Boston, We Hardly Knew You

Change is the byword in the city’s neighborhoods.

By Joseph D. Cutrufo

When my wife and I moved to East Boston last summer, our friends wondered why. Most had never been there before, and none had ever considered living there. They knew the neighborhood only by its reputation as an immigrant community with lower-than-average rents and airport noise. What they didn’t know was that it is well served by public transit and has a surprising amount of open space, not to mention great ethnic cuisine. As it happens, I was born in East Boston, and although I didn’t grow up there, I had spent a lot of time with family who live in the neighborhood.

“T’m glad you’re there to help turn that neighborhood around,” a friend told us. Of course I understood what she meant by that, but I couldn’t help wonder what, if anything, East Boston would “turn around” to — or if its residents wanted to see it “turn around.” It made me wonder, “Do neighborhoods create change, or does change happen to neighborhoods? Or can it be both?”

Even though the “Hub of the Universe” is technically one political entity, Boston is, as the saying goes, a city of neighborhoods — about two dozen in all — each with its own colorful history, provincial pride, and unique identity. And in many ways, Boston residents are as much defined by their neighborhoods as the city is.

At least that’s how things used to be. In recent years, some of the city’s neighborhoods have undergone changes that have dramatically altered their identities. Neighborhoods that were once defined by a particular industry have been gentrified, and enclaves once strongly associated with certain ethnic groups have become home to highly diverse populations.

Each decade, there are whispers of the new “it” neighborhood. In the 1980s it was the South End, with its renovated factories and warehouses. In the ’90s, it was Jamaica Plain and its rehabbed triple-deckers and trendy new restaurants. More recently, Charlestown and South Boston, both blue collar strongholds, have seen an influx of young professionals and with them, rising housing costs.

Some of these changes are the result of large-scale redevelopment schemes. Others are related to immigration or gentrification. The four Boston neighborhoods described below are evolving in distinctive ways: Roxbury is taking control of its own destiny by resisting gentrification, while East Boston is welcoming a new wave of residents. And while Downtown Crossing reinvents itself through private investment, the South Boston waterfront is being shaped by the public sector. But no matter what forces are at work, all four embrace the notion that with change comes opportunity.

Determined to stay affordable

Roxbury is a predominantly low-income community in the geographic center of Boston. Its population is 63 percent black and 24 percent Hispanic (compared to 24 and 14 percent in Boston}
as a whole). Although the neighborhood’s poverty rate is one of the highest in the city at 29 percent, housing prices, median income, and educational attainment levels are on the rise, possibly because higher paid, better educated people are moving in. Given its location and access to rapid transit (the MBTA’s Orange Line and the bus rapid transit Silver Line both serve the neighborhood), Roxbury would seem to be susceptible to the type of gentrification that has taken place in neighborhoods closer to downtown Boston, such as South Boston and Charlestown.

Today, about half of all the housing in Roxbury is subsidized — by the city or a local community development corporation, or through Chapter 40B, the Massachusetts affordable housing statute. The number of affordable units is expected to drop in 2012, however, when many subsidy contracts will expire, dramatically changing the housing landscape. Other factors that could eventually drive up housing costs are the recent decline in the number of multifamily housing units (with a nearly threefold increase in condominium conversions) and an influx of artists, often considered an indicator of a gentrifying neighborhood.

Changes like these are often seen as welcome signs that a neighborhood is “turning around.” In Roxbury, however, residents are fighting to keep their neighborhood affordable with the guidance of a strong set of community organizations and leaders.

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative has played a key role in this battle. In 1988, the initiative formed Dudley Neighbors Incorporated, a nonprofit corporation that was granted the power of eminent domain over several privately owned vacant lots (a first for such a group). Acting as a community land trust, DNI has developed more than 200 affordable units and in the Dudley Square area there has been an 86 percent increase in Chapter 121A land between 1998 and 2008 (referring to land acquired by a community group through eminent domain).

“It used to be that if you walked down Dudley Street toward Uphams Corner, you would see swaths of vacant land left and right, and now you can barely find an empty lot anymore,” says Penn Loh, former director of the Roxbury-based nonprofit Alternatives for Community and Environment, and currently professor of practice in Tufts University’s Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning. “They’re all some sort of affordable housing or open space.”

Gentrification is creeping into Roxbury from adjacent neighborhoods. This is especially true in Lower Roxbury, where the line between Roxbury and the South End has become increasingly blurry in recent years. “Massachusetts Avenue used to be the dividing line,” says Loh. “Realtors are marketing the South End further and further into Roxbury.”

Still a port of entry

You could say that the more things change in East Boston, where I live, the more they stay the same. “Eastie,” as the neighborhood is affectionately known, sits just across Boston Harbor from downtown Boston. Home of the now-shuttered East Boston Immigration Station, it was once considered Boston’s Ellis Island. For the last century, it has seen waves of immigrants, starting with Eastern European Jews in the early 1900s, followed by Italians, and later, Vietnamese. The most recent newcomers are from El Salvador, Colombia, and Brazil.

