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From the Outside Looking In: An Evaluation of Harbor Point

Harbor Point has won many awards, including the 1993 Rudy Bruner Award for Excellence in the Urban Environment. The Bruner Award is noteworthy because of the intensiveness of its application and selection process, which includes a two-to-three day site visit by an independent evaluation team. The following comments are excerpted from the report that Jay Farbstein and Richard E. Wener, the evaluation team, prepared on Harbor Point.

Historical Context

In many ways Columbia Point was an archetypical housing project gone sour. It developed notoriety as a very dangerous place to live or visit (“my children were house children, I wouldn’t let them go outside,” said a resident). It is reported that even ambulances and fire trucks would not enter the area without a police escort, and that it was impossible to get taxicabs to come there. One resident claimed that “the only way to get the police to come was to call and say that a white man was beaten up.” Gradually people moved out and units were left vacant. By 1979, only 350 units were still occupied.

Residents were also aware of what the broader Boston community thought of them — “we were a big disease.” For the planning community of Boston it was an eyesore and repre-

sented what was wrong with cities and public housing. Newspapers regularly cited it as the source of yet another murder or drug bust. The boarded up, decaying buildings were easily seen from busy highways.

Harbor Point Today

In many respects Harbor Point is a very successful project. The neighborhood which was (arguably) Boston’s most dangerous has become (also arguably) its safest. It has been transformed from a dilapidated, 20 percent occupied, homogeneously poor and minority housing project to one that is more than 90 percent occupied and economically and racially heterogeneous. Where Columbia Point was a drag on the development of the peninsula, Harbor Point may be a spur to its future growth.

Among residents, especially those original Columbia Point tenants, there is a sense of satisfaction and competence. Some positive effect is already apparent at the schools. The local middle school had been a problem; now it ranks at the top of Boston middle schools in reading. Drug problems among tenants have also decreased. Several tenants living in subsidized apartments are now paying full rents because their incomes have increased substantially.

Residents take obvious pride in their environment and its upkeep. Volunteer patrols and casual pedestrians keep watch for problems. A sign of the unusual level of community care is the survival of slender young trees, without broken limbs in spite of the presence of many children and teens.

Several tenants indicated that Harbor Point was “not for everyone.” It is not always tranquil, with many children playing outdoors. It is most successful for people seeking and willing to invest in a community spirit — and a number of middle-class white professionals told us that they live there for that very reason.’

Harbor Point has also developed and implemented a model social service program to support the goals of the housing. Youth programs, health care, day care, and other programs all are operating and are evaluated regularly against needs which were identified in the original programming process.

Fine Tuning Operations

Like any project, Harbor Point has had to address a number of issues in management and operations:

- Tenants and management are addressing the issues of crime at the development. While everyone agrees that this is a safe community, property

Harbor Point is more than 90 percent occupied and is economically and racially mixed. Photo © Peter Vanderwarker.



crimes and drug use and sales still occur (some residents say drug use is on the rise). The tenants walkers are one response to the problem.

- A common point of conflict between subsidized tenants (mostly families) and market-rate tenants (mostly singles) is the noise levels, mostly from groups of children outside in the summer. One response has been to promote a voluntary guideline of times for children to be inside.

- Tenants on the task force say that education and youth services are their most important priority. They are, for example, setting up a scholarship fund for residents.

- Harbor Point has representatives on the Columbia Point Neighborhood Coalition, which is working on plans for the redevelopment of the considerable open space on the peninsula. The success of Harbor Point has spurred this process and, in a sense, made it possible.

Points of Controversy

Costs: Harbor point is, in total, an expensive project. An assessment of the project's worth has to consider the social value placed on the extra costs for social services and relocation, but more importantly the value of restoring a stigmatized district to usable con-

dition, and the value of pursuing the mixed income model.

Cost was approximately \$140,000/unit, when all hard and soft costs are included. Much of the extra money went to pay for difficult site conditions related to the landfill, increased soft costs related to the need to negotiate with and satisfy many regulatory agencies, relocation, and social service costs, and higher than normal management costs (largely private security).

The costs are comparable to other low-income housing of the period. Several policy makers agree with Joan Goody when she noted that "quality costs" — that there are no short cuts to building good housing.

