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Architecture**Boston**

Change Comes  
to the Neighborhood

Mitigating Circumstances

Who Is East Boston?

## East Boston

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# So Near and So Far

**M**ost Bostonians don't really know East Boston, despite the fact that many of them drive through or fly over it on a regular basis. And most of them have no idea of the magnitude of the change that is underway in this neighborhood. In the last two decades, the largely Italian population has become increasingly Latino. Now new construction is underway, including waterfront condos that will lure a population of affluent professionals to the working-class community.

There are many reasons why Bostonians — or for that matter, anyone who cares about any city — should pay attention to the neighborhood on the other side of the harbor. East Boston — “Eastie” to its residents — is a microcosm of issues that are playing out in many communities across the country, issues such as waterfront development, conversion of industrial lands, reuse of obsolete buildings, changing identity, transportation and open-space pressures, and an increasingly diverse population.

Despite all that it has in common with so many other communities, East Boston has some unique physical features: its isolation from other Boston neighborhoods; its unparalleled harbor views of downtown Boston; Logan Airport; the Suffolk Downs racetrack; Chelsea Creek and the tank farms; the Belle Island Marsh nature reserve; Constitution Beach; and the McClellan Highway — Route 1A — which bisects the community. The fact that a community of 39,000 people has five rapid-transit stops is remarkable. As is the 35-foot Madonna — the statue at the Madonna Queen National Shrine at the top of Orient Heights, which offers breathtaking views of Boston. A short trek from the shrine to Saratoga Street, with its views across the Belle Isle Marsh, to Bayswater Street, with its view south to Logan across a cove, offers an imagined alternative history for Boston, one free of trade and politics, leaving a coastal landscape much like Duxbury or Newbury.

These features have in many ways shaped the personality of East Boston. Residents often refer to the experience of living on an island (in fact, the neighborhood was once five islands), and the spirit of island self-sufficiency reinforces Eastie's strong identity. Its residents fight fearlessly to protect their interests, with political skills honed over decades of fighting Logan Airport and Massport. Experts at negotiating mitigation packages, they have created a remarkable open-space network. They have weighed in on waterfront development, working with the BRA and Massport, to ensure public access to the harbor and connections to the rest of the community.

Given this David-and-Goliath history, the most remarkable aspect of East Boston is its openness to change. To be sure, there are residents who resent newcomers — especially those from other

**There are many reasons why Bostonians — or for that matter, anyone who cares about any city — should pay attention to the neighborhood on the other side of the harbor.**

cultures. But if any community today can have shared values, the recognition that East Boston has been home to generations of new immigrants seems to bind residents of all ages and ethnicities. Established in 1844, the Temple Ohabei Shalom Cemetery on Wordsworth Street, the first Jewish cemetery in the state, is a reminder of East Boston's once-large Jewish community. Today, neighborhood Catholic churches with previously dwindling congregations are filled again with Latinos who share with previous generations of Irish and Italian immigrants a commitment to church and family. Ethnic stratification has built East Boston as much as the layers of soil that filled its islands and saltmarshes. Still, ethnic diversity is one thing; economic diversity is another. It remains to be seen if money proves to be more divisive than language and skin color.

Elizabeth S. Padjen FAIA  
Editor

# Changing Times

East Boston will soon be home to 1,600 new condos and apartments, most of them luxury waterfront units. Will EaBo become the new identity for the neighborhood formerly known as Eastie?

## Participants

**Nina Brown** is a landscape architect and principal of Brown Richardson and Rowe in Boston. Her work includes a number of projects in East Boston: Bremen Street Park; Memorial Stadium Park; Constitution Beach; the Massport Southwest Service Edge Buffer; the master plan for Saratoga Park; and a renovation of the ballfield at American Legion Park.

**Al Caldarelli** is the executive director of the East Boston Community Development Corporation, a nonprofit that has developed a number of housing and community projects in the neighborhood.

**David Carlson AIA** is a senior architect with the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

**Nancy Ludwig AIA** is a principal of ICON Architects in Boston, the designer of the Maverick Landing and Carlton Wharf project, and the principal consultant for the East Boston Master Plan.

**Elizabeth Padjen FAIA** is the editor of *ArchitectureBoston*.

**Saul Perlera** is the owner and founder of Perlera Real Estate, Inc. Originally from El Salvador, he has been a resident of East Boston since 1986.

**Lowell Richards** is the director of port planning for Massport.

**Madeleine Steczynski** is the founder and director of Zumix, a youth arts organization, and is a resident of East Boston.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** Significant residential development in East Boston is a new phenomenon. In the last few decades, construction in the neighborhood has generally meant new transportation infrastructure. So let's start with the elephant in the room, the creature that has shaped so much of East Boston today: Logan Airport. What is the reality of Logan Airport for residents? Is it a part of your life? Do you hear it? How do you cope with it? How much of the issue of Logan Airport comes from the memory of battles fought, such as the loss of the Wood Island Park to airport expansion, and how much is actually due to the hassle factor in your day-to-day lives? I wonder if its presence is akin to what I call the West End Syndrome — a devastating loss for those who remember the history, but not something that newcomers can do much about.

**Saul Perlera:** I wish it was only a memory, but it's a reality. Log there: you hear the planes, you smell the fumes. It's going to be there forever, and you learn to cope with it.

**Al Caldarelli:** But things have changed for the better from the time when the airport really was a detriment to life in East Boston. Technological advances in aircraft and fuels have had a significant positive impact. A lot of the airport traffic has been re-routed from the local streets. A lot of houses have been soundproofed.

Clockwise from top left: Porter 156, Architect: Bargmann Hendrie Archetype. Maverick Landing and Carlton Wharf, Architect: ICON Architects. Piers Park, Landscape architect: Pressley Associates. Hodge Boiler Works (proposed), Architect: Albert, Righter & Tittman Architects. East Pier (Portside at Pier One), Architect: ADD Inc.



with new windows, courtesy of Massport. So, to new people, the airport is not the threatening neighbor that it once was.

**Lowell Richards:** If you're close to a runway end, you still know it's there. But there are certainly parts of East Boston where the consequences of the presence of Logan are not as great.

**Madeleine Steczynski:** It definitely depends on your neighborhood, and can even vary from block to block. I lived for a short while near the backside of Eagle Hill. It was really horrible there, particularly in the middle of the night — once or twice a week, big cargo flights would pass over and all the car alarms would go off, and the house would shake as if you were being bombed. I live in the Jeffries Point area now and don't hear much of it, although I sometimes smell it.

From my perspective, the bigger issue is not so much the planes overhead but the way in which the community has been split up by tunnels and highways in order to provide access to the airport. Paris Street now has a tunnel in the middle of it, so we have a weird disconnect. When people say they live on Paris Street, you have to ask them which side. What would have been our main street, Meridian Street, has a big scar in the middle of it because of that tunnel.

**Saul Perlera:** But air rights over the tunnel are a possibility. If we get enough development in that area, it would be economically feasible to build above it and restore the continuity of the street. There's already a huge demand for commercial space there.

**David Carlson:** East Boston has a tradition of that sort of radical change over time. It was originally five islands. As you walk through the neighborhood, you can see that the street grids come together in ways that reveal the original villages. It has grown in terms of its land form, from a series of islands to a single land mass. The airport was actually one of the largest landfill projects in the city.

On top of that, the neighborhood evolved in response to changes in infrastructure: technology; transportation; and the industrial uses congregating around the harbor that effectively made the waterfront unavailable to the residents of East Boston. That's why, to my mind, the taking of Wood Island for the airport resonates so much: that recreational land became precious.

There are a lot of old scars that are being healed through an improved interface with Massport and Logan through spinoffs from the Central Artery project, such as new parks and the new East Boston Greenway that help connect the dots along an old rail corridor. It's all transforming the old scars into something that makes a better community.

**Nina Brown:** The intermodal aspect of those improvements is worth mentioning, too — they will introduce new bike and pedestrian paths connecting to a number of T stops. Several segments of the East Boston Greenway have already been completed. The Greenway starts near the edge of Boston Harbor and goes through Bremen Street and Memorial Stadium parks, and to the Airport MBTA Station, with connections to Jeffries Point. And it ultimately will continue on to Constitution Beach and Belle Isle Marsh.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** The master plan that the city released five years ago clearly embraces the notion of making connections with the community, of trying to make up for the ills of the past. It can't help but think that East Boston is to some degree a test of what we've learned as planners and urban designers. We've come a long way since urban renewal clearances in the '50s and '60s, the megaprojects of the '60s and '70s, and even the largely successful neighborhood planning that was accomplished in Boston in the '80s. It seems as though all those lessons have been applied to East Boston.

**Nancy Ludwig:** The lessons are still being learned. One small example is Maverick Landing — the Hope VI redevelopment of the Maverick Gardens public housing project. With the cooperation of the City of Boston, we cut new streets and extended them down to the waterfront. Previously, you wouldn't have known the waterfront was there. The exploration of appropriate waterfront uses is very exciting, because people are embracing the idea of stretching the public realm down to the water.

**Nina Brown:** The early megaprojects — the Sumner and Callahan tunnels, Logan Airport — radicalized the residents of East Boston. These activists have a big role in many of these new projects. For example, many aspects of Bremen Street Park resulted from community pressure. With the Boston Natural Areas Network, they persuaded the Trust for Public Land to help them acquire Conrail property for the Greenway. They then collaborated with a variety of public agencies to make the Greenway part of the Big Dig's Bremen Street Park. This project didn't originate with an urban designer laying out ideas and making them happen. It came from the ground up.

