



The Albany Street Block: an industrial corner of the South End

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25 October 2005



Executive Summary

The Albany Street block, located in Boston's South End between Harrison Ave, and Albany, Randolph and Union Park Streets, began as did many pieces of land in the Boston area – under water. The forces that would bring it into existence and continue to shape it throughout history are varied and complex, and yet, patterns emerge. The changing tides of industry and transportation were responsible for the block's most pronounced alterations, especially during its most active years as a manufacturing area served by wharf and rail. However, both the first and last chapters of this story show that the forces of residential real estate development also played a substantial role in the Albany Street block's identity and offer telling clues regarding its future.

The block's story begins with **Landmaking (1800-1870)**, where the City acted as developer of attractive residential neighborhoods for a certain social class. Also present were transportation forces that pushed for the development of land for the growing railroads.

Next, the block is catapulted into an **Industrial Heyday (1870-1920)**, with the forces of industry, as well as transportation by wharf and rail, pegging the block as a site for some of the region's most prosperous factories.

After the turn of the century, a period of **Industrial Decline (1920-1950)** saw shifts in economic forces and subsequent changes in transportation modes that alter activity on the block and shape its connection to trade networks.

The **Effects of the Auto Age (1950-1970)** again saw transportation forces as key in the next phase of the block's evolution.

As the Albany Street block's surrounding areas entered a phase of **Regeneration and Revival (1970-present)**, the forces of residential development and subsequent social change, coupled with new cultural forces, combined to offer a new future for the Albany Street block.

The future of the Albany Street block evinces the diversity of the forces that shaped it, presenting its potential as a former industrial area whose historic buildings house new uses, facilities serve the transportation mode of the day, and cultural uses reflect a vibrant residential population attracted to the beauty and livability of the South End.



Landmaking: the creation of the Albany Street block (1800-1870)

The Albany Street block gained ground slowly, emerging first as a wharf protruding into the South Bay from the Boston Neck and not completely filled until halfway through the 19th century. It was, from the outset, used for industry and trade, and displayed a pattern of growth known as “wharfing out” typical of expanding commercial area of the Boston waterfront. However, an equal force behind the filling of the South End in addition to commercial and industrial interest and the creation of a larger port, was the City’s vision for a genteel residential neighborhood populated by Boston’s wealthier residents. It was the public will, then, driven by the desire for a certain type of social landscape and industrial expansion, that first gave rise to what was to be the site of an industrial block.

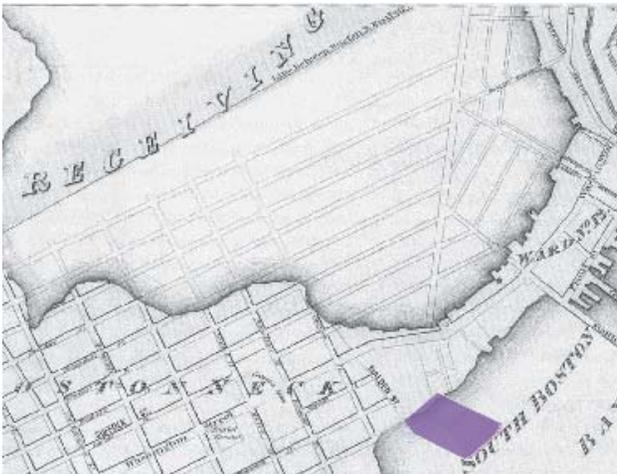
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Early landmaking efforts in the evolution of the yet-nonexistent Albany Street block were spurred first by the preservation and then the expansion and wharfing out of the Boston neck. A seawall was built in 1787 to protect against erosion from the tides that often lapped over the narrow strip of land, thus securing the town’s only link to its hinterland. After these initial fortifications, the block was nothing more than a flat, cordoned off from the tidal South Bay by this seawall (Seasholes, 258).

Only a short time later however, at the turn of the 19th century, the forces behind landmaking in the South End had shifted considerably. Now the City took center stage and acted as developer, initiating a series of major landfilling and residential

The Albany Street block would eventually come to rest on land built out from the Boston Neck.