“There’s been a lot of turnover in population. It’s always been like that,” says Clark Moulaison, director of East Boston Main Streets, a community-based group that provides support to local businesses. “Maybe you have a taqueria here instead of an Italian restaurant, but it’s still a working class neighborhood.”

Despite being separated from the city center by Boston Harbor, East Boston is one of the city’s most accessible neighborhoods, and it has attracted a highly diverse population. In recent years, artists seeking refuge from the South End have joined the mix. Young professionals are calling Eastie home, too. “We have middle- and upper-income people, ’yuppies’ you might say,” Moulaison says. “But we have a significant elderly population, and of course we still have low-income people, too.”

With a history of shipbuilding on the waterfront and with Logan International Airport right next door, East Boston has borne the brunt of many transportation projects. The most recent was the completion in 2003 of the Ted Williams Tunnel, part of Boston’s Central Artery/Tunnel Project. The tunnel, which linked Interstate 90 and the MBTA’s Silver Line to the airport, brought additional traffic and emissions into the neighborhood.

The Massachusetts Port Authority has responded with several projects aimed at mitigating some of these effects and improving the quality of life in the community. The newly created Piers Park offers unparalleled views of the Boston skyline, and the 15-acre Bremen Street Park, which replaced a 1,500-acre park-and-fly lot, have both made a significant difference in recreational opportunities for residents. The East Boston Greenway, which replaced an abandoned Conrail railroad line, provides safe green space for joggers and cyclists.

In addition to open space, East Boston has benefited from the MBTA’s Blue Line Modernization Project, which improved three of the neighborhood’s five rapid transit stations. The Maverick,
Airport, and Wood Island stations have been reconstructed in the last 10 years, while planning is under way for improvements to the Orient Heights station.

The next chapter in the East Boston story will likely emphasize the neighborhood's largely undeveloped waterfront. The East Boston Master Plan, prepared by the Boston Redevelopment Authority in 2000, identified several sites for development, and all have been reviewed and approved by the city in the last 10 years, according to Carlos Montanez, a senior planner with the BRA. Most of the development will be mixed use, with residential units on the upper floors and restaurants and retail stores on the ground level. Some of the projects feature marinas, and all of them have to include the Harborwalk (a 40-mile public walkway along Boston Harbor) on the perimeter, Montanez says.

Many of the waterfront parcels are likely to remain empty until the economic situation changes, however. "For years, city residents have been eager to see the [waterfronts] developed, but financing is the main issue," Montanez says.

Still, despite the stalled waterfront development, East Boston's business districts remain healthy, with many new business owners and entrepreneurs looking to capitalize on the growing population of young professionals. "With all these new local businesses, in the Main Streets District in particular, the vacancy rate is less than one percent, and it's been that way for the last five years," Clark Moulaison says. East Boston Main Streets has completed 46 facade renovations since it began in 1995. It has also removed numerous unsightly metal security gates — "relics from the 1960s," in Moulaison's words.

For observers of real estate trends have speculated that East Boston would become the city's next "it" neighborhood, and that housing prices would force out longtime residents. But even with significant public infrastructure investment, a growing artists' community, new cafes, and the transformation of factories into residential lofts, "Eastie" has managed to improve itself while retaining its unique character.

"The makeup of the population changes, but it's still the same kind of neighborhood it's always been," Moulaison says. "The diversity makes for a good place to live."

Downtown Crossing, Boston's historic urban center, has experienced both rejuvenation and decline over the last decade. The neighborhood was once the hub of retail activity in Greater Boston, but the growth of high-end retail in the city's posh Back Bay and the proliferation of suburban shopping centers have lured away shoppers, leaving empty storefronts in their wake. Since 2000, more than $1.2 billion has been poured into the district in an effort to revitalize it as a mixed use neighborhood. New theaters, hotels, and condominium towers have been built, but parts of the area are still marked by shuttered storefronts and vacant lots.

No vacancy is more obvious than One Franklin Street, a gaping, two-acre hole in the ground on the corner of Franklin and Washington streets in the heart of Downtown Crossing. Development of the site — once occupied by Filene's department store and the legendary bargain retailer, Filene's Basement — stalled as the result of poor economic conditions in the summer of 2008. Today the Franklin Street property remains an empty lot surrounded by chain-link fencing.

But there is also good news in Downtown Crossing: the renovation of the Paramount Theatre, the opening of several new restaurants, and the promised creation of the Downtown Boston Business Improvement District.

The BID, which has been in the works for over a year, is a response to local property owners' concerns about neighborhood safety and cleanliness. "BIDs have been used as revitalization tools, nationally and internationally, for over 25 years. New York alone has 62 BIDs, with 10 more in the pipeline," says Romarie Sansone, president of the local version, the Downtown Crossing Partnership. This BID, the city's first, is expected to begin operations this spring.

The organization's short-term goal is to revitalize the Downtown Crossing neighborhood by keeping the streets clean and free of graffiti, programming public spaces, and promoting the district in various ways, including banners and wayfinding signage. "Our hope is that the BID will create a heightened awareness of the district's unique amenities as well as marketing initiatives to reach and retain a wider audience," she says.

