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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

New park opens on old industrial site behind Honan-Allston library

Posted by Matt Rocheleau July 8, 2011 01:02 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

From left to right: Allston resident and Harvard Allston Task Force Chair Ray Mellone and Harvard president Drew G. Faust cut the ceremonial ribbon as two young residents Julia Weeks and Ava Healey, look on along with State Representative Kevin Honan, of Brighton, Boston Public Library President Amy Ryan, and Boston Parks Commissioner Toni Pollak.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Wayne MacKenzie and his sister Eileen Savoia grew up in an Allston home next door to a make-shift playground of sorts. They each share warmhearted childhood memories of their imaginative younger selves and neighbors playing in and around abandoned concrete drums, having rock fights and climbing stacks of giant concrete bricks.

But they conceded that activity was all a bit dangerous and the lot itself was a tremendous eyesore on the neighborhood.

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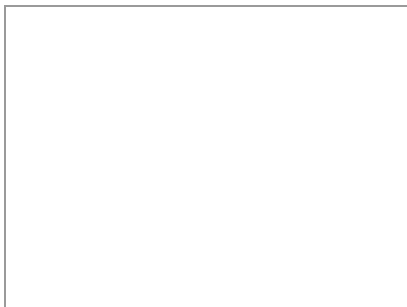
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“This is much nicer,” said the 47-year-old MacKenzie gazing across the 1.7-acre property he has watched dramatically morph from a dusty, noisy concrete manufacturing site into a grassy, intricately-landscaped, peaceful park space touted as being especially “green” and a model of sustainability.

(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

The former concrete plant, circa 1940.

Asked if he'll miss the concrete drums he once explored as a youngster, he replied quickly, “not at all.”

Despite the nostalgic recollections, “It was all just dumped, wasteful concrete,” he said at the new park’s grand opening Thursday afternoon. “It was awful.”

The new space, dubbed Library Park, sits behind the 10-year-old Honan-Allston Branch Library on North Harvard Street.

The McNamara Concrete Company, founded by John H. McNamara in 1916, ceased operations there shortly after the founder’s son, Albert J. McNamara died in 1991. The following year, the city’s health department reported the industrial site, which sits on what was once Charles River marshland, had numerous environmental- and health-related violations.

The lot was later emptied of cement equipment and remnants, but remained fenced-off and unused until three years ago when Harvard University announced plans to convert the land, which it had purchased nearly 15 years before, into a park.

(To see earlier design photos and shots of the lot before park construction began, [click here](#).)

(To see photos through the planning and building process, [click here and scroll down](#).)

Where a large conveyor belt once sat for several decades there is now a small, tiered hill with a slowly inclining walkway that circles up past trees, shrubs and other landscape before reaching a summit and seating area. The hill’s peak, also accessible by concrete stairway, offers far-reaching views over Allston and past the Charles River into Cambridge.

Marge Mojave has lived off of nearby Lincoln Street for nearly the past three decades. She stood below the hill on an open, circular grassy area surrounded by 150 trees and several other lawns, which are layered in salvaged fill and plantings that officials said are mostly native and deciduous.

“It’s a good addition to the library, and we use the library a lot,” she said, smiling at her grandchildren, 10-year-old Emma Schneider and her sister 6-year-old Sofia.

The park features three re-used, granite-carved lion head statues that shoot a cooling mist from their mouths; an aspen grove veiling the parking lot; several gardens, benches and reading areas; and a rain garden that collects water runoff for groundwater recharge.



(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

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dogs are allowed, and some brought their four-legged companions to sniff out the new pet and people relaxing play area.

A girl runs between the spraying statues.

Several other area residents arrived on bicycle to Thursday's opening ceremonies hosted on a warm afternoon by Harvard along with city park, development and library leaders. Marty Walsh, 32, of Somerville, owns a nearby custom bike shop he opened four years ago called [Geekhouse](#) and plans to relax in the park, weather permitting, during lunch breaks.

He also envisioned possibly having his customers test out products along the park's paths. However, a sign noticed later at the park's entrance says bicycling, along with skateboarding and roller skating are prohibited there.

The park designed by landscape architectural firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc. closes at dusk but will remain illuminated by energy-efficient LED lighting.

Eddie, who declined to give his last name, has lived about a football field's length from the site for all of his 49 years. He not only played there in his youth like other neighborhood children, but worked at the former concrete plant and remains employed by the company that is now based in Waltham.

While he said he most often travels the area by bicycle, he foresees himself strolling through the park's quarter-mile worth of walking paths on the way to pick up his morning coffee.

"It gives the older folks some place to go and a place for the kids to visit from the library," he added, sitting on a flat-topped stone alongside his yellow bike.

He said graffiti has been prevalent on nearby walls and buildings and hopes the park's structures won't be used as a canvass for more tagging. Otherwise, Eddie said he welcomes the green space's opening.

Harvard President Drew Faust said Thursday, "Library Park is a tangible reminder of Harvard's commitment to Allston, and is one of the many community programs and improvements that are strengthening the fabric of the neighborhood."

The university owns a large amount of empty land in North Allston and many of the school's ambitious projects for developing those properties have been stalled, scrapped or scaled back in recent, recession-plagued years.

Eddie is happy to see the university follow through on a development that will likely cater more to the local community than to Harvard, which has donated the land to the city's parks department. The school will oversee the site's "[organic maintenance](#)" – a new concept in sustainability, according to park architects – for the next decade.

"They're good at starting projects, but not at finishing them," he said of the Cambridge-based school that boasts the world's largest university endowment. But, "This one's nice. It shows a commitment to the neighborhood."

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

The hill in Library Park offers distant views of Allston and Cambridge, the city Harvard calls home on the other side of the Charles River.

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