SOURCE: www.mapjunction.com



The Albany Street block before the expansion of the Necklands

SOURCE: Seasholes, 262

development projects over the next fifty years. The City’s rationale for filling the flats and surrounding areas was driven first and foremost by the desire to retain its wealthier residents who were fleeing crowded Boston for surrounding suburbs by providing attractive residential enclaves for well-to-do businessmen and their families. Targeting this particular market would also block the tide of Irish immigrants clustering in the North End who would ostensibly overcrowd these areas and construct inexpensive, working-class housing. This development strategy and hidden social agenda was underpinned by the pressures of a rapidly rising population that would increase from 34,000 in 1810 to 137,000 in 1850 (Supplee, 18), and the City’s need to increase its taxable property and reduce its sizeable City debt. Thus, the City commenced a series of landmaking efforts for residential development that would have the effect of creating an industrial area for the South End

The City’s first major filling project in the flats and marshy land of the South Bay was the development of the Necklands. Planning for the new land began as early as the late 1700’s and saw many proposals including one by Charles Bullfinch (Supplee, 25). However, none resulted in any actual filling, and it was not until 1825 when a newly established Office of Land Commissioner stepped in with a settlement policy for the Necklands that any land was made. The policy in-

volved putting filled lands on the market at prices decreased by 30-50% to provide incentives for rapid ownership (Supplee, 79). The policy created enough confidence of the project's success to galvanize action, and by 1831 the first section of the Necklands was filled (Seasholes, 261). Part of the development on this new land involved the creation of several thoroughfares including Front Street (later Harrison Avenue) that would soon accommodate the wharf area that was the precursor to our block.

At the same time that the South end was being created for an esteemed residential class, another filling project that would also contribute to the creation of our block was in the works. However, this endeavor was driven by not by the City's desire for land for residential use, but by a development corporation's response to the demand for industrial lands to accommodate the major transportation mode of the day—the railroads. In 1831 a development corporation called the South Cove Associates entered into an agreement with the Boston and Worcester Railroad Company that the railroad would buy and build terminal and yard facilities on a large parcel of reclaimed land. The South Cove Associates proceeded to fill over two million square feet of tidal flats north of what is now the South Boston Bridge. The project also involved filling the area south of Front Street along which Albany Street—the eastern boundary of our site—would eventually be extended (Supplee, 250).



The wharfing out of the Necklands with the extension of Front St.
SOURCE: Seasholes, 262



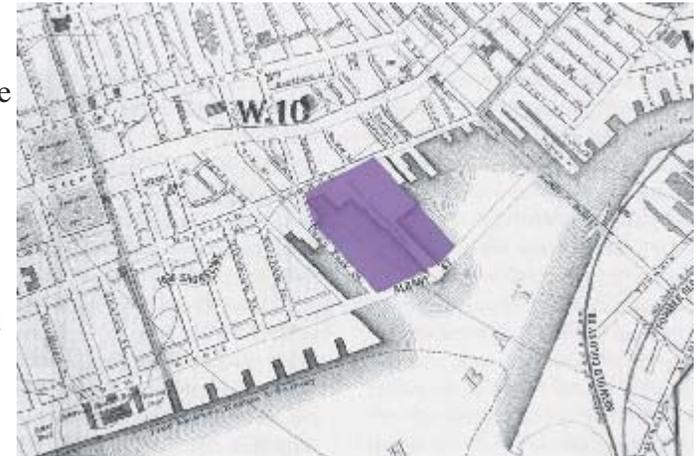
The shaded grey areas show land filled by two forces: the area to the northeast of the Albany Street block was filled for the expansion of the Boston and Worcester rail line, and the area to the southwest for the expansion of a residential neighborhood for Boston's businessmen and their families.
SOURCE: Seasholes, 265

The Boston and Worcester railroad company made good on their promise and extended their tracks to Albany Street in 1842. This locational choice not only spurred the development of the land on which our block would come to rest, but would also determine its early uses as a site for railroad-oriented industries. Thus, in addition to landmaking for residential use we see the appearance of transportation forces emerge to shape our site, a trend that would continue to affect our block throughout its history.

The South Bay Lands was the final iteration of landmaking to create our site. Here we revisit the forces and rationale that created the Necklands, that is, city-building for the business class, containment of immigrant neighborhoods, and increased tax revenues.

Taking place between 1847 and 1861, the major portion of filling for the South Bay Lands consisted of about 67 acres between Harrison Avenue, and Albany, Malden, and East Brookline Streets (Seasholes, 273). At this point, the site of the block-to-be was still occupied by the wharves created when Front Street was laid out. It was not until Albany Street was extended up to the South Boston Bridge over the lands created by the South Cove Associates and the area between the new street and the Front Street wharves filled in 1867 (Seasholes, 275) that the Albany St. block finally emerged.

