

Gateway to the Forest City? Portland, Maine's Bayside Neighborhood, 1866-2014

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Introduction: Trouble in the Forest City

Ever since Portland officials created Bayside out of earth and rubble in the 1850s, they have made changes to its physical landscape with limited, if any, resident participation in the process. Bayside, a small, urban neighborhood on the fringe of Portland, Maine's downtown, has never been deemed worthy of deliberate planning efforts that engaged the entire community, and has become both an environmentally- and socially-marginalized area. Now, however, the city has proposed a new development known as Midtown, a large-scale project consisting of four towers and two parking garages, for West Bayside (the western half of the neighborhood). Based on research I conducted on the social and environmental history of Bayside, I argue that in order to avoid the mistakes of the past, those who seek to change Bayside's landscape today must acknowledge the neighborhood's multifaceted history and include residents of all types in the Midtown project and other plans for the neighborhood's future. This strategy will enable Bayside to transcend the public perception that the neighborhood is only home to undesirable people and industry.

This essay draws from my Undergraduate Honors Thesis at Bowdoin College¹ in which I focus on the intersection of nature and history, especially in urban places. Given the proximity of Portland to Bowdoin's campus, it made for an excellent case study. The fact that Portland is at an environmental and social crossroads, and that I would be able to analyze how the city got to where it is and how it could move forward, intrigued me. In many ways, Bayside has epitomized this crossroads for Portland, and so it served as an apt subject for my analysis.

The Midtown Meeting

I walked into Portland City Hall for a Planning Board Meeting in January 2014. Before I could reach the stairs leading to the second floor where the meeting was to be held, a man handing out leaflets stopped me. "What's your stance on Midtown?" he asked, to which I replied that I was a student at Bowdoin College intending to observe the meeting. Apparently, that response satisfied the man enough to let me pass, and he seemed pleased that I was interested. I later learned that he was Tim Paradis, co-founder of Keep Portland Livable, a group opposed to the project. I continued on to the second floor, where I attended the Planning Board Hearing for Midtown. The room was packed, so I ended up sitting on the floor near the front and putting my recording device as close to the Board as I could get it.

The official name of the application at that meeting was "Midtown Master Development Plan and Level III Site Plan and Subdivision Applications for Phase I; Vicinity of Somerset, Elm and Chestnut Streets;" the developer is The Federated Companies, headquartered in Miami, Florida. The plan includes four towers (each approximately fifteen stories) with 650 to 850 market-rate housing units, 1,120 parking spaces in two garages, and 100,000 square feet of retail

¹ To obtain a copy of the full thesis, please inquire at atougas14@gmail.com.

space, all on approximately 3.5 acres. To accommodate the towers, the Planning Board voted to raise the city-wide building height limit from 125 to 165 feet. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Board approved Phase One of the project, which comprised one tower with market-rate apartments and first-floor retail space, and one parking garage (Portland Planning Board 2014; Billings 2014; Lyons and Carkhuff 2014; Miller 2014).

An additional aspect of the Midtown Project is the remediation of contaminated soils, called brownfield sites, which constitute another problem with which Bayside residents must cope. Thus, Midtown plans to address several of these sites, which take the form of scrapyards containing coal, cinders, diesel, ash, and polychlorinated biphenyls (Knowland 2014). The city believes that in addition to pollution mitigation, the remediation will stimulate economic growth. For example, in the mid-2000s, a mutual fund decided not to locate itself in Bayside due to the scrapyards; soon after, the city swiftly reshaped Bayside's physical landscape by tightening its environmental standards for scrapyards and relocating one of them.

At the meeting, I observed a clear conflict between two groups: the supporters, who wore "Support Midtown" stickers, and the opponents, mostly from an organization called Keep Portland Livable, who wore "Stop the Midtown Mistake" and "Stop the Bayside Massacre" stickers. The former was largely made up of the Teamsters' Union, Bayside residents, and the project developers, while the latter mostly comprised residents who lived outside of Bayside, including Peter Monro, co-founder of Keep Portland Livable (Kesich 2013).

