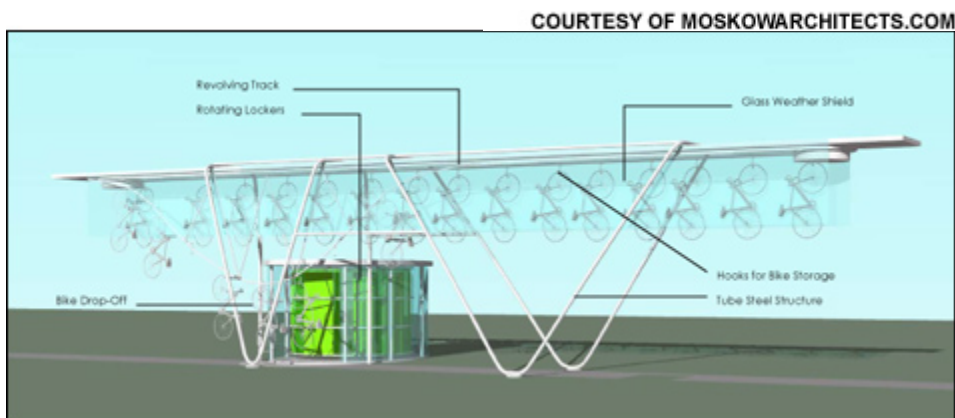


Walk the talk

Despite Boston's pedestrian-friendly reputation, there's plenty of room for improvement

By: DAVID EISEN

1/17/2007 3:13:31 PM



A KICKIN' BIKE STAND: Architect Keith Moskow's bike-stand design would free up clogged city sidewalks.

Boston is billed as America's premier pedestrian city, but is it really true? Yes, Beacon Hill's colonial townhouses and narrow streets are lovely and put tourists and locals alike in a pleasant mood. Back Bay's wide, leafy boulevards and Victorian-era eccentricities enfold the urban stroller in lush Olmstead-style greenery. And the more recently developed South End entices strollers with its outdoor cafes, lovingly restored storefronts, small parks, and intimate gardens.

But it's not enough to rely on the achievements of the past; we need streets that work for us today. Stand back and take in the city from the pedestrian's point of view: too many streets are not all they are cracked up to be. Overflowing trash cans and asphalt perennially under repair belie those adoring urban portraits found in college view books and tourist brochures. The delights of the city should be endless, yet they're too often marred by rundown sidewalks, uninspired design, and a loss of civility and respect.

Perhaps we've lost sight of the sensuality of public places now that the Internet and cell phones provide the connective tissue that holds society together. Too many of us — whether bankers, college kids, or cooks — armor ourselves against the environment in our rolling cocoons of glass and steel. All that technology may be convenient, but it sucks the life out of our streets. A sense of civic pride and our city's collective memory can only be achieved by re-energizing urban thoroughfares traversed by foot.

In Boston, a number of advocates are committed to making our streets accessible to the diverse city constituencies that share these narrow slices of real estate by making them as great they can be. Some are urban designers, some are nonprofits, and others are city officials, but they all want to give a better form to the pulsing energy of urban life today.

Hoofers' lament

"Walking is for everyone" says Wendy Landman of the nonprofit WalkBoston. "It brings people together on the city streets that belong equally to every one of us. Advocating for walkers is a social-justice issue, a health issue, and an environmental issue." The answer to our epidemic of obesity and diabetes? Walking. The solution to pollution? Walking. And how do we get rid of the asphalt all over town and replace it with grass? By leaving the car home and walking — taking back the streets, as it were.

With a staff of five and a flotilla of volunteers, WalkBoston's approach is both top down — pushing to make pedestrian issues a priority for government and business, and bottom up — raising expectations for the quality of the urban environment. Both are woven around a vision of a city in which a wonderful network of interconnected streets, efficient and accessible mass transit, and citizens personally invested in the character of the city, make walking a constant pleasure and an effective way to get around. The organization's well-researched maps laying out the best ways to get from here to there and back are distributed at hospitals, schools, and workplaces all over Boston, touting lifestyles that are better for everyone. Walking, Landman says, is not only good for people, it "makes the city itself vibrant and alive."

