

AllianceLetter

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FOCUS: Fort Point Channel and The Waterfront

The Waterfront: A Preservation Challenge

Preservationists are used to focusing their attention on buildings but Boston has a valuable historic resource that is not made of bricks and mortar: the waterfront. In the context of Downtown development pressure, the Boston Harbor Associates recently sponsored a very timely event, its tenth anniversary forum entitled, "The Development of Fort Point Channel-Castle Island Area." The May 26th conference featured developers, landowners, representatives of government agencies, and politicians including Governor Dukakis who used the occasion to announce the appointment of former Governor Sargent to head a new Boston Harbor Water Quality Committee.

As Kevin Lynch so ably outlined at the conference, what is happening along the Fort Point Channel is not unfamiliar to preservationists. The Channel was once a manufacturing and transportation center but, as means of production changed and shipping became a less efficient way of transporting goods, disinvestment occurred. For many years rehabilitation seemed out of reach. Now the Fort Point Channel area is seeing a period of intense revitalization; market mechanisms are beginning to kick in, land values are escalating, and low-cost uses (artists' studios, housing) are being squeezed out. As investments multiply, the area is experiencing growing pains.

The question for all parties involved, including preservationists, is what kind of planning process can best deal with this increased development pressure. The time is past when a city agency such as the BRA can do all the work. An alternative scenario,

continued on page 9

When Waterfronts and Roadways Meet: Issues Confronting Fort Point Channel

by Thomas Ennen

Much of Boston as we know it today was formerly open water. Expansion of the city into the harbor has had several historic causes. Military facilities, housing, and fishing are among them but the primary force has been the evolving needs for various transportation facilities. From the early wharves and docks which served as our connection to the Old World and other inter-coastal ports, through ship construction yards and dockage for the clipper ship era to railyards in the 19th century, the harbor has been host to structures built over the water or on landfill.

This filling process plays itself out in the same phasing again and again. Bridges, usually movable or opening span types which allow for the passage of vessels, are constructed between any of the peninsulas which make up the land masses extending into the harbor. Later these bridges become fixed or are replaced by causeways. Harbor filling then commences behind these structures, eventually consuming the contained waterscape and extending the actual waterfront out into the harbor. Fort Point Channel is the latest example of this process and its future will prove whether or not we have come to understand the actual value of this harbor to our City.

Boston transportation planners have viewed water as a barrier to be bridged or as blank spots on City maps to be filled or dug under. As a result, Fort Point Channel may be

continued on page 6

Harborwalk

by H. Parker James

Boston's Harborfront has long been a neglected part of the City. Lined with warehouses and factories, it is cut off visually by the Southeast Expressway from the rest of the Downtown area. Now, with the advent of much new construction (including some exemplary adaptive use), the waterfront is fast becoming one of Boston's most fashionable areas.

A group of local businesses sponsors a walking tour of the waterfront to introduce the uninitiated with what the area has to offer. Harborwalk begins at the Old State House. Pertinent information may be obtained from the Boston Historical Park office, located at 15 State Street.

The Old State House is the architectural jewel of the area and has had a succession of functions in the course of its 270 years. Built as the seat of British administration for the Bay Colony in 1712-13, it subsequently served as State House and City Hall, later housing shops and offices. Since 1882, the Bostonian Society has used the brick edifice as a museum of Boston's history. Today the Old State House stands as a shining example of a historic building's resilience if there is the will to use it.

Standing at the corner of Devonshire and State, looking south, is the Worthington building (Fehmer & Page, 1894), which houses the National Bank of Greece. Adjacent is the second Brazier building (1896), notable as the only work designed by Cass Gilbert in the Downtown area. This pair, and the alley between them, create an atmosphere which was typical of Boston as late as 20 years ago.

Across Congress Street, at 53 State, is a sight familiar to readers of the Alliance-Letter: the gutted facade of the Boston Stock Exchange (Peabody & Stearns, 1887), with the colossal frame of the New Exchange Place tower looming overhead. The two seem to repel rather than attract each other, and they underscore the need for integration between the old and new.

Moving along State Street toward the harbor we pass the Richards building (#114) on the left. Originally designed as a simple commercial building with a cast iron facade, the exuberantly turreted top two stories were the

continued on page 7

Kennedy's Update: Another 53 State in the Making?

June 14th....In what could be interpreted as a minor triumph for preservationists, Joseph Hoskins's design for Franklin Place (on the Kennedy's site) has been scrapped.

