

American Institute of Architects said it all in 1984 when it described the Inner Harbor as “one of the supreme achievements of large-scale urban design and development in U.S. history.” In 1991, the international Waterfront Center simply listed the Inner Harbor as “one of the top 10 waterfront places in the world.” As luck would have it, the 35-year period of development was observed and documented by a few individuals who remain on the scene, and one of them has compiled the reflections and description of lessons learned that follows below.

Abandonment of the old ports

It seems fortuitous, but nevertheless positive, that the Millennium has arrived at a time when the cities of the world are enjoying a surge of benefits – such as those experienced in Baltimore – from the maturing of the waterfront development movement. The huge success of cities such as Baltimore is persuading other cities to undertake or accelerate their planning and infrastructure construction to create waterfront activity and profitable, tax-producing urban centers. This is equally true of famous international cities and of urban centers in underdeveloped countries.

In many if not most cities, central city revitalization means waterfront development: after all, what important city is not located on a waterfront of some sort – and for very good reasons! The basis for this movement began in the years after the Second World War, when the emergence of the container shipping industry accelerated the abandonment of old ports all over the world. The old ports were too crowded, and their piers had too little dockside land area for the flow of containers; as a result, in port city after port city, deep-sea shipping has moved out of the city center, abandoning the historic old port area where the city began, and where the city’s image was created for the rest of the world.

This clearly opened up a great opportunity for new development, but with some problems or hurdles to overcome. First, of course, all ports are geographically subject to natural forces – tides, hurricanes, siltation, pollution – in a way that other urban development sites are not. Second, the abandoned piers and warehouses were surrounded by industrial properties which were also abandoned by maritime-related businesses, and the waterfront provided space where the construction of railroads and superhighways found the path of least resistance, cutting off the center of the city permanently from the water. As a result, whole port areas are shunned by public and private users and developers of other types of real estate.

In the last few years, the abandonment of old port areas has been reinforced by the growing concern for environmental problems: the old ports contain many forms of contamination of water, land and air, and the cost of eliminating those conditions often makes waterfront development too expensive to be economically feasible. Finally, there are liable to be inter-governmental rivalries that can create major problems for development in a situation where fifteen or twenty different authorities must give their consent for any new construction. Port authorities and municipal governments seem to have a natural tendency to disagree on goals and objectives for new development – or at least on the territorial question of who has the right to be in charge.