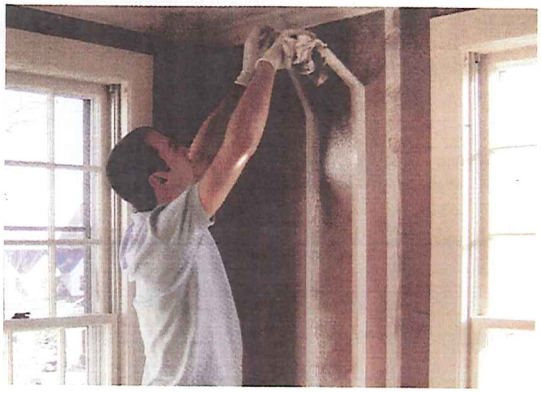
The Meaning of Home

BY WILLIAM HENDERSON



THE STORY OF ANY HOUSE begins with its ordinariness and its function, its status as a product of labor and money and its ability to accommodate our daily routines. But houses are more than that. In fact, Americans tend to be obsessed with houses—their own and everyone else's. We judge ourselves and our neighbors by where and how we live. We categorize the poorest members of contemporary society, not as hungry, badly dressed or unemployed, but as homeless. A house, for most people, is the largest single purchase we will ever make and ranks up there with marriage and childbirth in terms of significance. Even the financial services industry calls buying a home a "lifestage." Some people even use home-ownership as a barometer of stability before rushing headlong into a relationship.

All of the indigenous and immigrant cultures who have lived in what is now the United States have created a place of shelter in which to "house" their families. Look around, and you'll see the popular free-standing, multi-room, single family, but look closer and you can see evidence of what came before.

Early American dwellings, such as those surviving in the Bandelieu National Monument in New Mexico, were as simple as caves big enough for one or two

The Changing Face of the South End

BY LIZA WEISSTUCH

Photography by Robert Benson

Long before it was the site of a highly sought-after residence which happened to have won several national awards for its design, before it was the locale of an archetype of urban mixed-income living, or an eye-catching, highly functional frontage for a 277-space state-of-the-art parking garage, the land known in the municipal records as Parcel 32C was an empty, tumbledown lot owned by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. But it took 32 years—not to mention a few rejected blueprints and a $65 million investment—before action plans shifted into high gear on the property.

Since January 2003, the parcel bordered by Washington, Harrison and Savoy streets and sliced down the middle by Rollins Street has been the address of Rollins Square, a 184-unit mixed-income housing complex, comprised of 40% market rate units, 40% moderate income units (read: affordable), and 20% low-income subsidized housing. Units were not designed and consigned according to the economic bracket of the resident who would be living there, so in theory, nobody knows what their neighbors pay.

The unveiling of Rollins Square couldn't have been better timed, coming at a moment when Washington Street was in the full flush of its Renaissance. The long-planned, labor-intensive transition from "iffy" to "it spot" established the once cringe-worthy boulevard as a mecca of urban cool (a total of 18,000 hours were logged by hundreds of volunteers through Washington Gateway Main Street).

Since 1997, the area has witnessed a flurry of openings of design and home furnishing stores, chic bistros and an artist complex on Harrison Avenue that, with 15 galleries and over 50 studios, is the largest artist space in the area and unofficially dubbed "SoWa"—hipster shorthand for South of Washington.

