

Case Studies - Boston

Boston's Waterfront Story

By Richard Marshall

Boston's waterfront has a long history and what most people do not realize is that the Boston waterfront includes a wide geography that has been dramatically altered over a long period of time. Indeed the footprint of Boston today bears little resemblance to the original site of settlement with significant reclamation changing the shoreline of the city. The land added through reclamation includes the wharf districts of the historic port, choice residential neighbourhoods, the downtown waterfront, the modern seaport, Logan International Airport, and several of Boston's signature institutional and civic facilities.

Boston was a major American trading port well into the 19th century, first between the colonies and Europe, and later for trade with the Pacific Northwest and China. Competition, obsolete infrastructure and the development of alternatives to sea transport eroded the place of the Boston's working waterfront after World War I. As recently as World War II, Boston was one of North America's great port cities. Long-term factors beyond the control of the maritime community eroded that position. By 1980, Boston Harbour was in a sad state - desperately polluted and the target of parallel federal and state environmental lawsuits. In 1984, the Governor and Legislature created the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) and gave it the massive job of reinventing the region's wastewater conveyance, treatment, and discharge systems. For many Bostonians, in fact, the "rediscovery of the harbour" over the last 20 years means the MWRA cleanup. However, two other stories have been unfolding as well—the modernization of Boston's seaport, and the debate about how best to recycle those portions of the urban waterfront left fallow by earlier changes in maritime business and technology.

The Downtown / North End, Boston's original waterfront, was isolated from the rest of the city by construction of the elevated Central Artery in the 1960s. A primary purpose of Boston's massive "Big Dig" project was to place this expressway underground, reconnecting the waterfront to the downtown financial district and the historic North End neighbourhood. Some of the wharves in this area retain their historic building stock, while others were cleared and redeveloped with a mix of uses, including the New England Aquarium and an adjacent ferry and harbour cruise terminal.

East Boston, the home of Logan International Airport, has a long maritime history, including the yards where Donald McKay built America's greatest clipper ships. Today, obsolete wharves and piers, some of which have deteriorated to mere pile fields, dominate three sides of East Boston. The most attractive and intact segment of the East Boston waterfront is the one that faces across the Inner Harbour to downtown. Part of the site has become one of Boston's most spectacular waterfront parks and housing.

The Charlestown Navy Yard has operated continuously since the late 1700s, and is still home to the USS Constitution, the world's oldest commissioned warship and flagship of the Atlantic Fleet. In 1974, the Navy closed the yard. The Boston Redevelopment Authority purchased it shortly thereafter and set about creating a redevelopment plan, reinventing the infrastructure, and recruiting developers. A blend of historic preservation and new construction, the reuse of the Navy Yard is one of the most extensive mixed-use urban renewal projects ever undertaken in the US.

The South Boston Waterfront is a 1000-acre swath of filled tidelands that borders the downtown financial district, the Inner Harbour, and the South Boston neighbourhood. The eastern half of the South Boston Waterfront is and must remain the heart of Boston's long-term seaport economy. This area is home to Boston's principal container, mixed cargo support, ocean cruise, fish processing, and dry-dock facilities and has a critical mass of industrial infrastructure in place. The western half, which is within walking distance of the financial district and bustling South Station, is a mix of historic loft buildings along Fort Point Channel, Boston's new convention centre (this \$695 million facility, with 600,000 square feet of contiguous exhibit space, is built on a 60-acre site in the westerly, mixed-use half of the larger waterfront district), Boston's World Trade Centre (the redeveloped Commonwealth Pier), the Boston Fish Pier, the Seaport Hotel and the first of several planned office buildings. The Silver Line, an underground, high-capacity bus way, links the entire district to the downtown transit network and the airport.

In Boston, achieving a world-class waterfront means negotiating the institutional relationships between several major players. This is critical to Boston's efforts. Boston's success comes from constant dialogue between Massport and the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

Other Links:

[Boston Redevelopment Authority](#)

[Boston Harbour Association](#)

[Massachusetts Turnpike Authority — the Big Dig](#)