Symphony Streets stays in darkness the entire day. When I arrived, although the rest of the streets were dry and snow gone, these two places has small piles of snow, west sidewalks and puddles around storm drains. The lack of direct sunlight probably accounts for the first tow conditions, but the puddles around the drains is probably due to the higher water table in this area, of historical maps are accurate and a small creek is buried there. But, according to a Northeastern University report, the groundwater table here is eight to ten feet underneath the soil, so the answer might simply be a few backed up storm drains. Whatever the case, the water level of the neighborhood and the presence of a wetland park on its borders have a large impact on its physical structure.

Air

The day I visited my site was unique for this winter: sunny and warm, people out on stoops and walking around the neighborhood. But, like every other day this season, it was very windy. This gave me a nice opportunity to try and see wind patterns and how much they affect the area. Strangely enough, on this day with a strong wind from the west, I found few areas in which the wind truly affected the people or nature of the neighborhood. Of course, most trees were bowed over from the very strong wind, and it was difficult to walk at times, but none of these seemed specific to the particulars of the place. One major factor in this was the shape of the area. My site is almost a triangle, with a point near the Museum of Fine Arts, and with the wind coming from that direction, the buildings seemed to act as a funnel. Out near the open fields of the MFA, the wind was very strong, but as it entered the canyons of three story buildings, it was dissipated and weakened, yet still stiff. The aerodynamics of the buildings in this area (when the wind is from the west), prevent the blocking and speeding up of wind described in *The Granite Garden* (68). It was almost if the entrances to Hemingway St, Huntington Ave and The Fens acted to split the wind into thirds and travel it down their respective paths. This means there is less wind on the cross streets (Symphony, Gainsborough, Forsyth). Fortunately, not many doors in the neighborhood face the western part of the site, so I never saw anyone struggle to open a door against this stiff breeze (this is also helped by the fact that most doors are set into an alcove). Unfortunately I didn't notice any pockets of particularly stiff wind, even surrounding the taller Northeastern buildings. I feel that the breeze here is constant (dependant on direction) because of the uniformity of the buildings in the area. This leads to days where the wind whips through, and days of mostly calm, but the patterns will be uniform from

street to street.



Sound

Fortunately, throughout most of the neighborhood, this wind is the only sound that is heard. Within the interior streets of the site, sound from surrounding roads is dampened enough to provide peace and quiet outside of the homes. This is very shocking when you first realize it, considering the major roads and rails that run near the site. Also, the interior roads are narrow enough so that trucks cannot fit. Hence, on a calm day, all that is heard is the breeze, chirping of birds and some cars. I do predict, however, that in the evening (when school is in session) that the area can be quite loud, due to the large focus of college age students living there. That could lead to loud parties and many people walking the streets. Of course, on the major roads of the site, the din of trucks and automobiles is almost deafening. Huntington Avenue also adds the rumble of the Green Line underneath it, especially near the entrance to the tunnel. The intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Huntington is especially busy, with truck, bus, car and pedestrian traffic. This is also a large open space compared to the rest of the neighborhood, and so the sound travels about half a block down the street. Interestingly, the busy Fenway does not have nearly the noise of its similar streets, I think mainly due to the large plantings and trees lining the road that soften some of the sound. Entering the interior of the Fenway Cultural District is almost like going into a cone of silence as the design of the area leads to protection from the traffic noise along the edges.



Life

As I have mentioned before, the soil and pavement combination leaves much to be desired in the way of plant life around Symphony Neighborhood. Yet, the instances I saw were very interesting, and occasionally extraordinary. Above, I spoke of the community garden, and unfortunately, there was not much living in this garden, though most houses on the street have nice shrubbery and flowers between stoops. But further down, near the corner of St. Stephen and Symphony Streets, there is a very large tree growing in a tree pit much too small for it. This tree's roots have broken through the sidewalk, and then were paved over again, creating a large, root-shaped bump in the sidewalk. There are other similar cases of this throughout the neighborhood, leading me to believe that the trees are very old, and were possibly there well before a sidewalk was envisioned around them, also because they are not evenly spaced. There are also a few trees growing this way in alleys or along the backs of homes, leading to what will probably be a great canopy cover come springtime. Yet it is surprising to me that most of the trees do not grow in 'communities' as mentioned in *The Granite Garden* (185). These trees grow, and seem to thrive, alone, solitarily in the sidewalk. Also prevalent on the day I visited were the birds (and their droppings!). This area must attract a lot of birds compared to other portions of the city due to its proximity to freshwater and a park, as well as large trees and many rooftops. I doubt that too many other animals inhabit the area, mostly because I found many acorns around the site that seemed like they had been there all winter. If there were squirrels living here, most of the acorns would be missing before winter began.