All of this attention on the Midtown Project, both by those for and against the development, in hitherto marginalized Bayside, makes one wonder why Midtown has created such a lively debate in Portland. This can be explained by the fact that the conflict over Midtown represents a broader conflict over Portland's future, namely, whether to grow and develop in order to compete with places like Boston, or remain what Shelley Elmer, a Yarmouth resident who spoke at the Planning Board Meeting, termed a "fair and petite city." Taking the opinions of citizens into account, the Portland of the future will need to move forward with one of these options or some combination thereof; this will be in direct contrast to how Bayside has been treated in the past, in which it was either shaped by outside forces or passed over completely.

The public was quite vocal on this issue, providing several hours of comment at the previous public hearing, held on December 17, 2013, in addition to the one I attended in January. Indeed, the mood at this meeting was quite tense and contested. In terms of Midtown project supporters, Carol McCracken, who lives on Munjoy Hill (a neighborhood adjacent to Bayside), spoke about how she had greatly appreciated her experience living in Marina Towers, a development similar to that proposed for Midtown in Alexandria, Virginia. In her words, "A unique spirit of its own develops in such a community [as Midtown] in a way that doesn't exist currently in Portland rental housing. This city is trying to attract a younger generation here from larger cities such as Boston. Midtown is the sort of rental housing that this generation expects to find when it arrives here, not old, worn-down, falling-apart, expensive-to-heat-in-the-winter rental and without any building conveniences they demand."² And Greg Shinberg, the owner of Shinberg Consulting in Portland and the representative for The Federated Companies, the developer for the Midtown Project, stated, "We've done a lot of work. We've been working on this project for months and months, meeting upon meeting, neighborhood groups, I think six workshops...Absolutely, it's very right for the city."

² To respond to this argument that Midtown would draw young people into the city, one young man stated that he would avoid living in the towers. This exchange shows that the city is clearly divided on the issue.

But a vocal opposition expressed its displeasure with Midtown. Elmer, for example, was worried about putting a “gargantuan sum of steel and cement into our fair and petite city.” And Karen Snyder, from the East End, stated, “I oppose the building scope and the lack of diversity of just having one developer for this Midtown Project... It is basically putting all of your eggs in one basket with this one developer. It is not diversified and it doesn’t follow enough the Comprehensive Plan.” Finally, Michael Mertaugh, who served as an education economist at the World Bank for thirty years and moved to Deering Highlands (a Portland neighborhood) relatively recently, acknowledged that the project will generate revenues, but also believed that it will likely generate building and maintenance costs that will greatly exceed those revenues. For this reason, he argued that development should proceed at a smaller scale.

To respond to the Midtown project opponents, supporters cited the long timeline of the project and the extensive community engagement undertaken by the developer. Shinberg, the local consultant for Federated, is convinced that public participation has been more than adequate, citing the fact that the project was first brought up in 1999. After the city agreed to sell the land to Federated in the spring of 2011, Midtown plans were unveiled in September 2012. Since then, Shinberg feels the project has been thoroughly scrutinized by the public (in the form of six workshops) as well as the Planning Board. He maintains that some opponents, including Keep Portland Livable, are “not fully informed” about the project because they have not participated in the full process or attended the meetings; instead, he feels that they came to the process late and are just recently voicing their concerns. In his words, “This is a good process, and it should be about making the project better... It’s unfair to show up at the last minute and turn the cart over.” He also stated, “We’re really working with Portland Trail and the other groups and the stakeholders in the city... It’s very consistent with the vision for Bayside; it follows it to a T.” At the end of the meeting, the Planning Board voted to approve Phase I of the project, which will cost the city \$105 million, but Keep Portland Livable pledged to appeal the verdict in Cumberland County Superior Court. The organization claims that the project is “inconsistent” with the city’s Comprehensive Plan and zoning ordinances, and that city officials violated Maine’s Freedom of Access Act by not maintaining records of Planning Board hearings. However, the City Council has recently approved several infrastructure changes necessary to complete the project, which the developer hopes will commence next spring (Miller 2014). Thus, there is currently no clear path forward with regard to Midtown.

