

## ALEXANDER POPE AND THE CHALLENGE OF URBAN REGENERATION

It may seem odd to look at an 18th-century British poet for insights for a conference on urban regeneration, however, in his “Essay on Man” Alexander Pope got right to the heart of the matter when he wrote,

*“O’er forms of governance let fools contest;  
What e’er is best administered is best.”*

An analysis of the successes and failures in public/private regeneration efforts over the years reveals that what the successes have in common are the following:

- a) An overriding vision or an imaginative concept;
- b) A realistic financial plan that swims with rather than against the current of free market forces;
- c) Tough-minded, detailed physical, social, and economic planning;
- d) Astute local political sensitivity, resulting in effective local support; and
- e) Competent, dispassionate implementation of the program.

Prudent flexibility, what in the U.S. space program is called “mid-course correction,” adds to the chance of success; just as overloading a program with too many ambitious, often contradictory goals, diminishes those chances.

Experience shows that brick-and-mortar problems are the easiest to solve; social problems are the hardest; and economic problems fall somewhere in between.

On either side of the public/private negotiating table, one can find individuals of outstanding professional talent, character, imagi-

nation, and dedication. But one can also find intellectual frauds, self-serving cheats, and incompetents hopelessly out of their depth.

From the standpoint of urban impact, the important thing, as Pope realized, is to see that the right actions are taken at the right time in the right manner, regardless of the auspices under which they take place.

As a general rule, public entities should be expected to have a broader perspective than private, a longer range point of view, and a greater sensitivity to the needs of the entire community. Therefore, it is logical that public entities determine the broad outlines of large-scale urban regeneration programs, the goals, and nature of the public resources to be applied. I am not an admirer of the Houston, Texas, *laissez-faire* model.

The closer, however, that public entities get to specific instances and (if you will forgive the pun) concrete divisions, the more inept they become, the more doctrinaire, the more unresponsive to individual and immediate problems.

At some point, first-rate private entities usually far outperform them. Many of us have long known what Mr. Gorbachev seems first discovering.

Public entities suffer from a lack of understanding of the power of market forces in a free market. Even King Canute would have had greater success with his orders had he waited until the tide changed; and that applies to urban regeneration programs too.

In the case of my Boston activities, which began nearly 20 years ago at the suggestion of British real estate friends, we felt intuitively that the area had bottomed out economically and was poised for a long, continuing ascent. In speeches 17 or 18 years ago, I argued publicly that given the economic realities, Boston would be ill-advised to dissipate civic funds to retain inevitably declining blue-collar jobs, and that it should capitalize on its various educational and "quality-of-life" strengths to attract white-collar employment that provides better-paying jobs, higher tax revenues, and greater economic and social spin-offs. For our projects in Boston, which now involve nearly

6,000,000 square feet of commercial space, we required from the city government no financial help of any sort, merely zoning and land use cooperation.

However, such creative, seminal projects as Boston's Faneuil Hall/Quincy Market would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support of Boston Mayor Kevin White who ran Boston as his own personal fiefdom. He is architecturally knowledgeable, however, and had a vision of the downtown he wanted. It is no exaggeration to say that much of Boston's downtown bears his personal stamp. Our million-square-foot, 46-story office tower could not get its plans until he personally selected the color of the tinted window glass.

Today, each of our Boston projects is an unqualified success, for us and for the city; and there is credit enough for everyone.

In our major Washington, DC, project (Pentagon City) which will eventually comprise 6,000 housing units, 2,000 hotel rooms, a 1,000,000-square-foot retail mall, and 1,250,000 square feet of office space, we needed government support in zoning and land use controls. A local anti-growth group repeatedly challenged the master plan in the courts, but the local public officials successfully defended their approval of the plan all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court. After that, we needed no financial or other involvement, since the site was obviously in the path of healthy and sustainable growth. Today, much of the office space is built, and construction on the retail mall and first housing unit is scheduled to get underway this autumn; and it looks as if they will be a rousing success.

Increasingly, in urban regeneration programs, Pope's advice seems apt: the well-administered public/private partnership approach, in which each side plays its constructive role for the general good.

*"Partnerships in Urban Regeneration"*  
*Queen Elizabeth II Conference Center, London*  
*June 30 - July 1, 1987*