

New Territory: The architecture of the seaport district

Proposals for new buildings are already sprouting in the 1,000-acre site that lies across the Fort Point Channel from downtown Boston. Still colloquially dubbed the "seaport district," despite its official rechristening as the "South Boston Waterfront," this near-vacant expanse has been the subject of countless hours and innumerable meetings devoted to planning issues. Yet surprisingly little public discussion has addressed the design of the buildings that will ultimately shape the district's character. What is an appropriate architecture for the seaport? And will it signal a new direction for Boston architects?

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Photo: Jacob H. Ringelmann

Padjen ▶ People are talking about the future architecture of the seaport district in terms that convey a sense of excitement—which makes me wonder what they are hoping for, or why they're hoping for it in the first place. Is this really a commentary about architecture in other parts of the city?

Goody ▶ That's a fascinating question. I think that many of us have a respect for the quality of downtown Boston — the scale of the streets, the texture of its buildings — and feel that whatever we build new here should in some way respond to that and be sympathetic to it. But the seaport has its own ethos. The buildings there are robust and simple. Because of the character of the area — and in some areas the lack of character — I think there's an opportunity to do something bolder, maybe with larger gestures, though not necessarily a larger scale. What I find fascinating is that the seaport masterplan that many of us pressed for is one that includes fairly small-scale blocks. We're trying to replicate the pedestrian character of old Boston. But we're looking for buildings that are beefier — a bolder, gutsier architecture.

Campbell ▶ I worry a little about “bolder” and “gutsier”— it seems to preconceive what's appropriate. But there's no conflict between being contextual and being fresh and inventive. Those are not oppositions. Of course you want to respect the past. Of course you want to respect the character of the place. Of course you want to fit the context. That doesn't mean that the architecture can't knock your socks off. I think we are still in a backlash from the urban-renewal period and the devastating rebuilding of parts of Boston. And so architects and developers wrap everything in a kind of thick, woolly blanket of brick, because everybody thinks that's what Boston's all about. That's really absurd.

Miklos ▶ Everyone's enamored of the warehouse district and the Boston Wharf buildings, which evolved out of a certain response to an economic need as buildings of utility. To try to carry that tradition forward is a temptation because we love those buildings, but to carry that forward into this district today, which has very different functional requirements, is a great danger. I really believe it is possible to continue our pedestrian street quality but to have an architecture that is clearly modern and of our time. It's even been suggested that the whole district could be articulated in glass and steel.

Healy ▶ An entire district of glass and steel makes me just as nervous as an entire district of brick. It's just as arbitrary.

Campbell ▶ It's a visual argument, and I think we've got to get beyond that. If we're going to try to make something that is up-to-date, we're going to have to ask ourselves what's different about today. There's an interest in ecology, in minimizing the drain on the earth's resources. There is an interest in making the workplace far more agreeable. There's a need to re-concentrate people in settlements. There is a need for parks in cities. There are a lot of issues that make this era different, that make freshness and invention appropriate, while maintaining the human qualities of the older Boston.

Goody ▶ The proposal for the Fan Pier is an interesting test, because it is the block plan we all wanted. Kallmann McKinnell & Wood is working in a different area of the district, the Fidelity area, where the blocks are much too big — they were determined by the tunnel and the highways. Fidelity started by trying to replicate downtown Boston architecture in the most superficial stylistic ways with arches and other Beaux-Arts devices that perhaps seemed to them to suggest classy Boston buildings. The BRA [Boston Redevelopment Authority] and the BCDC [Boston Civic Design Commission] tried to encourage them to do something different. Michael [McKinnell] has come up with a building that makes me smile. I think the developers lean toward the traditional, some of them because of personal taste, others because they think that's what sells in Boston. It takes a design community to help lead them away from that and show them that other things could be wonderful.

Dunham-Jones ▶ It seems inevitable that when you talk about architecture, the discussion somehow comes down to style and image. Those are certainly important things to talk about. But I would much rather see if the discussion could be shifted toward building performance — like the German requirement that every office worker must be within 27 feet of a window. The impact that has had on building design is absolutely phenomenal. If one were to challenge designers with some kind of performance-oriented criteria promoting “green” building, for example, we would see far more creativity and far more bold, new moves.

McKinnell ▶ But issues such as ecological responsibility, decent working conditions, views, and light have nothing specifically to do with this particular part of Boston. They have something to do with every building that one should be building these days. So I don't see that a particular architecture for this part of Boston will grow

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Joan Goody FAIA

out of those concerns. I'm not quite sure what we're talking about here. Are we talking about what will make a new architecture? Or are we talking about what would be appropriate for this particular part of Boston and its development? If I look at the plan for this district, I see a scale or grain which is the antithesis, in planning terms, of robustness or large scale. So if we treasure the robustness and large scale of this area, why are we putting these dinky little blocks there, which are smaller than many of the blocks that are already there?

