

**DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF A
COMMUNITY PLANNING PROCESS FOR THE
LEDGE SITE IN MISSION HILL**

15 JANUARY, 1995

**PROJECT CONTRACT FINAL REPORT
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THE BUILDING BLOCK

A project of

Boston Building Materials Cooperative
Charitable and Educational Fund

TO: Chris Clamp, NH College HUD Work Study Administrator
FR: Glen Ohlund
RE: Final Quarter Update
DATE: 2/1/94

The final four months I worked at The Building Block (TBB) saw tremendous growth potential for the start-up Non-Profit. As I have alluded to in earlier reports, the space requirements of TBB have exceeded the current facility. The parent organization, The Boston Building Materials Cooperative needs the income generated by The Building Block to sustain viability. For this reason, additional space requirements of The Building Block will need to occur within the present structure or built on-site. For this reason, I believe The Building Block will need to continue efforts on Development of funding sources so that a capital expenditure can be made. There will continue to be the need for off-site storage. This creates difficulties for a small organization currently employing one full time project manager, and a number of college work-study interns.

The Work Study has been effective in my professional education. Watching a start-up organization build its client base and break-even potential, has shown me that TBB provides a needed service to low-income residents of Boston. If I had to make one recommendation, it would be that additional space should have been secured as the project manager indicated.

Respectfully Submitted,

Glen Ohlund/HUD Work Study Intern

Bill Perkins/Supervisor, Project Manager

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ledge Site Community Planning Process was a unique opportunity for members of the Mission Hill neighborhood to develop a vision and plan for the Ledge Site. The Ledge Site, a 9.38 acre parcel overlooking Brigham Circle, is the third largest underdeveloped parcel in the City of Boston.

In most major urban settings, the typical approach to real estate development involves the developer (whether for profit or non-profit) who has an idea, owns property, hires an architect, presents a development scheme for permitting approval and holds the required community meeting. Designs may or may not be modified following public comment. Neighborhood residents are generally left out of the process and allowed to react at the very end.

The Ledge Site Community Planning Process turned traditional development practices upside down. It started with soliciting the comments of residents on what they wanted to see built, who it should serve, and general concerns about changing the gateway to the community. Altogether, over four hundred participants were involved in creating a financially viable development plan that, when implemented, will create economic development and a new image for the neighborhood. The 25 million dollar development plan established will help to revitalize a depressed commercial district, create jobs and needed goods and services. It brought in technical consultants only when all interested community people had expressed their visions for the Ledge Site. The process demonstrated that individuals working together can have control of community development. It may very well be a model worthy of replication elsewhere.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

If no solution is found in the next five years to the economic de-stabilization in Mission Hill, a neighborhood of approximately 14,600 people in Boston, the community will continue to decline and institutional expansion will overrun residential areas creating severe displacement of the current population.

Community Description:

Mission Hill is a one square mile neighborhood in western Boston that is racially and economically diverse. The population of 14,600 residents is 28% African American, 26% Latino, 37% Caucasian, 8% Asian American, and 1% Other. 27% of households are below the poverty level. The median household income for the two neighborhood statistical areas included in Mission Hill are \$23,043 and \$15,798, compared to the City of Boston household income of \$37,900.

Almost three quarters of the neighborhood is residential, made up of privately owned one to four family buildings and a number of multi-family structures, including two Boston Housing Authority developments, Mission Main and Alice Heyward Taylor Apartments.

Brigham Circle is the center of the commercial district in Mission Hill. The primary population served by the Ledge Site redevelopment will be the residential community that relies on the Brigham Circle Shopping District to meet their daily needs for goods and services. Approximately three quarters of the neighborhood is residential with the other quarter including Longwood Medical Area (LMA) institutions and their employees.

The LMA and residential community have been at odds for three decades over institutional encroachment. As owner of the Ledge Site, Harvard Medical School and Harvard University, have made numerous attempts to cross Huntington Avenue, a natural border to the residential area, to develop the site for institutional purposes.

