

and areas of usable land too meager in size to support any sizeable settlement. To accommodate growth the city would have no choice but to make land. From the early decades of the eighteenth century an expanding seafaring economy led the young city to push outward into its harbors and bays to gain usable land.

The process began in two ways: by “wharfing out” – the filling of the slips of water between wharves – and with the dumping of earth into the harbor from the scraping of the steepest hills to make them easier to settle. These efforts foreshadowed the much larger nineteenth-century land-making ventures out of which emerged the form of contemporary Boston. The earliest recorded filling, for the purpose of adding usable land rather than as a mere consequence of clearing existing areas for settlement, occurred in 1803 with the widening of the peninsula neck, generally parallel to today’s Washington Street. Rapidly following were the filling of portions of the West Cove (the area around the present Massachusetts General Hospital), and the Mill Pond which became the Bullfinch Triangle. Early nineteenth-century maps of Boston depict these expansions well, on the eve of the most famous land-making project – the nearly 600-acre filling of the Back Bay of the Charles River which occupied Bostonians continuously from the 1850s through the 1890s. The creation of the present Seaport District began even earlier, but most of these 700 acres of Commonwealth Flats (as the area was called until recently) were created during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth. The land on which Logan Airport sits represents another 750 acres of fill begun during the 1920s. In all some 3,500 acres of land have been created through more than a dozen major landfill initiatives spanning a 200-year period.

Among the remarkable waterfront environments that this land-making history produced are the Quincy Markets, an “urban renewal” project dating to the 1820s, and, as is well known, adapted and re-imagined by James Rouse in the 1970s as the first “festival market place.” The Back Bay venture produced one of the nation’s most distinctive residential districts, which during the 1930s was augmented as a riverfront environment by the construction of a portion of the Charles River Esplanade. Indeed, the Charles River was eventually graced by a continuous eighteen-mile-long public open space occupying both its Boston and Cambridge banks. Frederick Law Olmsted’s late nineteenth-century work on Boston’s park system produced Day Boulevard, Pleasure Bay and Marine Park, a continuous recreational open space along the southern and eastern edges of the South Boston Peninsula. Beginning in the 1960s Boston’s oldest wharves, including Long Wharf, Central Wharf, Lewis Wharf, and a number of others in the North End, experienced adaptive reuse and/or reconstruction to achieve one of America’s earliest transformations of obsolete maritime infrastructure and historic wharf architecture into modern waterfront residential neighborhoods.

So with such impressive achievements, both historic and recent, why is the planning of the Seaport District producing a crisis of confidence? And what, if anything, might Boston planners learn from the experience of the eight cities – Amsterdam, Bilbao, Genoa, Havana, Las Palmas, Shanghai, Sydney, and Vancouver – represented at the conference, many claiming to