**Lowell Richards:** I don't disagree with that, but I think a little more credit can be given to urban design. The quality of urban design that you're going to see in the Pier One and Clippership

## The New Face of Eastie

Project	Units	Developer	Architect
Maverick Landing and Carlton Wharf	426	Trinity	ICON Architects
Hodge Boiler Works	119	Philip DeNormandie	Albert, Richter & Tittmann Architects
Clippership Wharf	417	Winn Development	CBT Architects
East Pier (Portside at Pier One)	550	Roseland	ADD Inc
Porter 156	216	Metric Corporation and ELV Associates	Bargmann Hendrie + Archetype

The bigger issue is not so much the planes overhead but the way in which the community has been split up by tunnels and highways in order to provide access to the airport. — Madeleine Steczynski

developments is very different from what you would have seen if those sites had been developed in the '70s or early '80s. Even if East Boston residents were not as active and involved as they have been, we would still see that difference simply because urban designers — and many developers — have become more sophisticated in knowing how to take advantage of a complex site like the East Boston waterfront. And obviously, these projects have also been enhanced greatly by neighborhood input, which is clearly very sophisticated in terms of planning concepts but also very sophisticated in understanding how to obtain leverage.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** Who are the activists?

**Lowell Richards:** Who aren't the activists? That's the easier question.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** The experience in many communities with a lot of new immigrants is that the newcomers tend not to participate for a variety of reasons: they don't understand the give-and-take process, they don't have time to get involved, they may be afraid of public processes because of experiences in their home countries, and of course many have language difficulties. Is that an issue in East Boston? Is the Latino community involved? Or is it the old-timers who are waving the flags?

**Al Caldarelli:** We've been an immigrant community forever. The Irish arrived in the mid-1800s; by the late 1800s, after the arrival of Russian Jews who worked as laborers on the waterfront, we were the largest Jewish community in New England. And the Italian immigration followed right after that. We see the same thing happening now. When we started the East Boston Community Development Corporation, the community was 85 percent Italian. As of the 2000 census, Latinos were 39 percent of the population; East Boston as a whole was 50 percent non-white. One of the things I'm proudest of in East Boston has been the seamless change. I think the Latino population in East Boston will soon be electing the public officials, much the same way that all the other immigrant groups did.

**Saul Perlera:** So far, the Latinos haven't really taken an active role in the actual policy-making. However, they have been the essence of the neighborhood, making a change in a different way, by going about their business — raising families, working, starting businesses. If anyone brought the real estate prices up in the neighborhood, it was the Latinos. We were there, renting and establishing roots until we were ready to buy. The city had a lot of programs available to help first-time home-buyers.

**Al Caldarelli:** But home ownership is still a challenge. We always looked forward to the day when the airport's effects on the community would be ameliorated. Now that that has happened, a lot of people are being priced out of East Boston. What scares me about the new waterfront development is that even though everybody is making an effort to include affordable units, the definition of affordable is not the definition that's acceptable to my constituents. When "affordable" means that someone who's earning \$60,000 is going to get the chance to buy one of these condos, that's great, but there's a whole community that needs to rent at an affordable rate. They're not ready for home ownership. We have an influx of immigrant families who originally came to East Boston because of affordable rents. I don't know if that will continue if these prices rise or even stay where they are.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** What makes this model of waterfront development different from Atlantic City? Atlantic City invested in development along the boardwalk, but the neighborhoods just a few blocks inland are falling apart.

**Lowell Richards:** In Atlantic City, people don't live on the waterfront; they visit casinos and they go away. Historically, the waterfront strip there was a resort area, distinct from the rest of the community. In East Boston, there are a number of reasons why the inland blocks have more potential. The new development won't be an enclave; there will be a lot of natural integration. The inland blocks could conceivably stay as they are. Or, more likely, they could gradually experience conversions so we will see a steady curve down from the water in terms of price-per-square-foot, while values generally rise in the neighborhood as a whole. There are a number of people who used to live in East Boston, left, did very well, and want to come back. They are familiar with the more central areas of East Boston and many of them will settle there.

**Nina Brown:** Another reason why East Boston won't become another Atlantic City is that it is not a linear strip. There are pedestrian connections through the development sites and the parks such as the Harborwalk, the East Boston Greenway, Marginal Street, and the Golden Stairs. The new connections all build upon the strengths that already exist in East Boston.

**Al Caldarelli:** And there's also the fact that prices are also going up in the interior of the community, not just the waterfront. That has its downside. We have waiting lists five years out for families looking for rental units. They had to close the rental applications at Maverick Landing after taking 5,000 applications.

**Lowell Richards:** But that's been happening without a single luxury condominium actually built on the waterfront — they are all either under construction, in the documents stage, or awaiting final approvals.

**Saul Perlera:** That's a very interesting point. Only one waterfront project has actually been built — Maverick Landing. Most of the change so far has occurred in small developments in the areas further inland. Many people are spending money on restoring their houses and bringing them up to code. The condo conversions have been incredible in the past two years. Three years ago we had 14 condominiums on the market. Today we have 159, and 33 are under agreement in any given month. People are converting three-deckers left and right. As we speak, probably 20 buildings are being converted right now. Some of the developers don't understand that not every house has good condo potential, because a condo buyer is looking for a certain community in a building in terms of neighbors and co-owners, and also for a certain character, such as high ceilings, moldings, medallions, marble mantels. Some of them just don't have it. Those are the ones that stay longer on the market and also tend to sell for a lot less.

**Nancy Ludwig:** It's important to remember that a lot of the pressure on real estate in East Boston comes from the pressure on Boston as a whole. When I moved to Charlestown 20-odd years ago, that neighborhood was quite similar. Other neighborhoods

that are closer to downtown have experienced the same pressure, and it eventually pushes out to other communities.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** How does East Boston's existing building stock respond to these pressures?

**Lowell Richards:** The dominant structure style in East Boston is wood-frame, with a relatively small footprint. That's different from other neighborhoods, such as the South End, which is mostly masonry, or Charlestown, which has some wood-frame structure mixed with masonry buildings and slightly larger footprints. It's probably closest to Dorchester. But the building stock will affect the future of the neighborhood — it's not really suited for conversion to Gaps and Starbucks and other chains that might be interested in the rising economics. The building stock favors the small owner-operated shops and businesses, now the bodegas, and previously the Italian-owned corner stores. I don't think the advent of 1,600 units, even if they're luxury units, is going to dramatically change the socioeconomic picture of East Boston as a whole.

It's interesting to compare East Boston with the South End, which has undergone a wholesale change. The South End in the 1960s and '70s had a very good building stock — buildings originally of high enough quality that they withstood 30 or 40 years of declining maintenance — but it was an extremely challenging social environment. But because of the quality of the buildings and their relatively large footprints, they accommodated



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Physical differences do contribute to the social differences in neighborhoods. The city is trying to balance changes that occur with each real-estate cycle.

— David Carlson

change over time — the physical infrastructure remained while the social aspects changed. It's harder to imagine how you could keep the physical structure of everything three blocks back from the water in East Boston and see that same wholesale social change.

**David Carlson:** Physical differences do contribute to the social differences in neighborhoods. The city is trying to balance changes that occur with each real-estate cycle. Right now, for example, the city is especially interested in holding on to young people who come to our colleges and universities and who want to stay in the city, to invest in the city, to grow here, to find jobs. As those people discover East Boston, they will help to temper the pressures that will come from the waterfront development. There will never be a Newbury Street in East Boston, but it's useful to remember that Newbury Street itself has evolved; it was entirely residential when it was first built. I suspect that the character of, say, Maverick Square, will be better defined in coming years, and that it will

regain some of the feel that it had in the early 20th century. I don't envision chains like the Gap or the big-box stores, but I do think we'll see the continuing growth of small businesses that add to the vibrancy of the community.

**Nina Brown:** The character of the existing buildings is an important point. East Boston was part of a tour for the recent annual conference on New Urbanism. The participants loved it, because East Boston typifies a lot of the principles of New Urbanism: people living above their stores; houses that are close together; small-scale structures; walkability; easy connections to open space and mass transit. It demonstrates that the New Urbanism is really just the old urbanism.

**Nancy Ludwig:** And I think a lot of the new development will take its clues from those patterns and attributes — even if it doesn't take precisely the same form. The goal at Maverick Landing was to give



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I have always felt safe there. In comparison with other cities or other Boston neighborhoods, we're still probably one of the safest areas around.

— Saul Perle

everybody a traditional stoop on the street and a private space in the back. The public park is not at the center of the development, but on the corner, across from the church.

**Madeleine Steczynski:** At the same time, I'm sorry to see what we are losing to new development. I was sad that we lost the old Hodge Boiler Works structure. There are so many views of the East Boston waterfront that are gorgeous the way they are, looking across those dilapidated piers and weird old structures. You can't bring them back once they're gone. I'm glad that the old 80 Border Street building will be saved — it's a former shipping building that's being renovated as artist workspace.

**Saul Perlera:** I agree — it could have been torn down or converted to luxury loft condos. Artists have played a major role in the renaissance of East Boston. It wouldn't be fair to say to them, OK, thanks for giving us what we need but now we're selling the building

to private developers, so get out. There's something nice about the fact that the East Boston CDC [Community Design Center] is facilitating its continued use as artist studio space, except that it's now going to be an updated building.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** What are some of the things that contribute to the quality of life in East Boston?