Goody ▶ Dinky little blocks are the best we've come up with in history. The large-scale blocks of places like Kendall Square [in Cambridge] have been the most hostile to pedestrian life.

McKinnell ▶ I can think of moments in history when there was the possibility of a large-scale new gesture — when Regents Canal was built in London, for example. John Nash worked on 500-foot-long blocks, all painted white.

Hale ▶ You can have gutsy buildings on small blocks. But this is not going to be like any other part of Boston. It's going to be more like New York, like the Upper West Side. It's an imitation of the New York 1916 zoning plan, with its set-back towers and 150-foot height limits.

Padjen ▶ Then how can we create a new district that still feels like Boston? Ellen and Joan touched on the issue of style. Style is ultimately a big part of this conversation — it's what a lot of people have in mind when they talk about a "fresh, new architecture." I hear people talking about a maritime character, about an industrial context. What does that mean? We are working now in the midst of a Modernist revival, and you can easily imagine an overlay of an industrial style onto that, which would result in a lot of proto-Modern buildings — which to us in Boston would feel like something new.

McKinnell ▶ You have to distinguish between style and fashion. Style is not a pejorative term. Many years ago, there was a marvelous article in the *Architectural Review* called "Nautical Style," written by a painter named John Piper. He analyzed, with a painter's eye, what constituted the style he observed as he looked at buildings and artifacts that were close to the waterfront. And he was able to abstract certain characteristics that were common to waterfront buildings and assemblages. One of them was "violent contrast." There is always at the waterfront a violent contrast — and it is violent —

between the massiveness of the structures that are built to accommodate people and the linear, taut elements that serve the ships. There's the violent contrast between the massiveness of the walls of buildings that were built traditionally on the waterfront and the shell-like quality of the boats that they serve. There's an incredible contrast between the Henry Moore-like bollards and the lines which are tied around them. It's very, very powerful. And I think a greater sense of visual violence would be a characteristic I would like to see in this part of Boston.

Campbell ▶ I really agree with that. I think it's typical, as you go up and down the coast, that the order of a town as it approaches the water begins to break down and fragment, because it's interacting with a whole different set of forces. Maybe there are things that are not contingent on function and not contingent on a particular city, but are basic to the idea of approaching the water.

Goody ▶ Those violent contrasts were more evident in the past. Today the industrial port has been pushed aside, and we're now tourists meeting the sea. What we really want is the feeling of an 18th- or 19th-century port, and we've got a failed 20th-century port, which is going to be God-knows-what in the 21st century. And, in a sense, our vision is romantic.

Hale ▶ But why not welcome the idea that it's romantic? There's a limit to how much I want to walk through places that feel like industrial landscapes. A little of that goes a very long way for a pedestrian. Instead, one possibility might be to start looking at a kind of Modernist expression of materials and, at the same time, somehow incorporate a smaller scale, even a sort of delicacy. That might combine an industrial vigor with a sense of scale, playfulness, surprise.

Dunham-Jones ▶ My biggest fear is that this district is going to be much too uniform. It's going to be another Kendall Square — completely boring. It's going to be out of scale and there will be too many design controls trying to simulate somebody's idea of Seaport-Meets-Kendall-Square.

Campbell ▶ You're absolutely right. The Pritzkers are building the first six blocks of the Fan Pier all at once, because the city refuses to build the streets. So the streets are being built privately. As is the below-grade parking. That's an enormous front-end investment. And the only way they can make that work, they say — and I see no reason not to believe

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them — is to build it all at once and get those rents pouring in from day one. I wish this were developing incrementally. But economically, it's not going to happen.

Dunham-Jones ▶ And because it's not happening incrementally, we can't recreate the effect of small-scale development and multiple individuals making a series of decisions over time. We'll lose the authenticity that usually comes from that process. So the challenge is to find strategies that will allow for some really vital differences, the violent contrasts that Michael was talking about.

Healy ▶ I think everyone's talking about the sexy part of the district — the Fan Pier and right along the waterfront. But behind that is a wasteland that connects with South Boston and a nicely scaled residential area. Maybe we could work from the interior back out to the water. That might provide the vitality we're looking for.