Instead, the developers have retained Tim Anderson (of Anderson Notter & Finegold) as a consultant-architect to work on a compromise design. The compromise would apparently include the retention of the Kennedy's facades together with new construction. Having discussed the issue separately with representatives from the Preservation Alliance and the Boston Landmarks Commission, the developers will be meeting regularly over the next few weeks with their architects and a special task force of the Commission to explore what might be arrived at by way of a compromise solution. Ron Druker, one of the developers, has said that they will contact the Alliance with the results at some point. While it would not be fair to predict the preservation community's reaction at the present time, the idea of this "prosthetic" architectural solution (to use a word which Robert Campbell, architectural critic of The Boston Globe, applied to the compromise reached for 53 State Street) is not one that has generally met with favor.

Recently, Kennedy's was accepted by Washington as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (only eligible because of the owner's objection to the building's actual listing). This automatically brings the provisions of the State Register of Historic Places into play with an effect that cannot be predicted. At the present time, the Alliance's position remains one of support for the building's designation as a City Landmark. Readers will also recall that the Alliance has retained legal counsel, who are providing advice of this issue.

The Alliance wishes to thank the following:

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Waterfronts and Roadways

continued from page 1

host to a depressed central artery, sewer pipes, new fixed span bridges, and a seaport access road which, on its own, will permanently foreshorten the Channel to the area between Gillette and the Post Office Annex.

Some of this may be appropriate. But the absence of any recognition of the value of this waterway, and the waterfront which surrounds it, to the City, its citizens, and boaters confirms that, in our rush to capitalize on Boston's latest development surge, several items of great value may well be left behind.

There are many ways to degrade land values such as inappropriate use, careless planning, poor architecture, and high density. The best way to destroy waterfront land values is to simply forget about the water. Boston Harbor Associates has known, for at least five years, that the redevelopment of the Downtown core would spill over and past the Atlantic Avenue waterfront and into South Boston. We have been readying ourselves for this eventuality, hoping that harbor values could be sustained through this surge.

The urban needs which have been raised in relation to Fort Point Channel are legitimate. The construction of some of these facilities in areas which are now open water is possibly inevitable. The real damage stems from two missing pieces of a reasonable urban/harbor development process.

-No review of analysis has been done which addresses the Fort Point Channel itself. The waterway has no clearly defined place or configuration in a policy sense. No work has been done to discover its current or possible future value to the city and its citizens.

-Proposals that would install the various pieces of public machinery, described above, have not been evaluated or planned in an integrated manner. Thus, bridges are to be built where tunnels might go. Waste water treatment plants and large discharge pipes must be sited and aligned while the City, not to mention the Channel, must operate. Invariably, this lack of professional review and management results in chaos, extended construction periods, and embarrassment with the final product.

Development in the 1980's will be remarkably different from what we have been used to in Boston. Public funding for streets, sewers, lighting and other necessary components of urban renewal is simply not available. Private investment will carry these programs. The requirements on developers today are much greater but more vague than in the past. The development community has been asking those concerned about the harbor to clarify our needs and desires. They have been asking government to clarify its plans and schedules for any public investment which might occur. It is now time to start answering those questions.

There is a way that all this pressure can produce positive urban/harbor results. Careful, timely, and short duration planning processes can easily evoke more sensitive design solutions to the current crop of parochial and isolated projects. Fort Point Channel needs a straightforward complete analysis. The consensus in this regard is gaining adherents quickly as the implications of current proposals become better understood. One can usually assume that something will occur when board room opinion matches statements made in community meetings in South Boston. In all of these matters the key is open and constructive negotiation. No one wants roads but we all need them. We've just come through twenty years of not needing the harbor and now we want it. Encounters between waterways and roadways need not be grossly unequal contests even though history shows that waterfronts and channels and harbors have almost perfect losing records. I personally believe that this time all interests can get involved and share in a truly remarkable outcome. If you don't know what to do, start by joining the Boston Harbor Associates.

Thomas Ennen is Executive Director of the Boston Harbor Associates.

The Madison

continued from page 5

This demolition took place as part of a \$500 million urban renewal project conceived by the BRA. The immediate project goals are to erect a new Federal General Services Administration building to be named in honor of Tip O'Neill, and a supporting hotel/office/retail complex.

The new construction is a part of the Bulfinch Triangle renewal project, which was designed for the BRA by Moshe Safdie in

continued on page 7