**Saul Perlera:** Parks. The waterfront public access is going to be amazing, and I'm excited about that. But Piers Park has already made a huge difference in quality of life, as will Bremen Street Park and Memorial Stadium Park when they are completed.

**Nancy Ludwig:** Yet you're just a short walk from a very vibrant commercial center, which has unique restaurants and retailers. Come into Maverick Square, and there is life. Great Italian and Latino restaurants.

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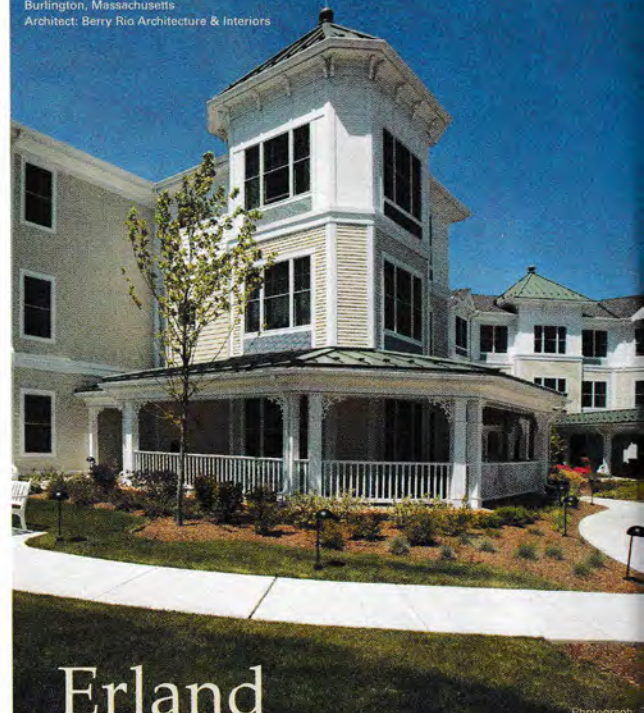
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**Elizabeth Padjen:** Does East Boston feel safe?

**Saul Perlera:** Of course. I have always felt safe there. In comparison with other cities or other Boston neighborhoods, we're still probably one of the safest areas around.

**Madeleine Steczynski:** I have new tenants on the first floor of my three-family who moved here this year, and they've completely fallen in love with East Boston. It's the first place in the city they've ever lived in that felt like a neighborhood, meaning that you see families outside, and people want to know who you are and what you're doing. People are nosy in a good way. East Boston is friendly, unlike the general reputation of the city.

I lived in Jamaica Plain for a while, and JP is filled with activists as well. But this is a different ballgame. Going to community meetings in East Boston is like going to the theater — there is so much drama. I have grown so respectful of a handful of activists, people who have dedicated their lives to fighting for a better quality of life for East Boston for the last 20 years. One problem we have right now is that a lot of those groups are made up of people who are getting old. It's incredible to go to those meetings and realize how much knowledge is in the room, to see how they work. But I was recently at a Piers Park committee meeting, and I was the youngest person in the room. Where are the new people who are going to help carry this torch? You have to pass the history along.

We talked earlier about the involvement of the Latino community. Most of our current public officials are Italian-Americans. And yet they're very much aware of the shift in population. They want to make sure that they have the support of the Latino community. I have Latino friends who end up in awkward positions when they're all of a sudden asked to represent an entire community of Latinos, who all have very different needs and different reasons for being here. But there is definitely a sense that politicians are listening and trying desperately to connect, and there are certainly people in the Latino community with political ambitions. But they are all very different from the community activists, the people who go to public meetings and fight on behalf of a new park or safety or clean streets — the little issues that make the quality of life. I don't see many of the new people integrating into those groups.

**Lowell Richards:** That's not unique to East Boston, though. If you look at the history of community activism from the '50s through the '70s, you find a population of blue-collar men who got out of work at four o'clock, and women at home who cared intensely about their neighborhood and their family. They had some scheduling flexibility — they could go to meetings that started at 6:30. If you look at many immigrant communities now, everyone is working, sometimes two or three jobs. In East Boston, where we're getting an influx of white-collar professionals, people go to work at 9:00 and come home at 7:00. People think they can be involved through the

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Internet, but it's a very different dynamic from showing up at a community meeting and haranguing the elected officials or the agency folks. So I totally agree with what you're saying, but it's part of a much larger societal evolution, and I'm not sure what it means long-term in terms of pushback from communities.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** And, of course, if East Boston begins to attract young residents who see it as a temporary waystation on their career paths rather than a place where they will put down roots, citizen participation will drop even more. We talked about factors that prevent East Boston from becoming another Atlantic City. Do you worry about the opposite extreme — gentrification? What might hold gentrification in check?

**Madeleine Steczynski:** One big advantage we have is that East Boston seems to be predominantly owner-occupied at this point, meaning there are three-family houses with the owner living in one unit and renting two, so the owners aren't often forced to move. As I understand it, many of the people who lived in the South End were renters and couldn't afford to stay.

But it's still a question: if 1,600 units of luxury waterfront housing are built in the next few years, what will that do to our community? Will we still have all the great little locally owned stores in Maverick Square that give our neighborhood its character? Or will the people who live on the waterfront demand completely different kinds of shops and services? Can they both

coexist? I feel that we have an incredible opportunity to avoid gentrification while bettering our community. What comes with gentrification is a sort of whitewashing: no more character, just a wealthy place to live with nice shops and fancy food stores. But East Boston has the potential to have a beautiful waterfront with high-end housing, affordable housing, and everything in between, and still have little bodegas and shops and a very funky interior that's just as desirable and attractive as the waterfront.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** Saul, let's take advantage of your expertise in the real-estate market. People confide all sorts of things about their lives to brokers, so brokers know a lot about communities. What are you seeing in terms of what people are looking for and buying? Have you seen a shift over the time that you've been in the business?

**Saul Perlera:** We have a lot of people, mostly in their late 20s and early 30s, looking for condos. They're not looking for a multi-family; very few of them want to be landlords. They just want to move to a new place where things are happening. They think that they're going to see a moderate or even sizeable increase in value here. They want to be part of the change, and they want a nice place to live. They're usually young professionals who recently graduated from college and are starting their careers. Their incomes are generally between \$35,000 and \$65,000, enough to qualify for a two-bedroom condo between \$200,000 and \$350,000.

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People think they can be involved through the Internet, but it's a very different dynamic from showing up at a community meeting and haranguing the elected officials. — Lowell Richards

**Al Caldarelli:** That's a very different profile from the people who we work with. My constituents are families with household incomes from \$20,000 to \$35,000, usually looking for two- or three-bedroom units because they have children. Other than the subsidized units, there's nothing we can do for them. And our waiting list is enormous.

**Saul Perlera:** We've lost a lot of people to Lynn, because they could get the same house there with parking, lots of space, in good condition, for \$100,000 less than they had to pay in East Boston. It used to be that they needed only one working person to qualify to buy a house. Now they need the husband, the wife, and maybe even the brother to enable them to buy the house. They're still buying, but they need those combined incomes to get a mortgage.

**Elizabeth Padjen:** What's the highest price that's been paid for a property in the neighborhood?

**Saul Perlera:** \$1,150,000 — for a former firehouse that had 3,800 square feet, a roof deck, and a garage. It was a great building, but we were all shocked. Nothing had ever sold for even half that amount in East Boston. But now you see sales at \$500,000 or more; some condos at Porter 156 are selling in the high fives.

Mayor Menino was right on the button when he created programs to increase home ownership — he definitely achieved that in East Boston. I would say that a majority of the market here that took advantage was Latino. And still is. I've been here for 20 years, and I have seen every single change since the mid-'80s, when it was probably 95 percent Italian. It was a neat neighborhood. Now it's changing, and it's changing, I think, for the better. I'm excited about it. I never could justify paying the price to move downtown, without the quality of life that you could have in East Boston, especially if you feel that East Boston is your neighborhood. And I feel that it is my neighborhood. ■

