From Project to Community: The Redesign of Columbia Point

Joan E. Goody

Columbia Point peninsula, only 10 minutes south of downtown Boston, has a history of being used for activities the city would rather forget. This former mud flat on the harbor was a garbage dump, then a World War II prisoner of war camp, and, finally, the Columbia Point public housing project — the largest such complex in New England and a notorious failure. But in the past decade the housing project has undergone a dramatic transformation. Now it is Harbor Point, a 44-acre, 1,283-unit mixed-income residential community with all new or radically renovated housing and public amenities that would rival those found in a new suburban development. The low-income tenants in residence at the start of this changeover still live there, and they have been joined by many other residents from a variety of different backgrounds.

It took enormous effort (and much time, money, and political persuasion) to accomplish this. Looking back from the perspective of the lead architect and planner of Harbor Point, I believe there are lessons to be learned here: about how to bring people together in a re-formed community, about what architectural forms can accommodate the varied lifestyles of people with very different incomes and backgrounds, about a way
to save some of our devastated public housing projects, and about the role of designers and architects in helping achieve this.

I have been involved with the project since 1978 when Joe Corcoran, the lead developer, asked me to insert with some tenants and talk about ways to improve the desolate (and almost three-quarters abandoned) 1,504-unit Columbia Point housing project. Isolated from other neighborhoods, the residents felt cut-off. The project, composed of 30 almost identical yellow brick buildings organized in a maze-like street pattern, was an alienating and disorienting place, and it began to deteriorate quickly after construction, becoming housing of last resort. By the 1960s people were already talking about how to rehabilitate it, and there followed over the years a number of studies (with tenant involvement) and small-scale attempts to make physical changes. But the magnitude of the project and its problems thwarted everything short of this massive infusion of money, political support, and developer-tenant tenacity.

Clearly, the well-intended "tower-in-the-park" model for multifamily housing (after which this and many other housing projects were modeled) had failed in ways its proponents had never imagined. The intent was to improve the lives of "shanty-dwellers" with fireproof, tuberculosi-free structures — buildings made of noncombustible concrete frames and brick cladding, shaped to provide cross-ventilation for every apartment, and set apart from each other to allow light in every window. The buildings accomplished their goals: Boston has never had a death by fire in a public housing project, nor does one hear complaints about dark and dank rooms in them.

What was not foreseen was that cross-ventilation was achieved at the cost of community. To reach even the same densities as on the old, narrow streets, buildings set farther apart had to be higher and bigger. More families shared a common entry and an elevator; fewer families were near enough to ground level to oversee their children playing outside or any other street-level activities. And, because of the large parking lots and other open areas separating the buildings, there were no real streets or focus for the kind of activities that create a sense of community — meeting, chatting, and recognizing neighbors (and strangers).

Corcoran knew the area from his boyhood and was convinced that the only way to improve such a place permanently was to change the tenancy from all low-income households to mixed-income (with both integrated throughout the site) and by doing so with the current tenants as his partners. He and his business associate, Joe Mullins (also from the area), brought their idea directly to the tenants, who agreed. I recall one, Terry Maier, saying at an early meeting, "If we need rich folks living here to bring the services out, then let's get the rich folks." There may be many reasons to advocate mixed-income housing, but certainly the clout of wealthier people in
getting better police, transportation and other services is a strong one. Neither developer nor tenants had a clear vision about what a renewed Columbia Point would look like. They just knew it should be radically different from what it was.

**Designing the Transformation**

It took four years for the Boston Housing Authority, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to agree that it would be a mistake merely to renovate an old run-down low-income project on this isolated site. A 1979 tenant-sponsored study by Carr, Lynch Associates helped convince them and formed the basis for a request for proposal to developer/architect teams in 1982.

