

Elizabeth Smith

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Boston's West End: Urban Renewal Research Paper

Project Overview

The West End of Boston is one of the largest examples of urban renewal in the Boston area, as well as the East Coast of the United States. This project took place over 24 years, beginning in 1950 and concluding in 1974. This project took an extreme impact on the community, demolishing about 80 acres of high-density residential buildings and locally owned businesses. This project, in total, displaced around 12,000 individuals, which is about 3,000 families (Lab et. al, 2017).

This project was supported by the Boston Housing Authority (BHA), who determined through neighborhood evaluation tactics that the West End is considered to be “slum” (Green, 1993). The BHA analyzed the characteristics of the neighborhood and determined that the architecture and inhabitants were “substandard”. This evaluation is what justified the clearing of the entire neighborhood to make way for high-end retail and high-rise residential buildings.

Today, the West End of Boston is a waterfront neighborhood encompassing high-rise condominiums, quaint parks, and high-end retail, sandwiched in by the TD Garden Stadium and Massachusetts General Hospital. It is a seemingly very quiet neighborhood that caters to a diverse range of lifestyles and cultures. However, what many West End residents don't know is the dark history behind what stands there today.

Community Profile & History

The history of the city of Boston is deeply rooted in the immigration of Europeans. The city saw an immigration boom particularly beginning at the time of industrial revolution. The West End specifically saw a rise in immigrants beginning in the 19th century, with people immigrating primarily from Italy, Ireland, Poland, and Soviet Russia (Boyles, 2020). Additionally, the West End had a large quantity of Jewish residents.

The West End's history actually began in the 1700s, as the area played a large role in early industry. In 1777, the land was developed with the intention to build factories that produced sugar, rope, and alcohol (The West End Museum, 2018). From there, the West End, due to its prominent waterfront location, became a hub for transporting food, products, and general goods. Once trains became the most prominent mode of transportation for moving goods, a train station was built in the West End, that moved both people and products. The train station, named the



Image Source: The West End Museum

Boston and Lowell Railroad depot (pictured above), became a large, highly trafficked station that competed directly with the inner-city stations in other areas of Boston.

As the American population grew, Boston's population grew as well. According to the West End Museum of Boston, the industrial revolution went underway in the mid to late 1800s, which caused a growth in all neighborhoods in Boston. The West End saw an influx in population because the surrounding neighborhoods also saw a rise in population. The North and South end both saw booms in population, but those which led to those who were over the North and South end's capacity, to move to the West End.

The analysis of the racial demographics of the West End by Boston's urban planners began in the 1940s. Planners would scope out the neighborhood, analyze what currently existed, and start to envision something different in the area. Concurrently, the neighborhoods of the city began to be graded through redlining efforts. With the shift in demand for home ownership post-World War II, the Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC) began mapping out existing cities and assigning them a "grade" based on their characteristics, ranging from hazardous to best, with definitely declining and still desirable in the middle (Nelson & Winling, 2023).

According to the Boston's West End was deemed about 78% hazardous and definitely declining. The basis for these characterizations was rooted in the "deteriorating architecture". However, the report also noted the fact that the area was primarily made up of lower-class, poor immigrants, which furthered the reasoning behind the area's substandard grade. This practice was the beginning of a few neighborhood analysis methods that justified the West End being a target for demolition and urban renewal, which is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Justifications

As stated in the previous section, by the 1940s, the Boston area neighborhoods were already being graded based on their physical and racial characteristics. The West End had a grade of being majority “hazardous” and “definitely declining” (Nelson & Winling, 2023). The reasoning behind this was that since the area had mostly immigrants who were also working-class and, on average, lower income compared to the rest of Boston. Because of this, the area could not be upkeep as well as the wealthy districts of Boston, and the architecture was deemed as “substandard”.

Below is the redlining map of Boston from “Mapping Inequality” by the University of Richmond. For context, red is colored on the neighborhoods deemed hazardous, with yellow being slightly better, then blue, with green being the best. This map shows the West End, labeled “D6”, being graded red for “hazardous”, which is the worst grade a neighborhood can get. It’s also important to note that surrounding neighborhoods like “D5” were reported to have similar characteristics, and a similar HOLC-assigned grade.