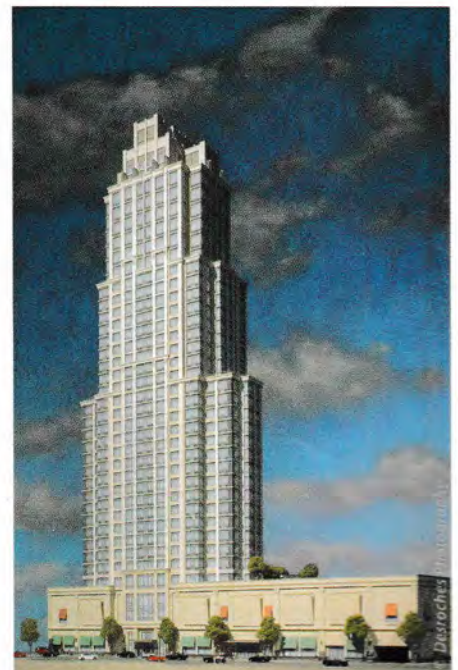


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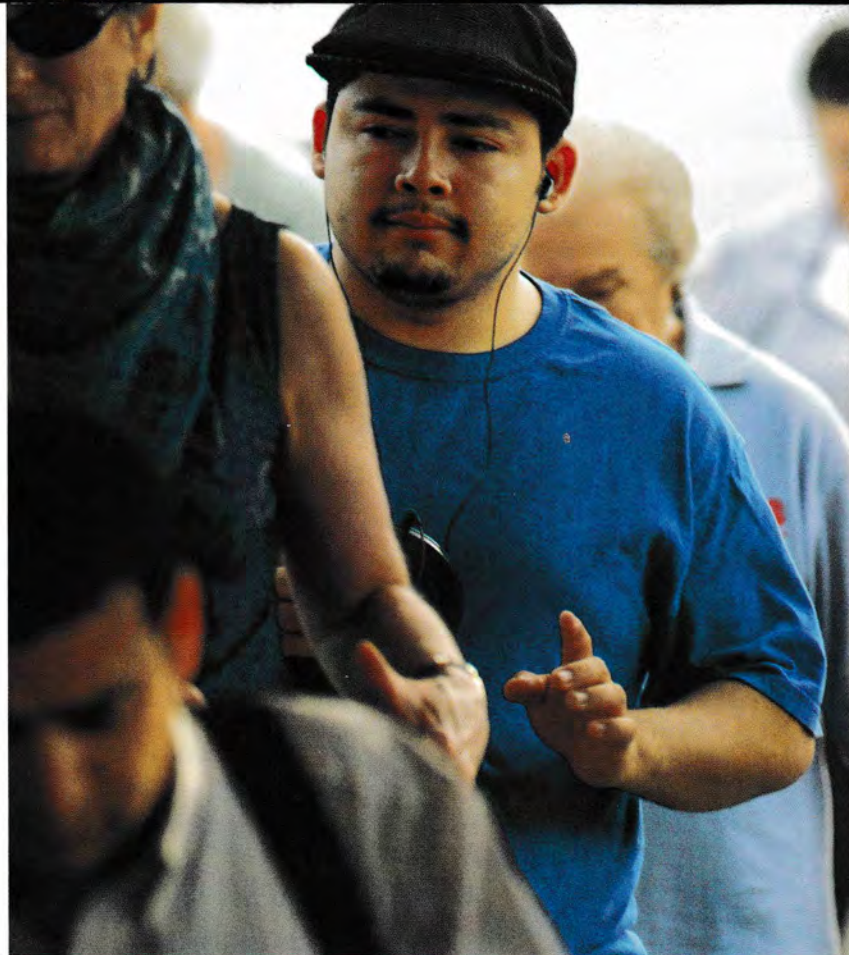


# DESIGNING COMMUNITY

It takes a village to build a village **By David Dixon FAIA**

**T**he changing face of East Boston is the story of much of urban America. Change is not new to East Boston: waves of immigration from Ireland, Europe's Jewish ghettos, Italy, Latin America, and elsewhere washed over its neighborhoods and transformed their ethnic character again and again. But through each period of change, one constant remained: these were highly homogeneous neighborhoods in which people of similar backgrounds shared the same blocks, churches, parks, and Main Streets — and enjoyed neighborhoods that fostered a deep and enduring sense of community.

Like the rest of urban America, East Boston is now experiencing a new type of change: people from diverse racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds all share the same streets. The triple-deckers, churches, parks, and commercial squares that once made the neighborhood a symbol of urban community are still there. By themselves, however, these traditional forms represent only the body, not the soul, of community. Though East Boston's houses still look similar, the people who live in them may or may not worship in nearby churches, very often don't have kids (or dogs) to take to the



corner park, and do much of their shopping at Target or over the Internet.

This story has a very human face. I met Josie in the late 1970s. She taught at the Beacon Hill Nursery School, where my son “studied” in the Blue Room. She thought the Beacon Hill neighborhood was OK, but a little drab and nothing like East Boston, where she lived. She loved East Boston. The airport made far too much noise, and there were too many trucks. Yet, she said, she would never leave “Eastie.” She knew and loved her neighbors, the shopkeepers, her priest, the local librarian, and the teachers in her daughter’s school. When Josie called East Boston “beautiful,” she was not referring to its Victorian houses, proud industrial buildings, or extensive waterfront. For Josie, East Boston’s beauty lay in the way that it naturally connected residents to each other. It was, in other words, a community.

Josie never envisioned a world in which someone would offer to buy her house for several hundred dollars per square foot. She never imagined that someone would successfully convert a nearby lingerie factory to lofts. She never dreamed of hearing more Spanish than English (or Italian) in church. She couldn’t picture an Eastie in which many of her neighbors would go to work at 8:00 A.M. and not 5:00 A.M., come home too late to chat on the street, and perhaps most surprising, an Eastie in which most of her new neighbors would have no kids. Welcome to East Boston today — Diversity, USA — and the joys and challenges of a world in which architects and planners need to work consciously to create community. Homogeneity once created community naturally. Diversity forces us to figure out new paths toward the same end.

The story of East Boston is being played out across urban America. Driving up Park Heights Avenue in Baltimore, a driver circles an elegant roundabout and comes into full view of an imposing synagogue marked by a handsome barrel vault. From a perch just below the vault, a grand Star of David, more than 12 feet across, greets all who arrive in Park Heights. For generations, the building and its star symbolized the close-knit sense of community as it welcomed people to Park Heights. Today, a small sign next to the stairs welcomes visitors to The Cornerstone Church of Christ, an evangelical Baptist Church. On the east side of Los Angeles, this same driver might pass Highland Park, filled with Mexican-American families enjoying a sunny weekend day. Yet, directly across the street, trendy new offices and expensively renovated bungalows tell the story of dramatic social change.

For more than a century, America had a “mass market” approach to housing. Until World War II, developers built one-size-fits-all neighborhoods for a growing urban workforce made up of immigrants from around the world. After the war, suburban detached housing became the standard model. More recently, “baby boomer” households, most including kids, shaped the market. In the late 1990s, however, shifting demographics pointed the country in a new direction, one in which no single group dominates the housing market; America has become, in the words of the Urban Land Institute, “a nation of niches.” Younger, older, and childless households now control a much greater share of housing dollars, and many of these “niche” markets are sinking their dollars into urban neighborhoods. Rising frustration with long commutes has reinforced this trend. During the 1990s, hours

## We need to add a new generation of civic infrastructure — densities, programs, and policies — that enriches people’s lives with a renewed sense of community.

lost to traffic congestion increased by more than 50 percent in the Boston region, a pattern reflected across the country. Last year, *The Boston Globe* reported that 79 percent of respondents in a national poll indicated that “a shorter commute would be a primary factor in choosing their next house.” Last May, *Parade* magazine reported that homebuyers were increasingly choosing a shorter commute over more square footage when buying a new home.

Is this interest in urban neighborhoods a bubble? *The Wall Street Journal* thinks not. It reported last October that “for many, an urban condo is now more luxurious than a... yard” and predicted that the trend is here to stay. *USA Today* reported last April that cities are reclaiming greater shares of regional wealth with the revival of interest in urban neighborhoods.

As housing markets have rediscovered urban neighborhoods, developers, planners, and architects have rediscovered townhouses and other building forms that promote walking and human interaction — and that historically constituted the “civic infrastructure” of community. Yet, as New Urbanist Andres Duany often says, “you can’t have a townhouse without a town.” We need

to add a new generation of civic infrastructure — densities, programs, and policies — that enriches people’s lives with a renewed sense of community.

In my experience, nothing strikes a deeper, or more telling, chord in public meetings than the desire for a nearby walkable Main Street. The neighborhood stores, coffee shops (now often a Starbucks), and pubs on countless Main Streets across urban America represent a sort of neighborhood living room where people can come together without a formal invitation. Goody Clancy undertook a study a few years ago with Pam McKinney, a nationally respected real-estate economist, to determine how many new housing units are required to support a single block of new Main Street retail. The answer turned out to be 1,000 to 2,000 units within a 10- to 15-minute walk. American cities did not require such densities when urban neighborhoods were first built, because earlier generations of residents spent a much greater share of disposable income at local stores. Those days are gone. To support the desire for healthy, vital Main Streets today — in both new and old communities — we need to find housing models that

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can sustain the required densities. Some models already exist: Tent City in Boston's South End; industrial buildings redeveloped into lofts in East Boston; and the redevelopment of single-story retail sites into mixed-use buildings, with ground-floor retail and housing above, along Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge. These are the new paradigms of density that can support walkable urban Main Streets for a new generation.

Vibrant Main Streets by themselves, however, are not enough. We need new programs that take on the roles that church suppers, school fairs, and fraternal-organization lunches once played. Across America, neighborhood residents themselves have great ideas about how to "program" their neighborhoods to build a sense of community. In cities as different as Miami and Cincinnati, people offer the same simple — and compelling — ideas about adding activities to local parks that invite people of diverse ages, races, and incomes to come together: splash fountains that draw kids of all ages on hot days; sports leagues for people with disabilities; neighborhood interpretive programs that tell the stories of past and present residents.

Faced with the daunting task of not only rebuilding their neighborhoods, but also resurrecting a sense of community, local leaders in New Orleans see their schools and libraries as places that can build on the concept of lifetime-learning to take on the role of traditional community centers for 21st-century New Orleans. In Columbus, Ohio, residents of one of the city's poorest — and now fastest changing — neighborhoods have expressed interest in creating a residential version of business improvement districts, whose

paid managers are helping to enliven Main Streets across America, as a way to organize neighborhood festivals and other activities that will bring the neighborhood's newly diverse residents together.