By 1870 the Albany Street block stood intact, situated between and created by residential and industrial areas, bearing testament to the different forces that had created them. Following its early life as a wharf and the introduction of the railroads, the block assumed its role as an industrial block serving the transportation mode of the day.



The extension of Albany Street during the South Bay Land project set the stage for the final filling that would eventually create the Albany Street Block
SOURCE: Seasholes, 264

Industrial Heyday: factories, railroads, and wharves (1870—1920)

The Albany Street block was born into a period of robust industry, manufacturing, and trade in Boston. A period of sustained commercial expansion during the first half of the century increased industry in the South End through the creation of new factories and by attracting existing industries located in the crowded downtown core to move to the South End where land was cheaper and labor plentiful. By 1895 the South End was the leading manufacturing district in Boston with about half of its employed population engaged in manufacturing (Ward 194).

This growth was fueled by the expansion of the two key modes of transportation of the day: shipping and freight railway. In 1870 the Fort Point Channel was extended, improving the waterfront along Albany Street and increasing the reach of the City's port into the South End (Lane/Frenchman. 1-23). In addition, the reach of the Albany Street freight railway was increased to include a stretch running along the edge of the Albany Street block. The proximity to raw goods from the wharves such as lumber and coal, and the presence of railway determined some of the first uses of the block. A snapshot of this period shows some of the most vigorous industries in Boston at work on the Albany Street site.

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Albany Block was well-situated for industry with both the Fort Point Channel and, for a time, the Albany Street Railway running along its southern boundary.
SOURCE: www.mapjunction.com

Piano and Organ manufacturing

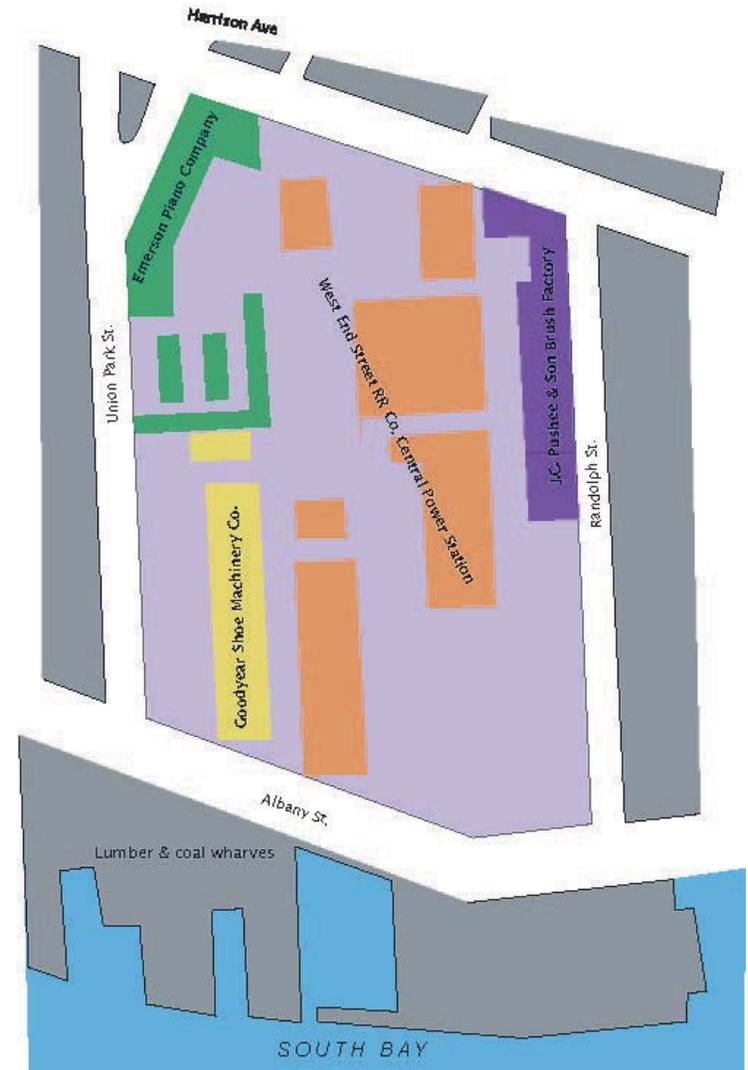
During the late 19th and early 20th centuries the South End emerged as a major locus for organ and piano manufacturing. Many business owners kept smaller showrooms downtown and moved only their manufacturing to the South End (Ward 194). Not only the quantity but the quality of pianos increased dramatically in the Boston area during this time, with the value of the instrument increasing by four times between 1845 and 1855, and then tripling again by 1870 when it was the sixth most valuable industry in Boston (Ward, 93).

