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On the Waterfront

By Alex Krieger

As it has done several times over its 370-year history, the City of Boston is in the midst of re-designing one of its waterfronts. The newly renamed South Boston Seaport District, an area exceeding 700 acres in size and lying directly east of the center of the city, is poised to receive the next expansion of the downtown. Amidst a robust economy and following substantial public investment in regional access, including a new harbor tunnel which brings the airport to the district's doorstep, the Seaport District is brimming with anticipation's; with plans, investors, visions, along with ample worries and political intrigue.

Such a combination of hope and unease is common today among waterfront cities around the world since often it is along their waterfronts that major planning and redevelopment -- or expectation that there a repositioning of local economies is possible -- is taking place.

The impending reuse of an urban waterfront generally combines grand expectations with considerable self reflection about the very nature of contemporary urbanism. Should planning for reuse support traditional maritime industries or promote new economies? Should cities seek new markets/status through refurbished waterfronts or maintain long-standing identities? Should public investment favor residents' needs, attract newcomers or cater to tourists; should it be used to shore-up adjoining neighborhoods or encourage gentrification; increase public access or leverage private development at water's edge? Should commercial expansion be favored or multiple civic needs addressed, especially those which private initiative does not readily achieve? Should, for example, cities seek to profit from the scale of modern development attracted to reconnected waterfronts or restrict density while enlarging recreational space?

Wise waterfront planning seeks to unravel such unnecessarily polarized visions. Yet, despite more than a decade of planning, if halting public decision-making, the unraveling of polarized visions over Boston's Seaport District remains, at the time of the writing of this essay, incomplete.

Boston's Seaport District

The area encompassing the Seaport District was created a century ago through a massive land fill initiative. The goal was the creation of a modern boat-to-rail port to replace the historic but by then obsolete central piers of Boston, no longer able to accommodate the scale of modern ships and lacking sufficient rail connections. However, since the decline of local maritime industries which began shortly following World War I, the area has been underutilized, maintaining some maritime and industrial functions, but also hosting large parking fields and similar supporting uses for the nearby downtown. The area has essentially served as a land bank for years, awaiting better regional access, and more importantly, demand for the expansion of the nearby downtown

Suddenly, seemingly overnight, it is metamorphisizing into convention venues, hotels, luxury housing, parks and a cultural amenity-or-two. But some wonder, if there will still be room for the traditional fishing fleet once such a fabulous array of modern uses -- upwards of twenty million square feet are in various stages of planning or design -- are realized? And the concern is not just about the survival of the fishing fleet, itself diminished over the years with the depletion of nearby fishing banks. The concerns extend to feared overbuilding, traffic congestion, gentrification and affordability, particularly of the housing being proposed, and the long-term affects on the cohesiveness (and some would say parochialism) of the adjacent South Boston community, long a cohesive working-class neighborhood, largely of Irish-American

make-up and generally intolerent of outsider influence. Maintaining industrial jobs for the residents of South Boston is another concern. Other worries include whether sufficient public space will be provided, whether the right balance of uses are being planned, whether the public sector can sufficiently guide the actions of a few large and powerful landowners, whether too much history will be erased, who stands to gain or lose local political influence, and so forth.

Somehow, two centuries of producing new waterfronts -- each a radical undertaking for its day, each eschewing conventional wisdom or timidity, each producing a quite striking and distinct environment -- hasn't produced a confidence about doing it again well at the Seaport District. It is worth a brief review of Boston's waterfront planning achievements before returning to the current dilemmas at the Seaport District, to seek insights from the experience of the eight cities which presented their waterfront plans at the Harvard conference.

Boston's Waterfront-Making History

The story of Boston's waterfront planning begins with the city's remarkable topographic transformations. Few of the world's cities, large or small, (with the possible exception of contemporary Hong Kong) have witnessed as substantial a change to their natural geographies as has Boston. As one walks around central Boston it is nearly impossible to visualize that the original Shawmut Peninsula was virtually an island, and that four out of five acres at one's feet is artificial land; constructed out of the determination to grow and prosper amidst a geography of steep hills, tidal flats, marshes and areas of useable land too meager in size to support any sizable settlement. To accommodate growth the city would have no choice but to make land. From the early decades of the eighteenth century an expanding seafaring economy lead the young city to push outward unto its harbors and bays to gain useable land.