Even if we succeed in rebuilding community at a neighborhood scale, we will lose at a larger scale if we allow dramatically shifting housing demand to price long-time residents out of urban neighborhoods. Decades of experience suggest that the answer does not lie in rent control. Instead, Boston and other cities must tap the extraordinary new wealth flowing into their neighborhoods — wealth that has more than doubled the assessed value of real estate in Boston over the past decade — to invest in creating mixed-income neighborhoods. There is no effective way to prevent housing values from rising, but we can move aggressively to finance and build mixed-income housing, expand inclusionary zoning, provide real-estate tax relief for lower-income residents, and take other steps that will create opportunities for a wide spectrum of Americans to enjoy renewed community.

Accepting diversity does not always come easily in America. East Boston is a living symbol of one success story. Long-time residents have supported proposals for more than 1,600 new "luxury" housing units in recent years and welcomed an influx of new Latino worshippers into their churches. But accepting diversity is the first challenge; recreating the same rich sense of community that enriched lives in homogeneous neighborhoods is the next. ■

David Dixon FAIA is an urban designer and principal at Goody Clancy in Boston. He chairs the AIA Regional and Urban Design Committee.

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# Mitigating Circumstances

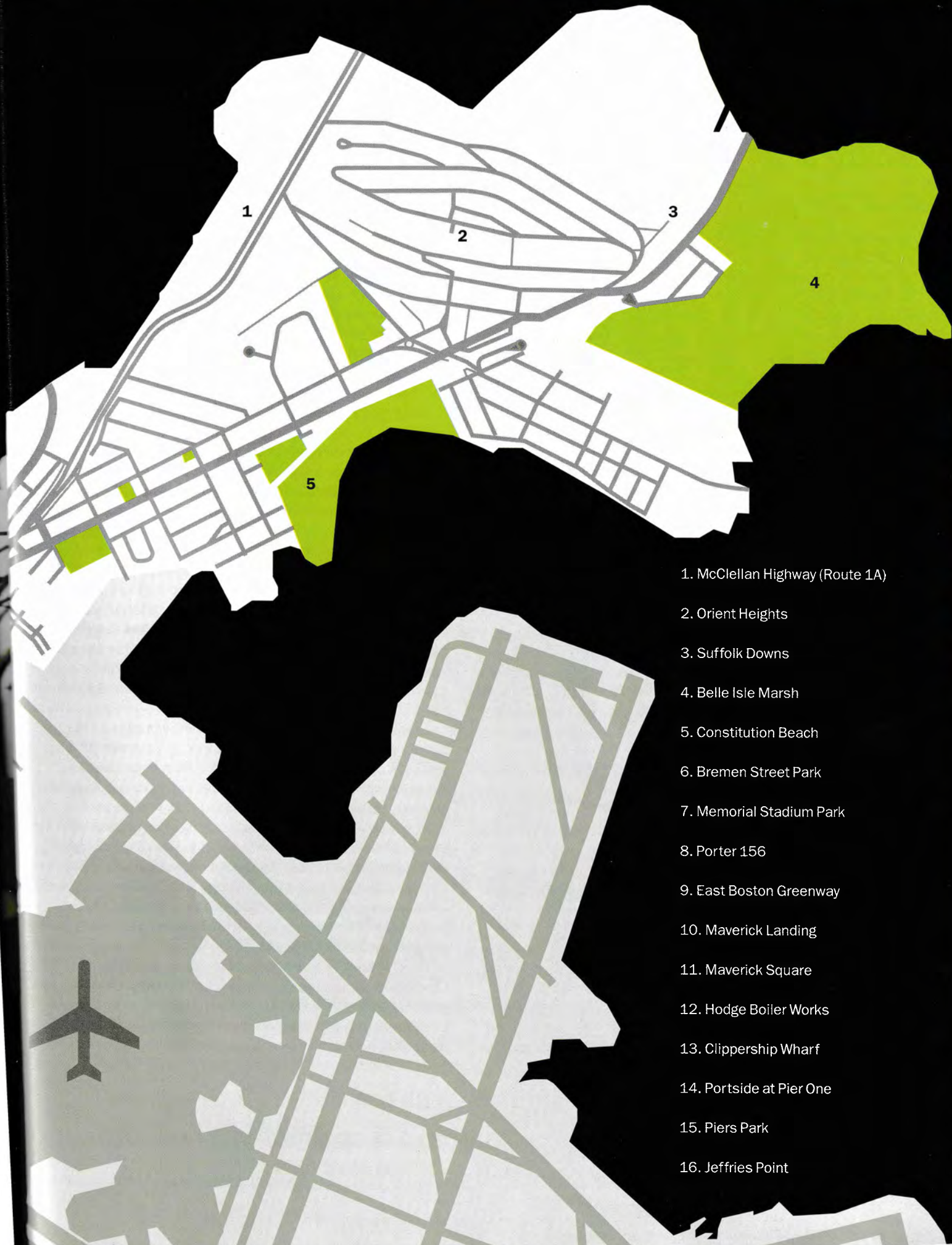
Residents of East Boston have become skilled practitioners of the art of negotiation **By Anthony Flint**

**P**erhaps more than any other community in Massachusetts, East Boston is the place that mitigation built.

For most of the 20th century, the residents of East Boston — predominantly immigrant groups and working families of modest means — have had to put up with an expanded Logan International Airport, an industrial waterfront along Chelsea Creek, tank farms, a predominantly above-ground rapid transit line, state roadways, a major harbor crossing in the form of the Sumner and Callahan tunnels and, since 1992, the Ted Williams Tunnel and related Big Dig roadway configurations. Traffic, pollution, noise, landtakings, and the destruction of open space were all the now-infamous hallmarks of Logan Airport. Pollution from the tailpipes of cars and buses queuing up for the tunnels hung over urban neighborhoods, the damaging effects of which, in terms of particulates and asthma rates, are only now being understood. The Big Dig turned East Boston into a construction site for years.

Ever since the late Jane Jacobs started blocking highways in the 1960s, the only way megaprojects could coexist with a residential





1. McClellan Highway (Route 1A)
2. Orient Heights
3. Suffolk Downs
4. Belle Isle Marsh
5. Constitution Beach
6. Bremen Street Park
7. Memorial Stadium Park
8. Porter 156
9. East Boston Greenway
10. Maverick Landing
11. Maverick Square
12. Hodge Boiler Works
13. Clippership Wharf
14. Portside at Pier One
15. Piers Park
16. Jeffries Point

## The critical turning point was the 1968 destruction of Wood Island Park, the greensward designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, to make way for runway expansion.

community was to soften — or mitigate — all the hardships and inconveniences and negative impacts. Over time, mitigation became a two-pronged strategy: minimize the harm — the noise and the pollution from jets, for example — and provide benefits that make up for the harm. The latter has shaped the public realm in East Boston. Mitigation has become the vehicle for delivering parks and infrastructure that used to be a more fundamental public-sector responsibility.

But while East Boston has become one of the leading models for mitigation in the country — along with other communities wrestling with transportation infrastructure, such as neighborhoods in Chicago and Atlanta — it's been a long and winding road. The process has been erratic and imperfect, and checkered by unfulfilled promises and legal and political wrangling that cloud a sense of coherent long-range planning.

**"I'm not sure I would even call much** of this mitigation," says Fred Salvucci, an East Boston native and former state secretary of transportation, who is now a professor at MIT. "I would call it a series of hard negotiations in a protracted conflict."

The mitigation era manifested in East Boston in many different ways, but most longtime residents identify the critical turning point as the 1968 destruction of Wood Island Park, the greensward designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, to make way for runway expansion. With open space already at a premium, the loss was made more painful by the heavy-handed process — a treasured allée of elm trees was chainsawed without notice. As residents who came to be known as the Maverick Street mothers staged sit-ins to protest truck routes, the chained-to-a-bulldozer community activism that East Boston is famous for was born. The message was clear: economic development would no longer ride roughshod over the community.

Pushed by the state, Massport and Logan set emissions and idling time limits and launched other environmentally sensitive initiatives such as electric baggage carts. The airport paid for the soundproofing of hundreds of homes.

The airport battles were only the beginning of the mitigation story, as activists turned to the matter of roadway infrastructure. Ultimately, the portal of the third harbor tunnel crossing (the Ted Williams Tunnel) was moved from the Orient Heights section to a site within the airport perimeter. The fight over the harbor crossing, following the runway expansion, prompted

Mayor Kevin White to push for greater involvement by City Hall in Massport plans, urging better choices and promoting a parks strategy.

A central idea, says Salvucci, was to use parks as a buffer between the airport and the community, bolstered by a 1964 law that also made it difficult to destroy parks for transportation uses. But greenspace would serve another important function. A hundred years ago, the green and residential areas were in the north and eastern sections of East Boston, and the hard industrial edge was along the southern and western edge and the waterfront. By the 1960s and '70s, the airport dominated the former and the latter had decayed, with warehouses and other structures routinely catching fire. A mitigation-driven open-space plan addressed strategic pieces of this new reality. Parts of Chelsea Creek, essentially an industrial sewer, were cleaned up. The Mario Umama school complex rose up on former shipyard property along Border Street. Massport built a park near elderly housing in Maverick Square. The city purchased a junkyard and turned it into Porzio Park. Massport created the Harborwalk around Jeffries Park cove, and when the airport Hyatt hotel was built, the adjacent edge was turned into walking and jogging paths connected to Jeffries Point. Belle Isle Marsh, the salt marsh south of Beachmont Hill in Revere, once the site of a drive-in theater and under consideration as a storage site for aviation fuel, became a state-run nature preserve.

