

GLASS ACT

By, Robert L. Turner

The Boston Globe, March 30, 2003 Page M10

This is the dream: Exiting South Station onto Summer Street, you are drawn across Dewey Square to a vast plaza serving as a welcoming entrance to the string of parks above the newly depressed Central Artery. Immediately behind it, an all-season Japanese garden provides a locus of tranquility in an urban setting. Just beyond, reached either at street level or via an elevated bridge spanning Congress Street, a squarish building contains a visitors' center and horticultural exhibits on the lower floors, with offices above. Still farther up Atlantic Avenue, toward the Evelyn Moakley Bridge, a winter garden - an acre in size and enclosed by nine-story glass walls and roof - houses a rich variety of plants and flowers rivaling those of any indoor garden in the world, certainly in such a downtown location. More than a million people a year flock to this emerald-green oasis tucked into the gray canyons of Boston's financial district.

This is the dream of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society and its president, John Peterson. The \$70 million Garden Under Glass will not only be a major new attraction for the city but will anchor the south end of the artery corridor, named the Rose Kennedy Greenway. Together with the new Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Bridge, a mile to the north, and the parks and other public spaces in between, the Garden Under Glass will help define Boston for the new century.

This is the dream. But can it happen? A great many people in Boston hope so, both because they think the project would add luster to the city and because there are no contingency plans for using the invaluable 4 acres of space if it fails.

But many have their doubts, doubts that were underscored last month when Mass. Hort.'s talks aimed at a collaboration with the Massachusetts Development Finance Agency collapsed. Agency president Michael Hogan says the society failed to come up with evidence of an anticipated "leadership gift." Peterson and Garden Under Glass counsel John Delaney say no such evidence had been demanded before, and the project's phased fund-raising effort is now getting underway. Still, the deal's failure left Peterson with neither a partner nor financial pledges to give his project credibility.

The Massachusetts Horticultural Society, once one of Boston's proudest institutions, with a rich history dating from 1829, has been struggling financially for some time. It sold its landmark headquarters building on Huntington Avenue, across Massachusetts Avenue from Symphony Hall, in 1991. And last year, to stay afloat, it sold much of its library in two batches, one to Chicago's Botanic Garden for \$3 million and the other through Christie's auction house for \$2.45 million.

Former directors have criticized the current leadership and called for Peterson's head. When Nancy B. Putnam of Manchester-by-the-Sea resigned as secretary and trustee last year, her letter to Peterson cited his "mismanagement," which she said had impoverished "one of Massachusetts' oldest and formerly most respected charitable organizations." And, she added, "the current lack of respect for the Society's management is such that it will continue to be extremely difficult to raise substantial amounts of money."

But Elizabeth Harris, chairwoman of the Mass. Hort. board, says financial troubles preceded Peterson's arrival in 1992 and have finally been turned around. William McDonough of the Federal Reserve Bank, a cochair with Harris of the Garden Under Glass board, says that the barbs aimed at Peterson are coming from outside the organization. "John Peterson is secure at Mass. Hort.," McDonough says. "The current trustees back him."

The project's community support is indicated by Boston lawyer Rob Tuchmann, who earlier this month told the Mayor's Artery Completion Task Force, which he cochairs, "I think we all have a responsibility to make it a success and not just say they haven't got their act together."

So the Garden Under Glass proposal is now at the center of a great Boston drama. Old families, raw politics, changing demographics, power struggles between the city and state, the failure of the philanthropic community to step into the breach - it is in many ways a familiar Boston story being played out again with relentless momentum.

And the stakes are high, both for Mass. Hort. and for Boston. If the project succeeds, the society will be reborn, and the city will celebrate a signature public space. But there is fear the project will be stillborn, wounding Mass. Hort. and blasting a gaping hole in the crucial effort to develop coordinated plans for the Rose Kennedy Greenway.

The designation of Mass. Hort. as developer of part of the corridor was agreed to more than a decade ago by Stephen Coyle, then director of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and by two Cabinet members in the Dukakis administration, Transportation Secretary Frederick Salvucci and Environmental Affairs Secretary **John DeVillars**. All three knew that the parcels near South Station would be coveted by developers for hotels or other structures. But they wanted the space kept open, and they determined to designate a developer whose mission was consistent with their vision.

The Garden Under Glass idea essentially walked into **DeVillars**'s office late in 1990, when a group from Mass. Hort. arrived with a proposal. **DeVillars** remembers that the discussion was "very much conceptual," without a lot of detail. The late Jay Hill, one of the founders of the Hill, Holliday, Connors, Cosmopolos advertising agency and then chairman of the Mass. Hort. board, led the group in suggesting that an ambitious horticultural exhibit, including a large winter garden, would work well on the site.