The process began in two ways: by "wharfing out" -- the filling of the slips of water between wharves, and with the dumping of earth into the harbor from the scraping of the steepest hills to make them easier to settle. These efforts foreshadowed the much larger nineteenth-century land-making ventures out of which emerged the form of contemporary Boston. The earliest recorded filling, for the purpose of adding useable land rather than as a mere consequence of clearing existing areas for settlement, occurred in 1803 with the widening of the of the peninsula neck, generally parallel to today's Washington Street. Rapidly following were the filling of portions of the West Cove (the area around the present Massachusetts General Hospital), and the Mill Pond which became the Bullfinch Triangle. Early nineteenth century maps of Boston depict these expansions well, on the eve of the most famous land-making project -- the nearly 600 acre filling of the Back Bay of the Charles River which occupied Bostonians continuously from the 1850's through the 1890's. The creation of the present Seaport District began even earlier but most of these 700 acres of Commonwealth Flats (as the area was called until recently) were created during the last two decades of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth century. The land on which Logan Airport sits represents another 750 acres of fill begun during the 1920's. In all some 3,500 acres of land have been created through more than a dozen major land fill initiatives spanning a two-hundred year period.

Among the remarkable waterfront environments that this land-making history produced are the Quincy Markets, an 'urban renewal' project dating to the 1820's and, as is well known, adapted and re-imagined by James Rouse in the 1970's as the first 'festival market place.' The Back Bay venture produced one of the nation's most distinctive residential districts which during the 1930's was augmented as a riverfront environment by the construction of a portion of the Charles River Esplanade. Indeed, the Chalres River was eventually graced by a continuous eighteen-mile long public open space occupying both its Boston and Cambridge banks. Frederick Law Olmsted's late nineteenth century work on Boston's park system produced Day Boulevard, Pleasure Bay and Marine Park, a continuous recreational open space along the

southern and eastern edges of the South Boston Peninsula. Beginning in the 1960's Boston's oldest wharves including Long Wharf, Central Wharf, Lewis Wharf, and a number of others in the North End experienced adaptive re-use and/or reconstruction to achieve one of America's earliest transformations of obsolete maritime infrastructure and historic wharf architecture into modern waterfront residential neighborhoods.

So with such impressive achievements, both historic and recent, why is the planning of the Seaport District producing a crisis of confidence? And what, if anything, might Boston planners learn from the experience of the eight cities -- Amsterdam, Bilbao, Genoa, Havana, Los Palmas, Shanghai, Sydney, and Vancouver -- represented at the conference, many claiming to have been at least in part inspired by Boston's earlier waterfront successes?

As presentations of each city's waterfront-related plans or accomplishments proceeded some considerable overlap in sensibilities emerged. Despite great differences in location, city size, rates of growth, and, of course, the uniqueness of each society, these waterfront cities seemed to share the following conclusions/insights:

Along its waterfront the aura of a city resides and persists

There is an enduring, even eternal, dimension to a city's waterfront as it bears witness -- and often takes the brunt -- of the ebbs and flows of a city's prosperity. Consider Shanghai. While Rome was not built in a day it appears that Shanghai is determined to prove that it can be done. In a little over a century Shanghai has grown from a large fishing village to a megalopolis expected soon to reach twenty million people. The full ferocity of this barely imaginable rate of growth is being borne today. While Americans worry about sprawl, Shanghai seems to be building Manhattan and Los Angeles one on top of another. The Shanghai delegation at the conference described that, incredibly, *3,000 kilometers of elevated highways* will be built in the metropolitan area over the next decade! With pride and without expressed sentimentality for the 'good old days,' so common today in the West, the delegation asserted that the transportation problem of the metropolis will be so solved.