As I have discovered through investigation of the Symphony Neighborhood, the influences of nature on the urban landscape are great and powerful, even if rarely noticed. The processes involving earth, water, air, sound and life that exist in the modern day neighborhood coexist well with the humans and concrete that have been placed on top of them. AS Professor Spirn says in the opening portions of the Granite Garden: “these interactions between human activities and the natural environment produce an ecosystem very different from the one that existed prior” (13). I look forward to now studying the human activities that affect my site, and determining how they all fit together to create the neighborhood that stands today.

Sources:

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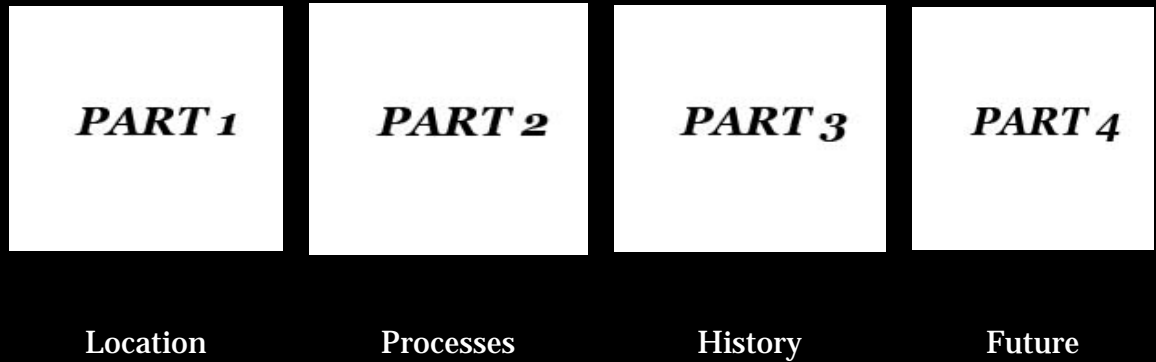
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The Symphony Neighborhood is one that is full of mystery and questions that beg to be answered. Luckily, many of these questions can be answered by evaluating the change of the site over time and by following this through maps. The major forces surrounding this change can be broken down into three parts: the institutional change, dwelling patterns and open space. Each of these has a significant impact on the structure of the site, helping to assemble it to the skeleton it is today.

Institutional Change

The biggest players on my site over time have been the major institutions that occupy lots on or around my site boundaries. Understanding these institutions through time is vital to understanding the site as a whole. The biggest and most famous of these institutions is the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Symphony Hall. Built in 1903, this massive structure takes up the entire depth of the block at the corner of Massachusetts Ave and Huntington Street, backed by St. Stephen Street. This building's footprint has remarkably not changed since it was built over 100 years ago. I feel that is of vital importance to my site how solid and storied this structure has been. By anchoring the corner at the entrance to the site, it shows a façade that is world known and lends an air of stability and credibility to the neighborhood. Over the years, the size of the Boston Symphony has grown, and this is also shown physically in the neighborhood. The BSO

occupies a small building that was formerly a hotel, and then a bank, behind the Hall on Westland Ave. Furthermore, offices exist along St. Stephen Street, and music-themed murals line the parking lots down here as well for symphony-goers. These, as well as the 'Symphony' stop on the Green Line, show how the BSO has grown physically throughout the neighborhood without actually increasing the size of Symphony Hall. This gradual change and expansion is an indicative pattern of my site overall, and many of the other institutions that lay within it as well.

