

NARR: In typical Salvucci fashion, he offered up a historical survey of the transit commitments that had been promised, and how they were ignored by Democrats and Republicans alike. But then, he told me this story that I keep thinking about. It's a story he heard once about the Italian mystic St Francis, who like Salvucci got his start as a bricklayer, of sorts.

Fred Salvucci: God came to him in a dream and said, Francis, you have to build a church. So Francis woke up the next day and said, oh, instructions from the big guy, I have to build a church. So he began gathering stones, piling them up, digging a foundation.

NARR: Francis worked and worked -- building the church all on his own -- and when it was finally done he laid down to rest. That same night, there was a terrible thunderstorm; the church was struck by lightning and destroyed. But Francis, once again saw God in his dreams.

Fred Salvucci: And he says, what is, what's this weird joke? I do what you tell me, I work in the hot sun, I build your church, and you... Destroy it with an electric storm, like, all these months of work, poof, it's all gone, and, uh, god, god sends to Francis, no, no, the church that you have to build is not a church of stones. **You have to build a church in the hearts and the minds of the people. That's the only church that matters and will last.**

NARR: So maybe that's the real question here at the end: not what the Big Dig built in stone, but what it built in our hearts and minds. Because when it comes to the future of infrastructure in this country -- that is what really counts.

NARR: I wish I could say the story of the Big Dig is dated, obsolete. That we learned the lessons already and got better at building infrastructure. The sad truth is: I don't think we have. So at some point I started asking people.

NARR: what lessons do you think we should take from the big dig?

NARR: What are the lessons we should take away from all this?

NARR: Are there any big lessons that you take away
lessons you draw from this story
what do you think are the lessons from the big dig
what's the lesson there for you?
what are the lessons that you draw
Are there any lessons that you feel like you learned
Are there any lessons that you take
Are there any lessons that you take
what are the lessons you draw?
big takeaways, big lessons
Was there a takeaway for you
lessons learned

NARR: When we look at the big projects of our own time -- at the bipartisan infrastructure bill, at the push for renewable energy, at climate mitigation...

Rick Dimino: if there's one paramount lesson learned,

NARR: What can we learn from the Big Dig?

Pat Moynihan: Who knows?

NARR: As you can imagine, there's quite a range.

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Tony V: I don't know if the word shit show means anything to you

NARR: There were definitely people who held this project up as the cautionary tale, an example of what not to do.

Alan Altshuler: I don't think it's a model

Ann Hershfang: it was poorly managed

Jeff Cohen: gross Buffoonery

NARR: People who told me that the project was riddled with waste and fraud.

Dan Johnston: corrupt from the top down

NARR: That it was too big for its own good.

Fred Wyshak: It was unmanageable

NARR: And at the end of the day, it cost way more than it should have...

Brian Donnelly: I mean, it's an embarrassment how much it cost.

NARR: But there were also people -- sometimes the same people -- who told me, just look at the results.

Doug McGarrah: it was completely transformative

Mary Jeka: transformative

NARR: They told me that clearly, this project was misunderstood all along.

Laura Brown: Mis portrayed in some ways

NARR: when in fact, it was well-managed.

Tom Palmer: it wasn't corruption and it wasn't theft.

NARR: It was just really hard.

Frank Martinez: It was tough, it was tough.

NARR: For a project its size, the Big Dig had an excellent safety record. It was built by all union labor. It was nominated for engineering awards. We just didn't want to see it.

Peter Zuk: It's not like this was a secret.

NARR: But maybe this was a success story.

Bill Womack: Not everything's peaches and cream, but you stick together and you get 'er done

NARR: And more than that, I was told, it was a bargain. For what we got, the price was right.

Jim Aloisi: Guess what? It's expensive. Get over it, is my view.

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NARR: There were people who told me that the big takeaway was: we just needed more oversight so that the public could see and trust that their money was being well spent.

Raphael Lewis: You better watch it like a hawk.

NARR: That what we needed was more transparency.

Rick Dimino: transparency

Martha Coakley: transparency

NARR: And then on the other hand...

Joe Allegro: all the oversight in the world isn't gonna change what you do day to day.

