



Viñoly to the left of me, Cobb to the right, here I am stuck in the middle of ... what?

With apologies to Stealers Wheel, that's a good question to ask when standing in the approximately 1,000 acres that make up the South Boston waterfront.

While the area was the hub of a thriving seaport in the early 1900s, by the latter half of the 20th century, it had become an unimpressive and largely underutilized area that featured a handful of well-known restaurants, one area of notable buildings (the brick warehouses built by the Boston Wharf Company in the mid-to-late 1800s), a host of parking lots, and a smattering of unimpressive buildings. Tellingly, my 1984 copy of the *AIA Guide to Boston* mentions only three places of note in the area: the "Summer Street Warehouses," the Children's Museum, and the Postal Annex.

In contrast, the book's latest edition lists three new buildings in the area — the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, the Moakley Federal Courthouse, and the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA). While these clearly are noteworthy buildings, taken together, they and several other recent buildings that aren't cited in the new *AIA* guide do not create a coherent, enjoyable district. Rather, they are islands in a sea of parking lots, roads, highway

ramps, and other unappealing and largely disconnected structures. At first glance, this makes no sense. How could so many seemingly significant buildings rise in such a seemingly random fashion? Writing in the *Harvard Design Magazine* in 2005, Hubert Murray, past president of the Boston Society of Architects, argued that the problem was that the powerful Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) "failed to take an active role in planning" for the district until the late 1990s, *after* the area's future had been largely determined by the construction of the Big Dig, particularly by the highway running through the area. The fault, he added, was not with the BRA, but the fact that in Boston a combination of turf battles, "political stasis, and cultural conservatism" created a milieu where ambitious, meaningful, comprehensive planning could not occur. In its absence, he lamented, "expediency has become the governing principle of urban planning, and the art of the deal prevails."

Indeed, in the South Boston waterfront district, as in many other parts of Boston (and other cities as well), such dealmaking is the norm because the public sector is relying on private developers to provide a host of desired amenities including parks, affordable housing, the 47-mile HarborWalk (which is 80 percent complete), and, in the case of the ICA, the land for major

You Are Here* (why?)

What conventioners (and Bostonians) need to know about the South Boston waterfront

by David Luberoff

new civic facilities. Writing about the South Boston waterfront in the same issue of *Harvard Design Magazine*, land-use attorney Matthew Kiefer warned, “this strange brew of profit motive and public benefit is fraught with complications.” Not only could it produce amenities that are “inadequately designed, built and maintained,” but the imposition of such requirements might also “hinder development that would be good for civic life.” Moreover, the process was likely to be “erratic and opportunistic” in both the timing and location of new public facilities.

At one level, Murray and Kiefer explain why the South Boston waterfront is so disappointing. But Murray’s focus on the lack of a singular planning effort and Kiefer’s focus on carefully delineating public and private responsibilities overlook the fact that for over two decades in multiple planning and permitting processes, state and city officials, private landowners, and several civic groups (including the Boston Society of Architects) have been actively discussing the scale, type, and location of future development, public spaces, transportation facilities, and other uses in the area. Taken as a whole, their decisions have produced a comprehensive, consistent, and intellectually justifiable framework. In short, a plan for the area exists in everything but name and includes the following key elements:

Mixed Uses in Green Buildings

Earlier plans for key parcels in the area mainly called for offices that would have extended Boston’s Central Business District into the area. But in response to concerns that this would create the equivalent of a suburban office park on what could be a vibrant urban area, the city is now pushing for a mixed-use district with roughly equal amounts of office, residential, and retail/tourist uses — all built to green building standards. Moreover, these uses must not crowd out nearby freight operations in the port of Boston, which handles a modest but not insignificant amount of traffic.

