

## **2004 Nomination for Renata von Tscharner**

The Boston Society of Landscape Architects is proud to nominate Renata von Tscharner, founder and President of the Charles River Conservancy for the LaGasse Medal in the non-landscape architect category.

Like other exceptional leaders and stewards of public lands, Renata von Tscharner is a determined self-starter, an accomplished, energetic instigator, and in fact a visionary. Trained as an architect and city planner at the Institute of Technology in Zurich, Renata then moved to London to work on the Greater London Council's Covent Garden team. Another aspect of her European background would also influence her in years to come; growing up in the Emmental, and when later living in Basel, Zurich and Bern, Renata loved to swim in the rivers that flow through these cities.

In 1979 Renata immigrated to the United States and co-founded the Townscape Institute. In her 15 years as principal there she worked in about 100 cities and towns across America and Europe. With close to 20 years experience as an urban designer, working on and writing about public spaces and "place making" in both Europe and the United States, she has developed a passion for places where beauty and pleasure converge.

In her adopted home of Boston, as she traversed the water and shore of the state-owned parklands along of the Charles River, she began to wonder why this magnificent public space and powerful focal point of the greater Boston region was crumbling and overgrown, and who was "in charge" of seeing to its care. In this way her volunteer vocation, as a steward of public lands, began.

Used by well over a million people each year, the 19 miles of shoreline within the Charles River Parklands include some 500 acres, and are host to many major events including the Head of the Charles Regatta, the annual 4th of July concert at the Hatch Shell, walk-a-thons, races and river fairs,. The parklands 's facilities, however, are inadequate to meet the demands put upon them. Public toilets are few, picnic tables are scarce, restaurants are nonexistent, bridges are in disrepair, pathways are dangerous, lighting is bad, and even passive recreational activities are diminished by untamed growth and the crumbling infrastructure.

As an active outdoorswoman exploring the Charles River, Renata windsurfed, kayaked, walked, bicycled and inline skated the water and shores of the Charles. As her experience with the river grew, the influence on her of the green and blue band winding its way through residential and commercial neighborhoods towards the harbor grew stronger. She started to research the genesis of the Parklands, which landscape architects Charles Eliot and Frederick Law Olmsted had created mostly from mudflats, tidal marshes and industrial sites.

As a way to further her research on the Charles and to share the compelling call of the Charles with others, Renata approached Harvard University and proposed a course on the Charles River for their Radcliffe Seminars Landscape Program, where she had taught "Townscape" courses two decades earlier. The proposal to look at all aspects of these 500 acres of parklands along both sides of the most urban ten-miles of the Charles was accepted.

As part of her preparation for teaching she also went to scores of meetings and read everything she could about the river and surrounding parklands. For her student projects she selected sites where their designs could make a real difference. On one particular project, a brownfields site encumbered by highway ramps and railroad tracks, her students designed a skate park that would

eventually become a catalyst for Renata's work, moving it well beyond the confines of the Radcliffe course and into the wider world of public policy and large-scale environmental renewal.

While she loved the challenge of working with students, her research led her to the conclusion that if the larger potential of the Charles River Parklands was to be realized, what was needed was the concerted, committed and ongoing efforts of a private, non-profit entity. Among its many tasks would be a working partnership with the public agency charged with stewardship of the Charles; the former Metropolitan District Commission, (MDC) now the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR).

Renata sought to create nothing less than a new vision for these parklands, a vision inclusive of much of the planning done by the DCR and many others. She saw one of her roles as lending support to planning officials in public sector agencies. But she also began to espouse a vision that went further. Maintenance, restoration and new parks needed the infusion not just of money but of the participatory and passionate efforts of thousands of citizens.

Starting with a symposium in 1999 attended by 75 civic leaders, landscape activists and environmentalists, Renata launched the Charles River Conservancy. It was founded as an advocacy group dedicated to the management and enhancement, of the Charles River Parklands and their surroundings, particularly parks, parkways, pathways and bridges.

Her goal for the Conservancy is to facilitate stewardship and renewal efforts by approaching them from all sides – legislative initiatives, educational and awareness programs, funding partnerships between public and private organizations, and coalition building within the community. Further, she began to promote the addition of new amenities to the Parklands, with swimming opportunities and a new skatepark at the top of the list. “The parklands have to be attractive and active”.

In the years since its founding, the Conservancy has sponsored legislative briefings and formed alliances with the DCR and many other groups. It has garnered support from the business and academic communities, as well as from a wider public, with upwards of 900 citizen-members. Today, the Charles River Conservancy is a well-established and influential organization with a full-time staff of five and funding from foundations and corporations. The Conservancy now offers educational resources to schoolchildren throughout the metropolitan area and through an extensive volunteer program has assumed responsibility for maintenance of much of the green areas within the Parklands.