NARR: Maybe there was too much oversight, too many people looking over too many shoulders, all trying to play gotcha and score cheap political points.

Jim Kerasiotes: The process stinks.

NARR: I heard that the media was too aggressive, that it fed those negative narratives...

Anthony Flint: Perhaps overly cynical.

NARR: And that the media should have been more aggressive...

Charlie Sennott: Be the watchdog bring truth to power

NARR: That there was too much citizen input...or maybe, not enough...Too much environmental mitigation...or maybe, not enough...

You really can learn whatever lesson you want from the Big Dig.

NARR: But here's where I'll come down. I do think the Big Dig can be a point of inspiration for the necessary and ambitious projects ahead. The fact that our leaders did pass this idea along for all those decades, kept it alive, and got it done, is inspiring. We will need that kind of perseverance. But we have to pay attention to what got lost along the way: the vision; the story.

Because perception matters. The narrative matters. If every major investment in our built environment leaves us feeling exhausted, burned -- betrayed even -- then we will never make the investments we need to transform our energy system, to improve our transportation system, to protect our homes and shorelines from the effects of climate change. Trust, belief, purpose, idealism -- the church of hearts and minds -- they have to be part of the mix.

The rest -- the technical stuff -- that we can get better at. And I do think this story can offer some ideas there too. We can get better at accurately estimating costs and anticipating the risks so there are fewer surprises. We can get better at funding projects in a predictable way so that the planning and construction process are not constantly warped by politics. We can get better at doing environmental permitting quickly and fairly, better at structuring contracts with private companies so their incentives are properly aligned, better at structuring management so that we have competent leadership and accountability. We can get all that right, but if we can't tell the story of what we're doing -- if the public doesn't feel part of it -- then the best plans and contracts won't be worth the paper they're written on.

NARR: One morning last December, I set my alarm to 4:30 am. It was twenty four degrees outside, the sky didn't have even a hint of light, and the sidewalk was crusted with half an inch of snow. But as I walked through my neighborhood and up a hill, I started hearing signs of life: people crowded around the entrance of a brand new train station.

It was opening day for the long-awaited Green Line Extension -- about four miles of new light rail that fills in a big void in our transit system. If you want to be technical about it, this project is part of the Big Dig. It was one of those transit improvements that was promised over thirty years ago as part of the environmental impact statement. Now, the first train was pulling into the station right on schedule.

Sure it was decades late, and way more expensive than the original estimates. And yes, the T was coming off a terrible year in which a train had caught fire on a bridge, forcing one passenger to jump out the window into the river, but hey, no one seemed to be sweating the details now.

There was a marching band playing at one station, and the little grocery shop there had a sale on all green vegetables.

AMBI: Oh, what'd you got here? It says, uh, first stride. You like fall 12 20 22?

NARR: An employee from the T was on the train passing out commemorative buttons. Nothing official, just something they had taken upon themselves to do, because they believed in this project.

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MBI: It's like you wake up at 4:00 AM and so many years in the making

NARR: The buttons were gone in minutes.

AMBI: do you like a button? Yeah. Would you mind? Yeah, absolutely. After four. Thank you so much. Could I take, can I also, yeah. Thank you. Thank you.

NARR: And I have to say, it felt good to be on this cramped train with a bunch of giddy passengers. Maybe more than that, it felt good to feel good about a big project that our city had accomplished. To put the cynicism away for a day and just enjoy the ride.

AMBI: So how would you rate your faith today in America's capacity to build infrastructure? Uh,

NARR: Beatrix, the T employee, was feeling hopeful. Cautiously hopeful that this project will be the one that inspires us to invest in the next project, and the one after that..

AMBI: I don't know if that's gonna pan out that, that way. That's just my hopes. You're

NARR: So here's to hoping, and hey -- for those of us who did squeeze onto that first train, drowsy and bleary eyed, at least the ride was free.

AMBI: Oh, I think I'm gonna get off here. All right. Thanks again for the button. Well, what, what's your name again? Sorry? My name's Ian. Ian. Ian. Cost Nice to meet you. Is it okay if I use this recording in my podcast? Yeah. Yeah. By all means, yeah. All right. Have a good ride today.