

Boston's Seaport District

The area encompassing the Seaport District was created a century ago through a massive landfill initiative. The goal was the creation of a modern boat-to-rail port to replace the historic but by then obsolete central piers of Boston, no longer able to accommodate the scale of modern ships and lacking sufficient rail connections. However, since the decline of local maritime industries which began shortly following the First World War, the area has been underutilized, maintaining some maritime and industrial functions but also hosting large parking fields and similar supporting uses for the nearby downtown. The area has essentially served as a land bank for years, awaiting better regional access and, more importantly, demand for the expansion of the nearby downtown.

Suddenly, seemingly overnight, it is metamorphosing into convention venues, hotels, luxury housing, parks and a cultural amenity or two. But some wonder if there will still be room for the traditional fishing fleet once such a fabulous array of modern uses – upwards of twenty million square feet are in various stages of planning or design – are realized. And the concern is not just about the survival of the fishing fleet, itself diminished over the years with the depletion of nearby fishing banks. The concerns extend to feared overbuilding, traffic congestion, gentrification and affordability, particularly of the housing being proposed, and the long-term affects on the cohesiveness (and some would say parochialism) of the adjacent South Boston community, long a cohesive working-class neighborhood, largely of Irish-American make-up and generally intolerant of outsider influence. Maintaining industrial jobs for the residents of South Boston is another concern. Other worries include whether sufficient public space will be provided, whether the right balance of uses are being planned, whether the public sector can sufficiently guide the actions of a few large and powerful landowners, whether too much history will be erased, who stands to gain or lose local political influence, and so forth.

Somehow, two centuries of producing new waterfronts – each a radical undertaking for its day, each eschewing conventional wisdom or timidity, each producing a quite striking and distinct environment – haven't produced a confidence about doing it well at the Seaport District. Before returning to the current dilemmas at the Seaport District, it is worth a brief review of Boston's waterfront planning achievements and to seek insights from the experience of the eight cities which presented their waterfront plans at the Harvard conference.

Boston's waterfront-making history

The story of Boston's waterfront planning begins with the city's remarkable topographic transformations. Few of the world's cities, large or small (with the possible exception of contemporary Hong Kong), have witnessed as substantial a change to their natural geographies as has Boston. As one walks around central Boston it is nearly impossible to visualize that the original Shawmut Peninsula was virtually an island, and that four out of five acres at one's feet is artificial land, constructed out of the determination to grow and prosper amidst a geography of steep hills, tidal flats, marshes