The factory building for the Emerson Piano Company was originally constructed on the corner of Albany and Wareham Streets but was rebuilt on the Albany Street block after a fire in 1878. Though the original factory building no longer exists, an 1882 office and wing building still stands at the corner of Harrison and Randolph. The location of the factory was influenced by its proximity to the lumber companies occupying the wharves just across Albany Street. In 1883 the factory employed 200 workers and produced about eighty pianos a week (Stott, 34).

Electric Street Railway

Public transportation by horse-drawn streetcars had developed in the decades prior to 1870. In the 1890's, spurred by increased demand for a rapid regional transit system, the street railroads were improved through electrification of all rail lines within the Boston district (Warner, 28).

The West End Street Railway, whose Central Power Station took the place of the Hinkley Locomotive Company on the Albany Street block, emerged as a giant in the age of the electric streetcar. It was chartered in 1887 to promote real estate speculation in Brookline, an area that was far beyond the reach of any existing street railroad (Ward, 245). The Central Power Station was completed in 1892 to replace its obsolete facilities in Allston. Like the Emerson Piano Company, the Albany Street block's proximity to raw material—in this instance coal—provided locational incentive. The railway company's physical plant was impressive both architecturally and technologically for its time, and the main power station remains the most distinct building on the Albany Street block today. The main building of the power station, completed in 1892, utilized the most innovative power-generating technology available and was touted as “the largest electric powerhouse in the world” (qtd. in Stott, 36).



Uses of the Albany Street block during its industrial heyday.
SOURCE: Sanborn Maps, 1897

The main building of the power station, completed in 1892, utilized the most innovative power-generating technology available and was touted as “the largest electric powerhouse in the world” (qtd. in Stott, 36).

The use of electric streetcars grew steadily for the next fifty years with the amount of track doubling between 1890 and 1910, keeping the West End Railway in business for the next fifty years.

Shoe and Boot Manufacturing

The shoe and boot industry had grown steadily in the Boston area since the mid-1800's. By the turn of the century, although the total number of boot and shoe machinery factories had decreased, the industry employed seven times as many people as it had forty years earlier. The Goodyear Shoe Machinery Company came to the block in 1897, bolstered by a new technology for making "machine welted shoes"—high quality foot wear bound without the use of nails, pegs, or tacks. In 1899 Goodyear was one of the three largest shoe machinery companies in Boston (Stott, 28). Although industry overall in Boston had begun to decline in the late 19th century, the City kept a high position in boots and shoes, and was the largest exporter of leather footwear in the world during WWI (Kennedy, 110). The Goodyear Company managed to keep its factory on the Albany St. Block until after WWI (Stott, 28), until it was replaced by the French Shriner & Turner shoe manufacturing company, which remained on the site into the 1950's.

Although South End industry flourished during this period, the area's residential areas declined. Beginning with the Panic of 1873 most of the residential South End entered a phase of deterioration that led to a population quite different that the upstanding business class imagined by Boston's city-builders. With the value of much of the newly built housing drastically reduced, banks who owned the properties were forced to sell at the going market rate which led to an enormous drop in the value of real estate throughout the South End (Whitehall, 137). The underutilized row houses soon found a role by providing single-residence occupancies for the City's transient, single, male and often immigrant population (Ward, 195). These shifts of people were hastened by the rise in transit service to the area as with first horsecars and later electric streetcars transverse the South End's major thoroughfares (Supplee, 91). Before long, many of the South End's residential areas were comprised mainly of lodging houses, and Columbus Avenue had gained the reputation of skid row (Whitehall 137). These social changes provided South End's thriving industry with a cheap, plentiful pool of labor to serve the thriving factories on the Albany block and the surrounding area.