The message from the tenants (both from the study and our earlier meetings) was clear: They wanted to live in a “normal” neighborhood, one that didn’t look or work like a project, one that felt safe for walking around and letting their children out to play. They wanted conveniently arranged, reasonably sized apartments (ideally with some private space at ground level) and nearby parking places, not the existing unsafe and remote large lots. They knew that shared entries for families with children could never be made secure: kids forget their keys; doors are kept ajar. Elevators were a further impediment to parents keeping track of children playing outside. (In buildings exclusively for the elderly, however, elevators were regarded as a convenience.) The images in the Carr, Lynch study were of a pre-dominantly low-rise community with new townhouses interspersed among renovated three-story structures on curved roads and culs-de-sac (reminiscent of suburban development).

Our first sketches (in 1978) predicted the Carr, Lynch study, and although they grew from similar planning principles, our image was one of houses facing each other across narrow streets, a pedestrian-oriented neighborhood that we felt could better achieve the tenants’ goals for a new community. Corcoran had no fixed ideas about the site design, and we began to explore the forms of successful neighborhoods in Boston (Dorchester, the South End, the Back Bay). We believed they could provide clues to the design elements that brought people together in the public (or semi-public) realm and supported opportunities for social interaction and a sense of community and safety. We saw common features in all these neighborhoods: orthogonal, connective street patterns as opposed to dead-end culs-de-sac; curbside parking; individual front doors and small porches, stoops, or porches facing the street that bring neighbors into contact as they come and go; and private rear yards and/or shared spaces that provide opportunities for “over-the-fence” socializing.

In these urban areas, neighbors saw and talked to each other as they walked from their parked cars to their front doors, sometimes stopping on adjacent stoops to chat. Or they
Left: Central mall and water's edge Park, Harbor Point.
© Alex MacLean Landslides.
Below: Interior street, showing mix of redeveloped high-rise and new townhouse construction and view of downtown Boston to the north.
Photo by Anton Grassl.
The street system is the most important feature, the armature which connects the various buildings and the residents to each other and, angled to give views of the Harbor at the end of each street, makes this great attraction available to all. Every design decision was made to reinforce the strength of the streets — to make them attractive and thus safe, to encourage people to use them and meet their neighbors.

— Juan E. Goody

Mid-rise buildings frame Harbor Point's central mall. The first-floor units have direct private entries to the street.
cy that characterizes older places that have developed over the years and to avoid both the rows of identical buildings and the harsh primary colors that proclaim a project.

After providing each townhouse and ground-level apartment with its own private rear patio, we made the rest of the open area within the blocks into common greens that encourage group activities among those whose homes surround them. But we did not want to create a secondary path system or locate parking in the rear, which might divert pedestrian traffic from the streets and front entries. In a residential community of this density there is often not enough foot traffic to populate both front and back, and we wanted to concentrate activity in the front to make the streets feel safe.

Boston’s nineteenth-century neighborhoods have many positive features, but they do not provide adequate parking for twentieth-century residents. Below-grade and other structured parking can help provide the desired "sizable" density but subsurface conditions and budget limitations allowed very little of this at Harbor Point. Comparing the coarser grain of the Harbor Point street pattern to the nearby nineteenth-century Dorchester neighborhood (which is perennially short of parking spaces) gives a sense of how the older street pattern must be adapted to accommodate contemporary automobile demands.

Most parking for both the new townhouses and the renovated three-story buildings is directly in front, along the curbs. To accommodate our goal of 1.2 cars per unit (Boston mandates only 0.75), we needed to provide 90-degree (rather than parallel) parking in many locations and to create some small parking
lots between groups of houses. We tried to arrange the lots so the shortest route to one’s apartment is still via the sidewalk.

The new five- to seven-story buildings (described later) contained too many units for this solution to work. Although there are typically small private yards behind their two- and three-bedroom ground level units, the rest of the rear space is dedicated to parking those cars that cannot be accommodated at curbside (only one of the elevator buildings, on a very tight site, has some basement parking). Parking behind these buildings leads directly to the same central lobby used by those who find spaces on the street, increasing the chances of neighbors meeting en route to their apartments. No spaces are assigned, and the parking ratio seems to be working well.

