

Where the City Meets the Water

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City-making is an art form. Likewise, it is the result of the interplay between design and politics. Look at the great waterfront cities of the world. They reflect the balance of civic, cultural, and economic forces that has led to great design. Cities such as Paris, Barcelona, San Francisco—or small towns like Edgartown, Massachusetts or Stonington, Connecticut—are where public policy and a design culture have joined in a successful collaboration.

However, in American cities of the late 20th century, cities like Los Angeles, Phoenix, Atlanta, or the newer so-called “edge cities,” such as Tyson’s Corner, near Washington, DC, city-making has lost its balance. In a time of a recurring interest in an

very water that fostered the founding of Boston in the first place.

Where the city meets the water immediately conjures romantic, indeed poetic, images—the opening lines of *Moby-Dick*, the Mississippi riverfronts of Mark Twain, or the fishing shacks in the contemporary poetry of Erica Funkhauser. For architects, where the city meets the water raises boundless formal opportunities and creates fundamental responsibilities. It is about that ultimate boundary between man and nature, that fixed line where human beings must come to a stop.

Where the city meets the water... Is it where the ordered, patterned, rectilinear city meets



Edgartown



Boston - Back Bay



Boston - Commonwealth Avenue

urban quality-of-life, many older cities with strong waterfronts find themselves with a major advantage over the randomly expanding cities and suburbs of the 20th century. And, almost inevitably, those older cities have the potential of a strong waterfront, for these cities were founded in the first place based on their waterfront locations—on a harbor, a river, or a canal.

Boston is a powerful example of a waterfront city. From its unplanned Beacon Hill to its highly planned Back Bay, from its natural harbor edge to its manmade beaches—evidence of a commitment to city-making abounds. More recently, with the encouragement of activist citizens, architects, and public officials, the waterfront has emerged as Boston's great 21st century planning and architectural opportunity. There is an extraordinary chance to bring city making back to the edge of the water—to that

the natural, organic, meandering water's edge? Or is it where the enigmatic, irrational, and unpredictable city meets the continuous, linear, fixed edge of the water? Obviously, it is both; these ambiguities are what excite me as an architect.

From the opening paragraphs of *Moby-Dick*:

“There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs...Right and left, the streets take you waterward...What do you see? – Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries...Here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the

land...Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues – north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite.”

If cities are to recapture their waterfronts, those waterfronts must reflect the urbanity of cities. It's folly to separate cities from water, whether by a wall of high buildings, by fences and private enclaves or by open spaces that are windswept and unsafe. To connect the city to its waterfront we must do four things: 1) Celebrate the continuous and public edge of the water; create continuous paths, or nearly continuous paths, along the water. 2) Make certain that areas near the water are vibrant and urbane. These qualities are best achieved when an important street,

on a tree-lined street of three-deckers in Dorchester, or on a lane of clapboard houses in a small town on the Cape. It is particularly true in the commercial center of any town or city. The continuous street edge becomes a fundamental first tenet of city-building, regardless of historic period. It can be a group of buildings from different centuries in Philadelphia or a row of 20th-century apartment houses in Miami Beach.

The second rule of thumb about the making of cities would be the observation that the most successful urban streets are two-sided. Whether this is a major street in New York City or a small street in an Italian hill town, retail activity is found almost always on two-sided streets. There is something about the



Miami



Boston - Quincy Market



Boston - Newbury Street

perhaps a Main Street, is near the harbor's edge. 3) Establish connector streets and views connecting the water with the important streets where people spend most of their time. 4) Make certain that the building patterns of the city are permitted to extend to the water's edge, (remembering that a building parallel to the water blocks views and a building perpendicular to the water allows broader views from behind it).