The largest landowner on my site is Northeastern University, as the campus surrounds and envelops much of the southern side. Northeastern has been around on Huntington Ave since 1913, having developed out of the YMCA sitting across the street. Over the years after the Great Depression, the University expanded greatly across the street into my site, buying buildings for reuse, as well as demolishing site to rebuild new centers. This growth was truly gradual and incremental, having taken 75 years to get to where they are today, with the center of North Campus sitting along St. Stephen Street. Interestingly, Northeastern (as far as I can tell) has never resold or relinquished a building it has acquired, even if it has not been used right away. This allowed the University to obtain property even when it didn't have the need, and save it for a time when it did. Today, Northeastern and the New England Conservatory (a smaller school located in the same basic area) own all the buildings on the western half of my site, and half the buildings between Hemenway and Fenway Streets. Add to this that Northeastern students rent most of the apartments that face Huntington Ave, and the school truly has a monopoly on space within my site. This means that over time, the shape of the site is often determined by how much land Northeastern owns. Sam Bass Warner stated that in the 1950s and 1960s that the neighborhood was in poor shape, and this corresponds with an era in which Northeastern was doing a lot of construction projects between Hemenway and St. Stephen Street. Today, that area is a campus quad surrounded by apartments rented to students. This has led to many street improvements and trees planted in the area as campus improvements – a stark contrast to the rest of the site. Both in history and in current conditions, Northeastern and the other colleges dictate the way in which almost half the neighborhood is shaped, much more than any

other player over the past 100 years.

Two other smaller institutions have existed within my site for many years and continue to hold their locations today. On Forsyth Street sits the Forsyth Dental Center School, a center for both dentist's offices and dentistry research. This square building, looking much like the poured concrete block that it is, has sat on a large lot with nothing around it since 1912. This is not surprising, considering the direction of Symphony Neighborhood development (east to west), but what is surprising is the large lot that it sits alone on, the lowest density block of my site. The reasoning behind this stems back to the 1880s as the city and Olmsted were developing The Fens. The site of the Forsyth Institute was originally included in the plan for the Fens as part of the Huntington Entrance. When this entrance was scaled down in later plans, the lot was left open, with Bryant Road (later Forsyth Street) running through it. We can only conclude that one owner (perhaps with a persuasion for teeth!) purchased the land, built this massive building in the center, where it remains today. Bryant Road must have been discontinued as a dirt path and entrance to the parking lot occupy that space today as an open swath between the dentists and home to the east. In the near future, Forsyth has applied to the BRA to double the size of the building and bury the parking lots, the first major change to the site in 95 years. This will certainly affect the footprint of the area, but the Institute will remain a long term tenant on this corner of the neighborhood. Down St. Stephen Street lies St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church. This structure has been around since at least 1872 (the earliest maps), and was once called the Church of the Messiah. Strangely, this church existed in the center of the neighborhood long before any homes would have been its neighbors, and today it is crammed in with a parking lot and some Northeastern buildings. This must be because churchgoers here must not have been very well accepted in Boston, and needed to move their church towards the outskirts of the city on a (at one time) remote area. During the Great Depression, the church either was abandoned, or the former members were forced to move on, as the Roman Catholics took over the building during WWII. This signals a shift in the population of the neighborhood to one of more 'mainstream Boston' background – Irish or Italian Catholic. Today, the church seemingly stands alone, an institution among rows

of apartments, but further inspection reveals that directly across the street sit the Hillel and Catholic Community buildings for Northeastern. The church has spawned a small little religious bubble in the center of the site. If neighborhood patterns show us anything, then, soon the church may be sold to the school, for most of the population today is students instead of working class. These two smaller institutions blend well into the neighborhood and provide an inner structure to the larger establishments that bookend it.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the very important institutions that lie just outside the boundaries of my site. The Museum of Fine Arts was moved to Huntington Street in 1909 to help create a new arts district to the south of the Back Bay along with Symphony Hall and the Opera House (which I will get to in a moment). This massive building anchors the lower end of the neighborhood and opens up into an entirely different district of schools and hospitals. The museum has served over the years to bring traffic and notoriety to my site, and has influenced the success of the neighborhood through its presence. Today, the museum is building a multimillion dollar expansion that will bring even more visitors to the area – a significant change considering how similar the MFA and Symphony Hall are to their original built forms. On the east end of the site, across Massachusetts Avenue, sits Christian Science Plaza, a massive redevelopment project of the 1970s. This plaza is world headquarters to Christian Science and has provided for a stable edge to the site. The plaza has also helped by ushering in new developments along Mass Ave, including the creation of Berklee College of Music and the Plaza Apartments, both which can be pointed to in helping pull the neighborhood out of its slump in the middle of the last century. All in all, Boston is full of institutions, but the ones directly next to my site have a very important influence upon it.

