

The Boston Globe

MAKING A CITY SING

making a city sing

The plan for a new 'Boston Common on the water'
is taking a rare kind of collaboration



Let's dream a little, shall we?

It might seem an odd time to do it, what with so many people struggling just to make it from one day to the next, as the federal government takes an ax to funding for much of what we hold dear, and mocks the very notion of the common good.

But there's a plan to transform a parking lot between A Street and Fort Point Channel that stands in proud opposition to all of that. It's a testament to the fact that we can still work together to do big things.

The dream: a public amphitheater, right by the water. There, 1,000 people could enjoy free public performances by big and small cultural organizations from all over, including Boston Ballet, Boston Lyric Opera, Commonwealth Shakespeare Company, Urbanity Dance, and Circus Up, among many others.

It would be a place where anybody who wants to could put on a show. The amphitheater would



Raber Umphenour, an artist and filmmaker, adjusted the architectural model of the proposed amphitheater inside his Fort Point studio.

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In Fort Point, a lesson in how to make a city sing

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include lighting and power on site, which would make performing cheaper and simpler.

The proposal comes after years of public discussions and planning between the city and Related Beal, the company developing the site, and a huge consortium of arts groups who have joined forces to push for something ambitious there.

"Everyone came together to say, 'Hey, we can do something bigger and better together, to benefit not just us, but this region, for generations,'" said Bradley Vernatter, CEO of Boston Lyric Opera. "You can see how this creates ... an opportunity, and a hope and joy, that is much bigger than any of us can do on our own."

The design also includes a proper dock, a place to launch canoes, dragon boats, and artwork into the water easily, part of a wider plan to bring the entire Fort Point Channel to life.

"Fort Point Channel is 50 acres of quiet water in the heart of Boston waiting to be discovered by most people," said Chris Mancini, executive director of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay. "Development and public benefits here will create an iconic new public space — a Boston Common on the water."



PHOTOS BY LANE TURNER, GLOBE STAFF

PHOTO BY LARA TURNER/USAID STAFF

It will all be completely open to all, who will be able to use the amphitheater and dock — an extension of the two public parks also planned for the site, closer to A Street — to gather and luxuriate.

Delightful, right?

Maybe turning that part of the city into a destination seems unlikely to some. So did creating the gorgeous Greenway, not long ago.

The amphitheater will also make the 6.5-acre site, called Channelside, more climate-resilient. The terraced seating will act as a berm, flood protection for the office buildings, market rate and affordable housing, parks, and civic spaces planned there.

The artists and others who live in this tight neighborhood of converted warehouses also want protection from another kind of tide. These brick buildings have for decades been the site of battles between longtime residents and developers who have tried to push them out to make way for more profitable properties. Residents have long feared that Fort Point would become a soulless place, a magnet for people who can afford exorbitant rent and shop in fancy, generic stores — like the Seaport, right next door.

The rise of the Seaport “seemed like a feeding frenzy,” said Don Eyles, an artist who has lived in Fort Point since 1984. “There was an attitude there



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that any development is better than no development, and I think that is a poisonous attitude.”

In the past, he said, activists in the neighborhood have measured success by how effectively they’ve been able to thwart developers. But this has been different. Related Beal has listened, as residents and artists have repeatedly joined to demand more. And those residents haven’t just opposed plans — they have marshaled their abilities to offer detailed proposals for more

ambitious ones. They convinced the company that anything less would be a huge missed opportunity.

“The energy and effort and engagement that the community provided was something I have not [seen] in my 40-year real-estate career,” said Steve Faber, executive vice president at Related Beal. “Here is a group, they don’t just complain or argue, they say, ‘Here is the analysis, and here is the answer we would like to suggest.’ How can you not respect that?”

Along the way, arts organizations that might be inclined to see each other as competition for donors and audiences have become formidable allies. They’re a force with whom future developers will have to reckon. Expect them to have a hand in the development of the nearby Gillette razor manufacturing plant property, 31 acres along the channel that will be vacant once the company moves its factory to Andover in the next year or two.

Not everyone in Fort Point is enamored of the plans for Chan-

nelside, citing the need for greater climate resiliency, among other issues. But those who have signed on say they’re happy with the concessions the developer has made here, including making 20 percent of the planned housing affordable.

They’re not just supporting the project, but actively trying to make it happen. There is a surplus of office and lab space in Boston right now, and Channelside won’t be completed in this business climate without an anchor tenant. No buildings, no amphitheater. Faber estimates that, once a tenant is secured, the amphitheater could be open in three years or so. The arts organizations have lobbied Gillette, which is keeping its administrative offices in South Boston, to be that tenant.

“I think we are as surprised as anyone that we have become the number-one champions for an enormous development project in the neighborhood,” said Raber Umphenour, an artist and filmmaker whose A Street studio hosts a scale model of the amphitheater proposal. “But it doesn’t make sense to advocate for something, be successful, and stay on the sidelines. We have to get it over the finish line.”

The pandemic hollowed out Boston. We need to decide what cities become in an era of remote work and vacant office spaces. To survive, they have to be about more than just work. They have to be places people want to visit, and live in.

“There have got to be reasons to be in a city that go beyond commerce,” Umphenour said. “That’s what civic life and arts and culture are about.”

We have to do big things. How else do we survive?

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