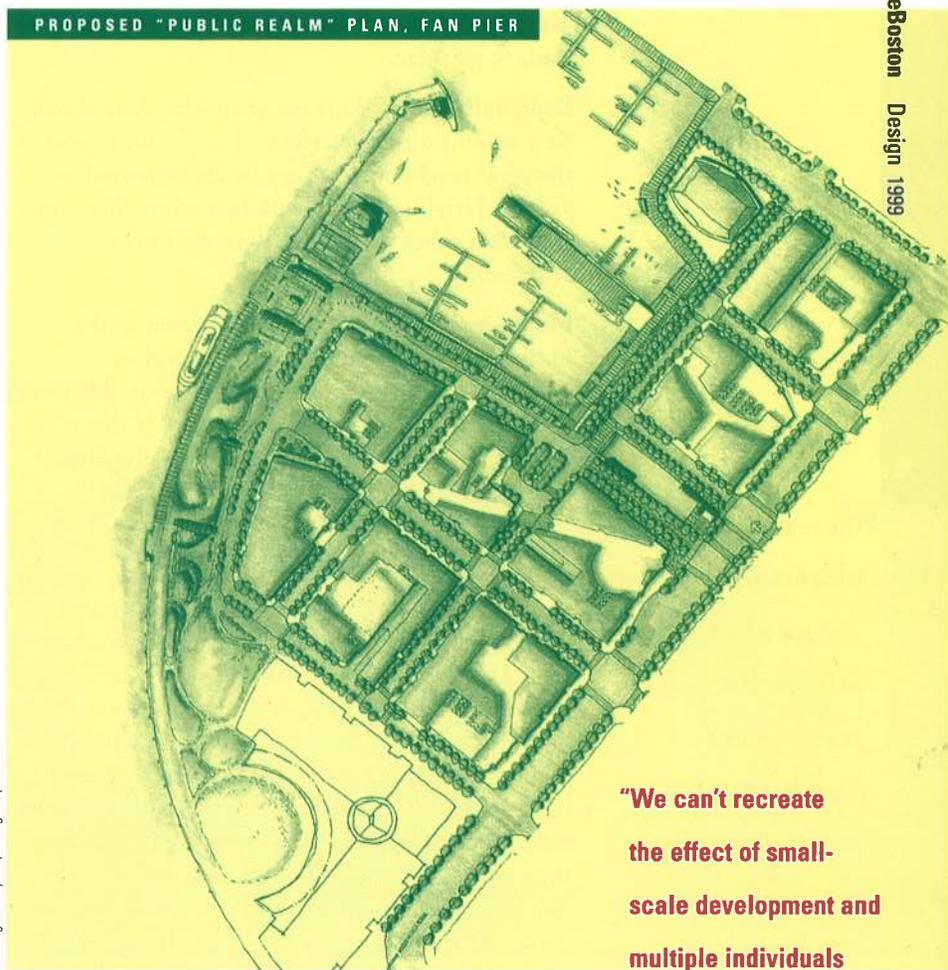
Goody ▶ The South Boston community would much rather see small-scale, contiguous residential development, which makes sense for them. The housing along the waterfront will probably be expensive condominiums, and the people who live there will probably only be there part-time, and so they won't contribute the liveliness that you get from middle-class people who are there all the time, out shopping and grazing along the Harbor Walk.

Healy ▶ The question is how to make a vital, real neighborhood instead of a commercial-cultural-retail district. You have to have real housing — not somebody's crash pad in the city. Most people, even a couple of working professionals, won't be able to touch those condos. My firm is in the process of converting a building in the North End into 28 lofts. The purchase price on a square-foot basis is so high that you have to limit the size of most units to between 900 and 1300 square feet in order to keep the cost within reach of even upscale buyers.

Dunham-Jones ▶ Architects often tend to either demonize the developers or shift blame over to the developers. A lot of developers try to do the good thing, and they in turn shift the blame to the regulations, the policies, and the city. Do we have to assume that the seaport will be market-driven? Who's providing the vision? Barcelona is a recent example of successful waterfront redevelopment. Good design there was driven by architects and the city, not developers.

PROPOSED "PUBLIC REALM" PLAN, FAN PIER

rendering courtesy of Spaulding & Slye Colliers



"We can't recreate the effect of small-scale development and multiple individuals making a series of decisions over time... The challenge is to find strategies that will allow for some vital differences."
Ellen Dunham-Jones

Padjen ▶ Is Boston's architectural community too passive?

McKinnell ▶ I think about the contribution that the architectural community could make here. It would be a memorable and visionary and absolutely compelling view from Boston. That doesn't exist at all at this time. And I can absolutely predict that were I or anybody else to produce such a visionary plan, it would be completely nixed by all the people who want something rather homey and comfortable and picturesque. I think that's the real missed opportunity here. I don't agree with Brian. I think the only important thing about this area as far as architecture is concerned — where architects could really make a contribution — is precisely the waterfront. The really important thing here is to produce a fantastic vision for the waterfront and let the rest follow — and the rest would follow if it was fantastic.

