

Seaport District, Boston, MA

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The South Boston Waterfront

The vision of post-industrial America, for many, is tied to the Great Plains and Rust Belt. While cities like Detroit or Pittsburgh might be the first to come to mind, pockets of aging, abandoned, infrastructure exist all throughout the United States. The city of Boston, Massachusetts is one of the oldest and most historic cities in the United States, and though its roots trace all the way back to the thirteen colonies, its population, and built environment also changed dramatically during the industrial revolution.

Boston quickly became a regional commercial center and cemented its status as one of America's most industrialized cities, along with the likes of New York City, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. Boston consistently ranked well within the top ten most populous cities in the United States until the 1950 census, when national trends of deindustrialization and outmigration arrived in full force.¹ What had been one of the most influential and commercially successful cities in the country was now downtrodden and depopulated, known more for the stench of its harbor and prevalence of organized crime.² As has been established, Boston's trajectory is not unique,

but its historic status and the fact that the region continues to be an educational and technological hub has helped the city maintain vibrancy and economic vitality when compared to other aging industrial cities.

During the peak of Boston's industrial glory days, one of the most prominent areas for shipping, jobbing, and commercial activity was the South Boston Waterfront, and Fort Point District. The area is located directly Southwest of downtown Boston and is known collectively now as the Seaport District. Despite being much older than other cities, the development of Boston's warehouse district did not pick up until the latter half of the nineteenth century.³ This is due in part to technological innovations such as railroads or the telegram that accelerated trade and commerce, but also to the fact that much of the land occupied by the district did not yet exist. In terms of American cities, Boston is perhaps one of the most well known for its land reclamation efforts and artificial expansion. Since the 1600s, the city nearly doubled its land area by expanding into Boston Harbor through building seawalls and filling tidal flats.

The Boston Wharf Company Company (BWCo) was perhaps the most prominent actor in land reclamation efforts, spearheading most reclamation efforts in the area, after being incorporated in 1936. The company's chief directive was to construct wharves for docking and warehousing, to propel the commercial potential of Boston Harbor. Their first step was to turn the tidal marshes along the shoreline into usable land. A unique law in Boston's history, which gave ownership of tidal flats to owners of adjacent land within a certain distance, also encouraged the reclamation of land, thus accelerating the trend.⁴ Today, much of Boston—including some of its most well known neighborhoods—are built on reclaimed land. By 1837, the BWCo had already completed its first stage of tidal infill, a portion of South Boston that is now part of the Gillette Plant. Land reclamation continued throughout the nineteenth century, culminating with the completion of Fan Pier in the 1870s, a wedge shaped piece of

reclaimed land, whose shape was maximized to limit interruptions to the harbor's tides.⁵ A little over a century later, Fan Pier would become a major site for redevelopment in South Boston.

Much like the warehouse district in Minneapolis, the bulk of the warehouses that remain today—largely in the Fort Point Channel Landmark District (FPCLD)—were constructed in large blocks to maximize the available real estate. Given that the land itself was created by the BWCo, much of the developable parcels in the area were subject to the company's regulations. While the warehouses in Minneapolis were mostly constructed and designed by individual firms, the BWCo served as the landowner, developer, and landlord of the district. Given that most all the buildings were designed by staff architects, there is a remarkable degree of uniformity in the district's architecture. The construction of most warehouses occurred between the 1870s and 1890s, and the accessibility and credibility of the area increased with the opening of the Congress Street Bridge in 1875, which connected the area with downtown Boston. The BWCo specialized in the handling of sugar and molasses, and in later years, the area became a center for the wool trade.⁶ The wool warehouses—mostly along Summer Street—were especially valuable as they were fireproof and required a high level of architectural finish, which meant the buildings remained in relatively good condition over time.⁷ Throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century, new connections were established between the growing waterfront district and downtown, rendering this area of South Boston an internationally recognized center for commerce.

The Seaport District, which includes the historic Fort Point neighborhood—designated in 2009—experienced a decline similar to that of the Minneapolis Warehouse District. Shifting transportation trends, and the rise of trucking as opposed to rail transport rendered it unnecessary for wholesalers to be located near railyards. The importance of wholesalers as an institution also

decreased, with manufacturers preferring suburban locations with better highway access. Despite Boston's historically advantageous location as a port city, its prominence as a trading hub faded with shifting transportation geographies, and the erosion of key industries.