The central focus of and major entry to the new Harbor Point is a landscaped mall that leads from Mt. Vernon Street, the public access street, to a public water’s edge park. Along this greenward, we located most of the communal facilities (including a large meeting hall, a day care center, management offices, an elderly center, tennis courts, and a clubhouse with a health club) and some of the higher-density housing, as well as the few shops a community of this size can support.

The mall is everyone’s introduction to the neighborhood and the place to which they return for community and recreational facilities. It is meant to function as a town green/main street/common meeting ground for the residents, as well as the link between the public access street and the public water’s edge park, both of which connect Harbor Point to the larger community and the city.

Living in a mixed community is good for everyone. I feel good about bringing up my children here. The races have changed, the family sizes have changed. I want my kids to learn more about how other people live, how the different cultures here live together.

— Queenie Santos, former Columbia Point resident and current Harbor Point resident.
We proportioned the mall after the Back Bay’s Commonwealth Avenue, a handsome tree-lined boulevard with tall townhouses (many of which are now subdivided into one or two apartments per floor). Our goal was to evoke the architectural spirit and positive associations of this lovely nineteenth-century avenue, but there are differences between the two that reflect changes in the last century. Commonwealth Avenue was designed for formal promenading; Harbor Point’s mall includes active recreation, such as tennis courts. Commonwealth Avenue’s four- and five-story townhouses have high stoops that add to its architectural character but are inaccessible to people in wheelchairs; entries at Harbor Point are at grade, and an elevator serves all upper-floor units on each block. And, while non-residential uses were zoned out of exclusive Commonwealth Avenue, our goal was for a street with diverse activities and types of people.

To create structures that would accommodate very different household types and living patterns but replicate the feeling of an “outdoor room” that makes Commonwealth Avenue so attractive, we designed a single-loaded-corridor building that extends the full length of each block and defines the street edge. The front facade is divided into a series of projecting bays and dormers that suggest vertical elements whose scale and proportion resembles that of the old townhouses. All first floor apartments have direct private entries from the street to generate more activity and evoke the many entries along Commonwealth Avenue. This also adds to the stock of at-grade units for families with children who live in the larger (three-bedroom) ground floor apartments.

A pair of existing seven-story buildings adjacent to the mall were linked by a new pavilion and totally renovated to accommodate apartments and services for the elderly. The exteriors were transformed by new pitched roofs, bay windows, areas of stucco finish (which contrasts with the red stained brick) and a layer of ground face concrete block over the cracked concrete foundation walls. Interiors were gutted and units enlarged by making corridors single-loaded. An arcade was added at grade along the mall side of one of these buildings to provide 5,000 square feet of retail space that accommodates a convenience store, luncheonette, and dry cleaner.

Much of the socializing at Harbor Point takes place on back patios and in neighborhood greens, as opposed to stoops and streets, as is common in traditional Boston neighborhoods like Back Bay and the South End.
At Harbor Point Day, last September, an annual event with music, food and festivities, the mall was lively and crowded. At other times it’s a quieter place: the tennis courts are heavily used on weekends but the mood is residential. What is the real character of this new community? What should it be?

The Neighborhood

About 100 years ago the late George Apley (of the Marquand novel of the same name) saw a Boston neighbor standing on his front steps in his shirt sleeves, took that as a sign the South End was deteriorating and decided it was time to move. At the same time, in other areas working-class neighborhoods, sitting on the front steps or stoop in shirt sleeves or a coat was a much enjoyed activity that both overlooked and enhanced a lively public life.

It is the latter image (one that now predominates in Boston’s South End) that inspires much of my work as an architect and urban designer: a semi-private zone that links the home to the public realm (and the individual to the community). When I revealed my image to the experienced housing developer of Harbor Point, he was sure it would not appeal to the suburbanites he was hoping to attract to this new, mixed-income community. He thought they would want neat, somewhat formal entries, and would expect outdoor socializing to be done in the rear patios.

This did not affect the site design significantly: it was agreed by all that front doors and porches facing the street were desirable for convenience and safety. But the porches are formal and small, not commodious porches that invite sitting out. Eliminating the raised stoops that provide opportunities for sitting was a loss of architectural richness, but this was necessary to provide wheelchair access. Moreover, the partially below-grade kitchen and other servant spaces that were originally housed below the stoops are not part of today’s program. (Indeed it is ironic that this very democratic and appealing exterior feature is the consequence of an interior built for a more hierarchical society.)

