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COMMENTARY

# wbur arts

**A Bear Necessity?**  
Toy retailer FAO Schwartz has left town, so what is the city of Boston going to do with Teddy Bear, its 3,500 pound statue?



Photo by Margaret Weigel

by Margaret Weigel

A tempest in a, well, honey pot is brewing at the corner of Boylston and Berkeley Streets in Boston's Back Bay neighborhood. The culprit is a lad named Teddy, as in Teddy Bear, a big-boned bronze character weighing 3,500 lbs. who spends his days comfortably plopped in front of the doorway of the former FAO Schwartz toy store. Don't let his bemused smile or easygoing demeanor fool you: this cherubic bear is becoming a lightning rod for Bostonians of all shapes and sizes.

Teddy's corporate parents, the retail toy legend FAO Schwartz, closed its operations in January 2004, jeopardizing The Bear's future. Teddy was formally bequeathed to "the children of Boston." But, according to the 2000 Census, there are 113,287 children under 18 within Boston's city limits. It will be difficult to determine if Teddy's owners want him re-gifted. Older city children (the young at heart, the never-grew-ups, etc.) may or may not legally have a stake in The Bear as well, which makes the whole conundrum all the more irresolvable.

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The issue has, thankfully, been punted into the hands of the various city commissions which manage public art, city landmarks, and general urban development. One sticking point is the costly matter of relocation. It is estimated that it would cost approximately \$10,000 just to foist The Bear from his spot.

The Bear, hugging three colorful blocks which read F, A, and O, was designed as a branded store emissary. But some area residents, as well as officials at the Boston Redevelopment Authority, argue that since its 1991 installation, The Bear has become a beloved fixture of the streetscape. The Bear serves multiple duties: he's a navigation tool (such as "bear left at the intersection of Berkeley and Boylston, ha ha!"), a training ground for aspiring spelunkers ages ten and under, and a charming piece of unexpected whimsy in a city choking in a sea of bricks and mortar.

Other concerned citizens vilify The Bear, seeing him as an unrepentant corporate shill whose mission is camouflaged by a snappy red bow tie and those big baby browns. He is also, in the opinion of several area artists, a mediocre example of bronze workmanship.

The issues fueling the Great Honey-pot Debate of '04 are similar to Boston's Great Citgo Sign Debate of '83. But an important difference between The Bear and the Citgo Sign is location, since future tenants of 222 Berkeley Street's retail space risk being saddled with an oversized bronze bear at their door in perpetuity. Still, both debates reflect growing tensions between private industries and the public streets where they promote themselves.

To help lay bear (pun intended) these burning questions of the day, this journalist surveyed a variety of local residents. As one might expect, there was little consensus on The Bear's future, but plenty of creative suggestions. Peter Desmond, 55, a Boston-area tax preparer and writer, is bearish on The Bear: "it's a welcome sight, and much more appealing than a Calder sculpture." George Hall, a musician with the band Seks Bomba, is also a Bear Fan, "I have to admit that I enjoy it, corporate icon or no, the intrinsic charm, relative uniqueness and sheer ridiculousness of The Bear. I'd like to see it stay." Ken Field, a Cambridge-based musician, says the bear should stay for safety reasons: "Who wants a ten-foot bronze bear let loose?" Field adds that at first, he thought The Bear was the mascot of his alma mater, Brown University.

Tim Halle, 40, a technical professional from



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Cambridge, echoed the nostalgic sentiments of many respondents when he opined, "So much of Boston has been knocked down and replaced, I think the addition of anything permanent, even a corporate icon, is good." Parents, in particular, confirm that children love to illegally climb on The Bear, and vote to leave The Bear be. The question concerning potential issues for future 222 Berkeley tenants was met with a resounding "Tough for them."

Other residents are squarely against extending Teddy's tenure. Several Boston-area artists decried The Bear as "just another corporate icon not created in the spirit of public art, but as a promotional eye-catcher." One even recommended that The Bear be smelted and the resultant puddle given to a real artist.

Allan Shearer, a PhD candidate at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, questioned the 'icon' status of The Bear versus the Citgo sign and brought up the issue of FAO store's closure: "Leaving The Bear in place would provide free advertising for a company that no longer contributes jobs to the city of Boston." Amanda Nash, a former editor of *The Fine Print*, did not mince words. "It is bad art. As Indiana Jones would say, it belongs in a museum. Not in a public place where innocent victims are forced to look at it."

A few iconoclasts surveyed suggested either moving the bear to a park or community center, or tinkering with its appearance to obfuscate the corporate message. "Let The Bear stay," volunteered one former Bostonian, "but get rid of those toy blocks! He would be just a bear, strangely waving to passersby, nicely incongruous." Another agreed: "Bears are pretty sexy in their own fur." And one reflective soul mused on the essence of Teddy: "I think its 'bearness' will survive, while FAO Schwartz will vanish over time except as a piece of trivia cab drivers know about."

As of this writing, FAO Teddy Bear's fate is still undecided. But while the Great Honeypot Debate of '04 may seem trivial at first blush, it raises significant questions. What kind of city will Boston be in the future? What will our streets look like? Will any statue, if kitschy enough, be granted a permanent visa after its corporate overlords leave for greener pastures? Or is there room in the definition of public art for popular, corporate-sponsored displays? What is public art, after all, and who gets to decide what is valuable and what is junk? And, of course, what should happen to The Bear?

One young respondent had a novel idea. "Why don't you ask The Bear?"

**Margaret Weigel writes for [WBUR](#), Boston's NPR News station.**

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