New York City became the preferred port of entry for manufacturers given its central location on the east coast, and large consumer base. New York City was always a much larger and more economically prosperous city than others on the east coast, but as ships became larger and more frequent, NYC's deeper and larger harbor had an edge over its competitors. The concentration of businesses and technology gave rise to NYC's status as a megaport, which reduced demand for smaller regional ports. Additional trade routes were also developed, such as the Erie Canal in the early nineteenth century, which allowed for goods to be shipped directly to the Great Lakes Region and necessitated passing through the Ports of New York and New Jersey. In the mid 1900s, the Saint Lawrence Seaway created additional passage between international markets and North America's heartland. Gateway cities that transitioned goods from boat to rail, like Boston, were no longer as important as they once were.⁸ Businesses could now get their goods much closer to the consumer through more direct routes. Ultimately, due to these shifting trade patterns, by the 1950s, Boston now required much less space to conduct shipping and warehousing operations. The port was scaled down to occupy only the western portion of South Boston, which left large swaths of abandoned warehouses and wharfs.

The Seaport District was known for its robust wool trade and fish markets, which had helped finance the area's expansive warehouse infrastructure. Unfortunately, the wool industry, which had thrived since merchants relocated en masse to the Seaport District in the early twentieth century, declined significantly following the Second World War. New England's robust textile industry stalled, and ultimately many manufacturers relocated operations to the Southern United States or abroad. Fishing is still a prominent business on the

Boston waterfront, but the commercialization and automation of the industry has decreased the demand for space and workers.⁹ Commerce continued well into the mid twentieth century in the Seaport District, but the end of the warehouse building boom in 1929—when the last BWCo building was completed—seemed to foretell the coming decline of the area.

By the 1960s, the Seaport District had developed into two distinct areas. One was the Fort Point Channel neighborhood, where most of the twentieth century warehouses were located. The warehouses were still largely owned by the Wharf Company, which left many of

them empty and unused. North of this was a collection of sprawling surface parking lots and abandoned parcels of land that had been home to various fishing and light manufacturing industries. For about a decade from 1955 to 1965, the area became a blighted wasteland between the central business district and the remainder of South Boston. Despite occupying some of the best real estate in the city, the Seaport District was home only to a few seedy establishments that were popular among Boston's mob scene. Gradually a few seafood restaurants and nightclubs opened their doors, bringing initial attention to the otherwise overlooked neighborhood.



Aerial photograph of the South Boston Waterfront in 1925¹⁰

Like many other post-industrial districts, the Seaport District became a haven for artists and craftsmen who were in search of cost-effective housing and workspace. Once again, the large loft-like spaces afforded by the old warehouses and the neighborhood's proximity to downtown offered unique advantages for working artists. During the latter half of the 1960s and 70s, the area became home to numerous dive bars and small scale printing and book-binding industries in addition to the decaying piers and abandoned parking lots. Despite the variety of land uses, only around forty percent of the buildings were occupied in the mid 1970s.¹¹ The Boston Wharf Company was still one of the largest property owners in the area and this level of control along with the high vacancy rates allowed for space to be rented out at low prices. Sculptors and woodworkers heard through word of mouth the opportunities in the Fort Point neighborhood, and soon the area became a hub for the Boston arts community.

At this time, the city of Boston, in order to combat its ongoing decline and growing obsolescence of industry, embarked on various urban renewal projects. These projects were spearheaded by the Boston redevelopment Authority (BRA) and called for the large-scale eminent domain clearance projects. Prominent projects include the construction of the modernist Government Center in the mid 1960s, and the razing of much of the West End neighborhood. Notably, South Boston was left relatively untouched at this time, as it was still largely controlled by the Boston Wharf Company and was still seen as undesirable—or at least at a lower priority than other urban renewal districts.

Real change came to the Seaport District in the late 1980s and early 90s, when two unprecedented public investments—the Big Dig and Boston Harbor cleanup—sparked newfound interest in the area. Historically, public investment in an area has been used as a catalyst for additional development. When government entities provide primary funds for infrastructure improvements, housing, or public

amenities, they not only provide a base for other developers to build from, but it also gives added credibility for the area. It is a risk to invest and develop abandoned or underutilized space—characteristic of industrial districts—which makes public investment an especially noteworthy endeavor.

The Central Artery/Tunnel Project in Boston—known as the Big Dig—was one of the most expensive highway projects in American history and rerouted a major interstate through a tunnel in the heart of Boston. The project began in 1990 and was plagued with controversies and cost overruns, but nevertheless had an immense impact on the way Bostonians navigated their city. At the time, the highway cut through the center of the city and was the source of worsening traffic congestion in one of America's oldest and densest cities. The major roadway was sunk below ground and covered with an extensive greenway that winds around the waterfront. In order to reduce the number of cars traveling through downtown Boston, an additional bypass was also created which went under South Boston and the Harbor. The extension of the Massachusetts Turnpike south of the city not only reduced congestion but also provided direct vehicular access to the Fort Point and South Boston waterfront districts. These neighborhoods were also now connected to the international airport and downtown Boston via the highway system. The improved access to the South Boston Seaport District was not coincidental, and policymakers anticipated an increase in private development and additional property tax revenues over \$100 million.¹² By the time the Big Dig was completed in the early 2000s, it was not only a traffic reduction measure but also an intentional investment in the growth of Boston into the twenty-first century.

