

Serpentine Fence
Beth Galston, Artist
2010, Jamaica Plain, MA
with Bartek Konieczny

Materials: Purple chain link, stainless steel, lights
Dimensions: 8' H x 15' 6" W x 126' L

This sculptural fence separates tennis courts from a sitting area of a Boston neighborhood park. Using an ordinary material, chain link, I created a unique serpentine design with billowing curves. The sculpture alters continually throughout the day as the sun shifts and with special lighting at night.

When the City of Boston Parks Department decided to renovate South Street Mall in Jamaica Plain, MA, a local non-profit, JP Centre/South Main Streets, had the vision to involve an artist in the project from the beginning. Ray Dunetz Landscape Architecture and I were able to work together in a special way to create an integrated design for the park and sculpture.

At the first design meeting in 2007, Ray and I agreed that we would approach the park collaboratively. This decision was key. It is a relatively small park, and working together would ensure that we would come up with an integrated design for the entire space.

As we brainstormed in our beginning meetings, we did not at first make a distinction between “landscape architecture” and “sculpture.” Both of us agreed that the park as originally designed was static and uninviting. The old park design was based on a grid, and we wanted to break things open. How could we invite movement and energy into the space? We envisioned the park as a lively area that would invite people to enter, stroll, perhaps pause and relax, or gather in small groups on their way to other activities. We came up with a “swirl scheme” that broke open the grid and incorporated sinuous curves throughout the design. The community supported this idea in our meetings.

As we progressed, I began to think about what my design component would be as an artist. My approach as an environmental sculptor is to think about the whole space or environment, and to create a sculpture specifically for it. I am also very interested in light and translucency, and using materials that interact with light in dynamic ways. How to combine these interests in a sculpture for South Street Mall?

I saw an opportunity for my sculpture idea when contemplating the existing chain link fence that separated the park from the tennis courts. This fence was 120 feet long, but it was certainly not a

thing of beauty. Functionally, it needed to be there to keep tennis balls from entering the park. I decided that I would design a sculptural art fence to replace the existing chain link fence. I wanted to create a signature piece for the site, transforming what was once an ugly barrier into an elegant and beautiful artwork that would set the stage for the entire park.

Using an ordinary material, chain link, I created a unique serpentine design with billowing curves. In most fences, the posts are all vertical. In this fence, the rails at the top and bottom are serpentine, and the posts are purposely set at angles (none of them are straight) to create a sense of rhythm and energy. The chain link fabric is stretched around this structure to make an undulating form.

To realize the sculpture, I collaborated with the highly skilled fabricator, Bartek Konieczny at Solutions in Metal in Abington, MA. I created models, then Bartek worked in CAD and full-scale mockups, refining the design until we were satisfied we would achieve the desired results before beginning fabrication.

To set the sculpture apart, I chose a purple color for the chainlink, which seemed in keeping with the spirit of Jamaica Plain. Purple is a color that combines ground and sky, the excitement of red and the tranquility of blue.

The design for the sculpture creates a sense of motion and dynamism, suggestive of wind or water movement. The sculptural fence echoes the swirling design of the landscape—the curved granite walls and paving design—to create a unified artistic vision, welcoming visitors into the park.

The appearance of the fence changes continually, depending on your vantage point and time of day. At different angles the fence can look more or less purple, or more or less curved; its appearance changes with every step you take. As the sun shifts throughout the day, the fence changes in color and translucency. In the morning, the mesh is in shadow and the color is subtle, while in the afternoon sunlight hits the mesh from the front, and it looks intensely purple. Sunlight projects through the fence, casting serpentine shadows on the walkways of the park. At night, special up lighting along the length of the fence creates a dramatic effect, emphasizing the curved form of the artwork.