Perhaps most importantly, it promotes extensive, effective outreach about the Charles River Parklands to the entire Greater Boston community. A constant stream of special events, online and printed newsletters, articles in local papers and media appearances by Conservancy staff and members are designed to highlight the Parklands in the public eye. In a city obsessed with the Big Dig, the Charles River Parklands are no longer forgotten.

First through her students, and then translating a new vision into plans, she realized the potential of physical activity, including skateboarding, to become an instrumental component of parkland renewal. While President Eisenhower's cardiologist Dr Paul Dudley White promoted bicycling along the river, new sports now offer other, more vigorous exercise. One of them is skateboarding and is on the verge of being adopted as an Olympic sport, which will bring it from the fringe to the main stream. By inserting a skatepark under highway ramps, her vision will not only bring an amenity to an area where no grass nor trees grow, it will also bring an attraction for those who watch these young athletes and thus increase parkland safety.

Obstacles to progress were substantial, but by gently and constantly moving the skatepark idea forward, and educating the public to view skateboarders as she says, as "good kids who prefer to do their own thing and prefer the athletic challenge of a board over team sports organized by adults," she had been able to garner public support for the concept.

In moving the skatepark idea forward, she has marshaled extraordinarily wide-ranging support from such diverse sources as Tony Hawk, America's premier skateboarding impresario and the Boston Foundation, to the Mayor of Cambridge who has included a skatepark appropriation in his annual budget submission. She has also sought and found support in the Massachusetts legislature and not only won over the powerful chairman of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, but gotten him, along with former Lt Governor Thomas O'Neill III on a video supporting this world class skatepark.

Today the first phase of skatepark development is complete, an ambitious fundraising campaign is well along toward its goals, and in case anyone is second guessing the prospect of groundbreaking taking place on schedule in 2005, an editorial appeared recently in the *Boston Globe* voicing enthusiastic support for the project, saying "vision is what the conservancy has in spades" The skatepark continues the legacy of active recreation on the river's edge which is exactly what Olmsted and Eliot intended a century ago, when not far from today's skatepark site they constructed America's first public outdoor gymnasium on the Charles River Embankment.

While the skatepark is gaining in visibility, several other on-going projects are fully staffed and funded, and major goals achieved. From the hands-on side of landscape stewardship, the *Conservancy Volunteers* program sees to the maintenance of Parklands' greenspace, a task increasingly neglected by the state. Between September 2002 and March 2004, over 1300 individuals have volunteered to roll up their sleeves, working with a full time Conservancy coordinator to maintain and improve the Parklands' groves and shoreline.

Working with companies, organizations (including Single Clubs), students and private citizens, the *Conservancy Volunteers* coordinator has trained hundreds of what Charles Eliot fondly called "Trustees." The *Conservancy Volunteers* coordinator recruits groups and individuals, and together with the DCR and the four local conservation commissions selects projects. The coordinator brings required equipment and materials in a Conservancy truck, supervises volunteers, and then follows up with every one. Because so many teachers and after-school programs approached the Conservancy to find a way to contribute to the Parklands, a "Service Learning" component was added to the volunteer program. This combines hands-on work along the river with age-appropriate education materials. All of this is provided at no public expense through Conservancy-funded programs.

In the past, pruning or removal of vegetation along the Charles was often controversial; particularly as ad hoc groups occasionally undertook work without local jurisdictions. In shepherding through detailed management plans, the Conservancy has sought and gained sanction from local Conservation Commissions,

While the accomplished work – be it cutting back vegetation to improve river views or enhance public safety, pruning trees and removal of invasive species, painting benches, reseeding eroded areas, repairing shoreline or collecting trash – is quite substantial, the larger and longer lasting benefit is the emotional connection volunteers establish with the Parklands. The dollar amount of contributed services, somewhat more than \$100,000 in the last year, alone, is not negligible, but will never represent the long-term benefit of reconnecting citizens to the outdoors and nature.

Re-establishing a visceral link between the people and the Parklands is very much a goal of Renata's efforts. "By physically working along the glittering water and caring for their public land, these volunteers become long term park lovers and landscape advocates," she notes.

Another facet of Renata's vision and ability to marshal diverse elements in service to Parklands renewal lies in her contributions to and use of the award-winning "Inventing the Charles River," a profusely illustrated book by landscape architect and urban planner, Karl Haglund. The ASLA honored this book with the Communication Award- and this confirmed Renata's goal that the more people know about the Charles River Parklands, the more they care for them.