If Landman and company are primarily patient consensus builders, they'll also stomp on toes when necessary. Consider the ruckus they made about plans for 500 Atlantic Avenue. The final design for the International Hotel pulled a public sidewalk in under the building to make it easier for cars doing drop-off, which violated the officially submitted — and more pedestrian friendly — plans. WalkBoston insisted on the public scrutiny required for these kinds of changes in a much-publicized warning shot to the city and project developers. As a result, a compromise was reached and lawsuits were avoided; but now every developer has been put on notice: limousines won't always get the right of way now that walkers are a force to be reckoned with.

Taking an amble

Architect Keith Moskow takes a different tack on how to improve our urban environment. He invents machines that deal with the realities of city life through a brilliant combination of common sense and whimsy. A parking tower modeled on a Pez dispenser packs cars in a sliding vertical assembly for release as needed onto city streets. It's designed to fit into slivers of left-over land too small to be used for much of anything else.

A bicycle-storage system inspired by the motorized racks at the drycleaners keeps parking meters and sign-posts free of the two-wheeled trip-hazards that clog curbs on sunny days. Instead, the bikes are lifted up by a mechanized belt and held aloft, while a small pavilion with lockers below allows riders to take off their spandex and change into a suit and tie.

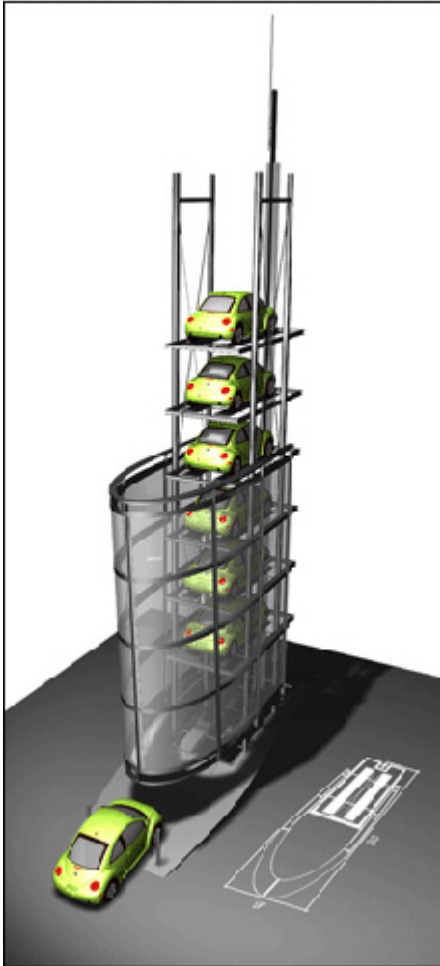
The "Urban Hookah" is a sculptural canopy that sucks up the fumes of sidewalk smokers while giving them protection from the rain and snow. Although its magic mushroom shape puts a happy face on a dangerous habit, it responds to the need for urban denizens to tolerate each others' bad habits so we can live together in peace.

© ANDREW FIRESTONE



TRASHED TREASURE:
Boston's sidewalks are riddled with garbage and cracks — not exactly a pedestrian's paradise.

COURTESY OF MOSKOWARCHITECTS.COM



PEZ, PLEASE: Moskow proposes stacking cars in space-saving Pez-dispenser-like garages.

Each one of these machines is a kind of anti-iPod, bringing people together through their use and form rather than pulling them apart into an acoustically induced isolation. They acknowledge that cars and bikes and even cigarettes are a fact of urban life that can be woven joyfully into the fabric of the city. Part public art, part public service, part billboard for responsible civic behavior, for now they are nothing but drawings and a vision of what could be.

Moskow is a freelance dreamer whose proposals seem to make too much sense to actually be built. Although he has won awards for his efforts, none of these plans are even being considered for implementation. The problem, of course, is money. His proposals address the needs of very specific constituencies, none of which benefits enough to foot the bill for fabrication and installation. They are unlikely to be profit centers for private business, nor such widely used crowd pleasers that they will win elections for government officials. They have dynamic shapes and bright colors that give them a photogenic quality as the poster children for the delights of city life — but that could backfire if they don't work as well as expected when installed in real-life settings.

Great streets may require minimizing the misery of snow and trash and traffic, but they should also elicit enjoyment and audacity and experimentation. This is exactly what Moskow offers Boston, despite the city's reluctance to take him up on it.

Hidden history

Ultimately, however, it is the City of Boston that must coordinate efforts to make its urban spaces as good as they should be. But as with so many bureaucracies, the struggle to prevent the worst often limits the drive for the very best, with a little red-brick paving and a couple of trees substituting for real ingenuity in the redesign of streets and sidewalks.

