

WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL

Sharing a podium with Mayor Kevin White is a rare opportunity, and I want to express the great respect the development community has for his positive impact on Boston of today and tomorrow. The mayor gives tone and guidance to the city.

England's great architect, Christopher Wren, is buried under one of his structures with the inscription "Si Monumentum Requiris Circumspice." (If you seek his monument, look around you.) Someday visitors to downtown Boston may say the same of Kevin White.

In considering the relationship between public and private factors in developing the built environment there are two points to keep in mind: The first is the assumption that all involved wish the city well. The second is that good intentions are not enough.

While we share a vision of the city in which we would like to live, work, shop and play, honorable individuals can have different opinions about how to achieve that vision. On the other hand, meaning well is not enough; errors are errors, regardless of intent. The Robert McNamara team that designed the Edsel automobile did not wish ill to the Ford Motor Company. The people who designed the Maginot Line were decent; they did not wish ill to France. The Argentinian generals who programmed a quick war for the Falkland Islands did not mean to harm Argentina. The people who designed the Pruitt Igoe complex in St. Louis won a prize for the best large-scale public development in the country that year. A decade later the buildings were were blown up.

What are the specifics of our desired city, given the constraints we have and the real-world trade-offs and how do we get from here to there?

Getting from here to there involves the physical and the social environment. “Should we have parks and playgrounds?” “Will the parks be occupied by mothers wheeling baby carriages or occupied by muggers and derelicts?”

Today I will deal with the built environment and how we get from here to there.

Historically there are four models of the planning process in America. The first is a city shaped by free market forces (the Houston model). The second (the 1916 zoning type) is a city planned for density and use, with the developer retaining rights so long as he builds a building for an appropriate use within the density requirements. The third model is the one that has been prevalent here in Boston in recent years: active government participation in the planning process, with private implementation. I call that the old Boston model. The fourth model is emerging in more and more cities. It is characterized by active community participation, often at the local neighborhood level.

Any system can work well if properly administered, properly structured and implemented. I remember the lines from Pope’s *Essay on Man*, “O’er forms of governance let fools contest, what e’er is best administered is best.” However, of these four types of program I think prudence will direct us toward the old Boston model.

It requires first that honorable, competent and efficient public administrators find and train men and women who will bring professional judgment and discipline to their work. Secondly, it requires private sector development types who will play the game with 52 cards and deal from the top of the deck. Thirdly, all relevant public voices must be heard. One of the roles of government is to serve as a buffer, a conduit, and a mediator between conflicting pressures. Fourth, such a program requires political leadership of a high order.

Government should be willing to lead, and to take the political

flack that short-term decisions may involve, if they will create long-term benefits. It is important to have a leader who says, "This is going through; have faith in me; I believe it's going to work in the long run."

We have outgrown the economic Darwinism of the Houston model. Oscar Wilde referred once to cultural Darwinism leading to survival of the vulgarest. Something comparable might be the result if only the developer's taste and judgment determined the nature of the project.

There have to be constraints, legal and moral, unless you define conscience as, in H. L. Mencken's words, "that still quiet voice that tells you someone may be looking." You can rely on a developer's conscience if someone is looking, and the person looking has some degree of control. We should not forget the free market, but it cannot be left to function totally alone. The 1916 zoning concept is inadequate. Our society has gone beyond the point where we require buildings to be freestanding and individual. Now we think of their context. We think of neighborhoods—of buildings in relation to one another.

If each building rivals another, if every building is made to be, above all, distinctive, planning based on context is impossible. That has been one of the weaknesses, I think, of modern architecture. Buildings in the recent past tend to say, "Look at me, I'm different, I'm significant."

We are entering a period in which developers, city officials, and individual architects will think more in terms of the context, environment, and setting. When you think of an Utrillo picture of Paris, you think of buildings. They are each sort of faceless but they hang together well. When you think of memorable cities, the general impression is pleasing. You might not remember the individual structures, but you remember the ambience. I think that is the direction in which we are heading.

The fourth model of planning, local neighborhood involvement, presents problems that a Center such as this one at MIT can solve through leadership and organized discussion. First of all, not all of the participants in neighborhood, community, or special interest

groups, whether they are interested in landmarking, the environment, or any other concerns, will necessarily have the same level of professional training. Not all of them come with clean hands. Some will come with hidden agendas, including issues such as political careers. Some of them are thinking entirely of what might be best for their little neighborhood and not necessarily what might be best for the greater urban context. Airports and community centers have to be somewhere.

For all of us, a certain amount of modesty is realistic. For example, Jane Jacobs was correct in her vigorous (and successful) effort to keep Robert Moses from building a highway through Washington Square Park and Greenwich Village; she was wrong (and unsuccessful) in her effort to prevent the creation of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

What form of administration is most conducive to good administration? Ideally, it should involve a city planning department (in Boston, it's the BRA) of technically trained and competent planners, with the tenure in office associated with senior civil service people. Planners in this kind of department would think in terms of the city's best interests and could run interference between the neighborhood and the development entity. They could play a part in the planning and also reflect legitimate community concerns. In such a planning context, the question of trade-offs is increasingly important. Trade-offs must be made between immediate and long-term benefit, cost and affordability; what's best for the neighbors vs. best for the city. Decisions about older buildings require subtle distinctions in terms of historic preservation.

On the issue of historic preservation, it's wise to remember the French expression, "The good is the enemy of the best, the best is the enemy of the good." When dealing with a cultural gem like Mt. Vernon, it's important that the substance be kept; it should not be turned into a motel or a fast food chain store. Mt. Vernon should be preserved exactly as it was—with George Washington's false teeth and his spectacles on the table. If, on the other hand, you're speaking of

the recycling of an old mill, one might want to keep the handsome physical exterior, but the time may have come for such a building to take on a new life. One hopes that the new life will be as integral to today's society as its old life was in a previous milieu. Another set of problems occurs in dealing with a situation in which it is desirable to preserve the fabric and texture of a street by retaining the façade of an old building, but it is necessary to put in plumbing and so forth to make it usable.

How does one deal with these subtle distinctions? We have to come up with ways, and then enforce the decisions we have made.

On issues involving not only the local community but the general public, our goal should be on the one hand how to have maximum input from all interested parties, but on the other hand, how to depoliticize them. It's almost impossible in any political jurisdiction with residential rent control to find an office holder who is opposed to it or who will speak out against it. Everyone understands that the long-term side effects of residential rent control (like unbalanced budgets) are counter-productive, but politicians choose to leave those problems for their successors.

Private developers should not consider each other adversaries; our relationship can be cooperative rather than confrontational. We have to ask ourselves what is the social and physical fabric of the society in which we want to live. What are the constraints? Economics is the science of the allocation of scarce resources. How are we to balance the physical setting and the social setting? How do we bring the various voices to bear on these decisions? Our goal should be to design a society in which rational, civilized people in settings of grace and charm and human scale, can lead productive and satisfying lives.

The public good should be the guiding principle.

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