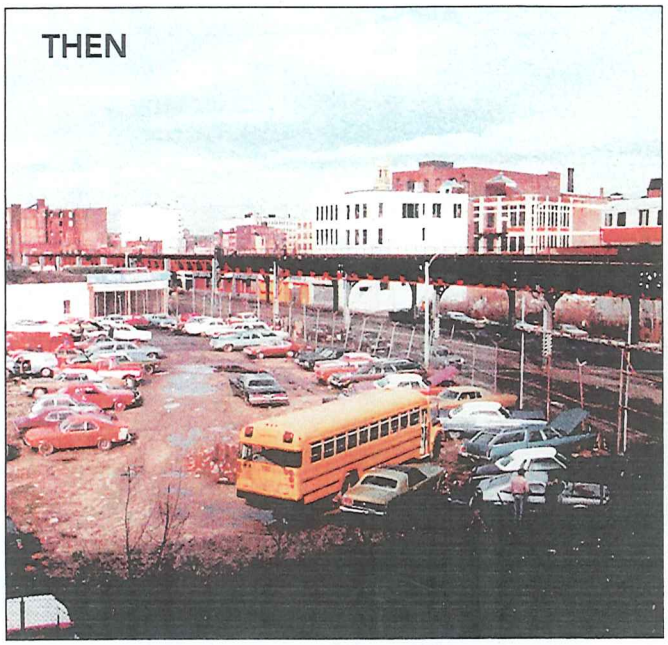
SoWa is, simply put, *the* Place To Be on the first Friday of each month, when couples and crowds from the neighborhood as well as area art and design school students and suburban art buffs wander though the complex nibbling on snacks and checking out the resident artists' recent work. Amid the groups' wanderings, it's not uncommon to overhear people marveling about the 180-degree turnaround of land that was once not even land at all, but a peninsula that ended at Harrison Avenue.

THE TURNAROUND

Some gallery owners remark that an influx of families is inextricably linked to gentrification, which inevitably elbows out working spaces for artists. But still, there is a level of diversity that's been maintained even as new residences fill up. That diversity is the fuel that drives the area's arts community, albeit not without challenges.

"The drastic changes in the neighborhood have moved a lot of artists out over the years, but I think it's commercially viable now that it's getting gentrified," said Camilo Alvarez, director and owner of Samson Projects, which he moved to the SoWa Artists Guild on Harrison Avenue from 46 Waltham Street in September 2004. It's a commercial gallery, like many in the Guild, so he's dependent on sales, not grants.

"Granted, I've got to sell work to stay in business. But coming to Boston from New York City, the line between the haves and the have-nots is a lot more vague," he explained. "I have to sell work to



Photography courtesy of GTI Properties

Lower Washington St., 1980, taken from an upper floor of 46 Waltham St., corner of Washington and Waltham.

Lower Washington St., 2002, taken from an upper floor 46 Waltham St., corner of Washington and Waltham.

up-and-coming. It wasn't like a lot of places where you get a nice place but not one you'd necessarily want to live in. The area seemed to be increasingly attractive to live in. But it was a developing area, and there's level of risk there—you think, 'Will the area in fact develop?' In this case it did."

That could have something to do with newcomers to Washington Street taking cues from nearby Tremont Street and the rest of the residential-heavy South End, with its plethora of voluble, effective neighborhood associations. For instance, when a 7-Eleven convenience store moved into Rollins Square's ground level retail space, there was some discontent among the residents. But because Parcel 32C is officially designated Urban Renewal Land by the Boston Redevelopment Association, it's zoned a Neighborhood District and therefore falls under the jurisdiction of the BRA. The residents saw to it that certain restrictions in the city's ordinances were followed. The South End is actually one of largest Urban Renewal projects in the United States, and since the Rollins Square property is part of that neighborhood district, the retail space is subject to stringent restrictions, and certain resident-friendly operating procedures can be enforced. Trucks, for example, cannot make deliveries before 9 a.m.

A NEIGHBORHOOD BY DESIGN

Still, it's not every day you hear people talk about a 184-unit complex as a place that "would work most effectively." All too often, such behemoth structures are like an anonymous wilderness—with long corridors and cookie-cutter units. But various design elements were incorporated into Rollins Square to differentiate the project from other buildings of similar scale, not least of which includes short corridors, which have only six or seven units per. With that kind of layout, explained Hill, neighbors have a chance to know each other. That and other elements are emblematic of the factors that led to the realization of Washington Street as a functional urban community.