The Big Dig was not the only major public investment in the Seaport District, and in the 1980s the city embarked on a massive cleanup project to restore the waters of Boston Harbor. The harbor, despite still being a key economic asset to the city, was one of the most polluted bodies of water in the nation, and even earned the title

“Harbor of Shame” by former President George H.W. Bush.¹³ The initiative was driven by the Clean Waters Act of 1972, and aimed to make the harbor not just a site for fishing and commerce but also for nature and recreation. The decades-long project was generally seen as a success and has been lauded as transformational for the city of Boston by environmentalists and politicians alike.¹⁴ Additional public investments in the South Boston neighborhood included a new federal courthouse on Fan Pier which opened in 1998, and a new convention center on Summer Street, which broke ground in 1997. The parcel occupied by the convention center was also unsuccessfully floated as a new location for a sports complex that would be the new home for the National Football League’s New England Patriots. Several key infrastructure investments created a new cultural and transit landscape in the Seaport District for developers to expand on. The location of the convention center in what had recently been a seedy, industrial area helped legitimize the neighborhood as a hub for arts and exhibition, building off of Fort Point’s status as a creative district.



View of the John Joseph Moakley Courthouse from Rowe's Wharf, 1998¹⁵

Following the prominent infrastructural projects of the 1980s and 90s, and the construction of the courthouse and convention center, the South Boston Waterfront began to see true interest in real estate development. Prior to 2005, much of the waterfront land, including Fan Pier—the site of the courthouse—was owned by the prominent Pritzker family of Chicago. At several points throughout the previous decade, the Pritzkers had attempted to develop portions of the parking lots, but eventually pulled out of the project which had included a \$1.2 billion office, residential, and hotel complex.¹⁶ At the time, then Boston mayor Thomas Menino had been a major proponent of redevelopment, and after the project fell through, he urged the Pritzker family to sell the 21 acres, which they did. One of Mayor Menino’s key policy goals was the redevelopment of Boston’s neighborhoods, and his nearly unprecedented 20 year tenure as mayor saw several large scale projects, including Roxbury’s Nubian Square and of course the Seaport District.¹⁷

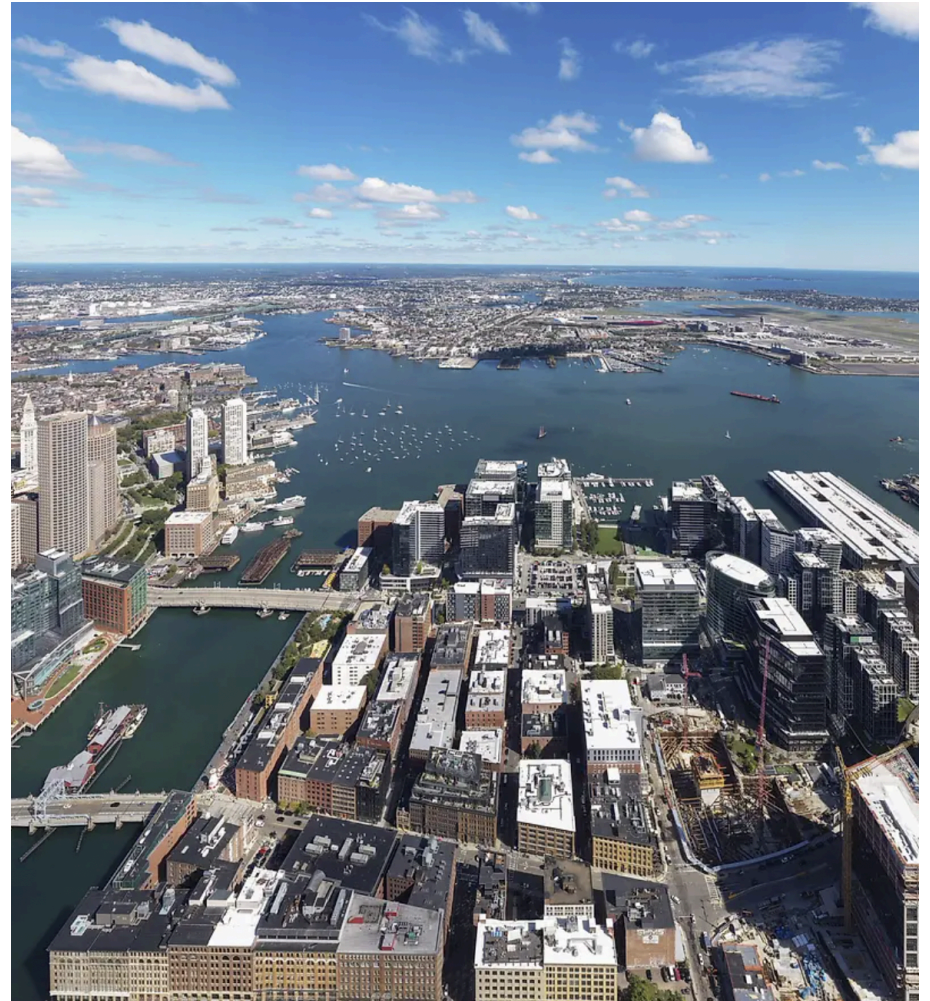
The Pritzker family held approximately half of the developable land on the South Boston Waterfront, north of present day Northern Avenue, and the Fallon Company took over ownership of the waterfront lot in 2005. The first major building to be constructed was the Institute of Contemporary Art, which was designed by world renowned architecture firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro, and sat on a prime harborfront parcel. The Institute was the primary anchor for the Fan Pier development and opened in 2006. Before long additional blocks were being developed and a new street grid began to form. Menino was intent on the area becoming a center for technology, life sciences, and creative enterprise. Inspired by innovation districts like Silicon Valley or Kendall Square by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Menino’s administration lured prominent biopharmaceutical firm Vertex into the Seaport District from neighboring Cambridge, by offering generous tax incentives. Vertex Pharmaceuticals became the first life sciences tenant in the Seaport District and has prompted the relocation of other prominent medical and research companies to South Boston. The Seaport has become

