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Transforming Public Housing: Conflicting Visions for Harbor Point

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What attracts people to a particular community and provides them with a sense of connection? Is there some predictable combination of the physical environment and social relationships that contributes to one’s feelings about a residential environment? Can people with very different social, economic, and cultural backgrounds coexist in the same community, despite their disparate experiences? These questions frame our interest in the transformation of Boston’s Columbia Point public housing project to Harbor Point, a 1,283 unit, mixed-income, multiethnic community.1

Social experiments in mixed-income and multiethnic housing stand out amidst the more homogeneous residential settings typical in the contemporary United States. “It’ll be a cold day in hell before people of different incomes live together in the same neighborhood,” U.S. Rep. Joseph Moakley (D-Mass.) said he was told when plans to resurrect Columbia Point were first discussed. “They got the temperature right, but the geography was wrong,” he responded to those gathered in Dorchester, Boston on January 25, 1987, to witness the first physical evidence that Columbia Point would be transformed into Harbor Point.2
The press grew to have a generally negative attitude toward the concession of Columbia Point to Harbor Point that was due, in part, to a number of valid questions that they raised, but then failed to accurately see how the answers were being played out at Harbor Point. ...

There was a great deal of skepticism in the press about whether a true partnership could be formed between a group of minority low-income residents who were predominantly women and a development company that was white and male. This skepticism continued while the press made little attempt to talk to the more active residents and despite the visible success of the conversion.

— David I. Connelly, President, Housing Opportunities Unlimited

No sooner did Monkley formally welcome the bulldozers than predictions of doom and warnings about untold social assumptions poured forth in the media. Three days after the groundbreaking, an editorial in The Boston Globe referred to the proposed transformation as a "social experiment" and "new vision" but warned of the dangers of mixing very different socio-economic classes in the same physical surroundings. While purporting to challenge the assumptions underlying the new development, however, critics employed their own unstated criteria for assessing the social and physical indicators of success. Harbor Point would be a success, they said, if residents could come to share a common set of values and behaviors.

We argue that the built environment is culturally constituted and mediated and, therefore, that any assessment of people's residential experience must take into account the complex, imaginative, and sometimes unexpected interplay of social forces. At Harbor Point, many visions of community have always existed simultaneously and those visions continue to change.

In this article we explore the dynamics between the way the media represented the Harbor Point community and the experience of living there. The images of the old Columbia Point and the emerging Harbor Point presented by the media have had a disproportionately strong and lasting effect not only on how outsiders perceive Harbor Point but also on how the tenants feel about themselves and their homes. These representations also influenced the marketing of the community to prospective tenants.

We also analyze the tenants' and the media's conflicting concepts about what constitutes healthy social relations and successful physical design. By "physical design" we mean more than the design of the built environment itself; we mean the way that people use space and interact with one another within designed spaces.

The Media Search for Success or Failure

The program to redevelop Columbia Point began in 1982 through the joint efforts of the Columbia Point Citizens' Task Force, comprised of an elected board of tenants from the public housing project and the Boston Housing Authority and the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Among the initial agreements was a guarantee that at least 400 of the new units be set aside for current public housing residents. These units were to be equivalent in design and level of amenities to the market-rate units and were to be dispersed uniformly throughout the community. It was also agreed that the three organizing groups would jointly run the design, resident selection, and development processes.

As the redevelopment of Harbor Point progressed and in debates about its financial viability raged, anticipation about what the community would be like grew and many presumptions for success emerged. Media depictions of the old public housing project contrasted markedly with images of the new Harbor Point. Columbia Point was described as a "wasteland of despair" and a "colossal symbol of failure." Conversely, the new Harbor Point has been described as a "monumental experiment," a "social experiment," and even "miracle." Some writers had high expectations for a radical transformation of residential life but also expressed doubts about mixed-income and mixed-race housing. They saw Harbor Point as a "daring test of whether upper-income tenants can live side-by-side with former public housing tenants" in a "luxury waterfront development." Success was often thought to hinge on erasing any memory of Columbia Point public housing and on changing the behavior of the former tenants of the project. "Can Columbia Point Be Harbor Point?" asked one reporter. "The answer," she continued, "depends in part on how completely the poor can be melded into model tenants, how receptive modest renters will be to diversity and how successfully the needs of both will be met." The media assumed the reasons former public housing residents were attracted to this new development were obvious: vastly improved living conditions and proximity to a better class of people. The attraction for market-rate tenants was considered to be less obvious: proximity to downtown, physical amenities such as waterfront views of Boston, a pool, tennis courts, and, for some, a pioneer-like interest in meeting people of diverse background in a safe setting.