City of Boston studies show that of an annual aggregate income near \$22.2 million, only \$5.2 million is spent on consumer goods and services locally. This means that there are severe leakages of money that could stay in the neighborhood and lend to healthy economic growth locally. This economic disinvestment has had a very negative impact on conditions, as evidenced by vacant storefronts in the commercial district.

Description of Lead Organization for Community Planning Process:

The organization I have been working with on my project is the Mission Hill Neighborhood Housing Services (MHNHS). The MHNHS is a twenty year-old group that was organized around bank redlining issues in the early seventies. It was formed to enable residents of Mission Hill to gain home improvement loans for an older housing stock, and to encourage home ownership to improve neighborhood stability.

The organization has 1,000 household members in a community of 4800 households. Over the years, 200 of these household members have received home improvement loans totalling two million dollars. In addition, Mission Hill Neighborhood Housing Services owns 117 units of housing of which 1/3 are market rate, and 1/3 are subsidized. MHNHS also owns two commercial properties that are occupied by a camera store and a cosmetics distributor.

Other Neighborhood Considerations:

During the late fifties and early sixties, Harvard University through the Harvard Medical School began acquiring triple deckers in the community for land banking purposes. Based on more than one account, I learned that they would rent them when possible but act as absentee landlords in terms of upkeep. Their goal; to allow deteriorating buildings to blight the rest of the community, creating low resale values, and to encourage residents to sell at low prices. They did not have specific plans for the land, but knew they would eventually.

In the past, Harvard has used their power to subvert community interests in lieu of their own expansion plans. There have been victories over Harvard. The University was asked not to cross Huntington Avenue in the Seventies and they agreed, temporarily.

The economic conditions have become more depressed since the end of the real estate boom in the eighties. House values have depreciated to 1/2 their peak values. Income levels have also been affected. Census statistics indicate a net reduction in household income. The residents of two public housing developments have been hurt due to the recession and other inner-city factors. In Mission Main, a fifty-five percent unemployment was reported by males of working age. This brings its own set of problems to the community in terms of crime and substance abuse.

PROJECT GOALS

To address the needs of the Mission Hill neighborhood in Boston, a participatory plan for community economic development of the commercial district was developed to assist in planning around the restoration and continued viability of the commercial center.

The overall goal of this project was to create a community economic development plan for the Ledge Site that has broad-based community support, local control, and which provides needed goods and services for the community. The objective of keeping dollars in the community is integral to this effort. This plan will also act as a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization and serve other needs of the people such as job creation and providing a town center for increased interaction among residents.

The activation of large numbers of participants was central to this project. Over four hundred people participated in various planning events throughout the 18 month process. People have been directly involved in site options research and assisted at neighborhood-wide meetings as "resident experts". When necessary, other technical consultants have been utilized in the areas of soils, geotechnical, marketing, and other business concerns. Without resident participation, this would have just been another developer's dream that met with vocal community objection.

An important outcome of this project was a heightened sense of ownership or empowerment in the community by those who have invested energies. I would hope that their involvement in this planning process is just the beginning of a long and mutually beneficial relationship between the people of Mission Hill and NHS. The Organization's image in the community has been dramatically enhanced. The involvement of residents from under-served districts in the neighborhood such as the two public housing developments has started to shift the NHS to a more inclusionary

organization. More work is necessary to promote cultural acceptance and diversity within the community and organization.

The development plan produced has already begun to sell itself in terms of community support and potential investor interest. We will begin working to identify possible partners soon and some have already surfaced. In some respects, the community planning process we embarked on was really a pre-development plan.

METHODOLOGY

Overview of the Ledge Site Community Planning Process:

The Ledge Site Community Planning Process has created a new vision for the Ledge Site in Mission Hill. The Ledge Site is Mission Hill's largest parcel of underdeveloped land, and the third largest in Boston. It is located in the heart of the neighborhood adjacent to both the residential community and the Longwood Medical Area. This new vision for the parcel, a major redevelopment, will serve as the focal point for enhancing the gateway to the neighborhood, a bridge to the institutional sector and their resources, and provide much needed economic growth to maintain a viable community.