one of the largest urban lab markets in the nation and much of this is owed to Menino's lofty goals for the new neighborhood.¹⁸

The other large plot of available land on the South Boston Waterfront was south of Northern Avenue and East of the Fort Point Channel historic district. This area included 23 acres of developable land, and the project was spearheaded by Boston Global Investors and WS Development under the name Seaport Square. Seaport Square was a master planned district set to include 1.3 million square feet of offices, spaces for over 6,000 cars, and 1,000 hotel rooms, most of which to date have been built.¹⁹ The mixed-use development completed its first blocks in 2007, and has continued construction since, with the last blocks set to complete in 2025. Seaport Square and the Fan Pier projects make up the bulk of the new development in the area, and are both mostly new construction. The glass and steel highrises were supplemented by the renovation and repurposing of the lowrise brick and stone warehouses in the Fort Point area. The intent was to create a diverse district where the historical building stock was complemented by the sleek amenities afforded by Fan Pier and Seaport Square. Overall, these two projects were pivotal to the reinvention of the entire South Boston Waterfront district and the ongoing efforts of developers and politicians alike ushered in immense change in the neighborhood's build environment.

Today, the Seaport District is known as a trendy live/work destination for young professionals and tourists alike. The high density of entertainment amenities and clustering of tech industries has made the South Boston Waterfront essentially a new business district for the city. Its galleries and nightlife have made the area a lively and safe destination which had been—just decades earlier—the site of crumbling fish marketplaces and mob violence. The wholesale, intricately planned transformation of the neighborhood contrasts with the incremental development of Minneapolis's North Loop. The large scale of the Seaport projects

certainly helped streamline the greater process, but also made the effort less privy to the values of hindsight and criticism. It's crucial to investigate the successes and shortcomings of the Seaport District in an effort to establish a better model for future industrial redevelopment.



Aerial view of the South Boston Waterfront, showing the historic Fort Point Channel neighborhood in the foreground²⁰

Creating Boston's Newest District

The redevelopment of the Boston Seaport has become the largest and also most controversial urban revitalization projects in the city's history. What had been a barren expanse of empty parking lots and abandoned warehouses was the target of \$22 billion in public investment starting in the 1990s. The endeavor resulted in over 8 million square feet of residential, hotel, office, retail, entertainment, civic and cultural spaces and became home to over 350 individual companies.²¹ The development, however, is seen as a missed opportunity by many, while others cite the new district as a vision for contemporary Boston's future. Critics point to its affordability, racial homogeneity, lack of public space, disregard for the environment, and car-centric orientation as key failures in the area's redevelopment. Proponents see the Seaport District as a major 21st century hub for innovation, commerce, and the arts that has brought more jobs, housing units, and tax revenue to the city. While the current land use is arguably better than the parking lots that previously occupied much of the South Boston Waterfront, it's difficult not to wonder whether Boston could have done more to create a more affordable, diverse, accessible, and resilient neighborhood. The following analysis will look at key aspects of the broader Seaport redevelopment, and identify possible instances of failure or success.

Upon the conception of the Seaport District, the project strove to be a "vibrant urban neighborhood" which included a mix of land uses and open spaces.²² In the 1990s, Boston had just started to rebound from the decades of urban flight that had plagued the city, and the Seaport offered an opportunity to cultivate a walkable, accessible, and attractive urban destination. The current composition of the district is certainly an achievement compared to the asphalt wasteland that had occupied the space, but it's important to hold the development to its own urbanist standards.