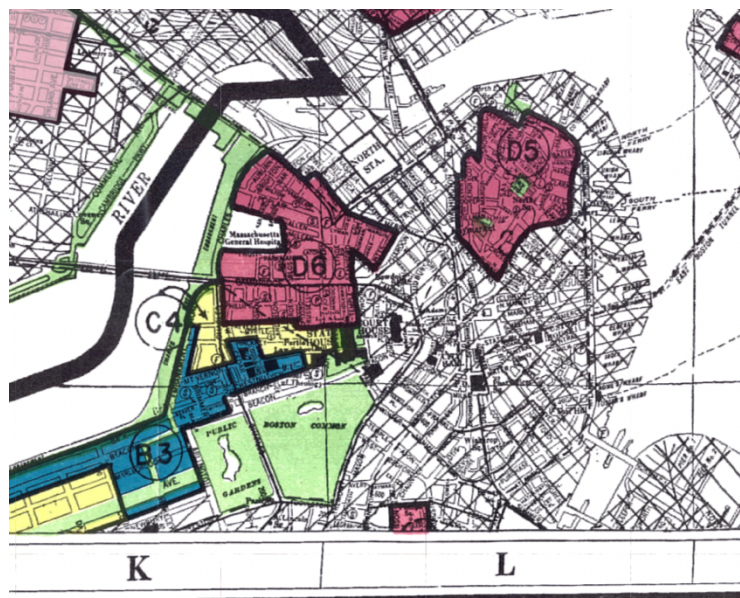


Image Source: “Mapping Inequality”

After the redlining maps were released, Boston urban planners began visiting the area to brainstorm as to what they could change the area to be. Many local planners looked to the downtown district, which at the time was high-income, white-collar, and business centric, that ultimately led to the early stages of revamping the West End (Auger, 1979). Additionally at the time, in the 1940s and 1950s, there was a resurgence of political dominance in the Boston area, that prioritized business and financial goals, which ultimately was the push developers needed to gain traction in redeveloping the West End (Tager, 1993).

The efforts to demolish and rebuild the area continued with the Boston Housing Authority's (BHA) analysis of the area. The BHA surveyed the area and determined that the West End neighborhood was at too high density, that the land itself is "overcrowded with buildings", and because of this the roads surrounding the buildings were too narrow (Boston Housing Authority, 1953). Additionally, the BHA determined that 80% of the existing buildings were at or substandard.

The legal justification behind this push to clear the West End was the Housing Act of 1949 (The West End Museum, 2018). This housing act made it a legal responsibility for cities to provide adequate housing for its residents (The American Presidency Project & Truman, n.d.). This supported federal funding for urban renewal projects and clearing of neighborhoods that were determined to be "substandard" in order to provide "adequate housing" for residents. These terms of housing are, of course, very loosely defined, which is how private developers were able to excuse the mass urban renewal projects like the West End.

Another main justification behind this project was the declining population of the West End. Contrary to the last one hundred years of steady population boom, within the last 30 to 40 years, the West End had seen a steady population decline. According to the BHA's report that sourced

the census, in 1910, the West End had about 22,656 people. By 1930, the population had decreased to 13,454 people, and by 1950, the population had plateaued at around 12,000 people which is who ended up being displaced just a few years later. There has not been a singular reason identified that contributed to the decline in population, but rather a variety of global issues.

Between the supposed dilapidated conditions in addition with the steady population decrease over the last few decades, the Boston Housing Authority, along private developers and other political stakeholders, ultimately deemed it necessary to demolish the West End neighborhood in order to make way for a new, more exclusive Boston.