Sansone notes that local businesses have been involved from the beginning. "That means everyone from small property owners, to shop owners and residents." She is optimistic about what it could mean for the neighborhood. "BIDs in other cities have helped to attract and retain businesses, generate jobs, and generally improve the quality of life for those who use the district," she says.
While the BID won’t necessarily fill in the hole on Franklin Street, it could lift the spirits of those interested in the future of this historic neighborhood, "With so much going for us, we know the Flene’s site will be filled. It's just a matter of time," Sansone says.

Next big thing?
When Thomas M. Menino was inaugurated last January for his fifth term as mayor of Boston, he announced a new approach for development of the South Boston waterfront, one of the few parts of the city with a lot of vacant or underused land. The 1,000-acre waterfront is known by two names: The eastern portion is the Seaport District, the western part is Fort Point.

The once thriving manufacturing center and freight hub is now distinctly underused. "It's been pretty dormant since the 1960s," says Richard McGuinness, deputy director of waterfront planning at the Boston Redevelopment Authority. "Even though it's just a 10- or 15-minute walk from downtown, its highest and best use for several decades has been surface parking."

The area has significant potential because of its proximity not only to downtown, but also to the harbor, the airport, the intersection of Interstates 90 and 93, and South Station, the city’s major bus and rail terminal. "You have to unlock that potential with public investment," McGuinness says. The city and the commonwealth enhanced the area’s infrastructure with the creation of the Silver Line; the extension of I-90 through South Boston and under the harbor to the airport; and the depression of the Central Artery expressway. "Those investments add value to the neighborhood, and help it realize its potential," McGuinness says.

Despite its overall desolation, the district does have some notable anchors. The Moakley United States Courthouse was completed in 1999. The newly expanded Boston Children’s Museum attracts nearly 600,000 visitors annually. And the Fort Point Channel area is an up-and-coming community of galleries, studios, and artists’ live-work spaces. The massive Boston Convention and Exhibition Center was completed in 2004, bringing with it a sprinkling of hotels, restaurants, and condos. McGuinness’s team at BRA plans to link these amenities with the waterfront to create a new “Innovation District.”

It was the mayor who came up with the idea of the district, says McGuinness, to retain the city’s intellectual capital and to attract innovators who will start new companies focused on research and development. "If you look at the city’s job base, it’s been financial, publishing, universities, and medicine, but we haven't had many significant corporations set up or expand here in recent decades," he says.

The plans for the district call for welcoming new business while protecting traditional port-related industrial uses. Their strategy is encourage transitional uses to provide a buffer between industrial areas and new residential development.

A key goal of the Innovation District is to hang onto the area’s student population. A third of Boston’s residents are between the ages of 20 and 34, many of them current or past students at the region’s world-class universities. McGuinness wants to make sure they stay put. "They're the future for Boston," he says.

Moving forward
Elsewhere in the area, two city neighborhoods, Back Bay and Beacon Hill, have maintained their reputation as high-end enclaves. A proliferation of high-rise condo developments had threatened the character of both neighborhoods, but construction has definitely slowed during the recent recession.

The streetcar suburbs made famous by Sam Bass Warner have for the most part retained their distinctive identity. West Roxbury (actually a Boston neighborhood) has for a long time been one of the most suburban, family-oriented, and expensive. Allston and Brighton (also city neighborhoods) both provide housing for many of the students at local universities. Harvard University’s expansion plans have caused considerable controversy over the last decade, although here, too, things have slowed.

Parts of another in-city streetcar suburb, Dorchester, have had economic struggles, although in other sections gentrification has begun to creep in from the South End. The big news in Somerville (a separate municipality) is the extension of the Green Line, which is expected to dramatically change the area.

There’s little question that the next decade will bring additional changes to Boston’s neighborhoods and close-in suburbs. What will become the next “hot spot”? Hard to know. Perhaps it’s not so much where these neighborhoods are going that's most important, but rather the process of getting there.

Joseph Cutsuro is a program manager for the Cultural Organization of Lowell, a nonprofit agency in Lowell, Massachusetts. He works on creative economy initiatives and downtown revitalization projects.

Sidebar: The BRA Grows Up

Resources
Images: Top — More than 100 volunteers came out to support the Boston Shines cleanup in Roxbury. The event was organized by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. Photo Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. Middle — East Boston is one of the neighborhoods that benefited from the MBTA’s Blue Line Modernization Project. Photo Joseph D. Cutsuro. Bottom — Prospects are mixed for Downtown Crossing, where there are still shuttered storefronts and vacant lots. The promised creation of a business improvement district could help. Photo Photo Joseph D. Cutsuro.


At the movies: Ben Affleck’s cops and robbers flick, The Town, was primarily shot in South Boston, although most of it takes place in Charlestown. Affleck has gotten good reviews for his verismimude. For more on-location shots, track down Good Will Hunting and The Departed.