In terms of walkability, the higher density of development lends itself to pedestrian access. On the other hand, the large sidewalks that accommodate masses of tourists accompany wide roads that encourage automobile usage. Despite being so close to downtown, over 40% of residents use a car as their primary form of transit, while in other neighborhoods the mode share is closer to 15% or 20%.²³ High automobile usage is understandable in more suburban neighborhoods that developed alongside the highway system. For an area like Seaport, which was constructed largely in the twenty-first century, and is within walking distance of the financial district, such a high car mode share seems antithetical to Seaport's pedestrian friendly mission.



A rendering from Boston's 1999 Seaport Public Realm plan²⁴

For such a dense new development, in a central location that offers thousands of new jobs and residential units, one might wonder why automobile usage is so high. It is partly due to the lackluster public transit connections with the Seaport—which will be discussed in depth further on—but it also is a product of who the district was made for. The Seaport District boasts an array of residential options, but for the most part they are upscale smaller one or two bedroom units and studio apartments housed within buildings that take up almost an entire block. Proponents see these buildings as a way to increase density, while critics claim their scale is inhuman. What is less debatable however, is that these buildings were constructed with primarily young professionals and new couples in mind. A neighborhood with no libraries, public schools, or family oriented housing options, seems a far cry from Boston’s famed residential neighborhoods of Charlestown, Allston and Back Bay. In a recent study, the Seaport District was found to have a much younger population, with nearly twice as many individuals between ages 25 and 40, compared with the rest of Boston, and a significantly smaller proportion of families.²⁵ This dynamic leads to a high number of commuters, particularly established professionals with families, or those who can not afford to live in the pricey district. Neighborhoods with intergenerational diversity are often linked with heightened senses of community and improved mental and physical wellbeing for its residents. Designing a district that caters towards younger generations, without providing the resources for people to raise a family or grow old, will only promote high residential turnover and long term instability.

The general lack of urbanist principles in the design and execution of the Seaport District has also drawn considerable criticism. The large parcels of land and wide streets of the new development contrast the existing smaller scale warehouses and narrower—yet denser—street grid of the Fort Point Channel District. The primary reason for this development pattern is due to the history of land reclamation and legacy of large landholders developing sprawling



Rendering of Echelon Seaport, a condominium development²⁶

parcels of land. Given that companies like the BWCo filled, constructed, owned, and operated much of the land on the South Boston Waterfront, they possessed a high degree of control over the land use. As the BWCo handed their land down to other development authorities, subdivision of the land was not a natural process resulting from increased density but instead a tactical development choice. One that favored larger blocks and buildings, rather than a walkable layout that mirrored the historic street grid of the Fort Point District. Despite originally calling for walkable streets, Fan Pier remains disconnected from the rest of the district by Seaport Boulevard which is at times six lanes across and requires at least two crossings at most intersections. Fan Pier had the potential to be a pedestrian only space given its limited size and high density, but vehicles still have the undisputed right of way on most streets. Overall, the Seaport District does offer some pedestrian amenities in the form of wide sidewalks, and clearly marked crossings, but increased permeability through smaller block sizes and more human-scaled buildings, paired with a decreased car dependency could have yielded a safer and more walkable neighborhood.

One of the chief concerns relating to the current status of the Seaport District is its ability to withstand the impacts of climate change and increasingly common major storm events. Given that the district was largely constructed on tidal marshes using infill over one hundred years ago, the area is particularly prone to rising sea levels and storm surges. It's lamentable that any area is vulnerable to climate change, but the fact that Boston's newest, and most expensive neighborhood is uniquely unprepared to combat its uncertain environmental future seems like a tragic lack of foresight.

Developers maintain that they used the best available predictions at the time which notably included outdated Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) flood plain maps.²⁷ Only in 2016, when a more comprehensive environmental report was published were the threats of sea level rise truly understood. At this point, however, nearly forty large-scale development projects had already been approved in the Seaport District. Despite the apparent lack of environmental resources when most plans were being drawn up, some experts, like Paul Kirshen from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, have asserted that city officials could have done more to prepare the district against sea-level rise. Climate change had been a threat since the 1980s, and the global sea level had already been increasing. Kirshen's assessment of the Seaport District is that despite having a chance to take precautionary climate measures, the area instead "became a shining example of how to do [development] wrong."²⁸ The lack of environmental futureproofing in the district could be disastrous for all of South Boston, and represents a substantial risk for a development that required such immense investment.