When we are talking about waterfronts as being integral parts of the city, we need to address that element that is most integral to the city: the nature of the urban street, its continuous edges and its two-sided character. Even with buildings of differing roof height, successful streets tend to have a continuous edge whereby all the buildings line up on the street and become part of a greater whole. This is true on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston's Back Bay,

human spirit and human experience that likes this character, this sense that you can see or feel the presence of the range of choices when you walk down a two-sided retail street. Of the major commercial streets in *any* culture, 99.9 percent of them are two-sided. Waterfront settings need these kinds of spaces for them to be integrated into the life of the city. Main Street in most American cities fits this mode. Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, the street with the highest cost per square foot of retail space in the Los Angeles basin, is a two-sided street. Newbury Street is an excellent Boston example. A two-sided street connects the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean in Key West, Florida. Ben Thompson brilliantly used this two-sidedness in several parts for Boston's Quincy Market. Even a county road, in New England or Provence, feels special when lined by trees on two sides.

Take a look at the main streets of two vibrant Massachusetts seacoast towns, Edgartown or Nantucket – they are perpendicular to the waterfront. The entire town congregates on the main street and walks down to the wharf on the harbor, a very public place that is central to the spirit of the town. This street is about city-building. The other seacoast model has the main street parallel to the water. In Woods Hole and Provincetown, Massachusetts, or in Stonington, Connecticut, the main street looks between buildings to see the harbor. This street is about a town that is a year-round place, one that is not windswept and inhumane in the winter. For instance, Provincetown has long, linear buildings lined up along

waterfronts should respond to the kinds of waterfronts they are. Harbors, by definition, are well protected; rarely are they subject to flooding. The only movement in a harbor is the tide going up and down, so buildings can come close to the water's edge; human beings can safely get right up to the water's edge.

Buildings must respond to the harbor, much as cities do. In Boston, Rowes Wharf, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill with the strong help of the Boston Redevelopment Authority's design guidelines, touches the edge of the water. Its human scale is wonderful. Public access is provided along the edge. Importantly, the pedestrian walkway that runs behind the Rowes Wharf finger piers provides an active



Stockbridge



Boston



Charlestown

the Main Street and connecting to the water. At intervals along that Main Street, cross streets intersect and extend with public town landings to the water's edge. Everybody is constantly aware of the water, and everybody has access to the water. In addition, walking down Main Street, one constantly catches glimpses of the water between the buildings. You are protected from the wind; you experience the water and have access to its edge. These are how the qualities of street are fundamental to city-building at the water's edge.

The key to forging a precise relationship between the city and the water is to understand the nature of the water. Boston, for instance, is special because of its harbor, which has qualities very different from those of a river edge, an ocean edge, or a canal edge. The urban treatment of

urban path parallel to the harbor, ensuring another active connection to the urbanity of the city.

Our firm designed affordable housing at the water's edge in the Charlestown Navy Yard. There we responded specifically to the Navy Yard's linear buildings and First Avenue, its main street. We felt that it was important to integrate our building into the fabric of the Navy Yard. The housing is about significant gable-ended buildings, long linear buildings, and special buildings on the water's edge. Here, the city is about strong, rectilinear, very predictable forms. Our building fits into that pattern of the city, while celebrating its intersection with the meandering edge of the harbor.

Rivers are constantly changing and constantly moving; they build new channels and create new sandbars. They are also prone to flooding, particularly on this continent; historically, river cities



have carefully organized themselves to respond to the unpredictable and sometimes dangerous edge of the river.

Unlike most American cities, which are located on one side of a river (e.g. St. Louis or Louisville), Rochester, New York, straddles its river, the Genesee. In our urban design work there, we were inspired by European cities that similarly straddle their rivers, cities like Paris or Florence. Rochester's river is glorious; it includes industrial flood control elements as well as an 80-foot waterfall in the middle of the city. Our study led to zoning recommendations for the first block and a half back from the water on each shore. These recommendations, integrated into the city's

into a thriving beachfront city.

Compare these with the more common American model, for example, Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. Very popular in July and August, it is cold, windswept, and relatively deserted during the rest of the year. If one wants to create a real city along the ocean's edge, one must design them to thrive year round. The open single-sided boardwalk is not enough.

