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Design Perspectives: Lessons from Boston about new life on the waterfront

By [CLAIR ENLOW](#)
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Some day soon, Gov. Chris Gregoire will announce her choice for replacing the Alaskan Way Viaduct.

Take a deep breath. We may be nearing the end of the longest, most intense Seattle process ever.

Design Perspectives
By Clair Enlow

In the end, it has also been about the city of Seattle, not just a state highway. The Washington State Department of Transportation has led an open, inclusive and rational process that began with eight options and ended with two choices on Dec. 11: a rebuilt viaduct or a surface option. But Gregoire

has said that all options are still on the table, including tunnels. Some combination of elements from the options is expected.

The construction nightmare of a cut-and-cover tunnel, which did not make WSDOT's final cut, is unlikely. Then again, because it is actually on the table, the rebuild option still threatens decades of dreams for a kinder and sunnier urban waterfront.

The latest and most intense phase of the process has yielded a huge number of small and medium improvements to the traffic grid, along with additional political investment in transit and non-highway transportation alternatives. We can hope that some version of a surface option — something friendlier than a highway with stoplights — will be announced.



Photo by Clair Enlow [\[enlarge\]](#)

Seattle's aerial freeway still casts its shadow along the waterfront. Many hope for sunshine when the governor announces her choice of replacement options.

Then the fun really begins: redeveloping the Alaskan Way corridor, a green street like no other.

It won't be easy. Ideas are still flowing (See "Viaduct vision calls for open tunnel with lids," a proposal by landscape architect Charles Anderson covered by the DJC's Margie Slovan on Dec. 23). As exciting as it is to contemplate new open space near the waterfront, there is no roadmap

for reclaiming a swath of the city.

Rebecca Barnes, now director of strategic growth for Brown University, helped to create Seattle's comprehensive plan during the Rice administration. During the years in between, she has been in Boston focusing on surface redevelopment after the Big Dig in three successive professional positions, most recently as chief planner for the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

“People kept asking: what's a good model for this?” remembers Barnes. “There's nothing exactly like this. That's going to be the case for Seattle, too. The lessons from around the world have to do with quality of life, rather than exact physical examples.”

Seattle city officials are not talking about it. They are no doubt waiting with bated breath, because the governor has not yet spoken. The opening of views across the waterfront and the prospect of usable open space and room for development are still only a dream.

Images of the surface option show a kind of paved patio between roadways. For the time being, this is a stand-in for “open space.” Transportation officials clearly don't want to make any design or development assumptions at this stage in the decision-making process.

Frank Salvucci, now a senior research associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has been called the father of Boston's Big Dig because of his early advocacy as that state's transportation secretary for taking down the Interstate 93 aerial freeway in downtown Boston and replacing it with a tunnel.

Viewed from the air, the path of the Big Dig is eerily evocative of the Alaska Way Viaduct, according to Salvucci. It also has the physical similarity of cutting a city off from its waterfront.



AP Photo/Elise Amendola [\[enlarge\]](#)

There are several similarities between the viaduct planning and Boston's Big Dig. In this photo, The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway sits where the elevated Central Artery once snaked through downtown Boston.

The two cities and their dreams of a renewed highway corridor also share what Salvucci calls “ancient history.” He remembers the 1970s, when Washington and Massachusetts vied for federal funding to finance similar cut-and-cover tunnels in their major cities. At the time, Senator Warren Magnusson was an advocate for rebuilding state Route 99 underground, Salvucci remembers.

Hope for both projects faded with the Reagan administration, but Boston came back and got federal funding for a cut-and-cover tunnel. After the project broke ground in 1991, Salvucci watched from his new position at MIT.

The Big Dig has yielded the open space that he had envisioned, and now the bottlenecks on I-93

are elsewhere. But realizing the potential of the surface has taken a back seat to the underground freeway. Two decades later, Boston's tunnel is operating, but redevelopment at the surface has hardly begun.

In the beginning, it was to be only open space, according to Barnes. Then, around 2000, discussions intensified about a wider mix of uses and the potential for knitting together the city.

The solution that came out of those discussions was to site several cultural institutions along the corridor, but those projects did not happen for a number of reasons. A simple explanation is that these were new institutions competing with each other for funding, even as the cost of building became a moving target. The foundations of these hoped-for landmarks were literally tied to the Big Dig lid and the cut-and-cover highway, a project that was plagued with budget problems, delays and finally lawsuits over the death of a motorist killed in a ceiling collapse.

While the city waited expectantly for parks and cultural institutions that did not materialize, blocks on both sides of the Big Dig came alive, along with public spaces along the harbor and shoreline.

In 2005, decades after the use of the surface as a park was officially envisioned, the redevelopment effort has been handed to The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, a non-profit that will guide development and fundraising.

Like the corridor in Boston, Alaskan Way will have to be rebuilt one way or the other. But in Boston the ground to be redeveloped is not ground at all, but an engineered lid over a highway. To complicate matters, as planning and engineering for the Big Dig progressed, the question of air rights — and the capacity of the tunnel lid to support multi-story buildings — remained in play. This has contributed to the glacial slowness of redevelopment, along with city waffling over funds for park construction and maintenance.

These problems are daunting, but minus a megaproject, the huge cost overruns and construction problems of Boston's experience can be dodged, with luck and planning. Because of the track record of cooperation between the state and city on deciding the future of the state Route 99 corridor, the re-development of the Seattle waterfront is not likely to get bogged down in the same kind of political, financial and bureaucratic stalemates witnessed in Boston.

Times have changed. When planning for the Big Dig began in the 1980s, big thinkers were paying attention to the problems of sprawl and the need to make cities more livable and inviting. Air quality was an important issue, but global warming was not a looming threat as it is now. Hardly anyone questioned a person's right to drive almost anywhere at 50 miles per hour.

Without an engineering marvel or construction nightmare — depending on which account of the Big Dig you read — it will be easier to plan for parks or other redevelopment options in Seattle with confidence and a schedule.

As for his own view of Seattle's big question, Salvucci had this to say: “It was a mistake to ever build the elevated, and rebuilding it would be the wrong thing to do.”

Some Seattleites have been saying this for a long time. And tomorrow, like the ghosts of Christmas past — and future — the prospect of a new viaduct or a Boston-style megaproject on the Seattle waterfront may be only a bad dream.

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