Many neighborhoods have been built for the wealthy and adapted over the years as home for the less well-to-do. Harbor Point is the reverse. The question has been how to include some of the city’s lowest income families who have never known anything but life in a “project” while attracting people who have enough money to have other options. The harbor views, new construction, swimming pools, and other recreational facilities were envisaged by the developer as lures for people who might otherwise have had to travel much further (to the suburbs) for such amenities. They have been, and are, equally prized by the low-income tenants.

A pair of seven-story buildings were rehabbed and linked with a new entrance pavilion; the building includes space for housing and services for the elderly.
Harbor Point's townhouse and first-floor flat entries are separated from the narrow sidewalks by a shallow lawn and shrubs. This zone is mowed and maintained by the maintenance personnel. Private plantings and fences are discouraged, although I have seen some infiltrations (the Easter azalea, for example) in front of the townhouses and the private entries along the mall. But in an attempt to maintain a neat (middle-class) image for the market-rate tenants, the plastic flowers and pink flamingoes that are the vermeil in successful public-housing projects and working-class neighborhoods have been suppressed.

Inside, the units are designed to give each household flexibility and control over the way it lives. Specifically, the first floor of the family townhouses was designed with a kitchen in the middle that opens to front and back rooms, either of which could function as family room or parlor. Each household can choose to orient its daily meals and living towards front or back, and it can reserve more or less (or no) space for a formal parlor. Parents can oversee smaller children who might be confined to playing in the rear patio and communal green or older ones who might be riding tricycles on the front sidewalks.

A different kind of flexibility was built into the two bedroom/two bathroom units in the buildings along the mall. Each has two equal-sized bedroom-bathroom suites that are separated by a living room and kitchen. This configuration offers more autonomy to the occupants and supports a greater variety of household types than traditional residential layouts. For example, two unrelated adults can come and go with greater privacy. These units seem to have attracted young, single adults, who constitute a large percentage of the market-rate tenants.

Some Conclusions and Questions

Recalling my own experience growing up in a mixed-income urban neighborhood, I believed that all Harbor Point residents, once there, would live together happily ever after. But I grew up in a different time, when we all lived by the same set of middle-class rules. Today there is less ready acceptance of a single standard; one family's agreeable decibel level of music is another's noise and neither feels compelled to bow to the other. There have been some conflicts, relatively minor, and quick steps to try and resolve them by meetings and discussions led by a strong tenant task force. My knowledge is mostly anecdotal, since there hasn't been and probably hasn't been time for an in-depth post-occupancy evaluation. But I read whatever is available, visit the site every few months and check in occasionally with the people with whom I worked.
When bid prices (at the height of Boston’s building boom) were too high, we had to change the more expensive 15-story stepped high rise buildings into pairs of seven-story mid-rises.

I regretted this because the two 15-story “towers” contributed to the variety of roof heights and to a dramatic profile against the sky that would have sig-
nalled the drama of the change from after. It was important for the entire city and the passersby (on a nearby highway) to be reminded of the change and its implications for other housing projects.

I realized myself with the thought that many great cities have “table-top” profiles and the attractive streetscape for those living at Harbor Point would be little diminished even if they missed those strong vertical landmarks.

— Joan E. Goody

Know each other over the back fence and when coming and going from curbside parking to front door or keeping an eye on the street from front windows. So far Harbor Point has been quite safe with that level of street activity.