More recently, the Big Dig became another mitigation engine for East Boston. The roadways leading to the Sumner, Callahan, and Ted Williams tunnels, as well as to a reconfigured internal airport roadway system, became an intricate puzzle that spun off several benefits for the public realm. Access to the East Boston Memorial Stadium Park, itself an earlier product of Massport mitigation, was improved with a new connection to the Cottage Street/Jeffries Point neighborhood. And the Big Dig's re-alignment of roadways along the CSX rail rights-of-way — after years of legal wrangling involving a park-and-fly proposal — ultimately resulted in the Bremen Street linear park and the East Boston Greenway.

Rick Dimino, former transportation commissioner for the City of Boston, longtime East Boston community advocate, and now head of A Better City (formerly the Artery Business Committee), says the Bremen Street Park will be a centerpiece in its own right, particularly with the joint effort by the city, state,

## As residents who came to be known as the Maverick Street mothers staged sit-ins to protest truck routes, the chained-to-a-bulldozer community activism that East Boston is famous for was born.

and Massachusetts Turnpike Authority to convert an old boxespring factory to a YMCA community center. But Bremen Street is also a "crucial link," Dimino says, in a vision for a series of greenspaces from the harbor parks to the salt marshes at the airport's edge and Belle Isle Marsh.

"This is a place where the regional transportation hub and the residential neighborhood face day-to-day challenges that are perhaps unique in the country," Dimino says. The Bremen Street Park is a leading example of how those two elements, otherwise at odds, produced something that has improved the daily lives of residents.

Dimino also cites Piers Park, the Harborwalk, award-winning ventilation building designs, the expansion of the parking freeze to include all of East Boston (to address concerns about increased traffic due to the improved roadway access in the area), as well as neighborhood access improvements that were built into the new airport station on the Blue Line constructed by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority.

The mitigation saga in East Boston is a vivid illustration of how community sensitivity has been built into government and development processes, says David Luberoff, co-author, with Harvard Graduate School of Design dean Alan Altshuler, of the book *Megaprojects*. That sensitivity has increased the cost of doing business, Luberoff says. But it's based on two themes: "One, stop hurting people. And two, how can we at least make you whole."

Today, airports are buying noise easement rights over "noise sheds" in residential neighborhoods. In some places, the themes of mitigation have carried on even after the airport has gone away. At Denver's Stapleton airport, which closed after the new Denver International Airport opened, the developer Forest City is making open space and parks available to abutting neighbors, to smooth the process of transforming that airfield to a new neighborhood.

"There is a sense, whether in Atlanta or Chicago at O'Hare, that the airport is a major economic engine, and those communities negatively affected should get some of the positive economic development," says Luberoff.

Cities such as Cleveland have actually put questions of expansion and mitigation directly to voters. "They said, here are the impacts, and here are the goodies," Luberoff says. But in this area, he says, "We seem to go at it backwards — who can make the most compelling case, what will work. The process gives a leg up to well-financed and tactically savvy groups. But I'm not sure we ever had a real chance to go to East Boston and say, yes or no? Is this worth it? Parks or schools?"

Even if a crazy quilt of benefits has arrived through tortuous means, residents in East Boston continue to see the fruits of mitigation appear almost on a daily basis. Thanks to a rainy spring, the grass at Bremen Street Park, in contrast to the concrete trestles of Big Dig roadways, is vibrant and green. ■

Anthony Flint is public affairs manager at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, a think-tank based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is the author of *This Land: The Battle Over Sprawl and the Future of America* (Johns Hopkins University Press).

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# Who Is East Boston?

Greg Luongo AIA and Tacey Luongo AIA talk with their neighbors



**Greg Luongo AIA**, a lifelong resident of East Boston, is an associate principal at Tsoi/Kobus & Associates in Cambridge. **Tacey Luongo AIA** is the principal of Renny Corporation, an East Boston development company. Her renovation projects, including their own East Boston home, have been featured in *The Boston Globe* and several design publications.

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It used to be, whenever we'd tell people we lived in East Boston, the response was invariably, "Where's that?" or "I've never been there." Mention Logan Airport or Santarpio's Pizza, and we might get a nod of vague recognition.

If, as the popular local slogan says, "East Boston Is Not an Airport" and East Boston is not "EaBo," as was recently suggested by a real-estate marketer, then *who* and *what* is East Boston?

This thriving section of the City of Boston, with a population of 39,000, is enjoying a surge of appreciation for its many urban offerings. East Boston is in a unique position of strength to respond to new development plans and infrastructure proposals, a strength that comes from being a culturally and economically diverse group of neighbors. Newcomers and lifelong residents alike share a sense of home, community, and belonging. This sense of connection imparts a strength that enables East Bostonians to respect and welcome change, and to work together to gracefully guide it into the future.

East Boston has always offered a home to immigrants. Its history has seen waves of hardworking, opportunity-seeking refugees from many cultures, and each has contributed to the strength that remains in place for the current newcomers, who discover a vital, bustling haven of acceptance and opportunity.

Who is East Boston? The East Bostonians interviewed here are a diverse sampling of characters, representing the remarkable mix of people living in this neighborhood. Each one remains here by choice. Their roots deepen daily, and their positive outlooks support the spirit that is palpable in East Boston today.



**Todd Fairchild**, 36, an artist and graphic designer, grew up in an Amherst, Massachusetts housing project, and has lived in many Greater Boston neighborhoods. Todd is active with EBAG (East Boston Artists Group). He met his partner, John Antonellis, just after John had bought and renovated a two-family house in the Eagle Hill area of East Boston.

Working out of his home has exposed Todd to the daytime activities and rhythms of the neighborhood: "It reminds me of

summertime, there is a taste of island living here. There's old and new, there's young and old — a nice mix."

As a gay male, he has been harassed in other towns but is comfortable in Eastie: "Living in East Boston is probably the first time I've felt that I belong, on every level. We feel really lucky that we're in the right place in our home, our relationship, and our neighborhood. We have casual drop-in friends nearby who we have dinner with on a regular basis. I'm involved with

**"I don't think I've scratched the surface of East Boston. I live in a place that I am proud to call home, without apology. I feel like I've been fed sustenance since I've been here."**

Brooklyn, in a way. East Boston is isolated from the nine-to-five ebb and flow; the immigrant community works 24 hours a day, there's no student flux, no mass exodus in the spring and return in the fall. So it has a rhythm that's very different from other towns."

The cultural diversity of Eastie is a big attraction: "I definitely feel at home. I feel integrated. I feel energized as well. I like the clash of what the new immigrants bring to it, the variety of independent entities living side by side. I joke that in the

some community groups. It has a big impact in such a dense neighborhood."

Growing up in subsidized housing, he often observed that tenants could never feel that they owned anything, nor did they feel responsible for maintaining anything for the long term. Eastie's economic diversity and high rate of home ownership are different. "I feel there is a real benefit to a mix of incomes, to have peer pressure to keep up your home."

**Diane Modica**, 59, a granddaughter of Sicilian immigrants, was born and raised in East Boston. Her mother ironed draperies for Filene's, and her father was a longshoreman and bar owner. An attorney practicing in downtown Boston, she is politically active and is a former city councilor. She owns a house in Jeffries Point, which has been in her family for over 75 years, and recently converted it from a three-family to a two-family with a roof deck.

She remembers a very different waterfront: "Marginal Street was where the longshoremen would line up in the morning for the 'pick-up.' There was a wall that ran the whole length, and the foreman would stand on top of the wall and start calling for the gang that was going to work the ships that morning. You could hear all the names being called, Irish and Italian. My grandfather was a watchman — watching to make sure that no one stole any cargo from the ships. Those were the days before containerization, so the cargo was all taken off the hold of the ships by hand, by a winch. It was a pretty risky business for a lot of the guys — if that winch ever let go, and you were down in the hold, you could be a dead man. It was always about the waterfront. We played as kids down there on the waterfront. Even when I was a teenager, when I was in the local CYO [Catholic Youth Organization] Drum and Bugle Corps, we would

have our practices down there. Horns and drums would be blaring and beating and you'd be doing your routines on the waterfront. I don't think there's a day gone by that I haven't looked at water."

With the proposed development, she knows the waterfront is changing yet again: "I just want to see the waterfront optimally used, and in a manner from which we can all benefit from the beauty. The waterfront was, for a very long time, a working waterfront, all about jobs. No one knew about condos on the waterfront, having drinks on the balcony. We'll see people with more money moving in — they find East Boston attractive, probably for all the reasons that I do."

The embarrassing state of the MBTA Blue Line stations is a continuing annoyance: "The Blue Line looks like a war zone. I love Aquarium Station. I love Airport Station. We should have had that at Maverick years ago. I've never seen so many people use Maverick as in the last five, six years. No fear coming home late at night because you've got people all around you. The T hasn't really acknowledged that East Boston is not a nine-to-five community. Their schedules are still dealing with a nine-to-five workday. Maverick is a big issue every day of my life. That's why I can't wait for the ferry service to return."

**"I must have some sort of primal connection to East Boston. Some people are searching their entire lives for a comfort level. I guess I found it early here."**







**Carlos Pemberthy**, 19, a budding recording artist and greenspace activist, came here from Colombia seven years ago with his parents and younger brother when an uncle offered his home until they found jobs. They are in the process of obtaining permanent resident status. Everyone in his family has different fluencies in English, and his mother is taking English classes.

Zumix, a youth group organization focusing on performance art, broadcasting, and music: “Zumix came to our school — I filled out an application and a couple months later, I was in the program. They teach songwriting skills, computer skills, software, and they have the equipment for professional recording. I can schedule sessions with their engineer.”