Management: Rather than apologizing for strict enforcement of the rules, the Task Force is especially proud of it. They feel that lax attention to attention to enforcement was an important factor in the demise of Columbia Point. They suggest that the rules are fair (and made with tenant input) and need to be enforced to maintain a good living enforcement.

The Mixed-Income Model: The turnover rate for the market units is 45 percent to 50 percent. Staff say this is normal in Boston for this demographic group. Exit surveys do show that noise is the most commonly cited problem, but that accounts for only 15 percent

of all departures. Most leave because they are getting married, leaving town, buying a house, or having a baby. The leasing office notes that 40 percent of all new market rate tenants have been referred by other tenants, up from 15 percent several years ago.

The task force members and developers argue strongly that real integration is taking place, that tenants of all kinds work together on management, exercise at the health club, and mix socially. They argue that the level of contact must be judged within the context of other communities where people frequently don't know any of their neighbors.

In our walk around the grounds, we found some market-rate residents who complained about loud kids using foul language late at night, especially during the summer. Some admitted being uncomfortable walking past groups of black teenagers at night. None, however, reported incidents beyond noise. Several people we spoke to were in the process of leaving Harbor Point, but all were doing so because of life changes and not because of complaints. On balance, the residents we met did not see Harbor Point as a social nirvana, but they did find it to be a pleasant community.

Replanning a Peninsula

Columbia Point is less than 10 minutes from downtown Boston by subway or car, but it more closely resembles the suburban office parks typically found miles from the city center. In the eyes of a Boston Society of Architects study team, it is ready for a makeover as dramatic as that which transformed the housing project there — but the problems and paths to change are remarkably different.

The peninsula is home to numerous large businesses and institutions (the Boston Globe, J.F.K. Library and University of Massachusetts, for example) that were lured there by large tracts of inexpensive land. Today, their individually-planned, campus-style facilities stand as isolated enclaves strung like pods along two arterial roads. There is no local street system connecting the facilities; there are few paths for pedestrians or places to which one might walk. Most usable open spaces are the private domains of one institution or another, and there are few shops or places to eat.

There is ample room for growth on Columbia Point — sites that are either underdeveloped (especially parking lots) or not yet built upon — providing an opportunity for knitting the peninsula's disparate components together and for connecting it better to the rest of the city. The BSA study team suggested this growth would best serve Columbia Point by looking outward, not inward, and by following several basic principles: responding to

the peninsula's unique identity, strengthening its internal visual structure, and improving connections to the rest of Boston.

The team's vision includes a range of improvements: new public infrastructure (such as a transit station and local streets); incremental private investment in housing, commercial, and institutional projects; and new arrangements among existing institutions for combining or sharing facilities and services, such as parking and day care.

To improve Columbia Point's identity, the team suggests, new projects should take advantage of its unique geographic location: Activities that make use of the water's edge should be encouraged, and views to the water and downtown should be opened and/or maintained wherever possible, particularly from main streets.

Better connections to the rest of Boston could be made improving regional infrastructure. Private development along the shoreline should continue Boston's public Harborwalk. A proposed circumferential rapid transit route, which would terminate at an existing station at the northwest corner of Columbia Point, could be extended into the peninsula. Local bus lines, most of which terminate at the station, also should continue into the peninsula. Ferry service could provide another new connection to downtown.

Columbia Point's internal structure could be strengthened by a new public street network, which would provide

better access within the peninsula and serve as a visual resource. The network might take its cues from the existing Harbor Point street system or the university campus, and the connections between these new streets and the major arterials should be well marked so it is evident they are public ways, not access roads for individual properties.

Finally, the study team concluded, Columbia Point should have a common meeting ground, a public space that is not the preserve of any one institution. Activities that serve all the peninsula institutions, such as a conference center, hotel, marina, and transit center could be located around this "town square."

This public investment in new streets, transit, and open spaces would serve as an armature for a range of smaller scale, infill projects:

Housing. More housing would create a critical mass for community and a market for retail activity, generate around-the-clock activity, and provide places for Columbia Point workers to live. The low traffic generated by housing is less likely to conflict with existing uses than new commercial and institutional development would.

Workplaces. These would provide more employment opportunities for people who live nearby. They should be located near the subway to take advantage of public transit and avoid excessive parking requirements.