Amidst such confidence for handling massive change can the DNA of the old fishing village survive, much less maintain relevance? Professor Zheng Shilling, vice president of Tongi University, answered affirmatively as his colleagues presented a plan to re-orient modern cosmopolitan Shanghai to its ancient river, the Huangpu, and to environmentally clean up its principal tributary, Suzhou Creek. While there will be many future highways, he said, there will only be one river. Precisely because everything in Shanghai (which means in Chinese 'upriver to the sea') is currently in flux, the re-commitment to its river is vital -- and culturally reassuring. After all, Zheng Shilling concluded, "water reflects the morality and wisdom of our nationality." Such near mystical associations are not unique to Asian cultures and valuable for waterfront planning anywhere.

Sure of their river as a stabilizing and enduring force and urban amenity, and welcoming modernization and growth, the planners in Shanghai are less concerned about precisely determining the most appropriate scale and uses along the river. In Boston, to the contrary, the general unease about the impact of further growth leads to a belief that certain uses, such as commercial office space, and scale of construction (tall buildings) will forever damage a proper relationship of city to harbor. If Shanghai is too casual about development impacts, Bostonians may at the moment be too cautious about what constitutes proper waterfront development.

Despite undergoing periodic and sometimes rapid change, a waterfront maintains for its bordering city some inherent and unalterable stability

Mind-boggling though Shanghai's current growth is, the phenomenon is not unprecedented. Shanghai itself experienced a similar boom towards the end of the nineteenth century when its population exploded to nearly a million from around 50,000 at mid century. By comparison to Shanghai, one thinks of Boston as being slow to change. Imagine then an expatriate returning to Boston following a forty-year absence, not so long a period in the life of a city. He would have left a Boston at mid-20th century with its historic waterfront emptying. A much diminished port (partly relocated to the future Seaport District), abandoned maritime infrastructure, pollution and decay resulted in a sort of ever-receding land-side tide. The not-so-busy wharves were storing a different kind of commodity: parked cars for the downtown. The waterfronts of many industrial-era cities experienced a similar fate, and many have yet to recover.

Could our hypothetical expatriate have predicted that within a generation the bustle at the waterfront would return, not in the form of warehouses, customhouses, longshoremen or clipper ships, but courtesy of homes, cultural institutions, tourists and pleasure craft. Boston's oldest waterfront is a center of action again, only in re-defined use and desires. Our expatriate would surely be surprised that Rowes, Burroughs, Lewis and Mercantile Wharves were now all elegant residential addresses, not places of industry; that life in the Charlestown Navy Yard was being directed by a homeowner's associations instead of naval protocol; that forty-seven miles of shoreline were being steadily converted to a continuous public promenade; or that some of the most valuable local real estate was along the not-so-long-ago dilapidating wharves.

Despite such shocks to his mid-20th century sensibilities, this returnee would have little trouble finding his way along Boston's historic waterfront. Amidst all that was lost or transformed sufficient continuity persists. The delegation from Amsterdam refereed to such persistence as the 'infrastructure' of the waterfront, and proceeded to show how it can be added to through imaginative new architecture and engineering. It is this capacity for persistence through reinterpretation that is one of the most valuable qualities of waterfront regions. This, too, should reassure Bostonians as they plan the Seaport District. They need only recall their own prior sucessful waterfront transformations.

A city's waterfront cannot be thought about as a thin line

One tends to think of land/water relationships in terms of opposites, or of the edge between the two. Metaphysically this edge is razor thin. In terms of city-building the opposite is true. Places like Amsterdam or Sydney make this quite evident with their complex land and water weave. Even when geography offers less variation, the broader the zone of overlap between land and water the more successfully a city captures the benefits of its water assets.

It is generally easier to attract investment to the very edge, and over time construct (even overbuild) a facade to the water. The Bund in Shanghai, the Malecon in Havana, the Avenita Maritima in Las Palmas; most cities possess at least one great linear avenue along their waterfronts (sometimes succumbing, sadly, to highway scale due to traffic) These avenues serve as prominent addresses, collect visitor accommodations and host celebratory events. They deserve much attention. Yet, nearly without exception the speakers at the conference spoke about resisting the allure of the 'thin-line'; of approaching waterfront planning in terms of perpendiculars to the water's edge. The reason is that in most cities who have opted for a tall or dense edge of development at their waterfront, the value of land a block-or-two away from the edge drops precipitously, and with it the quality of the environment away from the water's edge.