Campbell ▶ I disagree completely. It doesn't matter what it looks like from Boston. What matters is what it's like when you're there. Back Bay doesn't look like anything from Cambridge.

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McKinnell ▶ If it looks great from Boston, you'll want to go there.

Campbell ▶ But I don't see at all why there should be a vision for the waterfront. I don't think most of the great neighborhoods can be characterized as visions. Neighborhoods work best when they argue with each other, when they have their own character.

Miklos ▶ Ultimately it all comes down to the individual commissions and the individual architects. We've seen many variations on this plan. But in the final analysis, the character of the streets and the urban design quality of the district will come with the individual design of specific buildings.

Healy ▶ That quality doesn't come exclusively from individual decisions made by developers and their architects; the government makes some decisions as well. The selection of the Northern Avenue Bridge proposal is an example — a disaster, in my opinion. It could have been a wonderful gathering point around Fort Point Channel — that area is very lively and it's an integral part of the fabric. We could have had a collection of bridges as artifacts from a time when they really had a function instead of building new, symbolic gestures to a time past. I don't mind romance, but I think to design buildings in an industrial fashion now is a little bizarre.

Campbell ▶ I agree with that; I think it's theater.

Padjen ▶ I wonder how much we're influenced by words — names like "Seaport District" or "Waterfront District." I think they contribute to a certain amount of artifice, of theater. We've allowed this whole chunk of 1,000 acres to be influenced by that long, thin edge on the water. But in the rest of the city, we tend to think of relatively small pieces of land as discrete neighborhoods. Maybe the notion that we should somehow respond to a maritime tradition ultimately leads to an artificial crust over this whole district.

Hale ▶ I think there's a lot of room for theater in the city. When I'm walking down Newbury Street, I'm on stage and I know it. Of course, you don't want to feel that the set could be struck tomorrow. But there is a good kind of theater — and an inevitable kind of theater — in the city.

Dunham-Jones ▶ Theater often goes hand-in-hand with nostalgia. And whenever there is a technological shift, there tends to be nostalgia. There's a long history of this — cars are still talked about in horsepower and electric light in footcandles. I think there is going to be a lot of interest in the industrial aesthetic as our lives become increasingly digitally wired and simulated. What is tangibly industrial will take on a romantic, nostalgic appeal. That's very real and very understandable.

Campbell ▶ It's not romantic or nostalgic. I don't agree with those words. Materiality is just as much a part of our lives today — and tomorrow — as it was yesterday. It may become more desirable, but not for nostalgic reasons.

Dunham-Jones ▶ I think a lot of people look back at industrial buildings with a certain nostalgia: "Look at these great steel spans, look how we used to build!" But those structures can be reinterpreted in ways that are not nostalgic. Norman Foster, for example, who is doing an addition to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, is an example of an architect who is inspired by older industrial buildings, but carries technological expression forward in a manner that is in no way nostalgic.

Miklos ▶ What we don't want is the idea of romanticizing the Boston Wharf buildings and somehow projecting their image to these new 150-foot-height-limit buildings.

Goody ▶ We're meandering around the edges of a discussion about style. Style has to grow out of the plan in many ways; you can't disassociate it from planning.

Healy ▶ Or from construction. We talk about the radical changes in the world, but we still build with mud and sticks, and we still have to deal with gravity.

Dunham-Jones ▶ That's why I don't think it's such a leap to suggest that Boston could establish performance criteria — about embodied energy, for example — as part of the approval process. Renzo Piano does an energy analysis when he does a brick building. He actually figures out exactly what's going into those bricks and comes up with a new kind of brick. That challenges creativity so much more than looking at different brick patterns in different neighborhoods. That would be a truly fresh vision for Boston — to say we're going to build the most desirable office space in this country,

because it's also going to be the most habitable and the most progressive in terms of a real respect for the environment.

Miklos ▶ But couldn't the individual architects be the protagonists for that? One aspect of the economics of this district is that these buildings are going to be very expensive on a per-square-foot basis. And that may create the opportunity for more experimentation or innovation in construction and building performance.

