

11 Reflections on the Boston waterfront

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As it has done several times over its 370-year history, the city of Boston is in the midst of redesigning 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 – with plans, investors, visions – although there are 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 chapter, incomplete.