Planned Development

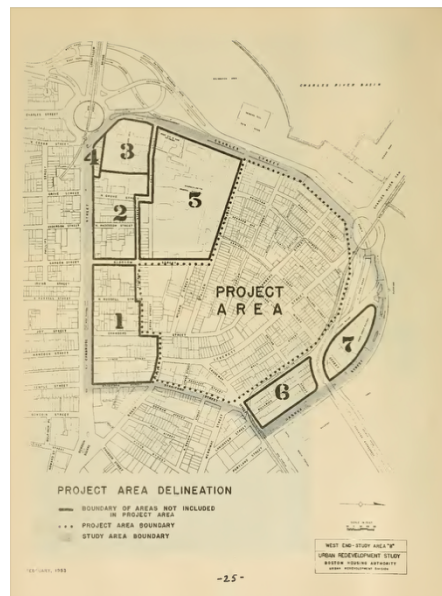


Image Source: Boston Housing Authority's West End Project Report

Above is the planned project area, according to the West End Project Report, a redevelopment study, written by the Boston Housing Authority in partner with local planning firms and public

city planners. Within the project area, there was about 80 acres total. The primary outcome of the redevelopment was to produce high-rent, residential buildings at a much lower density than the existing units. The existing residential area was at about 136 families per acre on 22 acres (3,000 families/22 existing acres of residential buildings), and the desired redevelopment density was about 70 families per acre on 10 acres, which is essentially cutting the residential portion of this neighborhood in half and likely charging double the price.

Additionally, there was a small portion of the redevelopment that was allocated to low-to-middle income housing that existing West End residents would have priority to buy or rent. While this was a helpful measure in theory, the portion of land that was allocated was only 4.8 acres, less than half of the high rent land allocation. Although this affordable housing was promised by the Boston Housing Authority, common to the theme of other urban planners of the time, that promise was not kept. Families who were displaced and promised affordable housing once the redevelopment was completed, were ultimately forced to relocate permanently.

In addition to housing the redevelopment plan included a brand-new elementary school, as well as an expansion to the junior high school. At the time, West End housed two elementary schools, a junior high school, and a small, Catholic K-12 private school. The conditions of the public schools were also a significant part of the justification behind redeveloping the area. Both elementary schools were built in the late 1800s, and due to the decline of the West End's population, one elementary school was operating at 62% capacity, and the other at 84% capacity (Boston Housing Authority, 1953). Both schools also lacked essential facilities such as a gym or library. The same standard went for the junior high school, which operated at 59% capacity and lacked a lunchroom, gym, or library. According to the BHA's project report, both elementary schools were set to be abandoned and demolished, and in its place a new elementary school with

all essential facilities. The redevelopment plan also intended on keeping the private Catholic school and building an accompanying Catholic church.

With the remaining acreage, the BHA planned to build a high-end retail shopping center in addition to keeping a small group of existing stores. There was also a 5.4-acre lot allocated for a mixed-use industrial area, and another large lot of land that was allocated to create another parking lot for the neighboring Massachusetts General Hospital. The BHA's report claimed that the redevelopment plan would "simplify" the neighborhood by making the street system more efficient and decreasing the housing density by about half.

Who Benefitted

The Boston West End redevelopment plan was published in 1953, and the project itself went underway by giving eviction notices beginning in 1958. Although the redevelopment plan was published, and certain components were promised to existing West End residents such as affordable housing units, this did not end up being the case. Given that the West End was a relatively large neighborhood and had a prominent location on the water, many private developers wanted a piece of the land to develop on. This is what ended up happening. Although part of the redevelopment plan was already allocated to high-rent, low density residential buildings, both government and private stakeholders sought out more high-rent housing, to what ended up taking over almost the entire project (Brennan, 2017).

In 1949, Boston elected a new mayor, a man named John Hynes. He was notably different than Boston's previous mayor, James Michael Curley, in that he had a much more aggressive approach to fixing the city's problems. The West End was Hynes's first major project that he

adopted. He incentivized private developers and those who were planning on moving out to the surrounding suburbs by proposing a new, modern neighborhood in Boston (The West End Museum, 2018). Hynes used the prime location of the West End, near downtown, and on the water to lure private developers to want to develop in the area, and higher-income Bostonians to the West End.

Ultimately, who ended up benefitting from this project is the high-end real estate developers, the residents of the new, modern high rent residences, and the political figures who had a stake in the project, such as John Hynes. Who suffered, however, was the 12,000 individuals who were displaced from the areas with promise of the ability to return that was never honored.

Public Interest Justification

The Boston West End project is one of the first and largest urban renewal projects that exhibited a bulldozer, top-down approach to redevelopment (The West End Museum, 2018). What this means is that the project had no reinstatement of existing buildings or housing, and otherwise leveled what was there with no community input. Below is a picture of how essentially,



Image Source: The West End Museum

everything on the West End was demolished with nothing remaining, creating a blank slate for private developers.