Anne Cook, manager of Port Planning for the City of San Francisco, advised *getting in* to the water; figuratively, by blurring the suddenness of the edge, and literally, by making sure that remaining and potentially new industrial, transportation or recreational uses of the water sheet itself influenced the land-side planning. Bostonians, for example, hold dear their "fingers-to-the-sea," the system of colonial streets (still prominent today) which were virtual extension of

the piers and wharves far unto the Shawmut Peninsula. Developing the potential of such perpendiculars is often the key to comprehensive planning, more naturally resulting in both land-side and a water-side plans.

On this matter several of the development proposals for the Seaport District deserve great scrutiny. The landowners nearest the water are, naturally, trying to maximize the value of their land by proposing to build tall, upwards of 300 and 400 feet. Arguing substantial land carrying costs, and the demands of providing a variety of services -- including streets and open space -- which traditionally was the responsibility of the public sector, they insist that substantial height and density is needed to make construction and debt-service feasible. Avoiding the less desirable consequences of this thin, tall, dense line of development depends on the public's success in creating perpendicular streets and civic corridors which become conisidered equally desirable addresses.

There is long-term value to be regained, do not endanger this for short-term riches

One of the most poignant observations at the conference -- pertaining directly to the seduction of the "thin line" -- was made by Mario Coyula, the director of planning for the Havana capital region. Confronted with a dire need to improve (indeed, to create) an economy, and with international tourism offering a very tempting vehicle, Havana is struggling with how much of itself to offer and how quickly. "Do not lead with your best sites," Coyula advised, "the early investors want the best locations but do not do the best projects." How true this rings for cities which too quickly accept second-rate development proposals or engineer entire redevelopment plans around specific sites to enhance commercial real estate, or 'jump-start' waterfront renewal.

Consider how unusual, and so far successful, Bilbao's efforts have been proceeding in reverse. First, and quite consciously, they set out to improve local self-esteem and enhance the region's image internationally through a cultural project, the Bilbao Gugenheim Museum. Nnow they are pursuing more conventional redevelopment efforts. Josu Bergara Etxebarria, the President of the Provincial Council of Bizkaia, spoke about the strategic goal of using culture as a tool for development, not just real estate development itself. The lesson here is that to compete globally may involve in some instances recasting, rather than more narrowly preserving, a city's waterfront image.

Having achieved such recasting several times in its history, Bostonians have nonetheless approached the future of the Seaport District with quite conservative ambitions. The popular local imagination seems to prefer another Back Bay over visions of more innovative, future-oriented urban contexts. Unfortunately, the conditions under which the Back Bay was realized -- incremental, block-by-block and house-by-house growth in which the public financed all services, infrastructure, not to mention constructed the land, is not easily replicated today. But how to achieve similar results?

To make waterfronts come alive (after industry has receded) they must become places for people to dwell not just visit or recreate

Lord Mayor Sartor of Sydney spoke of the importance of maintaining a "living city" even as pressure to yield to financially more lucrative commercial development grows along thriving waterfronts. But the most impassioned support for housing at the water's edge was made by the Vancouver delegation whose "Living First" slogan hammered home the idea that residents are as important to cities as anything else. Some of the international participants may have thought this too obvious a point. Yet, taken within a North American context, where industrial-era cities have been shedding population to their suburban peripheries for half-a-century, it is a crucial insight. Starting in the 1980's Vancouver began the transformation of its many downtown

waterfronts from industrial and rail uses with the goal of adding as many as 25,000 mid-to-high density housing units, and by century's end Vancouver is well on the way to achieving this goal.

The city's planning director, Larry Beasley, spoke of using waterfront locations to create a competitive advantage for downtown living against the allures of the suburbs. He called density, congestion and even high-rise housing "our friends" in creating lively, mixed-use urban lifestyles. He noted the city's adamant refusal to upgrade its highway system specifically to make it harder for people to commute from the periphery thereby inducing them to select in-town housing. Until recently such talk would have seemed sheer lunacy in most American cities, and perhaps for many sound improbable still. Yet, to experience Vancouver today is to understand what 'living first' means: housing has here created demand for virtually everything else: new services, shopping and entertainment, public transportation, and open space.