**“Sometimes people are maybe intolerant of other people’s cultures. But I feel like it is a matter of time. We have the Italian festival. You don’t only see Italians going to the festival, you see everybody going to it.”**

Carlos interns part time at NOAH (Neighborhood of Affordable Housing), a community development corporation: “Basically, the work I do is related to environmental justice. We need to develop green space for the community, like the [Chelsea Creek] Urban Wild. The youth group I belong to takes care of the park — maintenance, making sure the water quality levels are good. We’ve also done some fill studies. We did brochures and we also do monthly events at the Urban Wild to get the community involved, so we go out flyer-ing. I feel integrated into the community because of the work I do. I’m always going to community meetings. Not that I feel discriminated against, but you feel a little bit of tension being a young person, especially with the police. I got pulled over not even a month ago, so the officer asked me who I worked for. I told him NOAH and community projects and stuff like that, and he thought I was joking around. Just because I’m young doesn’t mean that I’m not going to be involved with my community.”

Carlos is working on an album and has been active with

Carlos acknowledges that there is some youth gang activity: “Most of the youth places close around six. Some kids don’t go home and they’re more likely to get in trouble. There are good community groups here for youth, but if they don’t go out there and try to recruit the kids to do the right things, someone else is going to come and recruit them to the wrong stuff, you know what I’m saying? You need to target the older people that are recruiting the young kids. I think the problem has decreased a lot because the police are getting tougher. I do feel safe. There’s always people just randomly acting stupid.”

Thinking about assimilation of immigrants into East Boston, Carlos says: “Anybody that comes here, they’re thinking of the American Dream — they’ll be here for just a couple of years, they’ll make some money, and go back. But that never happens. People end up staying. Right now you see people establishing their lives here, starting a little business, buying houses. If you’re here since you were young, you don’t remember the culture you came from.”



**Elizabeth and Jim Gagnon** bought a three-family fixer-upper in Jefferies Point three years ago after renting in Jamaica Plain for eight years. Elizabeth, 38, is a psychologist in private practice in downtown Boston. Jim, 32, is a property manager for a large Somerville real-estate company, as well as a jazz musician/vocalist.

Their quest for an affordable house brought them to East Boston, after combing Jamaica Plain, Roslindale, and Dorchester. Elizabeth: “The first time we drove into East Boston and drove up

Elizabeth notes that their initial sense of community has deepened: “My car was parked almost two blocks away, and my elderly Italian neighbor knew I had a flat tire. Even though he doesn’t speak English, he came to tell me about it. Everybody knows what’s going on. There was an incident where somebody’s window was broken at three or four in the morning. The entire neighborhood came out, trying to help, and stayed there the whole night to make sure it was safe. On another occasion, we had a power outage, and it turned into a block party.”

**“I am hopeful that the amount of homeownership that’s already in place in East Boston will help buffer it against becoming super-gentrified. A diverse community is what makes it the richest.”**

Webster Street, we were enchanted—it was ‘neighborhoody.’ I will never forget that summer night. Everybody was outside, and I was overwhelmed with this really great feeling.” Jim agrees: “Somehow we found our way over to Piers Park. The ice-cream truck drove by, and people were pouring out of the park. It was a pretty cool scene. It felt like it was an amazing discovery.”

The Gagnons notice an influx of young professionals; their own tenants are in their 20s: “They were really attracted by the mix of ethnicities and the different restaurants and the city feel. The local restaurant scene is very authentic. After living here for a while, I went to the Border Café, and I thought, why would I ever eat here again? This is so not the real thing compared to what I’m used to now.”



**Mary Ellen Welch** is a devoted guardian of the quality of life in East Boston. She teaches second grade at Hugh Rowe O'Donnell School and is a founder and now president of Neighborhood of Affordable Housing (NOAH). A seventh-generation descendent of Irish immigrants, she has always lived in "the First Section," as it was once known, on Webster Street in Jeffries Point.

**"The soul of East Boston is its people. When new people come here, they don't find antagonism, because there is always a group of people working to create an atmosphere that is nurturing and open. And, yes, there are things to get done, a lot of things to fix. But there's an aliveness about this neighborhood that makes a difference."**

Affordable housing is a continuing challenge: "It makes the community stronger and much more rich to have new people coming here all the time. This community should be accessible to everyone who wants to live here, and no one should be excluded because they don't have enough money. I am very wary of what has happened in the North End and Charlestown and parts of South Boston, where people who are working-class or poor or have lived there for a long time can no longer afford to live there. In the '80s, unscrupulous people bought investment properties here and didn't fix them up, and the quality of the housing stock went down. That was an opening for NOAH to buy property at a cheaper price and renovate it. East Boston CDC [Community Development Corporation] does the same. Developers want to put in upscale housing — market-rate rents and condos too small for families — so it's sort of a squeeze play. A house on my street just sold for a million dollars."

NOAH takes multiple approaches to the housing problem: "All the CDCs are trying very hard to create affordable housing opportunities. It doesn't always mean buying or building new buildings, although NOAH is doing two construction projects now. It's also having opportunities like a loan program by the city, especially for people who traditional lending institutions might not want to help. It's building a financial literacy component — teaching people how to save, how to pay off their credit debt, and offering first-time homebuyer classes. It's getting grants to lower or dismiss completely the closing costs. It's a senior home-repair program, which helps seniors stay in their houses. Homeownership is really key to stability in a community. You take pride in your house, your street, your block, and that fuels camaraderie and it fuels self-respect."

NOAH's programs extend beyond housing: "The Community Organizing Program at NOAH teaches people, who might have Spanish as a first language, how to get involved in the political process and in civic issues like clean streets, for instance. Some of them come from countries where they would be killed for doing exactly what we try to do. And some of them are here for that reason — they're not all here for economic benefits. Some of them are here to stay alive. The lives of people are more than just the house."

Transportation is a continuing challenge: "We could be looked upon as a transportation crossroads, but we're actually an island that connects to the core city. The quality of air is very poor, whether it's from the planes or from all of the traffic. And when the new waterfront developments come in, that's going to be 2,000 more people using the tunnels. If we're lucky, they'll only have one

car each, but that's a dream. The developers downsize their expectations about the number of cars; one of them said a lot of people are going to come by bike. It was just so laughable. We've been on the back burner with the T for so long that I think they forget where we are. They proposed to redevelop Maverick Station 20 years ago. The Orient Heights T stop is awful. The Blue Line has been inaccessible — you have to help handicapped people at Orient Heights, and the last time they repaired the escalator at Maverick, anyone who was handicapped had to go to Wood Island Park and then get bused back to Maverick. It's really insulting, and the attitude of the T has been abominable. We've always had a psychological feeling that East Boston people are stepchildren of the city because we're separated by the harbor. They just don't think that we're important enough to service. Blue Line, blue-collar line."

**José Callejas**, 39, left El Salvador in 1981 for Houston, arriving in the Boston area in 1989 and eventually settling in East Boston with his (then) wife, Maria, and three children. He owns Mi Pueblito, a Mexican/Salvadoran restaurant on Border Street near Central Square, a triple-decker home in Jefferies Point, and an investment property on Chelsea Street. He and Maria opened Rosticería Cancún in Maverick Square in 1993. After their divorce, Maria opened another restaurant, Taquería Cancún, José's sister-in-law bought Rosticería Cancún, and José established Mi Pueblito. His children all are attending or have graduated from Catholic schools outside East Boston.

José has seen change in his neighborhood: "We were the first to start selling Mexican food here, and now we have a lot of customers. I'm running this one, Maria's running that one, and we do real good. The people from El Salvador keep growing their businesses — they're hardworking people. They've got two jobs so they've got money to spend. The new generation maybe thinks different."

José eagerly anticipates the new development: "I understand old people don't want anything new here. I understand that. They believe it's going to bring more people and different people, going to change East Boston. But we need changes here, in a good way, not in a bad way. More investment is going to help things. That's why I'm fixing the fence and the garden, and last year I fixed all the apartments. I want to do condos; it's a good opportunity."

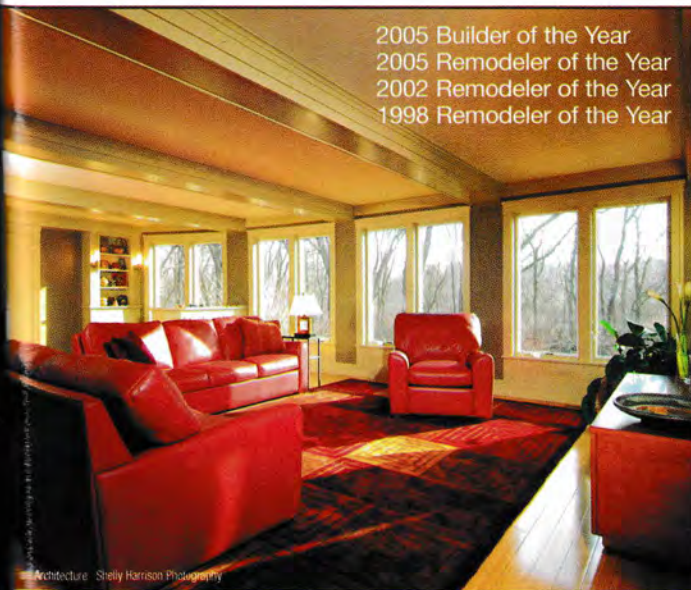
East Boston offers opportunity to immigrants: "These people who have come here already, they're hungry for a better life. When



**"You don't need to go back to your country when you've got your family here."**

you open a business and you've got your small savings, and you see your business growing, you're very happy. You're going to see these people smiling all the time. You've got a reason to smile because you see a difference, and you never believed in your old country you could do this. You never believed you could have \$100,000 in your hand. I tell my kids I never believed that, that I was going to try to make \$40,000 and go back to El Salvador. But I stayed, because I believe that your home is your wife and your kids, and you need to take care of them. You've got a reason to stay."