Harbor Point is safe: There is a private security force, strong social services are available to those who need them, the management is good, and the tenant task force is active and insists on strict rules enforced. No residents have champi-

The central mall is not the lively main street that a major retail component might have created. The few struggling shops are the most a community of this size can support; larger shopping centers are a short drive away. One conclusion: A commercial main street flourishes only in very dense, urban neighborhoods like Boston’s Beacon Hill or Manhattan’s Upper West Side or when there is no nearby competition from super-

About what the stoop-sitters (or today, aluminum-chair-on-

The developer, architect, or urban designer who works on large, long-range projects often finds surprises. The real-estate bust in Boston was one. Just as Harbor Point was finished, the market segment to which it had been targeted (young, would-

Instead, Harbor Point attracted young people who might otherwise have rented in neighborhoods like the South End — a group that was not afraid of urban life but was interested in the recreational facilities and parking (unavailable in the re-

know each other over the back fence and when coming and going from curbside parking to front door or keeping an eye on the street from front windows. So far Harbor Point has been quite safe with that level of street activity.

Harbor Point is safe: There is a private security force, strong social services are available to those who need them, the management is good, and the tenant task force is active and insists on strict rules enforced. No residents have champi-

The central mall is not the lively main street that a major retail component might have created. The few struggling shops are the most a community of this size can support; larger shopping centers are a short drive away. One conclusion: A commercial main street flourishes only in very dense, urban neighborhoods like Boston’s Beacon Hill or Manhattan’s Upper West Side or when there is no nearby competition from super-

About what the stoop-sitters (or today, aluminum-chair-on-

The developer, architect, or urban designer who works on large, long-range projects often finds surprises. The real-estate bust in Boston was one. Just as Harbor Point was finished, the market segment to which it had been targeted (young, would-

Instead, Harbor Point attracted young people who might otherwise have rented in neighborhoods like the South End — a group that was not afraid of urban life but was interested in the recreational facilities and parking (unavailable in the re-

know each other over the back fence and when coming and going from curbside parking to front door or keeping an eye on the street from front windows. So far Harbor Point has been quite safe with that level of street activity.

Harbor Point is safe: There is a private security force, strong social services are available to those who need them, the management is good, and the tenant task force is active and insists on strict rules enforced. No residents have champi-

The central mall is not the lively main street that a major retail component might have created. The few struggling shops are the most a community of this size can support; larger shopping centers are a short drive away. One conclusion: A commercial main street flourishes only in very dense, urban neighborhoods like Boston’s Beacon Hill or Manhattan’s Upper West Side or when there is no nearby competition from super-

About what the stoop-sitters (or today, aluminum-chair-on-

The developer, architect, or urban designer who works on large, long-range projects often finds surprises. The real-estate bust in Boston was one. Just as Harbor Point was finished, the market segment to which it had been targeted (young, would-

Instead, Harbor Point attracted young people who might otherwise have rented in neighborhoods like the South End — a group that was not afraid of urban life but was interested in the recreational facilities and parking (unavailable in the re-

know each other over the back fence and when coming and going from curbside parking to front door or keeping an eye on the street from front windows. So far Harbor Point has been quite safe with that level of street activity.

Harbor Point is safe: There is a private security force, strong social services are available to those who need them, the management is good, and the tenant task force is active and insists on strict rules enforced. No residents have champi-

The central mall is not the lively main street that a major retail component might have created. The few struggling shops are the most a community of this size can support; larger shopping centers are a short drive away. One conclusion: A commercial main street flourishes only in very dense, urban neighborhoods like Boston’s Beacon Hill or Manhattan’s Upper West Side or when there is no nearby competition from super-

About what the stoop-sitters (or today, aluminum-chair-on-

The developer, architect, or urban designer who works on large, long-range projects often finds surprises. The real-estate bust in Boston was one. Just as Harbor Point was finished, the market segment to which it had been targeted (young, would-

Instead, Harbor Point attracted young people who might otherwise have rented in neighborhoods like the South End — a group that was not afraid of urban life but was interested in the recreational facilities and parking (unavailable in the re-
Top: The Columbia Point project.
Center left: Private entrances to ground-floor flats in elevator buildings.
Center right: Residents gathering at the water's edge park.
Bottom left and right: Typical townhouse streetscapes.
Center left and bottom right photos by Anton Grassl.
borhoods like the South End. Harbor Point's ability to offer retail as well as recreational amenities within walking distance will depend on the successful future development of the rest of the Columbia Point peninsula.