DeVillars saw the proposal for a horticultural hall as answering part of his overall responsibility: counterbalancing the environmental harm of the mammoth road tunneling project that came to be known as the Big Dig. In the legally binding environmental certificate he signed on January 2, 1991, as the Dukakis administration was leaving office, **DeVillars** set down a requirement that only 25 percent of the entire corridor space could be developed, with the rest as public open space. Included in that document was the designation of Mass. Hort. as the developer of three key parcels.

Twelve years later, **DeVillars** has no second thoughts. "The idea is as laudatory today as it was then," he says.

The immediate problem – more pressing since Mass. Hort.'s recent difficulties - is that the society's early designation as the developer has left these three crucial parcels outside the planning for the rest of the corridor.

When a yearlong process was carried out in 2000-2001 to develop a master plan for the corridor, the team, led by architect Karen Alshuler of San Francisco and including some of Boston's leading landscape architects and planners, was told specifically to ignore parcels 19, 21, and 22. While no voices have been raised against the Horticultural Society moving forward if it can, questions are growing louder.

If the group can't raise the needed money - which it estimates at roughly \$70 million - what will become of the parcels? Shouldn't some fallback planning be going on now? Would it make sense for Mass. Hort. to develop one or two of the parcels, instead of all three?

For far too long, such questions were not even being considered. Finally, just after the society's negotiations with the Development Finance Agency collapsed, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, which is in charge of the Big Dig, acted. Chairman Matthew Amorello directed legal and design staff to explore alternatives.

Amorello says he still believes the Garden Under Glass is "a wonderful idea" but regards it as only prudent to examine other possibilities that would stress open space and perhaps cultural uses.

Stephanie Pollack, acting president of the Conservation Law Foundation, is another whose heart is with the project but who retains a pragmatic skepticism. The parcels along the Greenway must "work as an interconnected series of spaces," she says. "If the Horticultural Society is not going to be able to meet its commitments, then someone needs to be responsible for having this all work together."

Already, some opportunities have been lost because of the hands-off relationship with Mass. Hort. For instance, there was the possibility that Mass. Hort. might act as the gardener for the other parcels, an idea suggested by Patrice Todisco, head of the Boston GreenSpace Alliance. Also, it might have been better for the Garden Under Glass to be located elsewhere in the corridor. **DeVillars** says there was no magic to the choice of the three parcels near South Station. They seemed most appropriate to him at the time, and perhaps they still are, but no one has examined the question, and now it is too late. The Turnpike Authority has selected the final designers for all the other park parcels, and they are moving forward. Final design concepts are expected by this summer.

While the hands-off relationship with Mass. Hort. continues to jeopardize the Greenway, it is understandable. Anyone seeking to draw the organization in closer might be asked to come up with some of the needed funds, which are considerable.

The Turnpike Authority is now budgeting \$31 million for the development of all eight other park parcels; Mass. Hort. wants to spend more than twice that on three. The sources of funding are uncertain at best. And the current squeeze on state and city budgets - and on the philanthropic community - is a fund-raiser's nightmare.

Last year, Boston's mayor, Thomas M. Menino, said the city intended to partner with Mass. Hort. on the project, and talks have recently begun with the city's economic development agency. But there has been no detail of what that might mean financially.

The 1991 certificate from **DeVillars**, although slightly ambiguous, seems to require that the state come up with whatever funds Mass. Hort. is lacking in bringing the project to fruition, and **DeVillars** says that was indeed his intent. But state officials have not accepted that interpretation.

Even Salvucci, who is regarded as the godfather of the Big Dig, says now: "The Turnpike has the responsibility to help. I can't say it's their responsibility to build it."

Peterson has pointed out that his last major project, building the nation's fifth largest conservatory, in Columbus, Ohio, was aided by \$70 million in federal aid secured by US Senator John Glenn. But there has been no evidence that Congress would be so generous with anything connected with the Big Dig, despite Senator Edward M. Kennedy's personal interest - the Greenway is named for his mother - and his enthusiastic support.

When the funding issue was raised at a public forum held in Faneuil Hall last May, sponsored by the Beyond the Big Dig project led by the Globe and MIT, panelist Hubie Jones got the loudest applause of the night when he shouted: "This isn't Mass. Hort.'s problem. This is Boston's problem!"

Whether because Peterson's tenure has been so controversial, or because the society was in financial straits even before he arrived, or because some people feel the Garden Under Glass proposal is too ambitious, neither old money nor new has yet answered Hubie Jones's call.

Unless a financial backer with exceptionally deep pockets appears, the success of the Mass. Hort. proposal will probably depend on partnerships. The organization itself, led by chairwoman Harris, has pursued links with Kyoto, Boston's sister city in Japan, and with the Japan Society of Boston to secure support for an open Japanese garden on one of the parcels.