Finally, the last major category of institutions on or near my site is those that no longer exist. Each of the former institutions has contributed a good deal to the current shape of the neighborhood by providing buildings that have morphed into their current uses. The greatest example is the former Boston Opera House, built in 1901 along Huntington Street. This building stood as part of the great Avenue of the Arts until it was torn down after WWII and the land given to Northeastern. As homage to the former building, today the site of Speare Hall is built down into a pit, seemingly insignificant, but the outline is that of the former Opera House, giving Speare Hall some privacy through distance from the street. A Children's Hospital once separated Symphony Hall from the Opera house along Huntington, but when it too was abandoned after WWII, the land was given to Northeastern who added on, creating a large mixed use building that still stands today as "Huntington Hall." The Boston Storage Warehouse Company had two separate buildings, one behind Symphony Hall, and one next to the Opera House. These buildings had been on site for a very long time, probably because people didn't originally want them within the city, much like the Church of the Messiah. Unfortunately, the western building was torn down with the Opera House and Northeastern (again!) occupies the land. But the eastern building stood until the redevelopment of Christian Science Plaza, when it was converted to condos and apartments along Mass Ave. What is significant about each of these little short stories is how one block, built over 150 years ago, can dictate the land use for that same block today, as well as the blocks adjacent. The many institutions of this neighborhood have really been the driving force behind everything that has happened here, they have remained mostly constant, and provide the backbone of a site in which triple deckers provide the guts.

Dwellings

The inner sections of Symphony Neighborhood are dominated by triple decker homes that have been sitting on the site since the 1880s. Once the site was completely filled in, and the marshes near it drained to use in the Fens, roads were laid, most likely at a high grade. Parker Street (later Hemenway Street) served as a road and as an extension of the Mill Dam, protecting the area from the waters of the Fens along its northern side. By 1887, St. Stephen and Westland Streets had been created, with homes growing at the corner. Other streets in the neighborhood were built from St. Stephen north towards Parker to complete the angled grid over the next twenty years. The turning point in housing growth comes around 1890, as the Massachusetts Avenue bridge is created, making the area along a major thoroughfare. Homes began to quickly spring up, filling in the blocks surrounded by Westland, Batavia (Symphony) and Gainsborough within 10 years. By the time the next maps roll around in 1914, every space east of Gainsborough is filled by flats or apartments with most of the area between St. Stephen and Huntington filled in as well. The newer buildings being built during WWI are single family homes, right around the Church of the Messiah. Interesting, a set of flats is built over the intersection of Jarvis and Parker Streets, leaving the former as a dead end. Over the next 50 years, nothing will be done to this now worthless street until it is destroyed for a parking lot by Northeastern in the 1970s. Over the next series of maps, buildings slowly fill in, radiating from the corner at Symphony Hall. The outer streets all have a solid façade, but the interior triangle created by St. Stephen, Gainsborough and Hemenway Streets (with Jarvis in the center) remains basically empty until the 1970s. This could be explained by the fact that so much water was being pushed out of the site that this spot ending up being the low point and often flooding. Or it could simply be that the rapid home growth and university growth met at an impasse here, with neither side taking control. Today, the occupancy on site looks incredibly similar to the way it was built. Most homes are listed as apartment or condo, with all being three story walk-ups, and the pocket of single family dwellings remains right around the church. The only change

has been to convert those homes along Huntington and Westland to have stores on the first floor, making them mixed use buildings. The lack of change in the footprint of dwellings is accentuated by the anecdote told by Sam Bass Warner: that in the 1960s and 1970s, the area was so run down that owners were burning buildings for the insurance, but these buildings stood, were simply gutted, refurbished and resold. This backs up the descriptions given to me by residents that some buildings seem to have been renovated, while others feel the same as their original design, and that this disparity can vary between next door neighbors. Overall, the dwelling history on my site is a relatively simple one, but again we see how initial design has shaped usage over a century later.