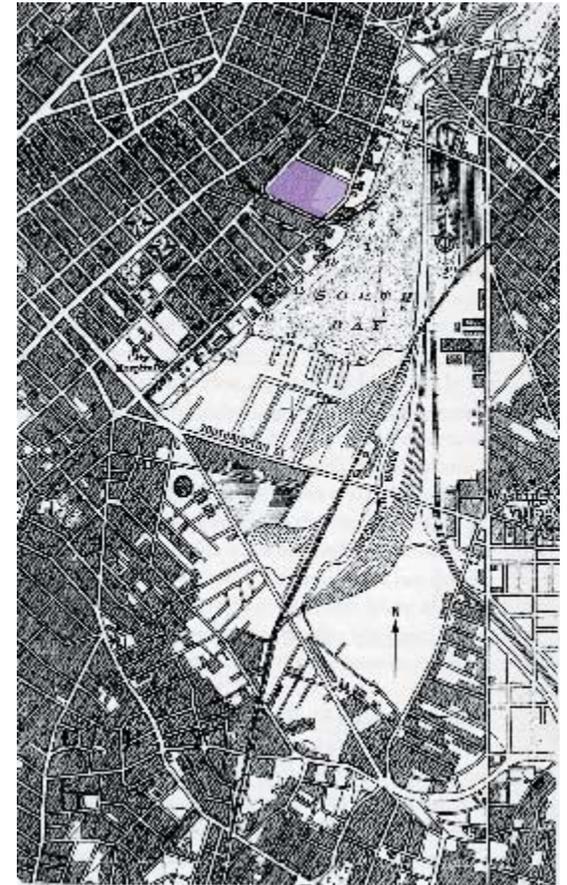
Industrial decline on a waning waterfront (1920 - 1950)

By the early 1900's, Boston's industry had begun to slow down. Though some industries remained strong, the overall trend was industrial decline precipitated by competition of factories in the south and midwest that had the advantage of being closer to raw materials and cheap labor (Conzen, 12-13). By 1930 Boston's balance of trade had shifted to imports (Lane/Frenchman, 1-28). WWII brought a brief resurgence of industrial activity after which the City went into a phase of massive industrial decline and economic stagnation. Between 1947 and 1959 the Boston core region (encompassing an area between Melrose to the north, Milton to the South, and Watertown to the west) lost a total of 48,000 jobs in the leather and textile industries alone and experienced an 8% decrease overall in industrial employment (BRA, 1967).

Paralleling this trend of industrial decline were changes to the Fort Point Channel waterfront at the edge of the Albany Street block. The coal and lumber industries that had supplied the Albany Street block industries with raw materials saw reduced demand and began to decline, causing less intensive use of the waterfront (Seasholes, 282). In addition, freight railroads had grown to a point that made it cheaper to transport via rail than ship (Lane/Frenchman 1-23), calling into the question the future of shipping as a viable conduit for industrial commerce. In 1920, a definitive vote was cast for rail when the New York, New Haven and Hartford railroad line filled most of the eastern portion of the South Bay (Seasholes, 282). Though the Albany Street block was still serviced by wharves, the future of its waterfront was clearly in question.

The viability of shipping was further diminished by the growing pollution of Boston's ports and an increased awareness of the public health risks it posed. Known as the "sanitary debate," this issue first emerged in the United States in the mid-1800's. With the connection between sewage and disease accepted as fact, and the increasingly putrid and dangerous condition of the Boston Harbor, the General Court of Massachusetts led efforts at sanitary reform in cities throughout the Commonwealth (Dolin, 23-24). Though areas of Boston had sewerage systems in place, their effectiveness was often lacking, and many areas still had no sewerage at all. The City of Boston, influenced by the growing alarm of local medical professionals and the increasingly dire conditions of other major cities' waterways, decided to take action, and by 1884 had installed a comprehensive system of drains and sewers (Dolin, 2). However, the new sewerage system delivered even more polluted water to sea, and as a result harbor waters grew increasingly polluted through the 19th century. As the question of whether the South Bay would continue to serve as a port intensified and its waters grew increasingly polluted, the sanitary debate was leveraged as a rationale for filling the area (Seasholes, 278).

Thus, the decline of industry, the growth of the railroads and decrease in shipping underpinned by regional economics and a public health debate, and the subsequent filling of much of the area's major waterway, caused the Albany Street block to see its current uses fade. In the next round in its development, transportation would emerge yet again as a force shaping present and future use.



The arrival of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford railroad line marked the triumph of rail over shipping and filled a large portion of the remaining South Bay
SOURCE: Seasholes, 281

Effects of the Auto Age (1950 – 1970)

Even as rail continued to grow in the Boston area, another modal shift, this time from rail to highway, was well underway. By the 1950's it had emerged as the definitive force shaping the Albany Street block, changing both the use of the site and the way it was connected to greater networks of trade. The majority of the block became used as bus garage and shop for the Massachusetts Transit Authority (later the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority), and the Fort Point Channel—the area's conduit for industry and trade—was replaced by the Southeast Expressway.

