

# **Lessons for Equitable Park Development on the Boston Waterfront**

The Urban Action Lab at Boston College

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## **I. Introduction**

accessible, climate-resilient open space in Boston that serves diverse community needs and brings value to the vulnerable harbor city.<sup>1</sup>

holders. Drawing on the examples of five urban waterfront parks across North America, this study examines the expected distribution of those benefits across communities in Boston and identifies relevant strategies for equitable park development.

The Urban Action Lab first presents the existing literature on the benefits of urban parks and describes how those benefits accrue to nearby stakeholders in the form of private benefits. Consideration is given to the underlying factors that prevent an equitable distribution of economic and social benefits in Boston. Each of the five case studies -- Waterfront Seattle, Millennium Park in Chicago, 11th Street Bridge in D.C., Waterfront Toronto, and Buffalo Bayou Park in Houston -- offers a lesson for overcoming the barriers to equitable park development in Boston. Lastly, the Urban Action Lab applies these findings to the potential sites of the Boston Waterfront Initiative

## **II. Opportunity for Impact**

of park employees and vendors in the local economy.<sup>5</sup> Summing these three categories yields a  
benefits to cities. Viewed more broadly, parks have also  
been shown to spur increases in property values, real estate development, business activity, and  
tourism.<sup>6</sup>  
will therefore bring about change further inland.

Across these impacts, a line can be drawn between the public and private benefits of parks. The  
cities. It view

Transportation: Transit access in Boston varies by neighborhood. Cost and inconvenience remain barriers for residents of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, and East Boston looking to reach the central waterfront.<sup>11</sup> City officials recognize the need to promote affordable

Affordability: While the median household income in Boston is similar to the rest of the United States, homes are more than twice as expensive.

#### IV. Lessons from Urban Waterfront Parks

How will these documented barriers to equitable development influence the progression of the Boston Waterfront Initiative? Five projects in other North American cities provide insight into the potential equity impacts of an urban waterfront park in Boston. Each of these initiatives has brought measurable social and economic change to its respective city. Some parks resulted from small-scale neighborhood effort; others are a part of on-going urban planning projects. Together they offer lessons for equitable waterfront park development in Boston.

##### **Waterfront Seattle: Expanding Physical Access**

ongoing effort, called Waterfront Seattle, began in 2010 and is set to be completed in 2024. The project will deliver the city with a new park promenade, two revitalized piers, an elevated walkway to Pike Place Market, and improved East-West roadways.<sup>19</sup> Waterfront Seattle will leverage the power of open space, infrastructure, and transportation to link neighborhoods along the waterfront to each other and the rest of the city.

predict its economic impact upon completion. Special focus was given to the potential equity impacts of the waterfront. The report found that rising retail rents near the waterfront, already the highest in Seattle, will continue to place pressure on local businesses. This risk applies especially to low-income, minority, and immigrant-owned businesses that are relatively resource strained.<sup>20</sup> Waterfront Seattle will bring 2,385 jobs to Downtown Seattle, but this increased economic activity is likely to benefit primarily knowledge-based and tech job growth.<sup>21</sup> So while the project is

position to reap the full benefits of these social and economic connections.

**Takeaway:** Increased physical connections between a new waterfront park and the rest of the city may exacerbate the threat of displacement for vulnerable residents and businesses.

and visitors.<sup>22</sup>

In 2011, Texas A&M and DePaul University produced a study on the value of Millennium Park. It found that the population of nearby homeowners and renters increased by 71% following the

in nearby hotel units and continue to bring in \$1.4 billion annually.<sup>23</sup> As the area around the park has transformed, the profile of a Millennium Park resident has also changed. Young professionals and Baby Boomers have moved in from the suburbs to take advant

<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Millennium Park has improved safety and security outcomes, stimulated public transit development, and provided opportunities for social and cultural involvement for all Chicago

and undeniable public value as a hub for art and culture.

