

Boston has not suffered any major earthquakes. However, in a historical sense the changes in the physical form of the waterfront have been no less dramatic. Hills were raised and shorelines molded to make the profile of the Boston waterfront as we know it. Given some of what is happening on the Boston waterfront now, it appears that earthquakes may actually occur in Boston – but only in boardrooms and community halls! However, the current tension over the South Boston Seaport District Plan is rare when one views the history of waterfront development in Boston. In addition, this tension exists, to the degree that it does, between the state and the city, rather than between Massport and the city.

With a decade's worth of public planning and investment in place, and with Boston's booming real estate market having focused at last on the South Boston waterfront, there remains a question in the year 2000 as to whether a critical mass of high-quality, mixed-use development will be realized on the South Boston waterfront anytime soon. The underlying reason, as in most American cities, is that land use is debated publicly, decisions are legally and politically susceptible to intense public participation, and different people want different things.

Ironically, the issue which dominates the waterfront planning debate in so many port cities – the spatial competition between the maritime and urban development sectors for land and water resources – was largely solved in Boston a decade ago. The Chapter 91 Regulations, and the broad public policy agreements among Massport, the BRA, and the state which made them possible, addressed the space allocation issues in general. The broadly understood division of the South Boston waterfront into two halves, one maritime and one mixed-use, addressed those issues in the largest and most complicated of the waterfront settings. What remains to be seen is whether the current lack of consensus on a seemingly narrower issue – the ideal nature of mixed-use development – will be a momentary or enduring obstacle to progress.

The San Francisco experience in waterfront redevelopment is an interesting comparison to Boston. The San Francisco waterfront is controlled by one agency, one vision and one layer of bureaucratic control. Despite this, the people of San Francisco reprimanded the Port Commission by voting for Proposition H. Perhaps most interesting to note about San Francisco's experience is that Proposition H, which at the time seemed disastrous to the port, has, in retrospect, been a blessing. Proposition H focused the port's energies on comprehensive planning and community outreach during the early 1990s, when developers were retrenching. When the economy improved the port was ready to respond with a publicly embraced blueprint for reconnecting the city and the waterfront.

In Boston, achieving a world-class waterfront means negotiating the institutional relationships between several major players. For the greater part of Massport's history, an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation has prevailed between the port and the city. This is critical to Boston's efforts. One of the problems of dealing with two independent agencies, as we have seen in Las Palmas and other places, is that the unique nature and responsibility of the port is not readily understood by other planners. The issue compounds when the city does not fully control the waterfront, and the Port Authority does not have a mission to make the "city" waterfront