Peter Grilli, president of the Japan Society, is an enthusiastic advocate, predicting that the Japanese garden will be "a permanent treasure" in Boston. Grilli says he is confident he can raise half the funds for the \$10 million project in Japan and the United States, while Harris expects to raise the other half locally.

Other possible links include Harvard University. Its Arnold Arboretum has occasionally been a friendly competitor with Mass. Hort., but it might see a downtown outpost as a complement that could draw visitors to its 265-acre Jamaica Plain site. Alternatively, the world-famous exhibit of glass flowers at Harvard's Botanical Museum is viewed by some administrators there as a treasure but one that is taking up space for more active, academic pursuits. A glass flower exhibit on the Greenway would fit Mass. Hort.'s theme and, with a modest admission fee, might attract funds for both the society and Harvard.

Neither of these ideas has advanced very far, but a number of partnerships will probably be needed if the project is to succeed.

One idea behind the Japanese garden, according to Peterson, is that "it would make the historical tie to the seafaring trade." Many plants that are now commonly found around Boston originated in the Far East, he says. One of the main goals of depressing the Central Artery and opening up the Greenway is to reconnect the city to its waterfront; the Mass. Hort. parcels, located only a block from Fort Point Channel as it opens into Boston Harbor, are ideally situated to do that.

Peterson and others hope parcel 22 can be developed quickly. It is located just before the elevated highway begins, and therefore construction on it does not have to wait for the steel to come down, which is scheduled for 2005. Boston's Japan Society celebrates its 100th anniversary next year and would like the garden to be in place. And with Boston preparing to host the Democratic National Convention in July 2004, the city would like to show off part of the completed Greenway. Says Peterson: "I am confident that we could deliver at least some kind of place holder for the convention."

Still, there are questions. Is a Japanese garden the best use for the site? Should gardens from other cultures be included? As for the other parcels, some advocates doubt whether an office building is appropriate for parcel 21, and the plans for the actual Garden Under Glass are very sketchy. Peterson talks about something that "is not a plant museum but a plant encounter - a dynamic experience that changes from week to week." But details, including the size of the structure, also vary.

In addition, Mass. Hort. has proposed that the development of parcels 21 and 19 be delayed so that it can finish planning and fund-raising, and that a traveling exhibit of topiarylike plant sculptures - recently in Montreal - be located there temporarily, starting in 2005. The traveling topiary idea has received only tepid response.

Also still undefined is the degree to which Mass. Hort. needs to raise money from these parcels, whether from concessions, rents for office space, or admissions charges for parts of the exhibit. Peterson insists that much of the space would be open to the public free, and that admission charges would be nominal, but he adds that the project does need a revenue stream to stay alive.

A 56-page marketing study for Mass. Hort. in 1999 projected that 1.1 million visitors a year could be attracted to an ambitiously designed and richly programmed facility. Still, assuming an admission fee of \$3 to \$4, the study projected an annual operating deficit of \$1.8 million. The report, by Economics Research Associates of Washington, D.C., also looked at more modest plans that would have regional rather than national interest. But the projected financial results were not much better, so the focus has been on a major project that would be recognized internationally.

A major problem, however, continues to be uncertainty in the public mind over Mass. Hort.'s plan and prospects. "We don't really have a clear idea of what the Garden Under Glass can be," says the GreenSpace Alliance's Todisco. "What is the mission, and who is it going to serve?" Todisco sits on several boards connected with the Greenway planning and is as plugged in as any advocate in Boston. Indeed, Peterson was on her own Alliance board until last fall. If she doesn't know the answers to these questions, it is safe to assume that few in the city do.

Mass. Hort. may have contributed to this sense by trying to juggle a variety of concerns. Its internal problems, including civil suits that produced bad publicity, stemmed from multiple disputes. Some members wanted to move the organization to a site on the North Shore, instead of west of Boston. Some were passionately opposed to the sale of the books. Some felt from the start that the Garden Under Glass was too ambitious and would obscure Mass. Hort.'s basic mission. All of this was occurring during a time of financial stricture, which produced its own divisions and finger-pointing within the society. Harris says that Peterson, hired three years before she joined the board in 1995, has made significant progress on all the goals set for him. Last year, after a review, the board voted to keep him on for two more years.

Peterson, who has an amiable public manner, has, however, shifted aspects of the Garden Under Glass plans a number of times, creating the impression that Mass. Hort.'s first priority is to plan whatever is most likely to be funded, rather than what would be best for the site and the city. Peterson says he likes the political give-and-take. "Trying to meet the interests of all parties is not easy," he says. "But doable if you're creative."

As with the Greenway, the Garden Under Glass has no exact model. Most of the botanical gardens and conservatories that exist in other cities are located at some distance from downtown, few attract as many visitors as are envisioned here, and none has such a complex management challenge. Still, ambitious facilities elsewhere offer lessons.

The Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis attracts some 800,000 persons a year to its 79-acre facility 3 miles from downtown. It is operated by a nonprofit organization and receives some public funding in exchange for allowing free admission at certain times for local residents. It is popular locally, enjoying a large membership of 35,000 - far more than Mass. Hort.'s total membership of 12,000.

More centrally located is the Garfield Park Conservatory on the West Side of Chicago, which has persisted in a changing neighborhood since 1908. It has a program working with Chicago public school students that Boston might well emulate. At 75,000 square feet, the Garfield Park Conservatory is slightly larger than the 63,800 square feet set for the Garden Under Glass in Mass. Hort.'s preliminary plans from Koetter Kim & Associates. However, the Chicago facility attracts only some 100,000 visitors a year.

More than a million are drawn annually to Montreal's botanical garden, a 383-acre facility near the Olympic complex there. Outdoors and in, the facility offers Chinese and Japanese gardens, formal European gardens, and even a garden for the blind, emphasizing the plants' different textures. Programming is richly varied, and administrators estimate that half of visitors come for special events. Once part of Montreal's

Park Department, the garden is now its own department, though it works closely with the Arbor Society of Montreal. It has an annual budget of about \$30 million.

The biodome is another facility in Montreal with a patronage of nearly 1 million a year, and a substantial budget of more than \$10 million.

While the 1999 study for Mass. Hort. looked at these and some other examples, more intensive work is needed. Gardens in Copenhagen and Amsterdam offer lessons for an urban conservatory in a northern latitude, and the gardens at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville are as ambitious as any. Boston's challenge is to take the best from the best, and improve on it.

For most of its long history, the Massachusetts Horticultural Society was a central part of Boston's old-line establishment, with a national reputation for excellence reinforced by its publishing of the magazine *Horticulture*. But the magazine was sold two decades ago, and the financial difficulties have been serious. As recently as three years ago, the organization was applauded, in the report mentioned above, for "a world-class historic library renowned for its collection of rare books and botanical prints" and for the fact that it maintained offices, albeit rented, in *Horticulture* Hall. But most of the library and the historic in-town offices are now gone.

Mass. Hort. today operates out of Elm Bank, a 188-acre estate in Wellesley and Dover that includes Italianate and Asian gardens designed by the Olmsted brothers, as well as plantings both traditional and modern, including some beds used for research into genetically modified flowers.

Peterson has been criticized for some of his moves to shore up the organization's finances, such as the sale of irreplaceable books. But Garden Under Glass cochair McDonough says it was the right move, partly because the books were not being used. "In truth," he says, "they were in a basement waiting for a disaster that would wipe out their value."

Mass. Hort. has reorganized its board, including creating a separate entity, Garden Under Glass Inc., to attract funding and community support. Recent arrivals have added some of the development and fund-raising clout that would give the project the credibility it needs so desperately.

For his part, Peterson is unfailingly optimistic. He points out that Mass. Hort. met a number of tests to get a long-term lease at Elm Bank, and he insists the Garden Under Glass plans are on track. Also, Mass. Hort. says that exhibition space for its big annual event, the Spring Flower Show (March 15-23), was fully booked earlier than ever before.

Boston's medical community is world famous for healing the wounded, but the city's corporate leaders, philanthropists, and foundations have no such reputation.

The Massachusetts Horticultural Society is a wounded institution, and the events of the past decade have made clear that its history will not save it. It must create its own future, and its chosen vehicle is the Garden Under Glass.

Yet to bring this off, Mass. Hort. will have to show an ability - soon - to raise money and create partnerships that has been scarce in recent years. This might mean help from the city or state or the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, but substantial private resources will be needed, too. It might mean a reconstituted board, with greater experience in development and fund-raising. Some think it might require replacing Peterson. Certainly Nancy Putnam's assertion that the organization will have difficulty raising money under Peterson has proved true, at least to date.

The venerable institution is at a crossroads. Turnpike chairman Amorello is actively exploring options. And Boston Redevelopment Authority director Mark Maloney says that lack of progress would require the selection of an alternative developer for the three valuable parcels at some point in the not-too-distant future. "It is not a decision I would like to make," he says, "but it will be an obvious one."

On the other hand, supporters of the Garden Under Glass have in recent weeks shown a new determination to fight for their project. John Henderson, a new board member and president of the George B. H. Macomber construction company in South Boston, endorses the plans for a phased approach, starting with raising \$2 million in the next 12 months. This strategy is "very rational and manageable," he says.

John Dineen, a veteran Garden Under Glass board member who is also one of Boston's leading property lawyers, says the project will succeed "because it deserves to be done - and besides, nobody's come up with anything better."

Because the Garden Under Glass is a dream that has excited so many, a lot is at stake, not just for John Peterson and the Horticultural Society, but for the entire Rose Kennedy Greenway and for all of Boston.