Environment and Open Space

The origins of Symphony Neighborhood are as a marshy area bordering the areas of fill for the Back Bay of Boston. This location dictated the shape of the site for the first centuries of Boston, as the area was not developed until filling was finished in the 1870s. From the forward, open space played a prominent role in determining the shape of the site. One of the major factors is the fact that originally the land was streams and marsh.

As the Fens were built in the 1880s, a lot of this water was controlled, but pockets remained, and can be seen on maps as small streams running from the Fens down towards Huntington Street. This is one possible explanation for the triangle of vacancy that I described above. But these streams all disappeared around the turn of the century, seemingly put into pipes and routed underground. This happened before much development was brought to the area, so had little visible impact on the shape of the neighborhood, although that is not to say that basements don't get flooded in the area when it rains. A significant mystery to me when beginning this project was why the homes here were so much higher on the street side than on the alleys – why the alleys dipped down to a lower elevation. Through the maps and Professor Spirn, this is now clear, as the roads were clearly built before the houses, and were built up high to allow the homes to be placed in without excavation. The construction of roads leads the construction of houses from east to west by a few hundred yards throughout the site over time. Today, this set up is still clear, evidenced by the sunken alleyways. Besides the major open space changes I have mentioned above, there are also two smaller sets of open spaces that sit within the site, with simple explanations. Along St. Stephen Street, there are matching empty lots, sitting across the street from one another. There have always been empty as they were the intersection with the former Jarvis Street. Today, they are occupied by small driveways, but could easily be converted to new homes to fill in the row – but with them having been empty so long, I don't see this as a likely outcome. Finally, along Symphony Street sits a garden among the houses that seems to be on the site of a former building. This turns out to be true, as there were two 'U-shaped' apartment buildings (think the shape of Bexley Hall at MIT) located on this site until my final map in 1972. Since then, they must have been razed, or, more likely, burned down as Sam Bass Warner described. The garden seems fairly new compared to the neighborhood, so it is possible it was just developed out of the desire not to rebuild on those lots whenever they happened to fall. With this, each of the major open space changes on my site can be tracked through time, leading us to know what the reasoning is behind them today. These open spaces have not had nearly the influence on my site that other things have, but they are an important part of the landscape, providing a respite in the sea of homes.

The body of Symphony Neighborhood can be broken down into these three major parts, with each having an important impact on the history and outcome of the site. Today, we see the result of these changes that we witnessed evolving through maps and photos across a century and a half. With the institutions providing the backbone, the homes the guts and the open space the organs, we can see how the people of this area flow along the arteries of the roads, and through the skin of the boundaries. The site is a living thing, based mainly on the people within it, but the structure plays a large role in making this place what it is today.

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Sam Bass Warner – former resident and Boston expert

Krista Sergi – current resident: 116 St. Stephen St.