Recreational Facilities. These should serve primarily those who live and work on Columbia Point and in neighboring communities. Such facilities could include a linear, waterfront park for walking, jogging, and picnicking; active recreation using existing sports facilities and fields; and museums, exhibits, performances, and other events sponsored by or located in existing institutions.

Commercial. Shops should serve the residential, academic and working populations. New back-office or research activities that benefit from the proximity of the nearby rapid transit stop for employee transportation and do not need special views should be encouraged.

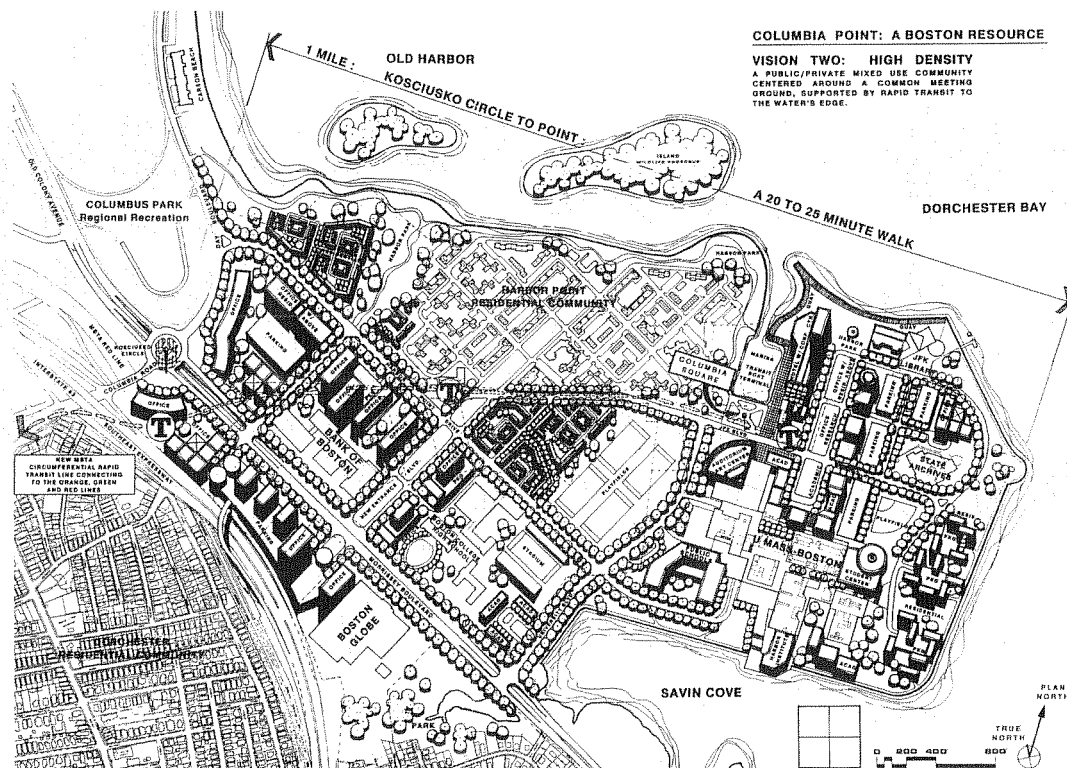
The BSA team summarized its proposals in the form of two visions — one for a “mature open space community” and one for a more intensely developed “mixed-use urban community” — but the messy details about how things might get done remain to be addressed. The BSA team hopes its visions can catalyze leadership, much

of which must come from the constituents of Columbia Point. They will have to forge better connections among themselves to support the development of common activities (like eating places, shops, day care), to facilitate the sharing of resources (like parking, shuttle busses, recreation facilities, meeting spaces), and to demand public investment in streets, sidewalks, and transit. So far, they have created a peninsula-wide planning task force, and they successfully blocked plans for a new sewage treatment plant.

The process of planning and building the Harbor Point residential community served as a catalyst for contem-

plating the future of the entire peninsula. The maturation and transformation of Columbia Point will clearly take many years, even longer than the emergence of Harbor Point did. But just as Harbor Point serves as a model for transforming the most troubled of public housing projects, Columbia Point could serve one day as a model for remaking socially isolating, environmentally wasteful “edge city” commercial sprawl.

— Todd W. Bressi



The BSA's vision for a mixed-use urban community on Columbia Point. Courtesy Joan E. Goody.