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"Letters"

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Admiration and thanks for a multidirectional look at that curiously voiceless (as Renée Loth noted) and often invisible island, East Boston [September/October 2006]. With some nostalgia for the mainland downtown, I called it “East of Eden” when I moved in six years ago and peered — from a four-decker built doubtless by Donald McKay’s shipwrights between launchings — over the harbor, the tanker traffic, and the tugboat wharf in my backyard, toward the other waterfront, the Old North Church spire, Charlestown, and the Mystic River Bridge. But it turns out that the town is a sort of Eden unto itself — an Eden of the dense, intense, modest, mannerly, family-spirited old urbanism, and a smart challenge to the new. Somewhere between neglect and renaissance, between the Italian landlords and Latino tenants, at the Café Italia with its Old Eastie clientele and its brilliant all-Brazilian kitchen, this may as well be remembered as an Edenic moment.

The only stroke I would add to your profile of East Boston is simply this: in an age of multipurpose dread, the town has a remarkable *fearlessness* about it. Cheerful East Bostonians of many stripes and generations seem to be fearless about the past, and the future, including the new apartments. They walk the streets — singles, pairs, and clusters — fearless of crime, and of each other. From the start, it struck me that East Boston is miraculously free of those venerable Boston hang-ups focused on race and on strangers. And that freedom from fear makes a radical difference in the life of the town. Concretely: if East Boston had been responsible for planning the new South Boston Waterfront, it would have put housing on that precious land and made a modern paradise of it, for people! If the architects do their job with some style, East Boston will surely make the most of its new neighbors and its overdue attention.

Christopher Lydon
Radio host, Open Source
East Boston

You know what I love about Greg and Tacey Luongo’s article [“Who Is East Boston?” September/October 2006]? They understand what makes East Boston great. It’s not the miles of waterfront, the spectacular views of downtown, the incredible parks and public spaces, nor Eastie’s gritty, storied past of immigrants and shipbuilders. The Luongos understand that East Boston is about individual people — each with a different story but a common love of the neighborhood.

I grew up in the suburbs and hardly knew my neighbors. I moved to the North End and, though I loved the neighborhood and the cafés, I still felt like a guest. But in Eastie, I’m home. Neighbors knock on my door if they see my car getting a ticket. When I walked out of my house this morning, I said hello to four neighbors before reaching my car — only 100 yards away. There are some great dives, but there aren’t really any pubs; so what do people do? They have neighborhood house parties; imagine that. Three generations of the same Italian family live next door to us. On the other side live three generations of a Salvadoran family. Across the street? A triple-decker converted into condos, occupied by an African-American woman, a white professional male, and a gay couple.

Parks and architecture are great, but the greatest thing about Eastie is the variety of the people who live and love it here. It’s about people from different countries, ethnicities, races, economic and social classes, sexual orientations, and political beliefs who all love the same neighborhood. This urban barrio of Italians, Latinos, artists, and professionals is, in many ways, the ultimate American neighborhood.

Rob Pyles
Audissey Guides
East Boston

Your East Boston issue brought back many memories. I came to East Boston in 1969 to work for two years as a community organizer, with plans to return to New York

and finish architecture school. The Neighborhood Council, with support from the Boston Archdiocesan Planning Office, was seeking federal funds to create the East Boston Community Development Corporation. My job was to find out from residents and activists what was needed and incorporate their ideas into development plans. Our original office is now Café Italia on Meridian Street.

The *East Boston Community News* began as a newsletter of the project in response to repeated requests for a real newspaper instead of the advertising rag that was the only paper in Eastie. The *Community News* became an independent newspaper after the first controversial story related to the airport and the governor’s race.

After my two years were up, I was rooted in East Boston and chose to stay. When I joined Urban Edge at the end of 1977, my wife Joan and I considered moving to Jamaica Plain to be closer to work, but chose to stay in East Boston. Over the course of 30 years, Joan fell in love with everything Italian. Now our neighbors next door and across the yard are from El Salvador and much of the music we hear has a Latin beat. Our block, like all of East Boston, celebrates many cultures and races.

We did not own a car until four years ago. Joan took the T to work and I got there via the ferry followed by a 20-minute bike ride. But most mornings I was the only rider, so the ferry service ended. With the anticipated waterfront development, I look forward to the return of the ferry so I can bike to work again.

Mossik Hacobian
East Boston

Your recent issue on Eastie performs a valuable service. You reveal the new community and its connection to the past. Eastie epitomizes the Gateway City, holding on to the broadest possible range of housing options and fostering community through civic engagement.

The world has come and continues to come to Eastie and call it home; now all Boston is coming, too. The number of windows overlooking Boston Harbor is now greater than the number overlooking Boston Common. The harbor is our shared front yard and new Common. The Piers Park sailing program and Zumix reflect the real Boston at play. An unstated challenge, however, is the need for cultural space and meeting places for old and new residents, both the “lifers” and the young, mobile types. Shared space is vital, and visitors need a welcome mat. What gets built to serve these needs remains a challenge.

Westy Egmont
Boston

Architecture embodies the values of the cultural milieu in which it is created. How unfortunate, then, that “on time” and “on budget” constitute the cultural milieu of most architects today. And those granted the resources to transcend those hazards seem to regard novelty and glamour as the muses most worth wooing.

What of the opportunity to serve humankind and the exquisite ecology that sustains life on this tiny planet? What of the comfort, dignity, and well-being of building inhabitants and likewise the well-being of generations hence? How might architects eschew ever-expanding consumption and embrace instead a steadfast moderation? And how will they ever persuade their clients to do so?

Happily, *ArchitectureBoston* attends to the loftier aspects of the practice of architecture with greater success than other segments of the architectural press. In a time when architects are said to design buildings with photo opportunities foremost in their minds, *ArchitectureBoston* acknowledges that architecture is about more than pretty pictures. The roundtable regularly includes wide-ranging perspectives on provocative topics. The photo essays explore the built environment from well outside the boundaries of conventional architectural photography. “Other Voices” closes each issue from the point of view of non-architects. In the most recent issue, “Who Is East Boston?” bore witness to the power of the built world to shape people’s lives and sustain their spirit.

That being said, I invite you to throw even wider the doors that confine the architectural press to the world of commercial allure. Are we called upon to do more than engage in the commerce of construction? What else is there?

Jay Weber
Arlington, Massachusetts

I loved “Where the Girls Are” by Joan Wickersham [September/October 2006]. The engineering and architecture professions have much in common, including problems like a protracted uphill battle to increase the percentage of women and minority practitioners. Hopefully outreach by role models like Judith Nitsch will make inroads on the engineering side, and the lessons learned can inform the architecture community. Closing that gap would likely make practice better for everyone and possibly improve the built environment, too.

Jeremy Edmunds PE, LEED AP, Assoc. AIA
New York City

The interview between Mildred Schmertz and Jane Thompson in your July/August 2006 issue was informative and profoundly stimulating. Mildred Schmertz has always possessed a keen mind in the advocacy and promulgation of the profession of architecture. While I have never had the privilege or pleasure to meet Jane Thompson, I have followed the Thompson course of exemplary practice of architecture and design. Inherent in this interview were the thought process and action necessary if architecture, design, and joyful living are to thrive. Congratulations to two great visionary women.

Der Scutt FAIA
New York City

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