

# The Landscape Architect's Guide to **BOSTON**

## Commonwealth Avenue Mall

### History

In Colonial times, this area known as Back Bay was literally that: an inland bay alongside the peninsula on which Boston was established. Twice a day the Atlantic tides would send cleansing waves up the Charles River to flood it. That is, until the 1820s, when an enterprising mill company built a dam along what is now Beacon Street.

**1821** The Mill Dam is built along the Charles River on the north side of the Back Bay.

**1856** Commonwealth Avenue Mall, designed as part of Arthur D. Gilman's plan for an elegant new Back Bay neighborhood, is today the crucial green link between the Public Garden and Charlesgate connecting to Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace Park System. Designed in the French Boulevard style, Commonwealth Avenue is testimony to this bygone Victorian era in which a central public open space or boulevard lined with trees and fenced with iron picket fence enhanced the townhouses and served as a public promenade. Construction on the first nine-block length of the Mall from the Public Garden to Charlesgate began in the late 1860s and was completed by 1888.

The mall is bordered by three- to five-story mostly brick façade residential buildings with small yard spaces set back in a uniform manner. Important to the axial design and sense of space of the avenue were deed restrictions imposed for size and setback requirements. Individual lots were standardized at 26 feet in width, and buildings were required to be set back 20 feet from the property line. Commonwealth Avenue has an overall width of approximately 200 feet from building face to building face with a 100-foot-wide pedestrian mall for strolling and sitting and a 17-foot central pathway. The linear pedestrian mall from the Public Garden to Charlesgate totals 32 acres in size with the original idea to have it lined along its length with matching deciduous trees that were spaced at set intervals.

Frederick Law Olmsted and Charles Sprague Sargent

of the Arnold Arboretum were asked in 1880 for advice on tree planting patterns. Their suggestion was "to obtain . . . the uniformity which seems to us essential to the future beauty and dignity of the finest street in the city," removing the trees already planted and replacing them with two single rows of European elms. Fearing public outcry at losing existing trees, the City Council rejected the proposal. Still, the Mall was known for magnificent American elms, some of which survive the Dutch Elm disease that devastated the species in recent decades. Trees on the Mall are still largely elms of various species. Today, Sweetgum, green ash, maple, linden, Zelkova, Japanese pagoda, and elm define this formal avenue, along with monuments and memorials decorating its expansive central promenade. Shrubbery on the Mall is limited to shrubs that decorate monuments.

Nine monuments have been added to the park since William Rimmer's Alexander Hamilton in 1865. "The Mall presents a selection of monument sculpture from both the 19th and 20th centuries and in particular displays the contrast among the three periods represented, early Victorian, late Victorian, and modern". Strollers can be inspired by inscriptions emblazoned on the statues that adorn the mall, commemorating the famous, and reminding us of important events in the history of the city.

By the 1960s, the allées had become the victim of both benign neglect and the highly destructive Dutch elm disease. By the late 1960s, nearly half of the 600 elms on the mall were dead or dying. The desperate state of the mall led to the development of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall Committee, an organization of neighborhood volunteers formed to partner with the city's Parks Department and with the Friends of the Public Garden to return the landscape to its original grandeur. The focus of the committee has continued to be on the trees of the Mall, including DED injections, and pruning and fertilization programs that have kept alive the last great urban stand of American elms in the region. In addition the committee

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has done all of the tree planting and maintenance on the Mall for the last 30 years, funded by grants, individual donations, and fundraising events. Other areas of interest are the statues along the Mall, the ornamental fencing, the paved walkway, lighting, monitoring the use of the Mall by events such as the Boston Marathon, and advocating for policies to protect and enhance the Mall.

The length of Commonwealth Avenue, as far as Charlesgate East, is part of the Back Bay Architectural District, established by state law in 1966 and expanded in 1974. Portions of Commonwealth Avenue were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990 and 2003.

#### **Resources:**

[The Cultural Landscape Foundation](#)

[Emerald Necklace Conservancy](#)