

8-1995

# Bonston's West End: 35 years after the bulldozer

Peter Dreier

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholar.oxy.edu/uep\\_faculty](http://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty)

 Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Community-based Learning Commons](#), [Community-based Research Commons](#), [Comparative Politics Commons](#), [Environmental Policy Commons](#), [Health Policy Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Other Political Science Commons](#), [Other Public Affairs](#), [Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Public Policy Commons](#), [Social Policy Commons](#), [Transportation Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#), and the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Dreier, Peter, "Bonston's West End: 35 years after the bulldozer" (1995). *UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship*.  
[http://scholar.oxy.edu/uep\\_faculty/682](http://scholar.oxy.edu/uep_faculty/682)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Urban and Environmental Policy at OxyScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in UEP Faculty & UEPI Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of OxyScholar. For more information, please contact [cdla@oxy.edu](mailto:cdla@oxy.edu).



Urban & Environmental Policy Institute  
OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE  
...for a more just, livable and democratic region.

## BOSTON'S WEST END 35 YEARS AFTER THE BULLDOZER

---

By Peter Dreier. *Planning*, Aug 1995, Vol.61, Iss. 8; pg. 14

A groundbreaking that took place in Boston last October closes (or at least adds a footnote to) a tragic chapter in the history of urban planning in the U.S. Gov. William Weld, Mayor Thomas Menino, Bank of Boston chairman Ira Stepanian, state senate president William Bulger, Cardinal Bernard Law, and U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy all took turns at the shovel to signal the start of construction of Lowell Square, a 183-unit, mixed-income apartment complex on the last remaining undeveloped parcel in the old West End.

The irony of the October ceremony could not have been lost on the former West Enders in attendance. Four decades earlier, the city's power brokers had decided to raze the neighborhood as part of the federally funded urban renewal program. Some 7,000 residents lost their homes in the process. Not only will former neighborhood residents be on a priority list for apartments in the new building, but the complex will include a museum and archives to commemorate the vibrant community that once existed in the area that is now dominated by the Charles River Park development, a complex of luxury high-rise towers that is most famous for its sign: "If you lived here, you'd be home now."

Two key players were missing at the groundbreaking. One was former Mayor Ray Flynn, who fought hard to get the Lowell Square project built, but left city hall in 1993 to become U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. The other was Jerome Rappaport, the developer of Charles River Park and a political insider who had helped to promote the urban renewal plan. He filed suit in 1986 to try to stop the city from approving any development on the site adjoining his project, but the courts ultimately sided with the city.

### PRELUDE TO CHANGE

For more than a generation, students and practitioners have examined the West End as a case study in misguided urban planning. It is not simply a story of bureaucratic wrongdoing. It is a story about how power is wielded.

The West End was the subject of Herbert Gans's classic 1962 book, *The Urban Villagers*. Gans, a sociologist who lived in the neighborhood a year before the wrecking ball arrived, described it as a lively, working class community of three- to five-story apartment houses--not the blighted slum the city's establishment claimed. A potpourri of immigrant groups and a small number of African Americans lived together in relative harmony, Gans wrote, their lives centered on their families and the churches, synagogues, schools, settlement houses, and small shops that dotted the West End, at the foot of Beacon Hill.

Nevertheless, Boston's business leaders, government officials, daily newspapers, and the Catholic archdiocese all concluded that the city's declining economy could be reversed by taking advantage of federal urban renewal funds. Mayor John Hynes's administration targeted the West End for redevelopment, proposing to build luxury apartments near the financial and government districts. They hoped to stem the exodus of middle-class families to the suburbs and justified their decision in the name of "slum clearance."

In retrospect, the West End was doomed in 1949, when Hynes defeated the colorful Mayor James Michael Curley, who had earned the wrath of business leaders. To Boston's corporate elite, Curley represented everything that was wrong with the city. It was not only that they were Republicans and he was a Democrat, or that they were Yankees and he an Irishman. Curley had developed an intensely loyal following by trading votes for jobs and favors, padding the city's budget to provide jobs for his friends and campaign workers, and taxing banks and business to pay for public works projects that employed his constituents.

For years, local business leaders simply had written off the city. They refused to invest funds in modernizing industrial plants, in new buildings or new housing. By the end of World War II, Boston had become an economic wasteland. But by the late 1940s, the business leaders regrouped and decided there were profits to be made after all--if they could build a new city of corporate office towers and luxury apartments.

John Hynes, the city clerk, was their choice for mayor. Jerome Rappaport, then a young Harvard Law School graduate and leader of a business-sponsored civic group, the New Boston Committee, helped mobilize support for Hynes in the business community and among middle-class voters. Hynes served as mayor for 10 years, from 1949 to 1958.

