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An Information City: Boston

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Cities are, to a large extent, organized around the control of information. All have their particular information profile, a characteristic feeling of how information is dealt with as a result of economical, cultural, and political conditions. How accessible is which information, who uses it, and for what end? How is it processed, what role do information markets play? What do inhabitants know and believe, and how?

Greater Boston's information world is particularly well developed. Its economic base is decidedly information technology and services biased. MIT and Route 128 are the central sections of one of the nation's most celebrated "technopolis." It is a college town, and there is a good chance that the person on the bus next to you goes to school or teaches somewhere. Boston is also the dominant cultural center of New England, where the region's unmistakable reality is produced and reproduced. There are networks of various scale, advocacy groups, social circles, community organizations, support services. Bostonians can be extraordinarily helpful in their guarded ways, and are usually proud if they can let you in on something they really know about. And there is relative institutional openness when it comes to sharing information, in the universities and elsewhere.

In terms of learning opportunities and concern for knowledge access, Boston is home to some of the nation's largest information-rich and information-deprived groups. Data segregation is a troubling phenomenon. It is not easily measurable quantitatively or geographically. Information poverty—that is, lack of access to useful knowledge—is likely to be found among those groups that are underprivileged in other ways as well, such as the poor and the old. And it is endemic, in the sense that the information most easily available publicly tends to be parochial, high in sugar content and low on fiber. Social conventions, opportunities and places for public discourse are elusive or appropriated as commercial devices. The local bars are usually dominated by one or several large television sets. The school system affordable to all happens also to be the one least capable of producing a solid education. There is a thin sprinkling of initiatives to provide the poor with access to the knowledge—and the knowledge of how to use it—required to transcend his and her condition.

Yet the Boston Area Yellow Pages list
540 schools,
90 facsimile communications equipment and systems suppliers,
880 printers,

107 detective agencies,
143 copying and duplicating services,
68 newspapers and advertising publications,
23 television stations and broadcasting companies,
60 radio stations and broadcasting companies,
138 telephone equipment and systems dealers,
670 computer dealers, and over 100 publishing houses.

It's an information-intensive city, but public knowledge exchange is not now a civic development theme. Alex Krieger's research suggests that city expansion—the system of parks and public spaces, the waterfront, harbor, and river basin, the street system, and the more recent initiatives of rebuilding the inner city—is what drove Boston's physical evolution thematically over the past two centuries. A less visible but no less significant set of evolutions brought about the school system and network of public libraries, two elements of the information infrastructure which could benefit from profound change today. "Advanced information exchange" in the broadest sense is yet to surface as a true urban change paradigm. With the advent of the computer and breakthroughs in digital information exchange, we have begun to incorporate computer metaphors into our language and views of the world. Scientific disciplines such as

neurophysiology and molecular biology have adopted the “information” analogue. And machine intelligence researchers study human modes to find nonlinear shortcuts to the patterns of automated logic. So why not the city? After all, storage, gathering, access, processing of information is what urban centers are largely about.

Fortunately, cities are too complex to be provided with the perfect nervous system in one fell swoop. As to the low level of activity around broad public learning systems, it is not immediately clear which potential sponsor group for a public knowledge infrastructure stands to reap immediate rewards, a *conditio sine qua non* for most current urban investment initiatives. Finally, the data-processing metaphor is in itself insufficient to bring about social change for the better without the willingness to investigate on a sustained basis the unique opportunities which may be presented by these new media. The 1960s and 1970s were the heady times of Lewis Mumford’s city-as-big-museum analogue, the “wired city,” Kevin Lynch’s urban perceptual psychology, Doreen Nelson’s City Building Educational Program, Richard Saul Wurman’s drives toward “making the city observable,” Stephen Carr’s proposals of illuminating the

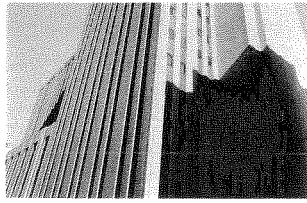
city with “signs and lights,” and of techniques of “environmental visual analysis.” Underlying was a shared and deeply felt desire to understand and make transparent, to afford a look behind the scenes, and to make widely accessible demonstrable insights into the workings of society at large. But the advanced stages of this period were also the days of much broader discourse across the issues and the land.

Today the city struggles to keep its basic infrastructure intact, and planners are far from seriously exploring meaningful civic information networks. Besides, isn’t this the domain of the market, the phone and computer companies, area networkers, telecommunication service providers, and cable companies? Ironically, public knowledge enhancement has lost attention as a theme for public investment, precisely when there emerge more accessible technologies and deeply troubling issues of widening knowledge gaps among the population. The American city of the 1980s is not about collective civic strategies. It is seemingly pragmatic, divided, competitive, and seeks to reduce its involvement in the provision of public services. Redevelopment authority officials debate visually tolerable levels of downtown speculation, attempting to compensate for slum build-up with development linkage

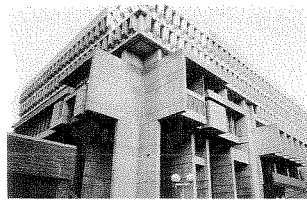
schemes, whereby developers agree to sponsor a certain amount of subsidized housing in the neighborhoods for the privilege of investing downtown. Housing does continue to be a pressing issue, but so does access to quality knowledge, and knowledge about its use, to help spawn and support with skilled manpower the anticipated industries.

