

Urban planning in Greater Boston needs to aim higher

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Do you have a picture in your head of what Greater Boston should look like in 50 years? Do you hope that we give something a little bit better to our grandchildren? A brighter Boston will not happen by accident. It will require us to plan something marvelous and embrace vision over fear — and not simply try to extend the status quo endlessly into the future.

But maintaining the status quo is a natural tendency on both sides of the Charles River. Last month, the Cambridge City Council chose not to make the zoning changes that would have allowed an ambitious life sciences building co-developed by MIT in Central Square. The City Council had earlier blocked the same team's proposal for a new apartment tower. Cambridge had previously commissioned a plan for Kendall and Central Squares that had boldly proposed up-zoning to allow more intensive development, adding millions of square feet of new construction over time, but the NIMBYists have already laced into that plan.

Each independent land-use decision can seem like a wonky event, interesting only to neighbors, developers, and the occasional housing economist. The developer has pecuniary reasons to want the project, the neighbors resist significant changes, and the economist's complaint — that limiting supply makes our unaffordable region even more expensive — seems overblown in discussions of a single development.

But these individual decisions add up and collectively shape our region. In effect, our metropolitan planning is being implemented at the sidewalk level, by abutters who see the downside of every project and who can't possibly be expected to take the larger view.

If we want a better Boston, we must recognize that building for the future involves some departures from what we've historically done. Triple-deckers, for instance, were a brilliant means of providing inexpensive housing a century ago. They are not the right housing for the mid-21st century. The City of Boston has wisely encouraged the greening — through better insulation and other steps — of these energy-intensive reminders of a bygone age. But it would be even wiser to rebuild the city with modern technology and higher density levels.

To do so will take an explicit commitment to allow these changes to happen. I hope for a region filled with exciting walking spaces, where pedestrians wonder at ever-changing marvels created by urban entrepreneurs. I want Boston's past to be ever visible, but never overwhelming. I hope for public art that changes with the season and public spaces that bring people together, instead of serving as a reminder of some architect's hubris.

We have the technology to create this kind of city today, and economic growth over the next 50 years will only make it easier. We live in a great age of city-building worldwide, as Asians move from rural poverty to their cities of the future. Their building will spur constant technological innovation.

Only politics prevents our city-building. During the 20th century, we made grave, if understandable, errors in urban planning. In 1904, Boston limited building heights to 125 feet. The city has loosened up since then, but significantly taller buildings generally require complicated variances. The recent Cambridge battles, meanwhile, remind us that residents still fear towers, despite their capacity to provide abundant and attractive homes and offices.

A century ago, urban planners worried about what seemed like unhealthy mixtures of factories and tenements. They didn't want children near factories, and they used zoning to artificially restrict the mixture of activities — first into broad categories (commercial, residential, industrial) and then into far more micro-managed neighborhoods.

Today, deindustrialization means that mixed-use developments are no longer unsafe. Mixed-use is now healthier because it promotes walking. We should push developers to always include the ground floor retail that makes streets interesting. We should always plan for mixed spaces that allow people to live near where they work. Yet our zoning rules are slow to change, and still reflect the concerns of yesteryear.

My vision of the region's future may not be yours, but the first step is to debate that vision. Instead of having a broad, forthright discussion, though, we spend our energy debating changes block by block. We need a bigger plan with what the legendary urban planner Daniel Burnham called the "magic to stir men's blood," for that magic is the best antidote for the NIMBYism that has choked our region's growth for far too long.

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