Outside housing experts equated the success of mixed-income housing with a magic formula for the proportion of low-, moderate-, and upper-income tenants. Providing a middle-income buffer with good management and ensuring racial
and ethnic diversity within income groups (so it is harder to tell who is subsidized and who is not) were thought to be crucial elements of success. Subsidies for moderate-income tenants, however, were removed from the final project. With this unexpected prospect of greater income polarization, journalists advised future market-rate tenants to "come with an understanding" of the poorer tenants and to "abandon" any expectations of displacing them. Former public housing tenants were warned of the "subtle pressures" they would face living among people whose upper-income lifestyles "they may never share." They were also reminded, however, that they, not market-rate tenants, were the original occupants of this run-down territory. Within weeks of Harbor Point's opening, journalists were highlighting specific social problems: disagreements over the replacement of a social service agency that had helped the former public housing residents, rules requiring the elderly to give up their pets, and charges by some former public housing residents of unfair evictions. A few market-rate tenants charged that "gangs" of young, subsidized residents harassed them when they jogged. Counter-charges by subsidized tenants asserted that they and their children, who, they claimed, were not gang members, were being unjustly harassed and forced to abide by biased regulations that favored others' lifestyles. The media took advantage of these confrontations to express their doubts about whether subsidized and market-rate tenants could share a residential environment and to wonder whether it was inevitable that Harbor Point would revert to its old public housing incarnation. Paradoxically, the very qualities about Harbor Point that were used to attract prospective tenants and create media interest, such as the diversity of its residents, were those very qualities many observers felt must be eradicated or, at best, carefully monitored and controlled, for the project to succeed.

Tenants Speak

Based on our research at Harbor Point we question the popular conception that success is predicated upon the development of a homogenous vision of community. We also question whether representations by non-tenants, many of which derive from media accounts, actually match the realities of tenants' lives and their feelings about the community.

Most prescriptions for success assume a simple "us versus them" dichotomy, be it a dichotomy based on class, race, or ethnicity. However, when tenants were asked what they felt the elements for success to be, many spoke of the importance of being willing to address problems constructively. For instance, during the controversy over teenage behavior in the early days of occupancy, some market-rate and subsidized tenants got together and suggested that the problem was part of a larger clash of interests between children and childless adults over appropriate uses of space and time. They believed changes would follow from positive interaction between the two groups.

Yet, there are differences in tenants' perceptions and expectations of Harbor Point that go beyond whether or not one has children. Even among tenants who share a commitment to making Harbor Point work there are subtle differences that result, in part, from cultural and economic backgrounds and which should be made explicit.

To this end we wanted to compare individuals' ideas about what Harbor Point should be, physically, socially, and emotionally. Would they find any patterns that correlate with their past residential experiences? Would people's expectations change the longer they lived there or the more involved they were with the community? How might these expectations compare with the views set forth by the media? To answer these questions, we asked people what their feelings were about Harbor Point now, what their concepts were about good and bad residential environments, what their past residential experiences were, and what their expectations of Harbor Point were before they moved in.

We conducted interviews and had informal discussions with a wide range of people who live and/or work at Harbor Point. These include members of the Harbor Point Task Force (which comprises both former Columbia Point and market-rate tenants, and which is responsible for making day-to-day decisions), tenants with different levels of involvement with the community, people involved with the community youth center, social
service organizations, management, and children. Many of our informants were women who raised their children in Columbia Point public housing and saw active in the transformation. They remember when Columbia Point was a good place to live, before government subsidies were cut and buildings fell into disrepair, when public housing was home primarily to the working poor; before it became a place where, as one woman said, “in- credible families” with histories of drug use and crime were “dumped,” many having been displaced when their homes were razed.\textsuperscript{13} The market-rate tenants with whom we spoke were younger, without children and brought up in middle-class neighborhoods, although several had lived in student housing immediately before moving to Harbor Point; most are task force members.

The perceptions of Harbor Point expressed by former Columbia Point and newer tenants overlap in some areas, but are significantly different in others. The definitions of success, for example, vary depending on where one is coming from, economically and culturally, and what one expects of the future.

Market-Rate Tenants’ Response: Market-rate tenants, with their more secure and comfortable backdrops, perceive the present condition of the community differently than the former Columbia Point tenants.

While some market-rate tenants were attracted to Harbor Point by the prospect of living in a culturally diverse community, many moved there because the buildings and community were physically attractive and close to downtown Boston, as had been anticipated by the media. When describing a good community they were at least as concerned with having adequate green spaces, trees, amenities, and a modern environment as they were with having safety, cleanliness, and community. They saw Harbor Point as a place that has great potential but has not yet arrived, describing it as “a challenge,” “changing,” “problems,” “improvements,” and “learning together” and using action-oriented phrases such as “needs constant work” and “trying to be maintained.” They saw it as safe and clean, but with qualification: “relatively safe” and “clean but needs improvement.” They also commented on its difference from other places, using images such as “unique” and “diverse.” The longer these tenants live there and the more they become involved with other tenants, the more their feelings about the community, and the importance of community, deepen.