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The shift from the electric streetcar and towards buses began in the 1920's as transit ridership waned with the rise of the private auto. Additionally, the diesel bus was introduced as a superior mode of urban transit with the first General Motors models available after 1930 (St. Clair 4). The result was a dramatic shift in mode choice. Though in Boston streetcars still commanded a large share of total miles of transit infrastructure, buses became a substantial component of the City's transit system beginning with the establishment of the first bus routes in 1922 and the establishment of the first bus garage in 1923 (Sanborn, 5). It was not until almost twenty years later in 1941 that the City began to use the site of the former West End Street Railway buildings as its Albany Street garage.

The plan for the Southeast Expressway would replace the dwindling Fort Point Channel as a conduit for trade and fill most of the remaining South Bay.
SOURCE: Macquire and Associates

Larger US transportation policy changes also shaped this area of the South End, resulting in yet another reorganization of transportation networks. Major federal investment in roads and highways had begun in the early 1900's and continued through the 1920's, with the emphasis gradually shifting from rural to urban highways (St. Clair, 20). In 1956 the Interstate Highway act was signed which provided for 42,500 miles of highways, amounting to a cost of \$27 million dollars, and changing transportation and affecting the form of hundreds of cities throughout the United States (Hayden, 166).

In Boston, there was already considerable pressure to expand the existing roadway system. In late 1925 a committee convened by the Massachusetts state legislature submitted a final report detailing measures to address the “intolerable conditions” associated with “the street problem in downtown Boston,” (qtd. in Tsipis). The report recommended the construction of a north-west throughway to open up parts of the city. However, the onset of the depression and WWII stalled these plans (Tsipis, Introduction). In 1948, with motorized vehicle use growing more rapidly than ever, the Commonwealth produced a Highway Master Plan for the Boston area. This significant document set forth a plan for Boston's Central Artery, the massive highway that ran north-south through the center of the city. The southern part of this highway—known as the Southeast Expressway—was built between 1956 and 1959.

From this point onward, commerce both for Boston and the majority of US cities would take place predominantly on the highways. However, even at the times of the Expressway's construction a small remnant of the Fort Point Channel remained on the western side of the South Bay, across the street from the Albany Street block. The area remained open water—though very polluted—until 1965 when the City contracted to build a conduit between the Roxbury Canal and the Channel and the final filling took place.

Our site then became a landlocked block. With Boston's economic activity now largely focused on non-manufacturing industries such as trade, finance, and services, most uses on the Albany Street block had become obsolete, and the majority of the block was taken over by the MBTA for the new motorized sector of the City's public transit system. During the next period in the site's history, the Albany Street block would remain as such while larger social and economic forces set the stage for its present-day transformation and intriguing future possibilities.

Regeneration and Revival reach the Albany Street block (1970 – present)

With industry stagnant and the Albany Street block functioning primarily as a site for the MBTA Albany Street bus garage, social and market forces were at work transforming the surrounding residential areas. These changes would eventually find their way to the edges of the Albany Street block and begin to shape for it a new identity. Growing demand for recently-renovated brownstones and warehouse lofts, an active arts community, and vigorous marketing of the formerly-industrial areas of the South End bring us to the site's present day state as a block still largely industrial but with inroads of cultural and residential uses. A look into the future begs the question of whether these two seemingly opposed identities can co-exist, or even mutually benefit each other.

The Albany Street block and the surrounding industrial area's decline during the latter half of this century led to the closure and demolition of many factories and warehouses. Though several original buildings on the Albany Street block remain, many of the neighboring parcels became pocked with vacant lots (Diaz). Equally severe was the transformation occurring in the South End's residential areas. Forces encouraging this downward spiral were in due in part to the City's urban renewal efforts, which razed large areas for public housing for returning war veterans and working families, and was compounded by the trend of urban flight that saw the middle class leave many urban areas including the South End during the 1950's and 60's. Thus, the South End became in many ways an abandoned Boston neighborhood, and by the mid-1970's, one-quarter of its buildings had been destroyed (South End Historical Society).

These forces, however, were countered by the preservation movement and the gradual rediscovery by artists and real estate speculators of this largely forgotten urban neighborhood. In 1973 the entire South End neighborhood was added to National Register of Historic Places as the largest Victorian neighborhood in the United States. A decade later in 1983 the South End was designated a Landmark District by the Boston Landmarks Commission, subjecting 500 acres to preservation and design criteria to preserve the physical features, architectural character and appearance of the neighborhood (The South End). This designation helped to generate interest in the area, with artists taking advantage of the low rents and large workspaces offered by the area's former warehouses and real estate speculators beginning to capitalize on the development potential of the intact row houses and residential squares (Diaz). The area was gradually infused with capital from young professionals who renovated deteriorated brownstones, a trend that has

continued through the past thirty years to the present day. The result has been the “gentrification” of the South End characterized by an increase in income and property values, the appearance of upscale shops and restaurants, and an increase in cultural activity and the arts.