**Takeaway:** In areas of Boston where physical displacement is a threat due to waterfront development -- like in Charlestown, South Boston, and East Boston -- so too is cultural displacement. A critical mass of cultural attractions for residents and tourists can work against this threat and widen the

which live below the poverty line (compared to 10% in the west).<sup>27</sup> These residents fear that the protecting their interests. BBAR understands these sentiments and has incorporated plans for affordable housing, small business loans, local hiring requirements, and community programming

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**Takeaway:** The 11th Street Bridge Park demonstrates proactive planning rooted in an

River, the Boston Harbor separates Downtown Boston from East Boston, home to the

By turning its attention to physically and/or racially isolated neighborhoods, the Boston Waterfront Initiative can connect long-divided areas of the city.

### **Waterfront Toronto: Transforming Negative Perceptions**

Located on Lake Ontario, Toronto has been ranked the fastest growing city in the U.S. and Canada.<sup>29</sup> Waterfront Toronto aims to revitali to the environmental, spatial, and economic challenges confronting the growing city. Since 2001, Waterfront Toronto has developed twenty five waterfront parks, amounting to one-fourth of the revitalized shoreline (400 acres).<sup>30</sup> potential impact.

A formal impact assessment was published by urbanMetrics in 2012 to review the first decade of work on the waterfront. At the time of the study, the revitalized waterfront had created 16,200 permanent jobs and \$3.2 billion in economic activity (compared to \$1.3 billion in development costs).<sup>31</sup> Despite a significant return on investment, the project has faced criticisms for its high price tag. Waterfront Toronto has countered these claims of grandiosity by pointing to its ability to use beauty as a tool for social and economic change.<sup>32</sup> Prior to its revitalization, the waterfront had been heavily polluted by industrial activity. Fiscal collapse in the 1990s forced Toronto to abandon important post-industrial redevelopment projects.<sup>33</sup> In a commercial city that is characteristically grey, the project has initiated a paradigm shift in how residents perceive and use the waterfront. A massive public asset has been created out of once-neglected space. The result is a more cohesive Toronto, both physically and symbolically.

**Takeaway:** Like Waterfront Toronto, the Boston Waterfront Initiative plans to transform underutilized space into a world-class attraction. In Boston, though, black and Latinx residents are already turned off by the exclusivity and luxury of the waterfront. An overly grandiose park may deepen these feelings of exclusion.

### **Buffalo Bayou Park: Overcoming Environmental Threats**

Winding along the banks of Buffalo Bayou in Houston, Texas, is a series of gardens, trails, art displays, and play areas that comprise Buffalo Bayou Park. The 160 acre park was developed between 2012 and 2015 as part of a larger initiative to revitalize a 10-mile stretch of the historic is now an anchor for recreational and cultural life in Downtown Houston.<sup>34</sup>

Two studies have investigated the environmental, social, and economic performance of Buffalo Bayou Park:  
-- both floods and

<sup>35</sup> According to the Landscape Architecture Foundation, the park withstood nearly \$2 million in damages and repairs from Hurricane Harvey in 2017.<sup>36</sup> Just days after the hurricane hit,





The project embodies each pillar of inclusive development: fostering neighborhood connections, honoring culture and community, and confronting existing inequities. In East Boston and open space as a catalyst for economic and social transformation.

### Appendix: Summary of Case Studies

Park	Location	Focus	Private Benefits	Public Benefits	Distribution of Benefits
<b>Waterfront Seattle</b>	Seattle, WA	Expanding Physical Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x\$1.1B one-time impact</li> <li>x2,385 permanent jobs</li> <li>x\$288M annual economic activity</li> <li>x8M annual visitors &amp; \$191M in tourism spending</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x Renovated surface street along &amp; new east-west roadways to reach waterfront</li> <li>x to protect from storms &amp; seismic events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>x Residents in study area more diverse &amp; less af4.05 reW*BT/F.</li> </ul>