Former Columbia Point Tenants’ Response: Columbia Point tenants, who had lived through the worst that public housing has to offer and who had feared being displaced up to the moment they moved into Harbor Point, described their current environment using positive, unqualified adjectives “safe,” “quiet,” “community,” and “caring.” Significantly, they

I just read the other day that some kid got shot on Beacon Hill. I thought, the minute my feet hit Harbor Point property I feel totally safe. I wonder how many people who live in the city can say that. I want to be able to say that in five years.

I would want to make sure the property was kept up. I think physical neglect of a property is the first sign of trouble. Of course, it would have to still be mixed income in five years. Market and low income people living side by side.

— Marguerite Maclean, Resident

Harbor Point will continue to be a success if the physical conditions remain high quality, the social environment remains attractive to market residents and supportive of low-income residents, new development occurs on the peninsula, and the waterfront park is used by people from all parts of the city.

— Doug Hauseman, Office of the Mayor

I would look at several characteristics: a majority of the former public housing residents continuing to reside at Harbor Point; a substantial reduction in the rates of crime, drugs, and violent behavior from the rates during the days of Columbia Point; a higher number of youth graduating from high school and going on to further their educations; the development of a real neighborhood to be judged by the amount of new residents and Columbia Point residents that are involved in community activities and events; and an increased rate of employment or education of all residents.

— David J. Connelly, President

Housing Opportunities Unlimited

Continued high standards and upkeep of the grounds and property; low tenant turnover and high tenant satisfaction; increased numbers of children taking advantage of scholarships and academic opportunities, including a higher rate of children graduating from high school; continued high resident participation in community-wide events; maintaining an active and diverse Harbor Point Community Task Force; financial stability and increasing capital.

— Etta Johnson

Harbor Point Community Task Force

The door comments and those by David J. Connelly and Marguerite Maclean elsewhere in this article are from statements read to the Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence.
focused not on physical appearance or design but on a sense of well-being, of arrival, of something that has become.

One's immediate past environment helps to explain different assessments of Harbor Point. In describing what constitutes a good community, the former public housing tenants never mentioned amenities, trees, or a modern environment—characteristics of the designed environment important to many of the newer tenants. They did, however, include other elements of the physical environment, such as "safety" and "cleanliness," and also used terms that stressed the importance of social interaction: "friendly neighbors," "communication," and "involvement." Even when describing the myriad of problems faced as Columbia Point, the women and children still expressed a strong attachment to their homes. They used words relating to their feelings, people, and the memories associated with them, both positive and negative. They did not use words relating to specific physical structures.

Comparative Perspectives: It is instructive to compare these reactions with those of some of the younger market-rate tenants. They described their recent student-oriented environments as "crowded," "turbulent," "noisy," and "dirty." All of these words could have been used to describe the Columbia Point public housing project. Yet, only the word "dirty" was used by former public housing tenants, for whom the outstanding memories of the housing project were highly emotive: "fear," " Shameful surroundings," "terrible," "exasperation," and "unresponsive." Although the students' descriptors were not positive, they were not indicative of being emotionally distraught and feeling out of control of one's life. Furthermore, the students considered their housing to be transitional, what was expected between finishing university and entering the professional job market. Their former residence was not meant to be a place where one had to raise children; it was not like the communities in which they themselves had been raised.

Like many reporters, the newer, middle-class tenants share certain perceptions about appropriate public behavior that sometimes conflict with those of the former public housing tenants. One former Columbia Point tenant, a woman who now lives in a Harbor Point townhouse, said she was told by security guards that she could not sit on her front stoop to socialize because she has a bad yard. Yet, she observed, people who live in the apartment complexes are allowed to sunbathe in the very public grassy mall. Whereas management might see a conceptual difference between these two types of areas, she did not. In a similar vein, only newer tenants considered "noise" to be a signifier of a bad community, while "quiet" was used by both categories of tenants to describe a good community. Concepts of when and which types of sound become a disturbance relate to people's past experiences and cultural background; there are no universal norms by which to judge.

Future Visions

Many long-time residents are aware that there are several perspectives represented at Harbor Point and about Harbor Point by outsiders. What disturbs them is the higher value placed on outsiders' views, as well as the implication that the absence of a single way of life and the existence of multiple perspectives are by definition problematic. They feel they have, in some sense, been set up by the media to fail. As one African-American woman said to me, "From the media, you would expect that a white woman would see me and cross the street. But you'd be amazed at the conversations that come up while waiting for the shuttle bus. People are happy you say 'Hi.' Who are they [the media] to say we can't live here next door to the rich
I have learned a lot of lessons here, like how to give people the benefit of the doubt. I remember during construction we used to cut through the property. It’s a large development, and with all the building the site was always changing. One day I was cutting through the site and realized I was lost. Really lost. Here I was with a briefcase and beers wandering through these buildings and a large group of black kids were watching me. I started to feel a little scared. The next thing I knew, one kid asked me if I was lost and they all walked me home. Right to my doorstep! I never felt afraid here again.