To create this vision, Mission Hill NHS implemented the Ledge Site Community Planning Process. It incorporated community participation and review in creating a financially viable concept plan that serves the needs of the entire neighborhood.

This eighteen month planning process has involved a number of tasks and activities -- small group meetings of abutters, other residents, businesses and institutions, user surveys, neighborhood newsletters, task forces, and larger neighborhood-wide meetings. It has also required additional staffing and professional consultants to assist participants with defining planning concepts and designs for the site.

Description:

The purpose of the planning process was to create a viable development plan for the Ledge Site that serves the needs of the community, acts as a catalyst to revitalize the Brigham Circle Commercial District, and has broad-based community

support. To accomplish this, the process had to define the community's objectives and goals; specific site uses; and design criteria/other concerns. In order to define and prioritize these issues, a number of steps were followed:

- 1) **SMALL GROUP MEETINGS OF:**
- ABUTTERS**
 - RESIDENTS**
 - BUSINESSES**
 - INSTITUTIONS**

Meetings were held in homes of abutters, church basements, community rooms, and hospitals. Turnout was accomplished through fliers, door knocking, phoning, and word of mouth. Spanish translation was required in some residential districts. The meetings ranged in size from four to more than fifty. The average meeting size was approximately twenty-five. The results of these 16 meetings are included as an insert to Ledge Site News #3 in the appendix.

These small group meetings accomplished a number of purposes. The primary purpose was to generate and collect information from a diverse group of participants on their desires, needs, and visions for the site. We also solicited their concerns and the problems they foresaw in developing the site.

The planning process was outlined at each small meeting to explain how the information collected would be used and how participants could stay involved. Information on community development was presented and distributed to give people an overview of all the steps and factors that were involved so they might have a better understanding of the decisions that needed to take place. These small group meetings also identified and developed individuals who were interested in greater participation in the design process.

2) LEDGE SITE NEWSLETTER

The Ledge Site News has kept residents and others informed and updated on the planning process, as well as increased NHS's presence in the neighborhood. It has been published at specific points in the planning process to solicit input, distribute information, report decisions, and announce meetings. Five are included as one appendix.

3) TASK FORCES

Out of the small group meetings, over sixty individuals expressed interest in investigating specific development issues through involvement in task forces. These task forces have greatly expanded the opportunity for community participation in the process and have provided assistance on various aspects of the process. They included:

- SURVEY**
- COMMERCIAL USE**
- HOUSING**
- OPEN SPACE**
- TRAFFIC & PARKING**

These issues were selected because of their frequent mention at the small group meetings as concerns or development uses that needed further investigation. Members were selected so that each task force had representation from as many districts within Mission Hill as possible. Task forces began work in the fall of 1993, and brought people together in a working environment to discuss and refine development issues. In many instances, members did not know each other before their involvement here. As a result, many friendships have developed beyond the context of the task forces, helping to coalesce the feeling of community. I firmly believe that the formation of these task forces was the springboard for neighborhood support of the planning process and Concept Plan. At their advent, it became more than a small group within the community making planning decisions.

Task forces researched and planned presentations of development issues at larger, neighborhood-wide meetings in the Spring of 1994. My role was to facilitate meetings and support the chair or co-chairs in preparation of meeting agendas, etc.

4) TECHNICAL SUPPORT

In order to conduct the Community Workshops, a number of consultant services were required. NHS developed Request For Proposals and Scope of Services for a community planning consultant, architect, and financial consultant. These individuals would help the community to create a development plan for the site by collecting, reviewing and analyzing information developed by participants.

5) COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

Neighborhood-wide meetings were used to generate community comments and additional participation in the process. It was at these four larger, half day meetings, that creation of, and decisions about the development plan occurred.

The Community Workshops involved information sharing by task force members, technical consultants in Architecture and Real Estate Development, and participants. Each half-day meeting had over fifty community people in attendance. A total of over 250 people with diverse backgrounds attended one or more workshop.

