

Shanghai, the Malecón in Havana, the Avenita Marítima in Las Palmas; most cities possess at least one great linear avenue along their waterfronts (sometimes succumbing, sadly, to highway scale due to traffic). These avenues serve as prominent addresses, collect visitor accommodations and host celebratory events. They deserve much attention. Yet, nearly without exception the speakers at the conference spoke about resisting the allure of the “thin-line”; of approaching waterfront planning in terms of perpendiculars to the water’s edge. The reason is that in most cities which have opted for a tall or dense edge of development at their waterfront, the value of land a block-or-two away from the edge drops precipitously, and with it the quality of the environment away from the water’s edge.

Anne Cook, manager of Port Planning for the City of San Francisco, advised getting in to the water – both figuratively, by blurring the suddenness of the edge, and literally, by making sure that the remaining and potentially new industrial, transportation or recreational uses of the water sheet itself influence the land-side planning. Bostonians, for example, hold dear their “fingers-to-the-sea,” the system of colonial streets (still prominent today) which were virtual extensions of the piers and wharves far into the Shawmut Peninsula. Developing the potential of such perpendiculars is often the key to comprehensive planning, more naturally resulting in both land-side and a water-side plans.

On this matter, several of the development proposals for the Seaport District deserve great scrutiny. The landowners nearest the water are, naturally, trying to maximize the value of their land by proposing to build tall; that is, upwards of 300 and 400 feet. Arguing substantial land carrying costs, and the demands of providing a variety of services – including streets and open space – which traditionally was the responsibility of the public sector, they insist that substantial height and density is needed to make construction and debt-service feasible. Avoiding the less desirable consequences of this thin, tall, dense line of development depends on the public’s success in creating perpendicular streets and civic corridors which become considered equally desirable addresses.

### **There is long-term value to be regained; do not endanger this for short-term riches**

One of the most poignant observations at the conference – pertaining directly to the seduction of the “thin line” – was made by Mario Coyula, the director of planning for the Havana capital region. Confronted with a dire need to improve (indeed, to create) an economy, and with international tourism offering a very tempting vehicle, Havana is struggling with how much of itself to offer and how quickly. “Do not lead with your best sites,” Coyula advised, “the early investors want the best locations but do not do the best projects.” How true this rings for cities which too quickly accept second-rate development proposals or engineer entire redevelopment plans around specific sites to enhance commercial real estate, or “jump-start” waterfront renewal.

Consider how unusual, and so far successful, Bilbao’s efforts have been proceeding in reverse. First, and quite consciously, they set out to improve local self-esteem and enhance the region’s image internationally through a