To be fair, making any structural change isn't easy in a city as old and stratified as this one.

Although what is above ground may be what matters as we make our way through town, there is a whole world underground on which urban denizens depend. Right below the surface of the streets and sidewalks is an unfathomably complex array of wires, pipes, conduits, and vaults belonging to a vast assortment of utilities dating back decades and even centuries. Each system is run by a different department or utility, and each has its own needs, schedules, and procedures. Moving a curb, adding a streetlight or tree, or even just changing the paving requires ripping things out by their roots and reworking the urban infrastructure with a series of different players.

These improvements can turn into something of a comic opera, as paving is repeatedly jack-hammered open and replaced to access underground infrastructure while keeping the traffic moving. This is the 21st century; isn't there a better way?

"In Paris", according to Peter Smith, co-chair of the Boston Society of Architects Urban Design Committee, "an underground network of interconnected tunnels houses the sewers and pipes that supply the city's water, telecommunications cables, and pneumatic tubes. That means the streets are not as disrupted as they are in Boston and other US cities by excavation and repaving."

It is a brilliant solution, one that Smith suggests could be integrated into the fabric of Boston's streets, at the miniature scale of today's technology rather than at Phantom of the Opera proportions. But the Paris tunnels date from the 19th century and earlier, when massive infrastructure improvements could be decreed. Without an imperial system it is hard to implement — and pay for — this kind of comprehensive approach to infrastructure, although Smith holds out hope that cleverness and common sense will ultimately prevail. Until then we will have to rely on more incremental approaches to improving our pedestrian experience.

Tim Love, principal of Utile, a prominent Boston planning and architecture firm, emphasizes the importance of collaboration in handling the complexities of urban infrastructure.

With the Big Dig mercifully near completion, a series of little digs, called the Crossroads Initiative, will improve the streets that cross the Greenway; Love is responsible for the urban design of the Broad Street component of the plan. "Urban planners, traffic planners, engineers, and utility companies need to work together to enlarge the possibilities for Boston streets, anticipating the outdoor-dining and innovative social programs, along with the cars and parking, that we want the city to accommodate." Planners have to look ahead, Love says; "we don't want to be back there digging it all up again in a couple of years." Keeping the jack-hammering of the asphalt to a minimum may be a reasonable expectation, but eliminating it is unlikely as long as all those utilities run right below.

But Love also has a vision for the future, one in which streets are built like the accessible floors and ceilings in an office building. With such a system, tiles could be lifted right off when new pipes or cables need to be installed. "Now that technology changes happen much more often, a new street concept should be invented," he says.

COURTESY OF MOSKOWARCHITECTS.COM



MAGIC MUSHROOM: Another Moskow design would shield smokers from wind and rain while sucking up their foul fumes.



GREEN MONSTER: New solar-powered trash cans are useful — but too ugly to ensure they'll be used.

Even far-from-grandiose approaches to infrastructure require leadership, though, and Dennis Royer, the new chief of Boston Public Works and Transportation, insists that incremental changes can make a difference. Boston's narrow 300-year-old streets clogged with traffic and parked cars are much harder to deal with than those at his old job in Denver. Planning ahead, working together, and setting goals that everyone can buy into, he says, can make accommodating changes more efficient. Like Mayor Menino, he emphasizes that this is "our city," where everyone has a role to play.

One prominent new public-works initiative is a good start, but not necessarily good enough. The city recently installed 50 solar-powered "big belly" garbage cans around the city to compact the trash so it has to be picked up only once a day, rather than the usual three that an ordinary downtown barrel requires. But these obese green boxes are about as ugly as the trash they hold. Where is the ingenuity that can give these things, however useful, the kind of design appeal that will insure they are actually used?

There is too little on Boston's streets to stir the imagination and rouse us from our cell-phone- and iPod-induced torpor. So instead of looking the other way, we — along with city officials, businesses, and institutions — should look at our great city with fresh eyes and address its problems in inventive ways. A few more trees and more brick paving are certainly worthwhile goals, but our streets should provide a compelling vision of our dreams and inspirations as well.

David Eisen is the architecture critic of the Boston Phoenix and a principal of Abacus Architects. He can be reached at deisen@abacusarchitects.com. Copyright © 2007 The Phoenix