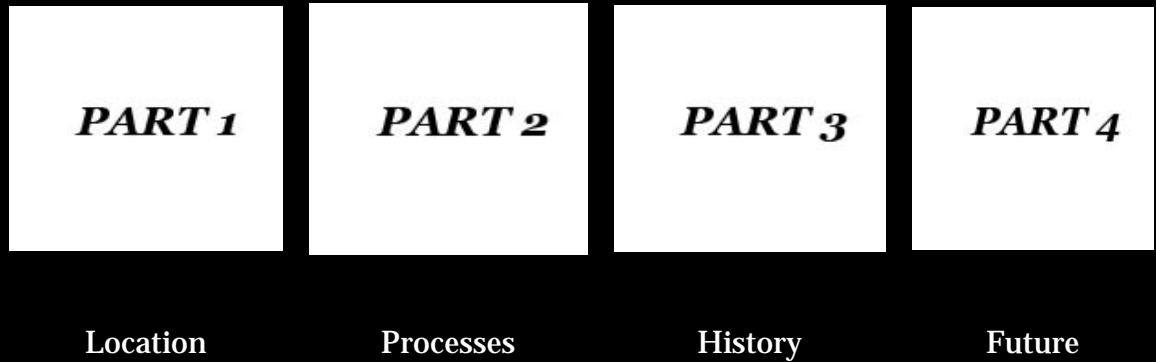
The City of Boston public records

Symphony Neighborhood

The Once and
Future City

Matthew Ciborowski

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Puzzles. The first time I visited the Symphony Neighborhood, all I saw were puzzles. I couldn't understand why this house was so different, why the roads were so high or why there was a pizza place next to Symphony Hall. These puzzles continued to multiply as I investigated more, and as I answered some, more puzzles appeared. By breaking down my site in different ways, I have been able to get a better feel for it, but still the puzzles remain. But finally, by making that large leap and connecting as much as I can do the past, I hopefully can answer all the questions that have puzzled me...

Artifacts

The Symphony Neighborhood has been inhabited for almost one hundred fifty years, and in that time artifacts have been left behind that gives us in the present a clue to that history. These artifacts come in all different shapes and sizes, from the shape of a curb or foundation, to the decoration on a building, to the entire shape of blocks. The greatest artifact remaining in the area in the parking lot at the center of my site. This area was once planned to be a through street named Jarvis Street, running south from Hemenway to St. Stephen. As documented in previous papers, the road was blocked off, bought by Northeastern and converted into a parking area. Today, the contours of that parking area provide us with a very interesting link to the past. Entering the parking area from St. Stephen Street, you drive along the planned Jarvis Street, and a parking area opens to your left. The far boundary of this space is the embankment built for Jarvis, while the near side is all filled in land. On the far side of the Jarvis embankment, the land sharply slopes down (so sharply that a large fence prevents cars from rolling over the edge) into the backyards of homes on Hemenway. This also happens on the near side, with the alleyway behind the St. Stephen's Street homes at the usual level, and the parking lot eight feet above. From a higher vantage point, it is clear that this parking lot has the outline of Jarvis Street, with some filled land, but the homes that were always there have a backyard at the normal elevations. This is an artifact referencing the time in which Jarvis Street was still a reality, instead of the imagination it is today.



Another interesting artifact of my neighborhood is not quite so obvious, in some ways. The building at 96 The Fenway is interesting from the front, as it is shaped like every other three story building in the area, but the front steps (in this case, a ramp) lead down to have you enter in the basement, instead of up to the first floor. As I approached the building, I noticed a small plaque by the doorframe, and discovered some interesting history. What is now known as Kerr Hall, a Northeastern woman's dormitory, was once called "Students House" and was built specifically for women from Simmons College in 1914. Over the years it grew to house women from multiple universities, before being bought by Northeastern in 1972 (institutional growth again!). Today, the building stands in its original footprint, having been restored in the 1980s, and continues the same use it was designed for. This artifact is a hidden one, even with the plaque by the door: no one casually passing by would know that this structure is a significant part of the history of my site. I am sure it will remain a hidden-in-plain-sight remnant for many years to come.

Most of the artifacts on my site are the homes and buildings that cover almost the entire neighborhood. Each set of homes tells a different story as to how and why they got to where they are. Along the north-facing side of The Fenway, the buildings are single family homes and large apartments, with ornate decorations and differing features from one building to the next. Most interestingly, these buildings are not connected, a unique characteristic in the neighborhood. From studying the maps, we find that these buildings are also relatively young. This indicates that these homes were built for upper class people moving into the neighborhood after the rest of it had already been established, and settling into large homes facing The Fens. This has created an artificial landscape along the road that differs from the rest of the site. It is truly one quarter mile long artifact of front yards, side alleys, parking areas and decorated facades. This is in stark contrast to other portions of the site. Along St. Stephen Street, every home is the same. The style, construction, shape, color and design of each building is almost identical. Over the years, some homes have been refurbished and updated, leaving small, incremental changes, but not enough to alter the distinct look of this repetitive lane. Also along this route, at the street level, the sidewalks are uneven and paved over roots of trees. The curbs are uneven, but the same materials are used all along the street as well. This tells me that St. Stephen Street went up quickly in order to provide lots of housing units. This street, as an artifact, has a jewel embedded: today 88 St. Stephen St. is the National Braille Press, but some digging has turned up that is used to be an elementary school. Upon careful inspection of the building, it is easy to see that decorations include scrolls and graduation caps, a clear indication of its former use. These two streets lie parallel to create a stretch of artifacts along my neighborhood, created by the workmanship of its former residents.