After reading Karl's PhD dissertation, Renata recommended that his comprehensive research might be re-shaped into a book for general audiences. Karl and Renata approached the MIT Press and suggested the edited manuscript might be enhanced by juxtaposed historic and contemporary images. To accommodate the enormous picture research for such an undertaking, Renata allocated a Conservancy assistant and also raised funds for a full color printing of high quality at an affordable retail price.

450 images, to which Renata added valuable context with appropriate captions, make this academic book accessible and a key instrument in the renewal effort. Her goal was to provide the reader with solid historic background on political and planning battles and at the same time illustrate the possibilities of ongoing invention in an exceptional urban setting. And in her foreword she outlined her vision for continuing the great invention started by Eliot and Olmste

When the book was published in November 2002, Renata convened another symposium, this time at MIT, and on a substantially larger scale than has been the case at Harvard a few years before. With almost 200 civic leaders, community activists and Parklands advocates in the audience, excitement surrounding the occasion was palpable. Speakers included US Congressman Michael Capuano, State Senator Jarrett Barrios, Pulitzer prize winning architecture critic Robert Campbell, and noted planners and officials. Within less than a year, the book has sold 5000 copies.

In addition to the broad vision and substantial energy Renata brings to her work, she has been vigilant in building a strong organization. Considering its young age, the influence of the Charles River Conservancy has grown far beyond that of most "Friends" groups. Countless funding proposals have been filed and a fair share have met with positive response. The result, while never meeting the ambitious agenda she has laid out, has been sufficient to retain a gifted and committed staff, whose vitality and imagination have led to enhanced programs and enlarged membership.

Renata and her staff have written scores of articles with the assistance of an editorial consultant. The media has become vastly more sensitized to the value and needs of the Parklands, with well over 100 articles and broadcast exposures just this last year. Wide media currency has paid dividends in new visibility for the Parklands and has led to popular radio stations beginning to air public service announcements on the Parklands' behalf.

As the first five years of the Charles River Conservancy under her leadership have shown, Renata believes that "park management is most effective when linked with the emotive powers of the place. When people love a place, they feel connected. Out of that emotional connection grows care and stewardship. Gradually this caring is translated into political action, increased park maintenance budgets and sustainable management plans. People not only take care of the

parklands, they lobby for its public support and they reach into their pockets. Thus, adding education and the arts into the effort of park management is a crucial component for effective park stewardship in times of diminishing public resources."

Many educational and celebratory events are held by the CRC. One example is bridge lighting events, which she introduced along the Charles, first on Winter Solstice 2001, then again in May 2003. While the first event included speeches about sorely needed legislation on protecting the Parklands, the second event was more of a celebration, incorporating dancers and musicians. Both events were free and included food and drink.

The Conservancy Website is another example of the organization's eclectic approach and energy. Content-rich and filled with information on the Parklands in all their various dimensions, it is a terrific tool for finding out what is happening on, in and around the Charles. With an extensive library of articles, planning documents, a well-maintained calendar of events, and live links to a wide array of resources, the Conservancy web site has become THE source of information about the Charles. A sample of site offerings is attached, or see *www.charlesriverconservancy.org*.

The work of the Conservancy is just beginning. Current plans include working with such groups as the Revels, the Cambridge Arts Council and the Underground Railroad Theater to create River Revels, a mass celebration of the Parklands scheduled for the fall of this year. Coming full circle to her youth and the times spent in the rivers in Europe, swimming is central to another goal of the Charles River Conservancy. Restoration of pathways is being planned. Road narrowing and Sunday closings are in preparation.

When she first moved to Cambridge in 1979, living just a block from the Charles River, Renata learned that swimming in the polluted waters of the Charles would be endangering to her health. But now 25 years later, the water is clean enough most of the time (at least 90%) for swimming. A whole new chapter is opening up for the parklands and their enjoyment. Aided by former regional EPA Administrator John deVillars, she is spearheading the effort to swim once again in the Charles. She has also enlisted other groups, in particular MIT, to help with the effort. Swimming was not part of the state master plan for the Parklands completed in 2001, but the Conservancy is pursuing this vision, hoping to convince officials and politicians that swimming adds not only fun and exercise but also returns a quality of life that exists in most European waterfront cities.

The Charles River Parklands are, if their founders and Renata von Tscharnher's Charles River Conservancy are to be taken on their face, "democracy's common ground," a description imbued with hope for a civil society and a dynamic future. "Park stewardship works better when people can participate with the bodies and their hearts : exercise, community, learning, food and fun" It is this broader vision of stewardship that Renata has brought to the Charles River Parklands.

We are thankful and proud to have Renata von Tscharnher working among us as a steward of public land.

Sincerely,

The Nominations Committee  
Boston Society of Landscape Architects  
A Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects  
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