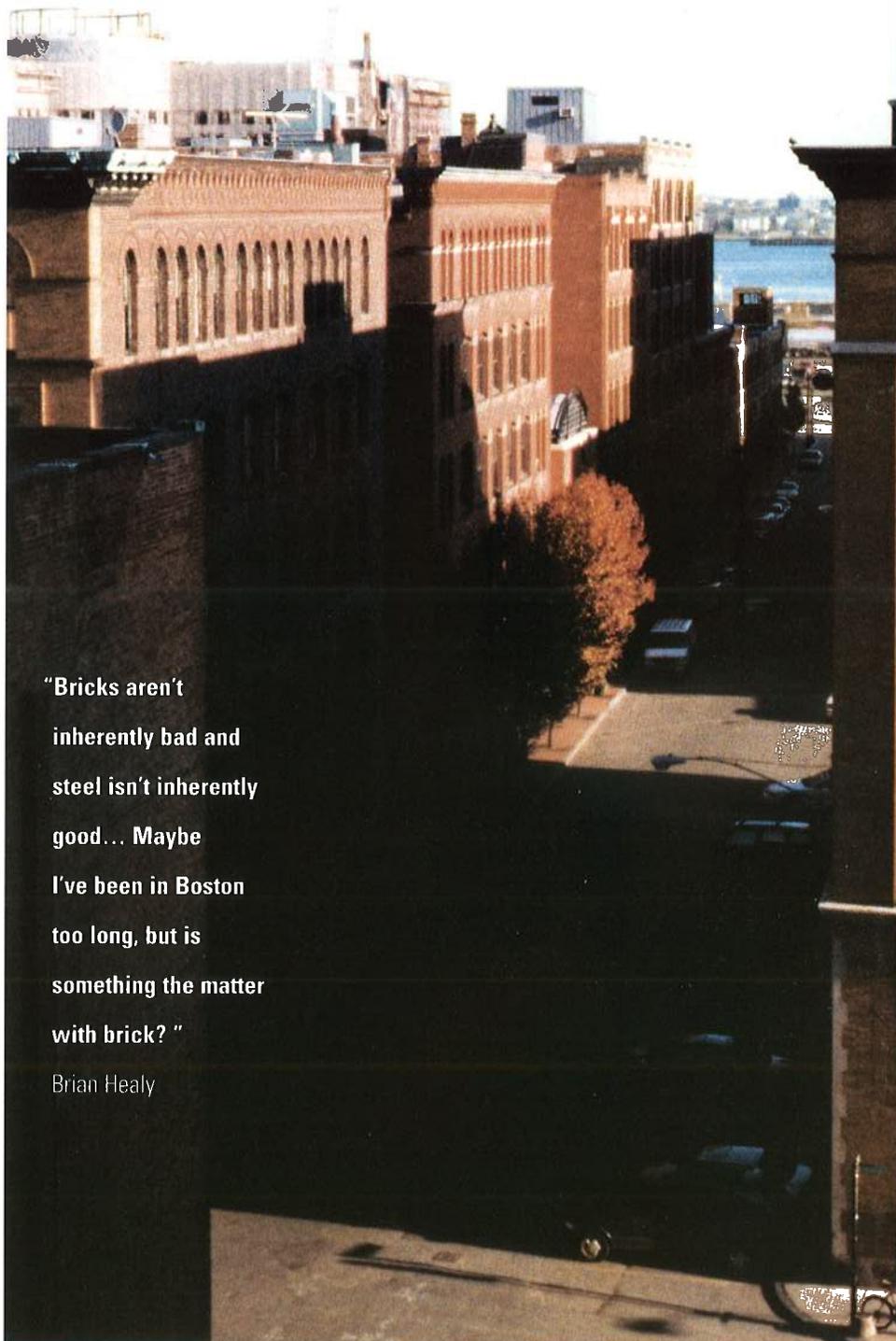
McKinnell ▶ I think it's quite the reverse. The buildings are going to be so expensive to build that each building will be reduced to the minimum necessary in order to be able to keep the heat and the cold out.

Goody ▶ It is hard to believe that developers would give architects more money or more leeway unless there's a commercial benefit or a governmental incentive.

Miklos ▶ So you think that can only happen if it's legislated.

Goody ▶ In the '80s, we had aesthetic competition, because presumably you could get a few dollars more rent per square foot if your building had a fancy top or a glamorous lobby. Developers were willing to spend that money, which was peanuts compared to the overall construction. But I think the only way you're going to get the innovation that Ellen is talking about is if you have a government that is self-confident enough to lay down strong and progressive rules.

Healy ▶ But there is still a role in all this for architects. How the pieces of a building go together is still our responsibility. How we put materials together is still a criterion for evaluating a building. Bricks aren't inherently bad and steel isn't inherently good. It's how they're used. Maybe I've been in Boston too long, but is something the matter with brick? I remember feeling that you couldn't do a brick building and be progressive, but now I'd love to see more progressive architects embrace the idea of doing good brick buildings.



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