Because the justification behind this project is so poorly supported, the public justification is far from valid. The Boston Housing Authority, private developers, and Mayor John Hynes all justified the demolition of this neighborhood in the name of clearing “slum” and creating a more profitable area of Boston. There was no consideration for the existing residents, before the project, during the project, and after the project. This makes the public interest justification invalid as they lacked consideration for the public that existed in this neighborhood and acted only in the interest of those who would profit off of this redevelopment. Additionally, not only the prior justification, but the approach to the urban renewal made the project politically and financially driven, and not in the best interest of the general public. Today, this type of planning practice would raise serious ethical concerns as it is not only unethical, but also inhumane.

The West End Today

Today, the West End is a thriving neighborhood and seen as a quiet pocket of the Boston area. It includes high-rise, high-end residential buildings that attract a young, professional crowd. The neighborhood is sandwiched in by two popular Boston spots. On the southwest side of the neighborhood is Massachusetts General Hospital, a large and world-renowned hospital, who had a parking lot proposed in the original West End redevelopment plan. On the northeast side of the West End is TD Garden, a very popular arena that houses the Boston Bruins, Boston Celtics, and hosts a wide variety of shows and concerts. Cutting through the neighborhood on the northeast side is Interstate 93 that connects Boston with New Hampshire and Vermont.

Another characteristic of the West End neighborhood that has always been prevalent, dating back to the early industrial era, is how transit oriented it is. In the early industrial period, the West End was known to be a good hub to transport goods, and eventually people. Today, the Boston North Station is nestled in the West End and is linked with both the local transit, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, and the Amtrak transit system that connects Boston with other cities and states all over the country.

By the 1980s, the urban renewal project had fully concluded, and the West End began evolving into what it is today. In the mid 1980s, many previously displaced West End residents moved back to the area to get back in touch with their community (The West End Museum, 2018). However, these residents moved back with the purpose of advocating for the 12,000 displaced individuals whose lives were deeply impacted 30 years prior. They formed advocacy groups and researched endlessly for archived information about the community that was lost.

The West End advocacy groups came together and formed what now is the West End Museum. The West End Museum, located in the West End of Boston, is working to preserve the history of this neighborhood. They have done extensive work to research the history of this particular area of Boston, dating back to the earliest settlements, all the way until today. Their mission is to restore some of the history and community that has been lost over the years, especially with the urban renewal project.

The West End Museum provides a plethora of information on not only the special characteristics of the neighborhood, but also the downfalls of those who wanted to redevelop the area, thought they had the residents best interest in mind, but ultimately fell short. This preservation effort provides an example for the community on the importance of preserving culture.

Lessons & Reflection

The West End of Boston is one of the largest urban renewal projects in America, displacing 12,000 individuals or 3,000 families. It is also a large-scale example of the bulldozer, top-down approach to urban renewal. The project, led by the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) in conjunction with private developers and political figures, began with visions of people who were not West End community members. The project then led into an analysis of the area that deemed it “slum” or “substandard”, which to the planners of the time, justified its complete demolition and redesign of the area without input of the residents. In place of the residential and commercial space that existed, the BHA proposed high-end residences, retail, and some affordable housing to supplement the loss. Residents and their needs were not only ignored in the redesign process, but they were also promised units in the proposed affordable housing, which was never delivered.

The Boston West End project is an example of one of the biggest lessons a planner can learn that community input is vital when thinking to redevelop an area. An example of this is the Charlestown project that took place in a nearby neighborhood. A few years after the West End was demolished, BHA proposed to demolish 80% of the Charlestown neighborhood (The West End Museum, 2018). After seeing what happened to the West End, residents fought back and BHA actually considered the residents voices, to where only 20% of Charlestown was redeveloped. These two projects further prove the importance of public participation in urban planning as a whole. When considering how to design a community, the community members must be the strongest factor in every decision, as they are who is impacted directly. The West End is one of many examples throughout the United States where a community is neglected and thousands of people lose their homes and sense of community. It is up to the planners of today to learn from projects like the West End to prevent history from repeating itself.

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