These four workshops were designed to funnel the information gathered at the smaller group meetings, add new ideas, and come up with a concept plan for the Ledge Site that was supported by the community. The themes for each workshop were:

#1- DEVELOPING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

#2- FUTURE VISIONS

#3- REFINING AND ADOPTING THE VISION

#4- TESTING THE REALITY OF THE VISION

Included as an appendix, are the announcements, agendas and other handouts for each Workshop.

Between the First and Second Community Workshops, two tours of the Ledge Site were held to give interested participants a more thorough understanding of the unique topography of the parcel.

One of the reasons that the workshops were effective in a politically diverse community is that Group Norms were established to facilitate the meetings. These included:

1. BEGINNING AND ENDING ON TIME
2. EACH PERSON PARTICIPATED
3. PROCESS REQUIRED OPEN, HONEST, AND DIRECT COMMUNICATION
4. USE OF "I" MESSAGES
5. RESPECT FOR DIFFERENCES
6. ATTENDANCE AND PREPARATION FOR EACH AGENDA POINT
7. ACKNOWLEDGING EACH PARTICIPANT HAS EXPERTISE
8. PARTICIPANTS MUST BE RESPONSIBLE FOR OWN LEARNING
9. THE PROCESS TAKES TIME

Participants were assigned a color coded name tag upon arrival. This meant that friends were not necessarily seated at the same table. Approximately ten to twelve tables were arranged for participants. Decisions around development priorities were established at each of these tables and then reported to the entire group throughout the four workshops.

The second workshop was attended by architects from the firm of Goody, Clancy and Associates. They were present simply to listen and view designs developed by participants at each table. It was explained to those in attendance, that four or five concepts would be developed as a result of this second workshop by the

architects.

The third workshop began with presentations of various conceptual plans by Goody, Clancy, and Associates. Decisions were made by allowing participants to "vote" on their favorite scenarios. The architects were asked to refine these themes and development priorities which were rated by participants at the front of the hall by placing colored dots next to their own particular development priorities.

Decision making continued at Community Workshop Four. Along with the architects, a financial consultant was present to give a lesson in real estate financing for approximately 90 minutes. Attendees decided to eliminate certain options that hurt project viability. Other options were tabled, and NHS was asked to do additional investigation of items such as below-market rate rent and low-cost financing of open space improvements. Financial proformas are included as an appendix, along with the yellow attachment participants used for rating the various options.

At the 3:30 anticipated close of the fourth workshop, participants voted to extend the meeting so that the agenda could be completed. This was the only time group norms were challenged. At the close, residents were asked if the concept plan reflected the original mission set out at Community Workshop 1, and if they supported it. They overwhelmingly supported it and the architects were asked to further refine the adopted concept plan.

RESULTS

Separation of results into community benefits and those of organizational benefit to NHS and the project are logical means by which to evaluate the Ledge Site Community Planning Process.

Community Benefits:

The Creation of a Concrete Development Plan:

The development plan created through the NHS Ledge Site Community Planning Process is a neighborhood generated plan. The Ledge Site development plan is a \$25 million, 155,000 square foot, mixed use complex that will be the catalyst in the revitalization of the commercial center in Mission Hill at Brigham Circle. A copy of the plans are included as an appendix.

It will create 45,000 square feet of neighborhood-based retail space such as clothing and shoe shops, grocery stores, and laundry facilities within walking distance for all Mission Hill residents. Also included in the development plan are 10,000 square feet for a sit-down restaurant and a number of small prepared food vendors.

Additionally, 100,000 square feet of multi-purpose, first class office space is provided in three separate buildings. The potential for local small business and micro-enterprise development here is substantial. A number of existing businesses have already expressed interest in expanding to the site.

The development also forms a 10,000 square foot outdoor landscaped shopping plaza that creates a new gateway, image and town center for the community. The plaza is of sufficient size to accommodate a number of community events, rallies and the farmer's market.

Diversification and Inclusion of All in the Process:

NHS has made strides to diversify the membership through this planning process. Translations of meeting announcements and bilingual meetings have enabled a more diverse population to become involved. As the organizer, I helped to identify a significant base in one of two public housing developments for this project, with some success in the other. These resident groups of African Americans and Latinos have traditionally been excluded from community planning in Mission Hill, except within their own developments. In the section covering recommendations, I will offer more information on this issue.