"The idea behind the housing is to use the site and work with the city and community to create something contextual and work with the existing fabric," said Hill. "We wanted to do more family units instead of a lot of one-bedrooms. People who work in the service industry in the city and their families need to live in the ci so it's important to create two- and three-bedroom units as oppos to fitting as many units as possible into the space. That would satisfy a need for housing and help with the cost."

The building was strategically devised to act as a visual ambass dor that unites the historic residential South End with the blocks lined with industrial warehouses closer to the water.

"The warehouse 'wharf buildings' are large, institutional and scale-less buildings—not residential in character or nature. Rollir Square breaks that scale down by integrating a range of details—bay windows, French balconies, different materials," Hill explaine "It's more fussy, more detailed. It elicits more residential character It has the scale of warehouses, but richer detail. Overall, the proje disappears like a chameleon [into the landscape]. You can't tell where it starts and stops. It's up and down. The colors and scale a right. It filled this hole and looks exactly like everything else to th point where you don't know where [it] starts and stops."

That may hold true from a bird's eye perspective of the physica landscape, but that fluidity also holds within.

"There's Peter and Sylvia, and Mark and Joe, and Mary Ellen li there," said Marc LaCasse, pointing to nearby units from his roof balcony one chilly night in December. LaCasse has been a reside at Rollins since October 2003 and is currently chairman of the board of trustees of the condo association.

"I've lived in Boston for 25 years and I know more people at Rollins Square who are my neighbors than I ever have in my life-

Aerial view of Rollins Square.

THE MOVING FORCE

POUA's contribution to the Washington Street area only bolstered the major transformation orchestrated by the non-profit organization on the vanguard of Washington Street's rejuvenation: the Washington Gateway Main Street, and its executive director and driving force, Sheila Grove.

Washington Gateway blossomed with volcanic force when a handful of local neighborhood association presidents gathered in the late 1990s to discuss what to do with the increasingly eroding eyesore called Washington Street. Its loss of foot traffic and business potential started around 1900, when the city erected the rickety elevated train on Washington between East Berkeley Street and North Hampton.

The urban disturbance was disassembled in 1988. Long known as historic but unsavory, Washington Gateway transformed the deteriorating pockmarked space into a vibrant community. With the staunch support of municipal glitterati, especially Mayor Thomas M. Menino, Grove and her entourage ended up establishing the 1.4 linear miles of Washington from Melnea Cass to Herald Street into the country's largest urban renewal project. According to Grove, between 1997 and 2004, commercial space more than doubled with 152,700 square feet added.

Within that area, nine acres of vacant land and boarded up property underwent grand scale nips and tucks—all in accordance with the Landmarks District Commission, of course—and turned into housing that included 200 market rate units and at least 1,000 low-income units.

But in terms of growth and change, what's most remarkable is that these are all residential spaces where there were no residents before, meaning that nobody was displaced. Hence, Washington Gateway's driving vision—to retain the neighborhood's diversity terms of ethnic, economic, and sexual preference—was well on way to realization. Yet nobody denies that when the mixed-inco factor of Rollins Square was revealed, potential buyers jumped s at the thought of paying $1 million-plus for their unit to live alo side Section 8 families.

"This is a 'grittier' fit, for people who like that [kind of urban lifestyle better. Personally, I like it because it's not the Back Bay," said Gerry Vann, one of the dozens of volunteers who logs many hours a week with Washington Gateway.

Even before Washington Gateway was established, much of the credit for spearheading the area's makeover was owed to gay forerunners and entrepreneurs, who had transformed the upper portions of the South End, such as Tremont Street to Copley Square, and Berkley to Massachusetts Avenue, into a livable community, with stores and restaurants. It was the start of making the South End not just a good real estate investment but also a destination for others who, straight and gay alike, lived in other parts of the city and the suburbs.

"A lot of gay people lived in townhouses in the South End, but no one was developing warehouses because