The city as a place to dwell, has been one of Boston's secrets, too. Creating great places to live in the heart of Boston and Vancouver are held to be early priorities, not a later consequence of other actions. Curiously then, there is a recent concern in the emerging Seaport District that planning for much housing will crowd out other uses and privatize the waterfront. Those so concerned do not know their own city's history, or overlook that Boston's most urbane 19th century accomplishment was to create the marvelous residential neighborhood of the Back Bay, and as a consequence eventually gain a great public waterfront along the Charles River. Again, along its oldest waterfront at mid-20th century Bostonians pioneered the American experience of adapting historic but abandoned maritime structures for residential uses. One can devise regulations against building massively, against the casting of undo shadows and loss of public access, but in all but the most extreme circumstances of density (or incompatibility with still vital industrial uses) having more people living in the proximity of the waterfront is a long term competitive advantage for a city. Rapacious users of land, as Americans unfortunately are, worry that only one thing may fit, but far more frequently than is assumed many uses can coexist side by side -- especially across 700 acres of land.

Geography may be a significant road to and antidote from globalization

It was known for centuries as 'Genoa the Superb,' not because of its leading role in the seafaring culture of the Mediterranean but for its unforgettable silhouette as seen from the sea. The amphitheater-like form of the harbor appears carved from the coastal mountains which seem to emerge straight from the sea. While the historic harbor is no longer adequate in size for modern cargo shipping, its shape is an even more powerful as a focusing devise -- like a centripetal force orienting the entire city to the old harbor. This condition of centering proved very useful as the city began to reinvent itself as a cultural and tourist destination in anticipation of the world-wide commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Colombian discovery of America. In a prior epoch geography enabled a well-scaled, well-protected port. Today it facilitates a diverse and spatially-contained realm of contemporary businesses, institutional, residential and visitor facilities all in view of and surrounded by the layers of Genoa's prior lives.

Likewise, visits to Amsterdam, Sidney, or Vancouver, indeed, to many cities located on major bodies of water, leave indelible images of place. The value of these proverbial postcard views is not to be dismissed. As we begin the new century 'globalization' represents, on the one hand, an ideal to reach (for cities and nations seeking access to the global economy) and, on the other hand embarking on a road risking homogenization of culture and the loss of local identity. A memorable geography uniquely reinforced by a special pattern of urbanization can address both the ideal and the concern. A memorable setting can help attract global markets while forestalling the 'this could be anywhere' syndrome of much current urban development. Just about every waterfront city should aspire to be called superb.

Perhaps unexpectedly, this is a greater challenge for Boston's Seaport District than in many cities. The original landfill created a rather feature-less, very flat land form; far less dramatic than the contours of the South Boston Peninsula to the east and that of the Shawmut Peninsula to the West. Thus, orchestrating a variable, interesting skyline may be more important than establishing some continuous district cornice heights (which some are advocating). As seen from the harbor the architecture of the district will have to compensate for the dull geography. Furthermore, the view *from* the Seaport District is generally towards an equally feature-less, flat, landfill-created landscape; that of Logan Airport immediately across the inner harbor. Views westward towards the downtown and eastward towards South Boston, to the harbor islands and the open Atlantic beyond are much more engaging (and come with less jet noise) than views directly across the water to the airport. It is interesting to contemplate how the orientation of the blocks in the district, the massing of buildings and their architectural quality could reflect these conditions. A standard 'contextual' approach to the urbanism and architecture of the district may not produce a superb enough setting.

Along the waterfronts of cities world-wide, as well as in Boston, the human instincts to both preserve and to reinvent are robustly acted out in the passion play of waterfront revitalization. This dynamic is ongoing. Cities which at one moment successfully calibrate the imperatives of progress and those of preservation often face new challenges. The very attractions of a balance forged between progress and preservation bring additional pressures for change along valued domains such as waterfronts, threatening new harm to surviving evidence of the city's prior (even recent) epochs. Still, as Boston has shown over its three centuries, and will demonstrate again in its Seaport District, approaching this predicament with undo caution is rarely the best strategy. Perhaps the tactics of urban planning at the waterfront should be a bit like that of the tide; scouring, reshaping, yet miraculously sustaining the shore.

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