Through this project, I realized that two visions for Bayside and Portland have materialized: one, a place of growing urban density; the other, a small city that continues to embrace its characteristic charm. However, few neighborhood residents, who are less socio-economically advantaged and more racially-diverse than many Portlanders, have had access to information that would allow them to form an opinion and participate in the debate. For example, Kristina Smith³, a Sudanese refugee from East Bayside who has lived in the U.S. since 2001, said that she had “no clue” about Midtown when I asked her about the project. If an English-speaker who is well-assimilated does not know about a project that will occur in the neighborhood adjacent to her own, there is a disjuncture between what the city believes to be community outreach efforts and the information that people are actually able to obtain. Upon asking her if she would attend a meeting were city officials to hold it at the Portland Adult Education office, Smith said she would attend. This joint meeting would allow two parts of municipal government, the public schools and the city planning office, to collaborate. Planners could attend these meetings, and teachers could include a civic or community activism

³ This is a pseudonym.

component in their curricula once the students have a functional knowledge of English. Currently, the Portland City Manager's Office has an Equal Opportunity and Multicultural Affairs Director, but that has evidently not translated into accessible information for all residents. My suggestion would allow the insights of community members, especially the most marginalized of them, to be taken into account.

It is important to note that income inequality between residents of Bayside and those of the West End contributes to their differential influence on city policies. The West End is where Monro, a vociferous opponent of Midtown, is from, and Smith, the Sudanese immigrant, calls East Bayside home. Indeed, the mean income level in 2012 was \$10,242 for Census Tract 5, which contains East Bayside, \$19,149 for Census Tract 6, which contains West Bayside, and \$33,292 for Census Tract 13, which contains the West End ("Social Explorer" 2014). Given this data, one can infer that wealthier Portland residents are trying to assert control over the physical landscape of Bayside, whose residents are poorer and have less political power than they do. In order to avoid such changes, that is, in order for Bayside residents, who are already largely disengaged from the political process by virtue of their social status, to have a voice, the city must take action to assure they are informed of changes that will occur in their neighborhood.

Such action would reverse the trend that has emerged in Bayside, that is, where the city shapes the landscape of a particular neighborhood, considers its efforts complete, and then ignores it. The Bayside story was one of neglect, until the neighborhood deteriorated and became an eyesore within the Forest City, a nickname given to the city because its streets are lined with trees. This was followed by renewal, which was large in scale and imposed from the top down, that is, planned by the government without citizen input. With regard to Midtown, people's visions are being heard; for example, city officials have facilitated public participation in the process and the project will ultimately be implemented in phases. However, the lack of racial diversity at the planning meeting I attended shows that the city's outreach can still be improved.

The lesson here is that all people must have the opportunity to exert control over the physical landscape in which they live; this has not occurred in Bayside, a low-lying, sunlight-poor section of Portland. For this reason, throughout history, Bayside became the natural place for industry, waste, and undesirable people, and this cycle perpetuated itself further. New, people-centered proposals for the landscape, such as a report entitled *East Bayside: Creating a Sustainable Vision for Maine's Most Diverse Neighborhood*, seem quite promising; however, they remain proposals.⁴ In addition, while immigration has brought racial and ethnic diversity to Bayside, which, like the remainder of Portland, has historically been extremely homogenous, it has also led to great tension among residents. Nevertheless, these residents are a part of the community and, like white, middle-class residents, have every right to shape their neighborhood.

As we have seen, without public input being taken into account regarding the neighborhood's physical landscape, Bayside ended up with several undesired components, a few among them being a housing crisis⁵, an arterial (or high-speed roadway) that split the neighborhood into eastern and western sections, and the Bayside Trail, a walkway/bikeway that is barely used because it is located in a place where people are not able to have a middle-class,

⁴ Co-authored in 2010 by various stakeholders, the purpose of this study was to promote East Bayside's development in the context of Portland's Comprehensive Plan. Its mission is "to coordinate and leverage the unique characteristics and the unparalleled opportunities now emerging to envision how East Bayside can be a model for creating a sustainable, urban neighborhood for the 21st century" (13).