Complementing these cultural and real estate forces was a resurgence and transformation of Boston’s industrial sector. Growing through the 1970’s and taking off in the 80’s, new high-tech industries served to reinvigorate the local economy (Bluestone and Stevenson, 60). Many of these firms located on the Route 128 corridor outside Boston city limits and far from the South End. In recent decades the high-tech sector has become increasingly service-oriented with the largest areas of growth in research and development corporations, and engineering and consulting firms (Bluestone and Stevenson, 60). With flexible space requirements, these firms have often chosen to locate in urban areas and are particularly well suited to the open, flexible floor layouts provided by rehabilitated warehouses, much like those in the industrial South End.

These surrounding residential and larger economic forces have converted much of the residential South End into an increasingly desirable place to live and provided a home for an active community of artists, the effects of which have begun to transform the formerly industrial area that is home to the Albany Street block. The conversion of former warehouses into artists’ lofts began over two decades ago (Palumbo), however, it is only in the past few years that the former industrial district has shed its image as a dilapidated and dangerous area and emerged as a sought-after place live and conduct business. These changes can be seen in rising real estate prices advancing southward from the already-gentrified areas of the South End with condo values on Shawmut Avenue rising 93% between 1998 and 2003 and median Washington Street prices increasing almost 200% between 1998 and 2003 (Diaz). These forces are now being leveraged by real estate professionals eager to redevelop this corner of the South End into a trendy, arts-oriented area for living and working, integrating its industrial past with an eclectic future.

The Future of the Albany Street block

Although the Albany Street block remains dominated by its transportation-oriented industrial past, the area nevertheless holds substantial redevelopment potential. Already several of the buildings on the block have been converted to mixed-use buildings, such as the former Emerson Piano Company now accommodating office space and a café, with a gym slated to open soon. Also a notable presence on the site is the now-vacant former Central Power Building for the West End Street Railway, currently used for parking. This mix of uses is being integrated into a larger identity that has been created for this area of the South End and will largely steer its future redevelopment.

This new identity, known as “SoWa” (the area between Washington Street and the Southeast Expressway) is now well established as a legitimate district in the South End. The idea was invented as a vehicle for real estate development in 2000 by the owner of GTI Properties, a residential and commercial property management company, with the hopes of transforming the still-gritty area into an thriving arts district (Wangsness). With GTI the owner of ten buildings in the area (two of which are on the Albany Street block), real estate forces were and remain the primary force motivating this new identity and subsequent physical transformation. However, one of the keys to GTI’s success was leveraging the existing demand for arts and culture to give the area a unique identity. Apartments were rented to artists at below-market rates and marketing materials, such as a bi-monthly newsletter that highlights available gallery spaces and local art exhibitions, began publication in efforts to shape this identity. GTI’s marketing strategy also leverages the history of the area, advertising its commercial and residential properties as “traditional architecture” that meets “modern technology.” The area’s industrial past is referenced by old factory machinery presented as public art in some of the properties courtyards, and by the preservation of the buildings themselves. Thus, culture, history and the desire for an arts-oriented urban experience can be seen as equal forces that have shaped and will continue to shape the area.

Forces affecting the future of the Albany Street block
SOURCE: Google Earth

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Besides the newly introduced forces of high-end real estate and culture, the future of the Albany Street block will also be shaped by the long-standing forces of transportation and industry. Although surrounding blocks have transformed some of their warehouses into condos and artists’ lofts, the Albany Street block is zoned industrial as it has been since the inception of zoning in Boston in the 1920’s. Additionally, it is included in the South End

Economic Development Area, a district established by the Boston Redevelopment Authority to provide an area for the development of business and entrepreneurial opportunities (City of Boston). While this description of use is vague, it does imply that industrial or commercial uses will be targeted over residential for most of the area. Thus, while encroaching residential has softened the industrial edge of the block, its future development will be steered toward commercial uses.