On the next page, see how Boston gathers, keeps, and manages its information. Look how it celebrates and categorizes functions, how it builds architectural barriers for data. We still design our schools and libraries as we did in the nineteenth century. And there is something charming about the unwitting Disneyland quality of the computer-linked neighborhood bank. What does a fortified City Hall or State Archives building tell us? The Museum of Fine Arts a classical palais, MIT’s state-of-the-art Media Lab a corporate headquarter? And the new Roxbury Community College an Ivy League clone? If the distancing symbolism of the institutional information containers is so critical, what does this tell us about the likelihood for acceptance of a less visible, less assuming, but ubiquitous and possibly more cost-effective network of computer-aided learning stations? Or, vice versa, what does it tell us about the representational requirements for such access

points, and the available “soft” material itself? Or will it be possible to detach structured learning and access to the best of cultural and social knowledge from its built packages?



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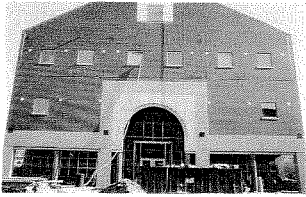
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- 1 New England Telephone and Telegraph Company
- 2 Boston City Hall
- 3 Arts and Media Technology Building, MIT
- 4 Central Post Office, Boston
- 5 Hynes Auditorium: new convention center
- 6 Roxbury Community College
- 7 State House
- 8 State Archives
- 9 Museum of Fine Arts
- 10 Boston Public Library
- 11 Television Station: satellite dishes
- 12 The Boston Globe
- 13 Neighborhood Post Office
- 14 Polaroid Corporation
- 15 Boston College High School
- 16 Cambridge Police box
- 17 Movie house
- 18 University of Massachusetts, Boston campus
- 19 Faneuil Hall
- 20 Neighborhood church

Photos by Peter Droegge



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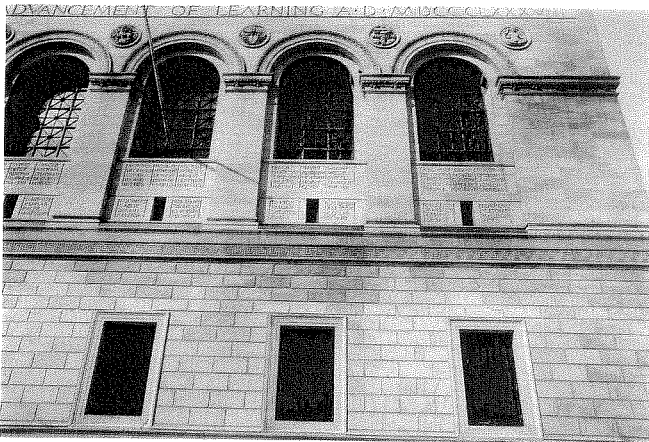
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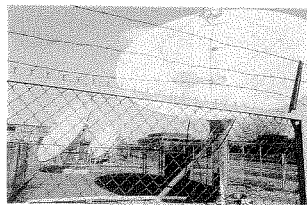
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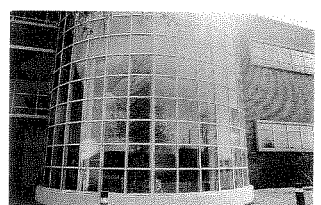
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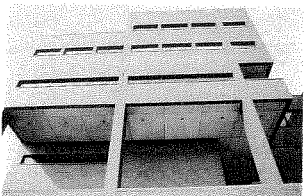
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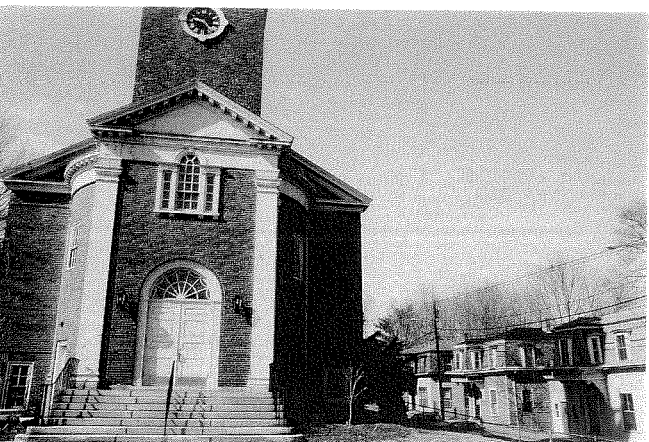
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