

*In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Head of the Charles to Hell's Half Acre*

Professor Anne Whiston Spirn; Course: Sites In
Sight: Photography as Inquiry, MIT

Photo Essay by:

Mike Houck, Loeb Fellow

Director, Urban Greenspaces Institute and
Urban Naturalist for Portland Audubon
Society, Oregon



The leaf is to the tree...as the site is to the watershed...
here...is the real "Head of the Charles"...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck



An appropriate twenty-first century corollary to Thoreau's aphorism, "In wildness is the preservation of the world" should be: *In livable cities is preservation of the wild.* Unless cities are made desirable, more livable places in which to live, the trend toward land-consuming and headwaters-destroying suburbanization and urban sprawl will continue. To be truly livable, however, the city's built environment must be fully integrated with a vibrant urban *greeninfrastructure*: streams, wetlands, rivers, forests and an interconnected system of recreational trails. The Boston region has worked to achieve such integration beginning with Charles Eliot and Sylvester Baxter who, in 1893, advocated for the creation of an *Emerald Metropolis*, a vision based first and foremost on protecting the region's most distinctive natural features, "the rock hills, the stream banks, and the bay and the sea shores."

...Sanford Mill and Medway dam...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck



The primary focus of *Sites in Sight* was to produce a photodocumentary of a site of our choosing, and to first let the landscape speak for itself through poetics, significant detail, and light. Later, our task was to create, through photography and use of our personal journal observations, a site essay. My site, one reach of the lower Charles River, covers about two river miles between the Arsenal and Larz Anderson bridges. It was impossible, however, to describe my reach absent a broader spatial and historical context. Therefore, the essay includes both a brief historical perspective and pictorial journey from the literal "head of the Charles" to the Back Bay Fens.

...and downstream...

...class I rapids and canoeable at high water...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03

Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor

In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:

Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck



Head of the Charles to Hell's Half Acre also includes my initial, admittedly limited, perceptions of the lower Charles as a recreational, aesthetic, and ecological resource. As with the Willamette River Greenway in my hometown of Portland, Oregon, popular myth about the extent and completeness of the greenway overshadows the reality. Similarly, it's my outsider's perspective that much work remains before the lower Charles River attains its full potential as an urban greenspace that equally serves the needs of people and nature, one that realizes Charles Eliot's and Sylvester Baxter's vision.



...near Medfield...and a new dam...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In *Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild*:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck





...non-structural flood management yields multiple benefits...
...yet, upstream development...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck





...vegetation removal... roads...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck





...and development all contribute cumulatively to decreased future watershed health.

11.309J Sites in Sight F03

Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor

In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck



Below Old South Natick dam one of ninety bridges over the Charles...and more than twenty dams and weirs...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck





... Broadmoor Sanctuary...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck



... Watertown weir... and footbridge...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck



...Arsenal Bridge... view downstream from canoe rental dock,
Herter Park ...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03

Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor

In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck





...downstream from Larz Anderson Bridge... The Esplanade ...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck



... The Fens ... The built ... and naturalistic...

11.309J Sites in Sight F03
Anne Whiston Spirn, Professor
In Livable Cities is Preservation of the Wild:
Essay on the Charles River by Mike Houck