The Community Workshops were designed to allow greater neighborhood participation. They were held on Saturdays, in the Spring of 1994. Daycare, transportation and food were provided to encourage participation. A total of about 250 residents attended one or more of the four workshops.

Job Creation Potential for Residents:

It is estimated that 118 construction jobs will be created through this development. One future goal is to develop community strategies to secure some of those jobs locally. The office/retail component will create 600 jobs, according to project consultants. Lease terms are expected to include local hiring provisions.

Improved Community Portrayal by Media:

This process has created the opportunity for positive news stories about Mission Hill, a community still plagued by the Charles Stuart murder coverage that painted the worst possible image of urban life. News stories in the community paper were only surpassed by an editorial in the Boston Globe. These articles are included as an appendix.

A Development Plan That the Neighborhood Supports and Controls:

Previous development plans for the Ledge Site have met with community

opposition due to lack of community review and input. The traditional process resulted in things going nowhere. Giving participants the necessary information and asking them to make difficult decisions helped to produce a concept plan that has community support. Residents were asked at various stages in the design phase to make choices regarding their preferences for the final plan. For example, the last workshop included a 90 minute explanation of the financial proformas for various development options. Earlier, residents had preferred to design underground parking for the development. When Pam McKinney of Byrne-McKinney & Associates explained the cost of this design option and showed the effect of this on the project's feasibility, the neighborhood participants opted for a less aesthetic, structured parking scenario that was affordable. They were able to analyze and understand the financial considerations in developing the site.

In a larger context, residents were asked to determine specific uses within the Ledge Site and they determined that housing was not a desired use. Even though housing would have made sense organizationally, NHS did not attempt to sway participants from their decision to exclude housing from final design options.

Organizational Support:

The community attitude towards Mission Hill NHS has been dramatically improved through the Ledge Site Community Planning Process. Apart from affordable housing advocates and those who have received low-interest home improvement loans, a large number of residents remain skeptical of affordable housing, a principal mission of the group. The integrity of the process, and that of Mission Hill NHS, are affirmed through the decision not to develop housing for the site by participants.

Most business owners now see the potential benefit of Mission Hill NHS because the organization is working to promote a revitalized commercial district. Reshaping the commercial center will serve all residents whether they are advocates of affordable housing or not. Bringing in the business community as stakeholders has

substantially increased the organizational base.

Prior to this planning process, many residents perceived the organization to be a closed group. The establishment of Task Forces charged with looking at development issues helped to break that tradition. Five Task Forces with more than 60 members in total, allowed new people to become involved in the organization. Task Force members were responsible for reporting information at the larger Community Meetings. This process identified new groups of community activists and fresh leadership to move the project along. Several members of Task Forces ran and were elected to the NHS Board of Directors.

Improved Relationships and Credibility Within the Longwood Medical Area:

NHS accomplished something Harvard has been unable to do with the Ledge Site in three attempts, spanning twenty years, by formulating a significant development plan for the site that meets community needs, has broad-based support, and creates a new image for Brigham Circle, the gateway into Mission Hill.

The credibility of Mission Hill NHS within the Longwood Medical Area hierarchy has been improved through completion of the concept plan. This is especially true for the Harvard Medical School, underwriters for a large portion of the process and to whom we regularly report project updates. Increased credibility will be helpful in the future as we look for financing, tenants, and other assistance to bring this project to fruition.

Creating New Opportunities for Foundation Support:

Organizational fundraising has been facilitated in part due to the successful community participation and local media coverage this process has created. Staff resources are still a critical need as the pre-development phase calls for ongoing community input and review around developer selection, open space plans, and other oversight/development issues. Staff requirements are expected to increase over the

next two years. For information on previous financial concerns, refer to monthly updates to the Organizing Project Focus Group attached as an appendix.

