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Copley Redesign

Copley Square is a unique landmark within Boston's architectural and intellectual landscape. Constructed on the nineteenth century Back Bay landfill, the square itself is on engineered ground meant to be an extension of Boston and a reflection of the city's ambition and cultural identity. As explained by Alex Krieger and Lisa Green, Copley developed as a framed stage that was defined by the surrounding institutions. The most prominent institutions that define Copley Square's architectural authority are the Boston Public Library McKim Building (1895) and the Trinity Church (1877). Trinity Church's Romanesque architecture by Henry Hobson Richardson projects the religious and cultural power. While the Renaissance revival architecture of the Boston Public Library, designed by the Beaux Arts classicist architects McKim, Mead, and White, presents an institution designed for the people, it symbolizes the Boston Brahmins' values rooted in intellectual prestige.

The recent design proposed by Sasaki improves circulation and accessibility by replacing the large portions of green space with structured pavements and pathways. The design was intended to modernize the space and support events. According to CBS Boston, the public has had mixed reactions to the lack of greenery, describing the square as overly gray and less welcoming. This reveals a particular tension in the new design; Copley holds architectural potential but is underperforming spatially. Currently, it feels more like a transitional or circulation space rather than an inviting and communal space that can support civic engagement,

gatherings, and be utilized for everyday use. We've seen the civic engagement potential of Copley Square, with over one thousand demonstrators who gathered there to protest ICE, as reported by the Suffolk Journal. The protest included speeches and community activists, etc. Copley Square is an active platform for pluralistic voices. My design responds directly to the needs of the historic evolving space.

My proposal includes a shallow amphitheater sunk into the ground approximately four to six feet below the existing ground. Instead of competing with the vertical authority of the Trinity church and the Boston Public Library, this intervention shifts the emphasis to a horizontal plane that functions as a shared ground of participation. Broad granite steps form terraced seating that can accommodate outdoor lectures, open mic nights, public debates, and informal studying. Multiple ramps will be integrated to maintain accessibility so the space feels inclusive rather than exclusive. The lowest level will serve as a flexible common capable of supporting other organized events and spontaneous use. A drainage system will be integrated into the seams of the geometric designs of the pavement, which would be supported by an underground drainage system that is appropriate for the Back Bay's high water table.

Importantly, the redesign maintains and enhances green space within the square. Instead of eliminating the landscaper, the appointed theater will be surrounded by planted areas and rows of trees that make the space more inviting. Along the upper edges, the areas will be surrounded by native grasses and other plants that will allow people to sit and use the space casually. These green areas have a purpose greater than just aesthetics; they help cool the area during hot summers and absorb rainwater. This redesign combines a structured gathering space with natural elements so the space feels both active and welcoming.

The plaza’s gemotectic design is rendered in blue and green tones, each chosen as a representation of Boston's rich history. The color blue references Boston's connection to the water from the harbor that shaped Boston’s early economy to the Charles River that defines its modern landscape. The water could also represent the flow of ideas, echoing the city’s history as a center for intellectual and cultural circulation. The color green references Boston’s landscape tradition, specifically the Emerald Necklace and the broader legacy of public outdoor spaces as spaces for engagement. Together, the two colors represent Boston’s rich history, origins, and commitment to a shared civic landscape.

The geometric design is based on six intersecting circles rather than one central form. Within each circle is a star-based pattern, and the overlapping circles form new shapes. No single shape or form dominates the design. Instead, the pattern connects each circle and creates a shared network of forms. His design also has symbolic meaning; it symbolizes how different communities, institutions, and ideas interact with one another in Boston. The geometry reflects pluralism, not a central authority, but multiple centers connecting and creating a common ground.

Historically, Copley Square has expressed authority through monumentality. This redesign expands on this legacy by transforming into a space for civic engagement, gathering of knowledge and new ideas, and a platform for voices of the future. Rather than asserting the past, this proposal builds on it, connecting Poston's architectural heritage to its contemporary diversity. In all that once expanded, Boston physically expands its design, expanding Boston socially, a resting ground for the city to foster pluralism. It will serve as a cultural institution, not just as the background to surrounding institutions.

Works Cited:

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