⁵ Across the entire city, between 1961 and 1972, urban renewal activities collectively cost Portland more than 2,800 housing units in comparison to the addition of just 539 new units. 1,148 of the demolished units were highly-affordable triple-deckers, apartments, boardinghouses, and other multifamily structures (Bauman 2012, 194).

leisure-based relationship with nature. That is, instead of a trail, poor residents want a safe neighborhood that includes spaces in which their children can play. In order to avoid the mistakes of the past and make Bayside a site of deliberate planning efforts that engage the entire community, those who seek to change Bayside's landscape today must acknowledge the neighborhood's multifaceted history and include residents of all types in their plans for the neighborhood's future; because of Portland's small size (with a population of 66,000) and developing urban character, this is possible. Other cities could then follow Portland's lead with regard to their own "Baysides," neighborhoods on the fringe of their downtowns. This course of action will allow such neighborhoods to transcend the public perception that they are only home to undesirable people and industry. Because social and environmental inequalities often go hand-in-hand, deliberate planning by civic leaders acting in concert with the community can make a difference.

Personal Reflection

An important motivation for the completion of this study was my desire to raise issues and stimulate change in the city of Portland. To ensure my contribution and pledge my continued support, I have sent my work to a staff member at Portland Adult Education, where the refugees I interviewed learned English, and to one of Portland's city planners, and I plan to keep in touch with them as future projects affecting the neighborhood occur. Finally, the thesis allowed me to engage place-based learning, which connects people to the world that directly surrounds them (Sobel 1996, 3). Moving beyond Portland, a Bowdoin professor is planning to assign my thesis to students in her urban studies class, and I am planning to present my work to the community at the Maine Historical Society. In many ways, my thesis is a work of public scholarship, which can impact the city of Portland and its environs as the city attempts to chart a path forward.

In addition to its impact on the Greater Portland community, the project impacted my personal growth as a scholar. Having interviewed six people, including two city planners, two refugees affiliated with Portland Adult Education, a volunteer with the Portland Housing Authority, and a leader of a transportation-focused nongovernmental organization, this work taught me how to construct meaningful questions and interact with a variety of stakeholders. Through this type of learning, I was able to focus on a particular location by exploring both its people and its natural and built environment. The location is central to my research, as Bayside's issues can only be investigated and ultimately solved by intense study of the area itself.

Conclusion

With the Midtown project up for debate, then, Portland once again finds itself having to decide between two divergent paths, just as soon after the 1866 fire, which destroyed approximately one-third of the city, it "sought to find a balance between the city's aesthetic attractions, defined by these leaders as the 'Gateway to Vacationland,' and its commercial and industrial economy" (Hutchins 2013, 108-109). In many ways, it is still struggling to reconcile these same issues; in a more modern context, this has to do with the city's scale. One troubling fact worth noting is that Federated, the Midtown developer, does not have a long-term stake in the neighborhood (Midtown has only one local liaison), so the company will merely move on to its next project once it either brings Midtown to fruition or fails to do so. The city will decide how to proceed with this project, but before doing so, it must receive input from a wide cross-

section of city residents, including immigrants and refugees from Bayside. If the city seeks, and receives, this participation, Bayside residents will finally be able to shape their physical landscape, engage in deliberate planning, and determine a future of their own making. With community-centered planning, the plight of marginalized neighborhoods can be improved. Thus, I envision my contribution as assisting Portland, and other cities, in reconsidering how they treat their “Baysides.” To return to the text of my original argument, I wrote this piece to help Portland avoid the mistakes of its past by urging those who wish to change Bayside’s landscape to acknowledge the neighborhood’s multifaceted history and include residents of all types in their plans for the neighborhood’s future. This action will hopefully lead to the improvement of the social and environmental plight of this neighborhood’s residents and make Bayside a true gateway to the Forest City.

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