Traces

With all the history surrounding my site, it is difficult to overlook the impact that movement and travel have had over the years. The traces left behind by the presence of something or the action of people are often quite obvious: the Green Line runs along Huntington Street just as it did as a streetcar over one hundred years ago. This line is a trace of the movement of the past, and is quite simple in definition. More difficult to

understand are traces that do not always extend in a straight line along the ground. The Forsyth Dental Institute is a building that has confounded me since the very first day I stepped on my site. It was a large institution set within an open lot, nothing around it, with a continuous use for most of a century. This just seemed odd and different than the way most development occurred. On my most recent site visit, I was walking around with a 1951 map, and I realized something that I had quite simply missed the few times prior: the Forsyth Dental Institute has had a major addition since the 1960s. The maps show a much smaller building than sits there today, and if we look closely, we can see the connection rising up the site of the structure. The building doubled in size sometime after the production of my last map. The most intriguing feature of this is the elevation on each side of the building, probably due to its renovation. As we know from earlier investigation, the lots in my neighborhood were at a lower level than the streets, and the buildings built in, and then filled up to the level of the road in order to make it flush. On The Fenway and Hemenway Streets, the building is flush to the sidewalk, but on the west end, the parking lot is much lower than the street, consistent with this model from the rest of the site. Strangely, on the east side, where a dirt walkway and garden lay, the contour is level with that of the street. Earlier in my examination, I hypothesized that this was due to the planned extension of Jarvis Street into this area, but now having looked closer at the evidence, I do not feel this to be correct. I think that when the addition to the Institute building was happening (a section between the existing structure and Hemenway St.) the contractors needed somewhere to put the fill that had to be dug up: the area where the extension went was previously filled in to make the entrance level with the street. Most of this fill was moved to the side of the building, probably because the pathway was so important to the residents of the neighborhood, that bringing it up to grade would enhance its use. This shows us that this trace of a pathway was so important, that a design incorporated an enhancement to it in order to allow for improved usage.

Over and over again in city neighborhoods, walkways of this sort are important as historical traces and links off the common sidewalk. My site features many of these back pathways, some that I have not even yet visited. But two of these stick out to me as important traces of movement over time. In the above mentioned parking lot along the

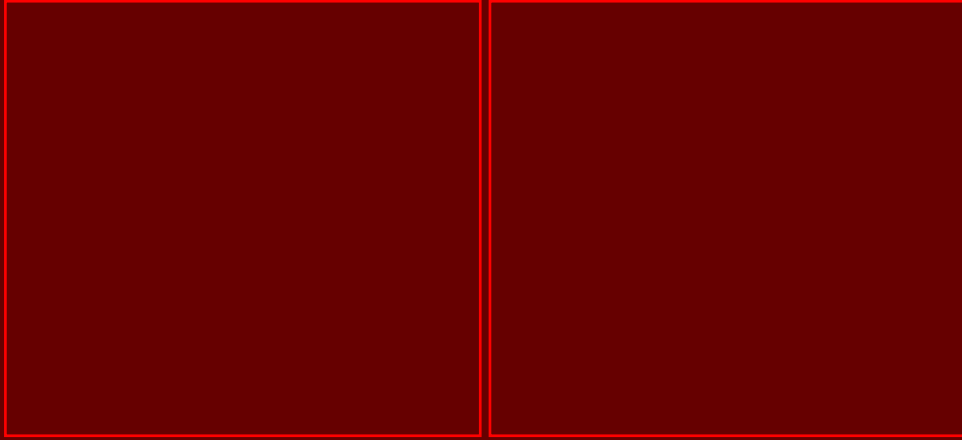
former Jarvis Street, the western edge, as I observed, serves as a frequented cut-through for students coming from the northern part of my site to the Northeastern academic buildings along St. Stephen Street. This walkway has not been well preserved, with the students walking along the backs of buildings, and in between parked cars. In old maps we see that this walkway was once set aside and purposefully not built upon (for whatever reason), but today it simply exists as parts sidewalk, alley and parking lot. This is in stark contrast to the alleyway running along the northern edge of my site, from Gainsborough to Westland, parallel to Hemenway. The oldest maps show this as an alleyway from the time of the first homes being placed near there. Today, the area is a connector for the residents living in the center of these long blocks who do not want to walk up to the corner to just come down the street again. There are no cars allowed, and the alley is well maintained for specifically walking. Each of these paths has a specific purpose and is definitively a trace made a long time ago, but their current condition shows us how much these traces can vary over time.