For a few years, Rappaport worked as Mayor Hynes's chief of staff and, along with the city's business leaders, helped promote the urban renewal plan, including the razing of the West End. After Rappaport left city hall, the Hynes administration chose him as the developer for the new complex that became Charles River Park. The West End was torn down between 1958 and 1960.

While the establishment favored the West End project, the community itself was not well-organized and had no representation on the city council, then composed of at-large members. Because this kind of wholesale neighborhood destruction was unprecedented, few West End residents knew how to fight city.

## FAREWELL, MY LOVELY

During the mid-1950s, as the plans to raze the West End triggered public discussion, people slowly began leaving the neighborhood. When the Boston Redevelopment Authority in April 1958 gave West End residents and shopkeepers formal notice that their homes and businesses would be taken by eminent domain, the evacuation accelerated. By November, almost half of the 2,700 households were gone. By 1960, almost the entire 52-acre neighborhood was gone.

The property owners were promised that they would be fairly reimbursed for their buildings, and both homeowners and renters were told that they would be relocated to comparable low-rent housing, including the new apartments to be built where their homes had been. All these promises were broken.

According to research done in the early 1960s by Chester Hartman, then a young city planner at Harvard and now executive director of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council in Washington, West Enders were totally displaced from their neighborhood and dispersed all over the Boston area. Gans wrote in *The Urban Villagers* that the displaced residents suffered emotionally, and that almost all of them had to pay considerably more rent after they were forced to move.

At the time, the planning profession generally concurred with the bulldozer approach to urban renewal. But the critiques by Gans and others, along with protests by community groups around the nation, soon changed minds. Today, most in the field view the wholesale destruction of the West End as an example of the worst kind of urban renewal: using the wrecking ball to destroy low-income communities and replace them with enclaves for the affluent.

The West End redevelopment served as a warning to other Boston neighborhoods that they had to organize to have a voice in the planning process. It also led to changes in federal urban programs. By the late 1960s, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development obliged city planning agencies like the Boston Redevelopment Authority to emphasize neighborhood rehabilitation, low-rent housing, and community participation.

Federal urban renewal money was used to raze the West End. Most of the land was then sold to Jerome Rappaport for \$1.17 a square foot; additional federal funds and insurance subsidized the development itself. Political squabbles between Rappaport and city hall delayed construction of the project, however, and he did not complete Charles River Park until the early 1970s. Today, 2,300 apartments (including many now renting for over \$2,000 a month), two swimming pools, a tennis club, a hotel, two office buildings, parking garages, and a shopping center stand where the houses and shops of the West End once existed.

## HANGING ON

Over the years, many West Enders have stayed in touch, refusing to let the physical annihilation of their neighborhood destroy their emotional attachment to it. Even today, many display bumper stickers that read, "I'm a West Ender."

Led by former residents Jim Campano and Joseph LoPiccolo, West Enders have held annual reunions and summer picnics, sponsored a monthly cable television show about their old neighborhood, and helped the Bostonian Society put together an exhibit of West End memorabilia at the old State House. For over a decade, they have also published a regular newspaper, the *West Ender*, mailed to more than 3,000 households.

Rappaport became a force in Boston politics. For decades, his fundraising ability and political clout were so effective that the local news media labeled him the "tenth city councilor." In the 1970s, he used his influence to exempt Charles River Park from the city's rent control law. He has never expressed any regrets about the destruction of the West End.

## NEW DAY

Rappaport never completed his West End project. A 1.5-acre parcel at the corner of Merrimack, Staniford, and Causeway Streets (near North Station) remained undeveloped for more than a quarter of a century. For many years, former West Enders tried unsuccessfully to get city hall to use the site for a memorial to their old neighborhood.

Then, soon after populist Mayor Ray Flynn took office in 1984, he told his aides that he wanted to build affordable housing on the site. Flynn and his Boston Redevelopment Authority director, Steve Coyle, met with a group of former neighborhood residents and announced a public competition for the long-vacant parcel, which they dubbed Lowell Square, after one of the old neighborhood streets eliminated by urban renewal.

The competition was stalled when Rappaport sued the redevelopment authority, asserting his right to develop the site. Appraisers hired by the agency valued the property at \$15 million, but Rappaport insisted that he should get it for about \$100,000, its 1960 value.

Flynn relished the symbolism of helping to bring West Enders back to their neighborhood, but some of his advisers urged the mayor to cut a deal with Rappaport and avoid the litigation. Flynn nixed the compromise. The suit over Lowell Square took several years to resolve, but in 1990 the Massachusetts Appeals Court upheld the BRA's rights, clearing the way for the development.

A few months later, the BRA selected the Boston archdiocese's Planning Office for Urban Affairs, which has a long track record of building affordable housing, to transform the vacant parcel into the Lowell Square cooperative. The BRA also helped the former West Enders to form a nonprofit corporation, which worked with the archdiocese land codeveloper Robert Keuhn to design the \$30 million project and to incorporate a West End archives and museum into the development. The housing cooperative will have roughly equal numbers of low-income, moderate-income, and market-rate units.