City/Government Support:

Boston Mayor Menino has pledged his support and provided NHS with \$15,000 to complete a market study of the Commercial District. City support is crucial to this project, in fact, they may need to become more of a financial supporter of the development.

ANALYSIS/CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This project has shown that, given the necessary information needed to make tough decisions, people will make the difficult choices and support overall plans to enhance their community. When I began work at NHS in the fall of 1993, I visited a local CDC that thought the process was totally wrong. A community planner there told me that we needed to show the community two development options and ask them to take a vote. In part because of the political schisms within the Mission Hill community, this process would not have brought people together, but rather acted to further divide the community.

A community planning process takes time and resources. Many participants are amazed at the amount of time and resources developing the concept plan took. It would not have occurred any other way. I was originally hired as a part-time employee. If the financial resources had been available, my position could easily have been full time. I believe a number of additional benefits could have been achieved had more time been allocated to community organization. The original timeline was 6 months, the actual time was 18 months.

The meetings between Task Forces and consultants were an effective tool in addressing development issues. I believe that the final concept plan might have benefitted from more of these meetings. Two occurred between workshop two and four with architects present at both and financial consultant present at the last. Issues such as underground parking might have been discarded earlier, allowing for more design work around other development issues including open space improvements.

Because of economic variation within the community, choices for retail stores were heavily dependant on income level. Getting people to envision a new commercial center for the community dissuaded participants from simply naming their

desired retail outlets. This helped to keep people focused on the larger goal for the Ledge Site redevelopment.

A Jobs Task Force should have been created early on to attract additional participants from the two public housing developments of Mission Hill. It is being pursued now and is meeting with favorable response in the lower income community. Redoubling our efforts in the Mission Main and Alice Heyward Taylor developments would greatly improve organizational diversity. Looking at the historical exclusion of minorities from community issues, it is clear that new strategies are necessary to encourage participation of the disenfranchised.

Related to this, A bilingual newsletter should have been started from the beginning. The translation of meetings and their announcements increased our connection within the Latino community of Mission Hill.

Neighborhood politics played a big part in the process. At the smaller group meetings, detractors were allowed to bring up unrelated issues to derail the process. These individuals were shut down at the larger community wide meetings in part because of the group norms that were adopted, partially because they were not always seated together, and additionally, because they were outnumbered more dramatically.

City and State agencies needed to be on board supporting this project earlier. The resources that they can bring to the table are necessary in community development even with established Community Development Corporations. A CDC with only housing experience could benefit greatly from political support of both the City and State. The political support of the city only surfaced when it was realized that the Mission Hill community was organized around the Ledge Site redevelopment.

The Housing Task Force should have been implemented earlier. Developing more sound strategies to inform participants about the possible benefits of housing on the Ledge Site might have allowed for other low-cost development financing options. The Housing Task Force had some good resource people serving on it from the non-profit and for-profit sectors. Additionally, working with the Mission Main Tenants Task Force around relocation issues could have given housing uses additional support in the final plans.

The process could still be more open. Allowing Task Force members to sit in on Ledge Site Committee meetings would have given us different neighborhood perspectives on the process implementation. I understand at some point the lead organization needs to make the decisions. This process has shown that added input only enhances the results in most cases.

Next Steps:

A number of steps are required to bring this project to construction including:

Getting a written agreement from Harvard, owner of the site, that authorizes us to proceed with the developer selection process, defines NHS Role, and is followed with an option agreement.

- * Compile Development Guidelines from Community Planning Process to include in Developer's Kit.
- * Prepare Developer's Kit to include community guidelines.
- * Developer Selection Process:
 - Establish Short List of Developers
 - Hold developers conference
 - Conduct Site Tour
 - Evaluate proposals with community review
 - Select developer with community review and Harvard approval
- * Project Feasibility and Equity Development:
 - Review plans with city agencies
 - Conduct office and retail market study, traffic study
 - Define open space improvements with community input
 - Identify open space improvement funding
 - Identify potential low-cost project financing
- * Other NHS tasks during pre-development:
 - Design review with community
 - marketing program for retail and office space
 - job creation program with community, city/state, developer, tenants, etc.