Layers

Within any cityscape, layers become an important, if not overbearing factor. Everything around you was built on top of four previous things, and the walls you see are not the same walls all the way through. These layers appear in every shape possible, and every orientation imaginable. One of the most important types of layers on my site are the horizontal layers. I have documented extensively the structure of land filling over time, and the way in which buildings were built, but the most interesting point for these layers on my site is (predictably!) in a sunken parking lot. Along the back of St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church, there is a parking lot that dips down from street level like the rest of the neighborhood, The strange part is that here, the homes just off the edge of the lot are sitting on brick pilings of a different color than the brick they are built of. These pilings are over five feet tall and a foot square. They run back along the edge of this one house, and are the only ones of their kind I can find. Similarly, at the back entrance to the church sits a set of three wooden steps to a door, different than the mortar and concrete steps of the rest of the building. These two layers indicate to me that this area must have sunk over time, and may still be sinking. When the parking lot got lower, the houses had to compensate in order to avoid cracking and falling, and so built these pilings to sit

upon and remain level to the front of the street. Likewise, the door of the church may at one time have been level with the parking lot, but as the lot lowered, the steps were built to make up the difference. This evidence is supported by the large amount of foundations showing here, but cannot be confirmed as the parking lot does not show too many signs of cracking in the pavement, but the pavement might all be new as well. This sort of horizontal layer adds another layer of intrigue to my site, one of sinking buildings that makes me wonder exactly what sort of other layers lay beneath the soil.



The complementary piece to this layer puzzle is the horizontal layers that appear all over my site. The most prominent place is certainly Huntington Avenue. Here, older buildings have kept their form, but a façade has been placed over them to give a consistent look all up and down the street. This façade can be clearly seen where the road bends by looking up to the tops of the buildings. I have spoken before about the different buildings that used to line the main avenue, and today they still exist, simply covered over by shops and restaurants. This must have been done in order to create a welcoming face to the neighborhood, as most visitors first interact with this area near the schools and theatres. This layer provides an aesthetic and tourism value that has nothing to do with structure and form. By contrast, along the northern side of St. Stephen Street, the homes have an unusual configuration. These homes were built in a U-shape, with the opening facing the street. This leaves a darkened area within the U just off the sidewalk that is a bit of an eyesore for those walking by, and an area that attracts trash and loitering along with its shadows. To combat this, these center areas have been filled in with an open-air lobby, basically meaning a wall across the front of the building, turning the U into an O. This creates a little more privacy for the apartments inside as well as creating a much more appealing streetscape for passerby. These two layers are superficial and serve as facades, yet the intentions are different, as one is to welcome, and the other is to protect. But each layer provides us with a look to how the site has been laid out over time, both along the ground and up from it.



Each different way of looking at history has opened up new puzzles, while solving others. The mysteries that remain have me thinking about the future of Symphony Neighborhood. The trends in my neighborhood have been slow and gradual; change has come when a group goes out in search of it, and not a moment sooner. Links to the past are clear and defined, leaving this place, my place, with an air of history, but the ever changing student population keeps it leaning towards the future. No matter how it changes tomorrow, we can be assured, the past will never leave it.