Because of cutbacks in federal and state housing programs, it took the development team four years to put together the financing deal, which involved city, state, federal, and private funds. One of the project's major financial backers is the AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust, a pension fund now headed by Steve Coyle, the former BRA director. Construction was scheduled to begin this summer.

The archdiocese will give priority to former West Enders in 56 percent of the 183 units. Some West Enders have objected, claiming that under 1960s urban renewal laws they should be given first crack at all the units. City officials argue that more recent fair housing laws require them to give racial minorities, few of whom lived in the old West End, an opportunity to live in this government-subsidized housing development.

Those West Enders who wind up in the new housing complex will be living in a very different neighborhood--and a very different Boston. But whether or not they return to live at Lowell Square, all former West Enders will soon have an opportunity to show the world what the West End was like. The West End museum and archives will be filled with memorabilia, news clippings and television footage, documents from West End institutions and government agencies, and taped interviews with several generations of West End residents.

So when the former West Enders return to visit the new Lowell Square, they will honestly be able to say, "If I lived there, I'd be home now."

Peter Drier is the E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and director of the public policy program at Occidental College in Los Angeles. From 1984 to 1992 he served as the BRA's director of housing and as policy advisor to Mayor Ray Flynn.

## THE MAN BEHIND THE MOVE

Jerome Rappaport says he is tired of Monday morning quarterbacks who romanticize the 1950s--and disdain urban renewal. "If you look across the country at the projects that were undertaken then, Charles River Park is one of the economically and socially most successful. Tell me which community has withstood the test of time better," he says.

Urban renewal was a sensible strategy at the time, he argues, because large cities were struggling to recover from the Depression and World War II. In Boston, as elsewhere, urban property values were falling, he recalls, and people and businesses were abandoning the cities in droves. "At the time, there was a real sense of desperation" in Boston, he says.

Rappaport also vehemently denies using his political connections to influence the city's decision to demolish the old West End or

to win the development rights once the neighborhood was razed. He jokes that when the city put out a nationwide call for bids on the West End land, "everyone who was smart wouldn't do it."

Only three development bids were submitted, and one was withdrawn. That left Boston developer Max Kargman, who bid a penny a square foot for the land, and Rappaport and his partners, Theodore Shoolman and Seon P. Bonan, who bid \$1.17 a square foot for residential land and \$1.37 for commercial land.

Rappaport's group got the contract--and federal loan guarantees. But even then, Rappaport says, his group almost failed to line up financing for Charles River Park. Then the Prudential Insurance Company decided to build a 52-story office tower about two miles from the West End. The announcement convinced Prudential's main competitor, the John Hancock Insurance Company, to underwrite the mortgage for Charles River Park.

And what about the residents of the West End? Rappaport acknowledges that urban renewal was a hardship for many of them. But he disagrees with those who argue that the neighborhood was a vibrant community that should never have been targeted.

Urban renewal had "nothing to do with the quality of the people, their strength, or their character," he says. "It had to do with the physical quality of the area." The housing in the West End was deteriorating, Rapaport says, but the neighborhood was well situated near downtown, Beacon Hill, and the Charles River; planners thought it would attract the development dollars required by federal guidelines.

Today, he says he has nothing but respect for the former West End residents who pushed to recapture part of their lost neighborhood by winning back the parcel where Lowell Square is being built. "I respect their leadership and I wish them well," he says. "It's taken a great deal of perseverance on their part."

In fact, he says he's lucky that he lost his lawsuit against the Boston Redevelopment Authority and was prevented from taking control of the land--because Boston's real estate market hit the skids at the end of the 1980s. If he'd been allowed to build the 335 apartments he wanted to build, "our blood would have been flowing in the streets," he said.

Rappaport, now 67, says he and his Charles River Park partners are largely retired from the development business. But he and his two sons have recently launched a new firm, the New Boston Real Estate Investment Fund, to invest in undervalued office and residential property across the country.

And what is the lesson of Charles River Park? "It may not suit everybody's taste," Rappaport says. "But the great thing about cities is that they offer everyone a choice."

Gendron is a reporter with the Boston Herald.

Copyright American Planning Association Aug 1995

[UEPI Home](#) | [About Us](#) | [Programs](#) | [Blog](#) | [Publications](#) | [Media](#) | [Staff](#) | [Site Map](#)  
[Contact the Webmaster](#) | [farmtoschool.org](#) | [progressivela.org](#) | [arroyofest.org](#) | [Occidental College](#)

Website hosted by [Occidental College](#). All content is the property of the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College unless otherwise noted.