In terms of public space, the Seaport District has been criticized for its lack—or inaccessibility—of public recreation and greenspace. The original 1999 plan for redeveloping the South Boston Waterfront called for a network of smaller parks and multi modal walking and biking trails in the spirit of Boston's Commonwealth

Avenue Mall or Emerald Neck park chain. Only a few isolated parks, however, came to fruition in an area of the city that so sorely needed greenspace given its industrial history. The tightly packed historic warehouses permitted little open space, but the expanse of parking lots offered a clean slate to develop a comprehensive system of greenspaces. Another important note is Boston's relative lack of greenspace compared to other large metropolitan areas. In an analysis of major cities, Boston had a smaller greenspace per person ratio than even cities like Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.²⁹ Though there are some park spaces, like Seaport Common or Harbor Square, they are often subject to the regulations instituted by the public-private partnerships that created them, such as oversight from private security companies. This is not to say that the provision of park and recreation space was an abject failure in the broader Seaport development, but given the apparent need, potential, and resources for something much more comprehensive, the current state of public space is underwhelming.

Apart from green space, the Seaport District is rich in other cultural amenities and entertainment opportunities, including Boston's Children's Museum, the Convention Center, and Institute for Contemporary Art. While the presence of educational and cultural institutions is an obvious benefit for any growing community, these same attractions have been cited as a source of traffic congestion and gentrification. Places like the convention center, or art institute cater mostly to tourists and both frequently host large events that draw international attention. For those who designed the Seaport, this type of economic activity is exactly what was intended: a tourist haven driven by buildings designed by world famous architects and anchored by prominent cultural institutions. Contrary to other popular tourist destinations in Boston—like the North End or Leather District—the Seaport District is home to significantly fewer small or local businesses, and instead is heavily populated by chain stores. While places like Starbucks, L.L. Bean, and Equinox fitness certainly have demand, there is an undeniable lack of local flavor in the

Seaport District. Robert Campbell, an architecture critic with the Boston Globe, summarizes the neighborhood's personality, proclaiming that it "has all the charm of an office park in a suburb of Dallas."³⁰ So while the Seaport District might have been a fantastic economic opportunity for investors seeking reliable chain retailers, the neighborhood does little to distinguish itself from a tourist trap, office park, or outdoor mall.

Former Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and his administration were strong advocates for the reinvention of the South Boston waterfront, and sought out aggressive financing opportunities in order to realize their vision. While the longtime mayor was able to secure the funds necessary to kickstart an ambitious redevelopment plan, some question the affordability, longevity, and

morality of their strategies. The city used tax breaks to promote growth in the Seaport District, offering generous packages to the likes of pharmaceutical corporations and banking behemoths like J.P. Morgan. The practice of using tax incentives to tempt businesses into relocating is a controversial practice given that it often uses taxpayer dollars and has few empirically proven benefits. Researchers found that tax breaks are often given to businesses that would have selected the same location regardless of incentives, and have little impact on a firm's profitability given that property taxes comprise such a small percent of expenditures. Additionally, the widespread use of tax incentives across major cities reduces the overall effectiveness, ultimately depleting the tax base without promoting economic development.



Former Boston Mayor Menino standing over a mockup of the Seaport Redevelopment Plan³¹

To illustrate the hazards that come with the implementation of tax incentive programs, one can look at General Electric's 2016 relocation to the Seaport. Despite having already attracted several other large firms to the district, the city unofficially provided over \$140 million to lure GE away from its Fairfield, Connecticut headquarters that it had occupied since 1974.³² While these benefits were spread over several decades, in 2016—the year of GE's move—the city of Boston was short some \$50 million in funding for public schools, adding injury to what was already a questionable use of taxpayer dollars. Even with Boston's generous incentives, six years later, the company had created only one fourth of the jobs they had promised, and announced plans to leave the Seaport District—albeit staying in Boston. The company was set to develop a new campus along Fort Point Channel that would incorporate the retrofitting of two historic warehouses. While it's possible for tax incentives to bring economic growth to an area, in many cases—from Conagra in Omaha to General Electric in Boston—these incentives are, at best, an economic policy with dubious benefits, and at worst, a gross misappropriation of funds.

The usage rate of property tax incentives continues to increase in the United States, despite inconclusive evidence that they are an effective tool for economic development. Implementing policies that support businesses and job creation is a laudable endeavor by city officials, but it's important to consider what uses of taxpayer money, apart from tax incentives, might be more effective in achieving these goals. Researchers with the Lincoln Institute propose redirecting investment to customized job training, and additional business support services that would both grow existing local businesses and attract new ones.³³ Alternatively, if cities continue to pursue tax incentives, lower property taxes for all businesses might result in a more equitable distribution of funds and would reduce costs associated with the administration of select programs. It is difficult to support the argument that wealthy international firms like General Electric or J.P. Morgan are more

deserving of tax benefits than smaller businesses that might have a stronger geographic or cultural connection with a given city. Boston was ultimately successful in courting companies for the Seaport District, but it's possible that they could have found the same result with other economic development strategies. Cutting back on tax incentives would have then allowed the city to redirect taxpayer dollars towards initiatives that directly benefit the community, such as schools, parks, or welfare programs.

