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What's hot and not on waterfront

By Steve Bailey, Globe Columnist | August 3, 2007



The empty patio area behind the Intercontinental Hotel, left, stands out in stark contrast to its crowded counterpart, the Intrigue Cafe behind the Boston Harbor Hotel. (Globe Photo / Aram Boghosian)

You don't have to be an urban planner to understand what is working on Boston's waterfront and what is not. All you have to do is walk the waterfront with me on a perfect summer day.

We talk endlessly about the greenway, but what of the blueway? That narrow strip of great promise between the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway and Boston Harbor is where the billions we spent on the Big Dig meet the billions we spent cleaning up the harbor. And while it remains a work in progress, "needs improvement" would be a generous grade for what's happening at the water's edge at this point.

Walk from Fort Point Channel to Christopher Columbus Park, and what you see is vision and lack of vision. The much-hyped Boston Harborwalk is fine, but we're here less for the harborwalk than what is happening on the harborwalk. Programming works. So does blurring the lines between the public and the private. Barricades and fences definitely do not work. Potential is ours for the taking -- but only if we aim higher.

Highlights and lowlights:

Norman Leventhal's Rows Wharf is the oasis on the waterfront. "Have you been down there at night?" Leventhal asked me recently. Often, and I'm hardly alone. The red-brick plaza behind the Boston Harbor Hotel, with the boats and the band and the people and the magnificent water view, is the single best space in the city. With the hotel packed and a deluxe double room going for \$650 a night, these people are making gobs of money. But telling where the public space ends and the private space begins is hard to know. It is the kind of privatization that might drive Shirley Kressel, the valuable neighborhood gadfly, crazy. But it works, and works well. Tuesday is Motown night on the barge. You can dance to swing music on Wednesday, hear blues on Thursday, and see a classic movie on Friday. Drop a bundle for dinner and drinks or watch for free on the steps. Nice touch: fanny cushions for the freeloaders.

The neighboring Intercontinental Hotel, by contrast, has a long way to go. There's a nice green lawn, but no one is there. What's private is private. The entrance to the outdoor cafe is through the hotel, not from the waterfront. All the outdoor seating is sealed off by large planters. There is no programming at all and nothing happening on the water itself. The hotel's general manager, Tim Kirwan, makes the fair point that the hotel has only been open since November, and he promises improvements next season. This would be good. We're stuck with the hotel's glass facade better suited to a Houston inter state, but there is huge room for improvement on the waterside.

Which way Russia Wharf? This could be the next big project to begin in Boston. The "alien on the park" design that emerged a few months ago was scary. We must do better, up high and down below.

The anti-Leventhal of the waterfront was Les Marino, God rest his soul. It was bad enough that Marino got caught adding a floor to 470 Atlantic Ave., but it is amazing the city also let him get away with a claustrophobic 6 1/2-foot high passageway that passes for the harborwalk behind the building. How bad is this? Griffin's Wharf, as it was once known, was the site of the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Those Bostonians would not have taken this lying down. (Speaking of improvements, the civic-minded attorneys at Goulston & Storrs, right next to Rowes Wharf, should help take down the six-foot fence and hedge out back and let the rest of us in.)

How much imagination does it take to see the potential of James Hook & Co., the lobster seller? Combined with the old Northern Avenue Bridge, an icon that was nearly lost, this could be a jewel of the waterfront. Instead, the bridge rusts, most of it closed off by a chain-link fence.

The New England Aquarium is overrated. But the space around it is alive with families, T-shirt and hot dog vendors, ferries to the harbor islands, and more. What happens next at the giant garage next door is critical. Next door, the Boston Marriott Long Wharf was not one of Kevin White's finest moments.

The waterfront has come a long way. We have a long way to go. Beyond downtown, there is all of South Boston. What would Norman Leventhal do?

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