Accommodating Regional Growth

In an effort both to take pressure off the city’s historic core and to slow (or even stem) the ongoing decentralization of people and jobs in Boston, the area is slated to absorb significant amounts of development. Specifically, city officials anticipate that the area will ultimately house almost 40 million square feet of office, residential, and retail/tourist space. To put that in context, there is currently about 17 million square feet of space in the area. Most of that space, about 13 million square feet, is in the area’s historic buildings, and the convention center represents about 40

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percent of the new space that has been built. Moreover, given that Boston as a whole generally absorbs about one million square feet of new office space a year and 1,000 to 2,000 units of housing a year, this suggests that it will be several decades before the construction in the area is largely done.

Density but not Height

The district will not include major high-rise buildings, largely because of concerns that such buildings might hinder operations at Logan Airport. While this seems like an obvious policy, it actually is one of the first times that the Federal Aviation Administration has taken such a strong stance on this issue, which is a growing concern at a variety of airports around the country. The limits on height, combined with the desire for significant development, suggest that buildings will cover the bulk of the land on buildable parcels.

Moderately Sized Floorplates

For the most part, the streets in the area, which is a combination of historic and new roads, are generally laid out in ways that will


not allow for the creation of supersized developments. On the other hand, recognizing market preferences, the streets do allow for numerous sites for buildings with 30,000-square-foot floorplates, the apparent minimum for a successful commercial buildings. (Sites for hotels and residences are somewhat smaller.)

Respect for the Waterfront


Stringent state laws and regulations limit the size of developments near the water's edge and generally require that much of the waterfront be open to the public and that at least some be reserved for water-dependent uses.

Transportation

The new highway makes it easier (for now) to get to the airport, downtown, and many other residential and commercial areas and, in contrast to the early 1980s plans for that road, most of the road is decked, which both minimizes the road's impacts on the area and creates significant development opportunities. To be fair, the highway's ramps are intrusive and the fact that some of the district's roads have to serve the trucks of a working port creates difficult challenges. But these challenges do not stem from a lack of planning. Rather, they represent some of the many tradeoffs that have to occur in a robust planning process. Even with this constraint, the district's roads basically create a grid with a few oddly angled streets that in the long run should create



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needed variations in development patterns. The district also is served by the new Silver Line bus rapid transit system that still has excess capacity and that can be adapted as the region grows.

Strategic Public Investments

The public sector has made two significant investments in anchor facilities for the district. The first is the convention center, which was deliberately located away from downtown and away from the waterfront so that it would encourage rather than block new development. The second, located on Fan Pier, the closest pier to downtown, is the Moakley Courthouse, which has helped bring commercial tenants to the district.

To be fair, and in support of some of Murray's argument, the courthouse also involved deals because its construction helped resolve a bitter dispute between Anthony Athanas, proprietor of the well-known restaurant Anthony's Pier Four, who owned the land, and a consortium of the Pritzker family and Richard Friedman, who were going to develop the site. Specifically, in the early 1990s, after state courts ordered Athanas to pay the developers about \$150 million for breaching his contract with them, then-congressman Moakley, who like many of the region's politicians was close to Athanas, stepped in and helped broker an agreement to have the government pay \$34 million to buy part of the Fan Pier site for a new federal courthouse. With this money in hand, Athanas agreed to settle the suit by turning over the rest of

Fan Pier (but not Pier Four) to the developers.

No Stadiums

Finally, it's worth noting the many things that the public sector decided not to build. In the 1990s, the city rejected plans to build a new stadium in the area for the Patriots. Several years later, it did not support two different plans to build a replacement for Fenway Park in the area. Proposed by two different prospective buyers of the Red Sox who also owned waterfront land, the first envisioned a new ballpark on Fan Pier and Pier Four. The second called for a stadium on largely vacant land near Fan Pier owned by Frank McCourt, who subsequently bought the Los Angeles Dodgers and sold his Boston land to help pay for that deal.

Will these decisions produce good outcomes? To paraphrase C. Ernest Fitzgerald's famed assessment of new weapons systems, the simple answer is that in the end there are only two stages in planning: "too soon to tell and too late to make a difference."

While Fitzgerald is right, this is too facile. To have any chance of succeeding, the plan for the area should be comprehensive, coherent, and justifiable. Like it or loathe it, the plan for the South Boston waterfront meets those tests. ■

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