Another economic development tool instrumented by the city of Boston in the Seaport District was tax increment financing (TIF). The establishment of TIF districts on the South Boston Waterfront allowed for the city to use diverted property tax revenues to attract private-sector businesses. The future expected property taxes that resulted from development in the Seaport would then be used to fund said improvements. In 2011, the city granted a 15 year TIF agreement for Vertex Pharmaceuticals and the Fallon Company, saving them an estimated \$12 million in real estate taxes.³⁴ Additional TIF agreements have been made for a computer technology company and J.P. Morgan.³⁵ The agreements were intended to incentivize the companies to move to the Seaport District, which would in turn create new jobs and additional tax revenues that would fund city services.

Tax increment financing might be a better alternative to blanket tax breaks with no regulatory framework, but the policy is still controversial. Proponents, like urban governance expert Richard Briffault notes that TIF allows for local governments "to articulate and shape a distinct urban development vision," while taking advantage of a more sustainable development model that does not require riskier financing strategies like tax increases or loans.³⁶ TIF does, however, divert revenues from other government sectors, and the process is often less transparent, as it is separate from a city's normal budgeting process, and thus subject to less public scrutiny.³⁷

The use of the rather complex financing strategy often yields different results based on the context. In the case of the Seaport District, it was used to attract already successful and established businesses to a new area, but could have been used to fund affordable housing projects. In areas that are largely industrial or commercial with a low night-time population, TIF districts can redirect tax revenue from businesses to build additional housing and create mixed-use neighborhoods.³⁸ This model was likely feasible in the Seaport District but officials sought to instead create a luxury and tech-centered district that largely prioritized the interests of companies and investors.

Economic development instruments like property tax breaks or tax increment financing not only have questionable results, but can also be the source of blatant corruption and mismanagement of funds. In the case of Boston, the development of the Seaport District has seen several bribery scandals come to light in recent years, relating to ongoing business ventures in the area. In 2021, a state representative was sentenced to fifteen months in federal prison for accepting almost \$30,000 in exchange for fast tracking legislation that would provide millions of additional dollars in tax credits for developers wishing to develop property in the Seaport District.³⁹ In 2020, a city hall aide admitted to accepting bribes for helping a developer extend their permit for a condominium development in the neighborhood. Both of these cases were headline worthy scandals, but they were not isolated cases. Complicated public-private partnerships create a perfect atmosphere for businesses to take advantage of city officials, and the complexity and longevity of these projects yields itself to the misappropriation of funds. The redevelopment of the Seaport District has, in fact, prompted a city wide investigation into Boston's current development procedures. While this investigation is commendable and could result in more equitable and transparent practices, it's unlikely that private corporations won't continue to have undue influence on urban development projects.



View from the Summer Street bridge while crossing into the Fort Point Channel Historic District⁴⁰

One factor that has led to such a high cost of living in the Seaport District is the relative homogeneity of its housing stock. Other high end neighborhoods of Boston, such as Back Bay, Charlestown or Beacon Hill are historic areas with buildings that date back centuries, meaning they have a mix of old and new housing. This diversity allows for there to be lower rents for some—typically older—buildings, while charging a premium for others.⁴¹ The aging warehouse spaces in Fort Point thus provide a viable option for diversifying the types of housing in the South Boston Waterfront. While several affordable housing projects exist in the neighborhood, the vast majority of these warehouses are occupied by businesses, lab space, or entertainment venues. While the renovation and repurposing of these historic structures is laudable, the choice to prioritize commercial conversions over residential conversions has had a negative impact on the affordability of the neighborhood and the city as a whole. If the Seaport District was truly to be mixed-use, there must be additional goals besides profit when developing real estate.

In a time where office vacancy rates are still much higher than the pre-COVID-19 levels, converting these offices to new residential spaces could have a significant impact on a housing strapped city. Especially as redevelopments fall through—like General Electric’s short lived new headquarters—it might be time to reconsider the land use priorities for existing warehouses and empty lots. There have been several instances of historic offices or warehouses in Boston that have been converted to commercial use and then ultimately converted to residential space. There is a model for this transition, and adopting a more fluid perspective towards land use in downtown areas will be increasingly important for the resiliency of American cities. There are indeed some engineering challenges to these types of conversions, but at the very least, this indicates that new construction should take into account a range of uses that might occur in a building’s lifetime. Added flexibility is rarely a detriment to the function of the built environment, and adaptive reuse can not only be seen as a renovation but an improvement to a building’s adaptive capabilities.