— Marquetae Maclean, resident

because we’re poor? Because you have money are you more human, a better resident?”

Harbor Point tenants, who generally are motivated to make the community succeed, tend to approach their differences in ways that avoid pitting themselves across class or racial lines, and together they are addressing a number of common concerns. They also emphasize the importance of time in adjusting to their new residence. This contrasts markedly with outside observers who searched for evidence of success or failure immediately after the bricks and mortar were in place.

Those who participated in the transformation of Columbia Point into Harbor Point, whether former public housing tenants or members of the non-resident management and design teams, have particular sets of expectations and views of success. For them, the bulk of the struggle is over and although problems remain, the cup is half full. For some of the newer market-rate tenants, many of whom share a similar socioeconomic background with reporters, the cup is half empty; there is a larger agenda yet to be filled.

That the former public housing tenants do not emphasize the imperfections in their present community does not mean that they do not recognize them. We suggest that their priorities are different than those of the newer tenants. For people coming from a self-defined unsatisfactory environment in which they felt limited ability to control changes, the cause of gaining control of one’s life is central. This includes ensuring basic security — of person and of mind. For the market-rate tenants, whose past has enabled them to take control for granted, basic security is implicitly expected and is only part of what the home environment must have to be successful.

Regardless of previous histories of involvement, and despite one’s age or background, active participation in Harbor Point’s community life creates bonds that open up possibilities for much greater tenant interaction and satisfaction. One newer resident, who expressed both surprise and delight at the personal benefits of living in a diverse community, recognized how much this experience was enhanced after becoming an active member of the task force. Similar feelings were expressed by residents who were building captains, volunteer fundraisers, and organizers or participants in community events.

The importance of participation for developing a sense of community context raises the question, however, of whether one’s stage in the life cycle, the presence of children in the household, and/or tenant mobility may prove to be as significant as class, race, and culture in affecting Harbor Point’s future. Clearly, any evaluative study must take this complex interplay of social forces into account.

Our observations suggest that one element of success may lie in what others have pointed to as the significant obstacle: diversity. Although diversity yields multiple perspectives, the dynamic that is created when people from different backgrounds push themselves to understand and communicate with others has the potential to create a foundation for community and for change. We anticipate that as time goes by, the expectations of residents will change due to new experiences.

Standards set by the media about how space ought to be used and how people of different backgrounds ought to interact should not become determinants of success. These measures influence tenants’ feelings about themselves in a negative way, and they represent Harbor Point as a risky experiment to the outside world, directly affecting its financial survival. While we do not believe there is any predictable combination of design factors and social relationships essential for successful community building, we do believe that each community must find its own balance between the two. The voices of residents must be given primary. The general public, media, designers, planners, and others involved with creating and representing communities must modify their assessments as Harbor Point continues its process of transformation.

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Notes
1. In this article, we use the term community broadly, to reflect its non-specific usage by Harbor Point residents and the media.
3. Media coverage of the Harbor Point community has been extensive. By the end of 1991, 40 articles had appeared in The Boston Globe alone.
averaging three per month in 1990. These articles, as well as ones in architecture and planning journals, raised doubts about the likely success of Harbor Point.


12. Carablos, "Security Issue Provides a Test .... ".

13. Our association with the community began in 1991 with short visits and includes observations we made while living there in August, 1992.

14. Interestingly, Boston media play down the fact that the public hearing remains themselves, mostly women, were the main forces behind finding a developer and realizing the transformation. (Early coverage of Harbor Point in the New York Times featured the role of women and included many quotes from them.)


16. To middle- and upper-class people, parks like the gravy mall are appropriate places for passive activities, such as sunbathing. See Galen Crant, The Politics of Park Design (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982).

17. On the other hand, they consider front areas, including yards, to be places where one person's self to others as one wants to be seen, similar to the front rooms in a house. In working-class urban communities, the area in front of one's house becomes an extension of the room like the streets, it is an important place for socializing with neighbors. See Marc Fried and Peggy Glodchuck, "Some Sources of Residential Satisfaction in an Urban Slum," Journal of the American Institute of Planners 27 (4): 305-315 (1961).

18. One of these concerns is to create more community building activities for young people, who comprise 26 percent of the population. Another is to develop more commercial enterprises, especially food stores, on the premises or nearby.