Another unexpected source of renters has turned out to be students from the nearby University of Massachusetts campus. This is a robust group whose age may make it more in tune with the desirable level of some of the original residents, possibly forming a cultural bridge in a time of transition. Also important are people drawn to Harbor Point because of their desire to forge a new kind of community.

The character of the community is still developing; it will become clearer over the next few years, even as it continues to evolve. Management policies may allow more outward expression of individuality on building fronts, or the tenants may focus on the rear patios and their barbecues, or both. The strong role established for the tenant task force assures that this group will have a say in the changes. The apartments, the buildings, and streets allow for change and will be enriched by them.

A designer can build the framework, suggest how it may be used by providing opportunities to personalize (a small front lawn, an entry portico, a patio) and invite social interaction by providing a series of semi-private and semi-public spaces (such as the tot-lots, communal greens shared by groups of townhouses, and central mall). She can even try to imply some of the variety of traditional neighborhoods (by varying the colors of bricks, paint, and roof shingles). But room and time must be left for the residents to make their mark.

Notes
1. All units are rentals; the 400 subsidised and the market-rate units are identical and integrated throughout the site. Subsidised families were given their choice of any unit of appropriate size for their family. The site shows a nine-arch wall/walk-edge path.
2. Goody Clancy & Associates' involvement and first designs (working directly with the tenants) began in 1978 and continued after a formal competition for architect/designer teams in 1983. Construction begins in January of 1997 and was completed in 1990.
3. A major retail component on Mr. Vernon St. was in one of the competing proposals, but rejected for lack of sustainability. No plans have been made for organisation of the current shops, but ground floor apartments on the mall could be converted into offices (or even shops) with minor renovations.
4. In an attempt to hasten the arrival of that day, I have been working with a focus team of the Boston Society of Architects and the surrounding land owners to develop new visions (and plans) for the whole peninsula.

Credits

Owners: Harbor Point Apartments Co. (in partnership between the Columbia Point Community Task Force and Panama Partners)

Developer: The Harbor Point Community Task Force and Panama Partners (a limited partnership composed of Carencon, Mullins, Johnson, Inc., managing general partner; Crest Construction Co., general partner; Brown Development Corp., general partner)

Contractor: Vermont Construction Co. (a joint venture of CMJ Construction Co. and Pendergrass Construction Co.)

Managing Agent: CMJ Management Co.

Site Design and Design Guidelines: Goody, Clancy & Associates

Architects: Goody, Clancy & Associates (all new construction except two of the mid-rises)

More Associates (all renovations and two new high-rises)

Russell & Scott Architects (superseding architect)

Subsidy Funding Section: Massachusetts Rehabilitation Finance Agency, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Housing Assistance Council), Commonwealth of Massachusetts, State Housing Assistance for Rural Development (Commonwealth of Massachusetts)

Construction and Permits: Financing: Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency, tax-exempt bond financing; Federal Housing Administration (inclusionary program); HUD (Urban Initiative Loan and modernisation); HUD (In) Development Assistance Grant, Chapter 184, Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Project Description

Area: 34 acres not to include a nine-arch wall's edge park.

Density: 35 units per acre

Types of buildings: Townhouses: 38 units; three-story garden apartments: 295 units; two- to six-story studio to tripe-

ome buildings: 827 units

Size of units: One bedroom (371), two bedrooms (673), three bedrooms (361), four bedrooms (80), five bedroom (12), six bedroom (9), Total: 1,285.

Economic 66 percent market rate, 31 percent subsidized for low income.

Resident Services: Adult and family swimming pools, tennis courts, exercise facility, package and lifestyle path, neighborhood play area, basketball court, direct service to public transportation, waterfront park, playground.

Resident services: Health care center, day care, Housing Opportunities Counseling, on-site, provide outreach, referral, and advocacy, and coordinate dialysis, health services, senior citizen assistance, and community service programs, which are provided on site by other agencies.

Retail: Convenience store, dry cleaner, cafe. Total: 5,900 sf.

Parking: 1,482 spaces.