*View of the Boston Children’s Museum, with the former warehouse in the background and modern addition in the foreground.*⁴²

The older Fort Point landmark district was intended to complement the new-build construction in Seaport Square. Per the theories of urbanists Jane Jacobs or Dolores Hayden, a mix of old and new, and a range of building materials and heights help promote a diverse and vibrant streetscape.⁴³ A Successful example of this relationship is the Boston Children’s Museum, which was a former warehouse that was renovated into a modern museum space. Additional projects that married the historic building stock from the nineteenth century with newbuild development could have had significant effects on the contiguity of Fort Point Channel and the new construction.

One of the primary criticisms associated with the Seaport District is the neighborhood’s extremely high cost of living. In a city that was already known for being expensive, the plan to develop largely luxury housing and gleaming high rises for technology and pharmaceutical companies seemed out of line with the needs of the community. As of 2017, median rent on the South Boston Waterfront was nearly twice that of the whole city, coming in at over \$2,600 compared with Boston’s \$1,320.⁴⁴

Not only are the housing prices in the Seaport District prohibitively expensive for most Bostonians, but many of these new luxury units barely serve as housing at all, with a study by the Institute for Policy Studies referring to them as “wealth storage lockers.”⁴⁵ The report summarizes how wealthy individuals will purchase expensive units in Boston—particularly the Seaport—to safely and anonymously invest their money. Often these houses and condos are the second or third place of residence for the homeowner, and many of them stay relatively empty despite having sold most of their available units. An excess of luxury development is a disservice to Boston residents, as it takes away opportunities to create valuable affordable housing, and inflate housing costs while providing few true benefits to the local economy. While some affordable housing exists in the neighborhood, it makes up a minute percentage of units in most buildings. Lack of diverse housing options makes it incredibly difficult for new

homeowners to enter the housing market, and although heavily subsidized, the small percentage of affordable housing does little to address Boston's acute affordable housing crisis.

The Seaport District is not only one of the most expensive neighborhoods in Boston, but also the least diverse. Rents make housing available to only those with higher incomes and a higher level of educational attainment. Almost 80% of South Boston Waterfront residents have at least a bachelor's degree, while that number is only 45% for the entirety of the city.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, median income in the Seaport is almost twice that of Boston as well. Much like how the district is economically homogeneous, it is racially homogeneous, coming in as the "whitest" neighborhood in Boston. The lack of affordable housing and large proportion of wealthy out-of-state investors has prevented the diversification of the neighborhood, and few financial opportunities exist for those looking to move into the area. In 2015, not one home mortgage loan was issued for African-American and Latino families, and according to study by the Boston Globe, in the decade preceding 2017, only three residential mortgages of 660 granted in the Seaport were to black buyers.⁴⁷ Some policies have been implemented since these reports, including one from a developer who is requiring that applications include new provisions for diversity and equity, but immense progress still needs to be made.⁴⁸ While Boston is a city that has historically struggled with systemic residential segregation, the fact that its newest twenty-first century neighborhood is also its most segregated neighborhood fails to assuage issues of lasting inequality.

Additional gentrifying effects have permeated throughout the entirety of South Boston as a result of the Seaport development. Despite the Seaport being constructed on what were mostly vacant parking lots, the sudden increase in housing costs and influx of additional amenities has led to higher rents and home prices in neighboring areas. A 2018 study out of the Massachusetts Institute

of Technology found that the proximity of real estate to the Seaport District correlated with the rate in which its value increased. The value of residential real estate that is closest to the Seaport District increased the most, while real estate values in all of South Boston grew at a faster rate than the entire city.⁴⁹ These results indicate that the Seaport District might not only be unaffordable itself, but could have priced out surrounding residents as well. It is evident that much of the investment in the South Boston Waterfront was motivated by profit. Developers favored luxury housing, chain stores, big-name architects, and prioritized services for the wealthy elite, rather than focusing on the needs of the existing community.

In sum, the Seaport Development has been rightly criticized in its planning and implementation, despite providing vital infill in one of Boston's most depressed urban areas. Based on the developments own goals and aspiration, established in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the project failed to create a truly walkable and urbanist cityscape, but did provide additional amenities and housing on land where there previously was nothing. When given a blank slate to develop a new sustainable, accessible, and equitable urban district, what resulted was an expensive, racially homogeneous and car-centric neighborhood. While the impacts could have been worse, the resources and insight at the time of development should have prevented these outcomes in favor of more affordable housing, better transit and pedestrian accessibility and public amenities. It's challenging to conclude whether mismanagement of the project or a simple prioritization of commercial success caused a divergence from the project's initial mission. Either way, the final vision for the Seaport District leaves much to be desired, and future projects should take careful consideration of the project to create a better and more sustainable framework for redeveloping industrial or commercial land.

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