

11.301/J4.252J
URBAN DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

Assignment 1, Fall 2005

Urban Change

Cities evolve incrementally as the result of many individual public and private actions. These actions are shaped by macro forces, and each piece of the environment when built becomes an important determinant of the next. Over time, some forces, such as climate, come to exert a pervasive and continuing influence on the city's form. Other forces, such as fires or public "slum clearance programs" are short lived but result in drastic changes at specific locations. Some forces, like transportation, are essential to urban life. Others, such as the drive to express a civic vision in monuments and public spaces, are more capricious but nonetheless can have powerful consequences.

This assignment addresses the underlying urban dynamics that are causing a city to change. It also seeks to develop or sharpen your skills of observation, encouraging you to make inferences from the evidence of the physical environment and to test these through interviews and research.

Directions

- 1. Choose a place within the Boston Metropolitan Area which has undergone significant physical change through its history, particularly over the past 10-20 years.** The area should be larger than a single building or site, and should involve multiple ownership (an institution is not appropriate). A block of the inner city would be appropriate, or a section of the waterfront, or a two to five acre suburban site. The changes it has undergone might be positive or negative, but must be observable. And choose an area that interests you a great deal, since the job of digging up information on it will undoubtedly prove time consuming and difficult.
- 2. Document the evolution of your area through time.** You may wish to develop a set of "snapshots" of the area at key points in time during which significant changes occurred -- not necessarily intervals of equal duration. Documentation should include both illustrations (maps, sketches, photos, or other media) of the physical environment showing patterns of development, architectural typologies, etc., as well as descriptions and data about the functions of the area and its role in the city.
- 3. Discuss the key forces which resulted in physical and functional change.** These forces may include, for example, changes in the economic function of the place, social structure, introduction of new public infrastructure, changes in the rules of development, or application of a particular vision of the city in your area of study. Try to describe the motivation behind these forces and the particular effects in your area.

4. **Predict the future of your area.** Evaluate the forces for change which are now active. Consider if these are a consequence of the historical chain of events which have effected this place in the city, or whether a whole new set of forces and interactions are now in play. Interviews of residents, business owners, and others with a stake in the area would be a good way of supplementing written data. Observations of building conditions, recent construction or other signs of change would also be helpful. Based upon your analysis, try to predict what changes will be likely to occur at this location over the next 10-20 years.

Product

Document your findings in a brief paper, **no more than 15-20 pages in length**, including any data and illustrations you may wish to include. Be sure to include a one-page summary of your conclusions. The assignment should be done individually.

To help you get started, we have assembled a preliminary bibliography that identifies sources on the development of Boston organized by various forces which have affected the city over time. You should also obtain a copy of Whitehill's *Topographical History of Boston* as a general reference for the assignment. Nancy Seasholes's *Gaining Ground* is another good source. Robert Campbell's *Cityscapes of Boston: An American City Through Time*, Lois Craig's *Images of Boston*, may be helpful in identifying potential areas for study.

Please be prepared to identify the place that you are studying on **Session 6**. The assignment is due in class on **Session 15**. We will discuss the exercise in sections in the following class when you may be asked to make a brief presentation of your findings.

Notes: *You may choose a place in another city, however you must have ready access to sufficient information. If you would like to work another city, please see the instructors.*