Our firm has worked with the town of Hull, Massachusetts, another resort "boardwalk" town. Hull has a strong city grid that continues to the water's edge. In the late 19th century, beautiful amusement parks and grand waterfront hotels were built along what



Rochester



Hull



Amsterdam

zoning code, emphasized not only the creation of a continuous edge along the river, but also the strengthening of the connection between the river and the important streets a block away.

Oceanfront cities are more rare. These cities have a different economic *raison d'être*. Not usually founded on historic models of commerce, their location is typically based on recreation and leisure. Given the predictability of tidal movements, like harbors, they are safe places for urban settlement.

Probably the world's greatest oceanfront city is Rio de Janeiro, where the major parts of the city literally open up directly to the beach; imagine if Lexington Avenue in New York City opened to the beach. That is the level of urbanity of Copacabana or Ipanema beaches, for example. Miami Beach is analogous: a beachfront tourist town evolving

Thoreau called one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. Today parking lots and sad penny arcades mark that same area – not sufficient even for the center of a small town. We developed a plan for Hull by recommending the creation of a redesigned town center, one based on a two-sided main street. It was predicated on the importance of maintaining the view to the beach from the main street. Buildings could be carefully designed along the street edge to permit the views of the water that everyone in Hull wanted to preserve, yet these buildings could provide the requisite sense of enclosure to the main street to establish a true urbanity.

A fourth city type is the canal city. Amsterdam is the great example. Venice is obviously another. These cities are totally man-made, well protected, and carefully controlled. Yet they are very

beautiful. Amsterdam is organized with a series of radial streets emanating from the city center. Invariably these are two-sided commercial streets. Perpendicular to those are one-sided residential and warehouse streets along the circumferential canals. With Brown and Rowe, landscape architects, our firm designed Boarding House Park for the National Park Service in Lowell, Massachusetts. Lowell is a city dominated by wonderful man-made canals; its buildings often touch the water's edge. Yet, much of the city is now dominated by parking lots.

In our plan for the Boarding House Park, we created a linear pavilion building to strengthen the canal edge of the Park. This pavilion was

powerful quality-of-life comparative advantage for a city vis a vis its suburbs.

Cities are under stress in this country. Take the examples of great 19th-century cities like St. Louis and Cleveland, which were founded on major rivers for transportation or other economic advantages. They have the special qualities of open space, beauty, and ambiance because of their setting; yet these qualities are lost today. Drab suburbs are taking economic power away from downtown. Go to St. Louis and look carefully; it barely touches its waterfront. That could be changed.

Today, Boston has a powerful opportunity; the amount of activity that could take place



Venice



Venice



Boston

transparent enough to generate views of the canals and the mill buildings beyond, yet opaque enough to form a fourth embracing edge to the Park. Established as a music stage, the pavilion was designed to be simultaneously a theater, a marketplace, a trolley stop, and a site for ethnic dance performance. It has become the site of a famous folk festival. In addition, we designed the pavilion as a civic space, celebrating the open space on the canal. Within a year of completion, its civic nature was so obvious that Paul Tsongas, native son of Lowell, chose it as the site to announce his candidacy for President in 1992.

Where the city meets the water, for the public and for public officials, is a place of immense controversy. The water's edge clearly reflects America's current preoccupation with history, with the environment, and with open space. It also reflects a

on its waterfront in the next 50 years is extraordinary and the choice is becoming simple: Does Boston build a real city along the water's edge or does it build undifferentiated open space, a glorified suburb, at its harbor's edge. One choice references a history and urbanity that is part of city-building; the other once again turns its back on those qualities that are so much a part of the city. This is a choice that many cities face today. A city is a fundamentally democratic place, a mix of rich and poor, young and old, black and white, a place that derives its vibrancy from interaction and diversity. Bring these qualities of the city to the waterfront, to the port city, the place where that exchange and interchange has always taken place. The opportunities are boundless.