Also affecting the future use of the Albany Street block is the familiar force of transportation, and, more specifically, proximity to a major transport conduit. Like Hinkley Locomotive, Emerson Piano, and the West End Railway and their connections to freight railway and the Fort Point Channel, future business on the Albany Street block will be influenced by their proximity to the South-east Expressway. Signs of this connection are already evident on the block, with a vacant Expressway-facing warehouse sporting a banner that reads “Tech Space” for passing traffic to see, and GTI using proximity to a major transportation corridor as a selling point for its properties. However, the presence of the highway behemoth may emerge as a constraint by reducing the viability of residential development on this side of the site.



The Albany Street block offers new businesses access to I-93 and I-90.



The MBTA's Albany Street bus garage presents the greatest barrier to redevelopment of the site.

The presence of the MBTA bus garage presents both barriers and slight potential for the future of the Albany Street block. At present the Authority is the largest landholder on the site and, according to MBTA officials, has no plans to change its current use. However, under the right circumstances potential changes could emerge both on a small scale through new uses of the former West End Railway Central Power Station and its surrounding vacant land, or on a larger scale with the relocation of some of the MBTA's facilities and redevelopment of a large portion of the MBTA-owned parcel. Taking the more likely scenario first, a new use for the Central Power Station is quite plausible and will probably emerge within the next few years. Already there exists a precedent for a cultural or events-based uses for the site with the weekly appearance of the South End Open Market, an event at which local artists and other small businesses set up their wares along Harrison Avenue in front of the Central Power Station. With the long-established tradition of historical preservation in the South End and the impressive Power Station building standing vacant, the incorporation of this edifice into a similar cultural use is likely. The major obstacle to this development is the MBTA's ownership. However, as use of the area intensifies, the MBTA could make some concession and sell some of its current Albany Street holdings to open up this new use for the northern edge of the block.



The South End Open Market shows the potential for the adaptation of the block's vacant buildings for cultural uses.

A more distant and less-likely scenario for the future of the Albany Street block is the relocation of some of MBTA's facilities and the large-scale redevelopment of a larger portion of its parcel. Such a project would face considerable obstacles such as the task of relocating the part of the City's bus fleet, suitability of existing structures for reuse, and potential environmental contamination, not to mention the political and legal complexities that would be involved in any decision to sell or release the land to some other entity. However, a precedent for this type of project exists and is exemplified in the Boston area in Cambridge's Trolley Square Project.

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Located north of Porter Square on Massachusetts Avenue, Trolley Square provided a location for the Cambridge's trolley barns in the early days of its public transportation. In 2001, the City acquired title to a site in Trolley Square previously owned by the MBTA through a land swap associated with extension of the MBTA subway's Red Line to the Alewife station northwest Cambridge (Fuentes). The project will involve a new mixed-use development that is adjacent to the MBTA's active electric bus terminal (Trolley Square). This partial redevelopment of a former site for bus storage and repair provides a potential model for the future of the Albany Street site. A transformation of this nature would take many years to be negotiated, planned, and approved and therefore should be considered a long-term redevelopment scenario.

The Trolley Square Project in Cambridge provides a model for the reuse of former bus storage sites. The MBTA will continue to occupy the area in the upper-right corner of the graphic.
SOURCE: www.trolleysquarecambridge.com

Concluding remarks

The forces affecting urban places are complex, weaving together a tangled web of the history of a place that is difficult to unwind. Shaped by a variety of political, industrial, social, and cultural forces, the Albany Street block is no different. Its initial creation was spurred largely by market forces and City's will to create a residential neighborhood and particular social landscape for Boston while adding to tax revenues. Industry, however, quickly emerged as the defining force for a large period of the block's history, with transportation forces running a close second. In the more recent past, we see market and social forces re-emerge to shape the block through its surrounding residential neighborhoods. Indeed, the recent gentrification of much of the South End could be seen as finally delivering the very sort of well-to-do urban community the City originally intended to create.

However, despite the influx of new investment, the integration of arts and culture, and the transformation of some former factory space to residential use, the Albany Street block will not lose its role as a thoroughly industrial block in this section of SoWa. The presence of the bus garage and the former Central Power Station ensure this identity, as do its designation as an Economic Development Area and its proximity to the Southeast Expressway. Though we should not look for a complete transformation of the block, the potential for partial redevelopment and new uses—particularly cultural—is strong. Whether a variation of the South End Open Market or a combination of office and gallery space similar to those filling nearby buildings, the new uses will coexist with the remnants of the block's industrial past. And while the result will not be the captivating rows of brownstones and residential squares so adored in purely residential areas of the South End, there exists the potential for a unique blending of the area's diverse identities that meet the demands of the market, industry, and new cultural cravings alike.

Source List

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