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“I am very happy with the way I am and the way the community is; I know everybody, and they all love me. East Boston is very good to me and I will never leave it. God bless America.”

**Assunta Luongo**, 78 (center, with her sisters Antonietta Baldassare and Nina Contrada), is an energetic, retired widow, whose life centers on her family and church. She knows everyone in her neighborhood, volunteers at the Don Orione Nursing Home, brings Holy Communion to the house-bound, and sings in the choir. Every inch of her tiny yard in Orient Heights produces roses and tomatoes.

She came to East Boston from Montefalcione, Italy, in 1950, an orphan sponsored by two aunts already living here: “America opened the door for us. We were seven children with no parents, so we grew up by ourselves. It was very hard, but we were happy here.”

She never learned to drive, as everything was close at hand — her work as a stitcher was a block away, her church is three doors away, and her three sons all went to East Boston schools: “I live near everything, so what else do I want? I live right near the MBTA station and the bus and so it’s very convenient. That’s East Boston for me.”

Affordable housing gave the family stability: “In the ’50s the rents were very, very low. We paid \$27 a month for four rooms.” She was finally able to save up money to buy the building from her landlady, providing the landlady could stay there rent-free for the rest of her life (“she lived a long time”). For many years, it was three Luongo households in the three-family building; the mailman finally gave up sorting the mail. Today she rents out two units of the triple-decker.

She welcomes newcomers, including new immigrants: “I came across, the others came across, too. I’m happy to see change.”

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**Ralph Vertuccio**, 62 (above, with his sister Linda), is the owner of Vertuccio Funeral Home. The grandson of Italian immigrants, he is the owner of the 160-year-old historic Eagle Hill home of the legendary shipbuilder, Donald McKay; he has lived in the house since the age of seven.

The house was central to his own family history: "My parents had the Friendly Auto School business from the '50s until about 1968, and my mother became friendly with all of the people who would sign up for lessons. They all became friends of the family and we always had a house full of company. They rented out the first floor of the big house, so we used to take that over for parties, and my mother did all of the cooking. Linda, my sister, married the boy downstairs."

His involvement in the community started young, with a tight circle of lifelong friends: "In this house, we founded the East Boston Historical Commission. Mike Laurano was very diligent in obtaining the history of old East Boston from the early 1800s to the 1970s and '80s, compiling it, giving slide shows. We were active in

politics, too, as young men just approaching 21. We were all elected to the Democratic Ward Committee."

Politics colored life in East Boston: "East Boston had such a brilliant history back in the time of John F. Kennedy's grandfather,

**"I've never moved, I've never gone anywhere. It's so hard for me to leave here, I love this house. I belong to another era. I do."**

Honey Fitz. Politics was how you got things done, so you became active in politics. That's how you secured power, and you placed all of your friends and all of your family in jobs, in positions where they could help each other. It's very different now, not nearly as interesting. And the youth of today have virtually no interest in that stuff. They wouldn't form campaigns the way we did as kids. As teenagers we worked for politicians, writing envelopes, stuffing envelopes, putting up signs. I don't think you'd find that anywhere now. Of course, everything was redistricted, so politics doesn't have that real local flavor that it once had — somebody from the North End could be running to represent you here in East Boston. You don't know them, so you don't have the passion." ■

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## THE EAST BOSTON HOUSE

[www.thisoldhouse.com/toh/tvprograms/currenthp/0,16515,,00.html](http://www.thisoldhouse.com/toh/tvprograms/currenthp/0,16515,,00.html)

*This Old House* ventures to Eastie to renovate a 1916 two-family house a block from the water. The two owners want to do a small-scale renovation on a limited budget. No teak, cherry, or granite. Just the basics...and a wicked nice view.

## FRIENDS OF BELLE ISLE MARSH

[www.friendsofbelleislemarsh.org](http://www.friendsofbelleislemarsh.org)

The 350-acre Belle Isle Marsh Reservation, located in East Boston, Revere, and Winthrop, is the largest surviving salt marsh in Boston Harbor. The mission of the Friends of Belle Isle Marsh is to preserve the marsh and publicize its importance as an urban nature laboratory and resource. Go to bed early if you want to join them for birding. Meeting time is half an hour before sunrise.

## LOGAN AIRPORT

[www.massport.com/logan](http://www.massport.com/logan)

You need this site. Check out flight status, parking conditions, weather and, most important, figure out where you're going to buy your "Meal to Fly." (You don't ever want to buy one of those onboard "snack boxes.")

## EASTBOSTON.COM

[www.eastboston.com](http://www.eastboston.com)

The news of the world and the neighborhood, through an East Boston filter. Check out links for East Boston history.

## MAVERICK: DISAPPEARING VIEWS

[www.themavericksite.org](http://www.themavericksite.org)

This site is the brainchild of Jennifer Gilbert, a graduate of the MIT School of Architecture and Planning, and documents the past and present of Maverick Gardens (now Maverick Landing), a 414-unit public housing project in East Boston that was redeveloped by the Boston Housing Authority. Includes interviews with residents who lived through the race riots of the 1970s and traces the outcome of the revitalization program.

## EAST BOSTON EATS

<http://eastbostoneats.com>

An East Boston resident and his mom started a tradition of trying a different restaurant every Thursday night. They encountered great food, good prices, wonderful people, and no crowds. They want to get the word out that East Boston is a dining destination. Be careful what you wish for.

We're always looking for intriguing websites — however mitigated the connection to architecture. Send your candidates to: [epadjen@architects.org](mailto:epadjen@architects.org).

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# 11 Meridian Street

I love reading the real-estate transactions published periodically in *The Boston Globe*, and not just because of the voyeuristic thrill I get snooping on the neighbors (they paid *how much* for that house?!). The property-transfer notices list the names of buyers and sellers as well as the price, so they are a kind of miniature anthropological study, a lens on the changing city. When Murphy sells to Nguyen, or Lombardi sells to Rodriguez, you know the neighborhood is in transition. And when Rodriguez sells to Herrera, you know the transition is complete.

In East Boston, a neighborhood I know better than anyplace even though it's been 20 years since I moved out, the names on the deeds have been flipping like flapjacks. Between the 1990 and 2000 census, while Boston as a whole was shrinking, East Boston gained 6,000 residents, most of them immigrants. It saw more demographic change over the decade than any other section of the city.

I lived in East Boston for five idealistic, happy years from 1978 to 1982, much of that time running a small shoestring weekly called the *East Boston Community News*. It was my first newspaper job, and I imprinted on the neighborhood like a newborn duckling. I would walk to the converted second-floor apartment near Maverick Square that served as the newspaper's office, reveling in every greeting or complaint I encountered along the way. Could we do something about the vacant lot on Bremen Street that was collecting trash? Would we be covering the big meeting on the piers

development? Why did we stop running the church bingo times?

We rented 11 Meridian Street, above Lee's fabric shop, from an Italian tailor for \$115 a month: two large rooms with no central heating. The darkroom enlarger was suspended over the bathtub. When we needed heat, we cranked up the oven. We had meetings of the all-volunteer staff there, typeset and laid out the paper using hot wax and Letraset, fretted constantly over money, and plotted how to empower ordinary people in a low-income neighborhood under siege from airport expansion, urban social ills, and an often indifferent government.

While 1970s activism was giving way to smug self-absorption, Jimmy Carter's earnestness to Ronald Reagan's chauvinism, and protest-rock to disco, the *Community News* was an institution that knit East Boston together. We didn't make any pretense to objectivity; ours was advocacy journalism, on the side of the neighborhood in every battle. For neophytes, we were surprisingly effective at muckraking: shaming absentee landlords into repairing their properties; keeping ever-vigilant of airport expansion; even conducting an arson investigation into property owners with "more than their share of bad luck."

One advantage East Boston had in those days was coherence. According to the 1980 US census, the neighborhood then was 96 percent white. Irish and (mostly) Italian immigrants had been settled there for two generations, and a certain unity had been forged through shared adversity.



But nothing is permanent, least of all living, breathing cities. The *Community News* ceased publication in 1989, and today its office is immigrant housing again; the Italian tailor is now a Spanish-American grocery and convenience store. According to the most recent census, Eastie is now 50 percent white and 39 percent Latino.

The fact is, the seeming stability in the 1970s was just a lull between demographic shifts. When I tried to sell ads, I cajoled and flattered Jewish merchants whose families had long since decamped to Lynnfield or Peabody but who still operated Broadway Stationers in Central Square, the Consumers Credit Union, and the cavernous "seconds" clothing store, Lacy's (motto: "Tiny imperfections you will hardly notice").

Now they say million-dollar condos are coming to East Boston. For all our coverage of land-use issues, gentrification was never much of a worry. Today I watch the scaffolding rise and the neighbors struggle for a living — and a voice — and I think: This place could really use a community newspaper. ■

Renée Loth is editorial-page editor of *The Boston Globe*.