

# BOSTON'S HOUSING DILEMMA

by Florella Orowan

Housing has been a constant topic in Boston's mayoral race. Throughout the Walsh administration, it was mainly addressed by new construction consisting of multi-unit structures of 8-20 stories. The units in these buildings have typically been studios or one- and two- bedroom apartments, with many buildings consisting of only studios or one bedrooms. This model has generally been promoted as a viable solution to high rental costs and the presumed shortage of rental units, although to date no hard data has been published on the actual availability of rental units in Boston.

But this type of housing doesn't work for everyone. For one thing, it is not family friendly. There are usually no outside spaces for children to play, there is no provision for overnight guests, and storage space is limited or non-existent. These limitations restrict access to neighborhood or extended family culture. The fact is, they are primarily designed for single people, students and transients.

The buildings currently under construction and recently built are mostly market rate rent and above, with a modest percentage of "affordable" units. However, owing to their hasty construction, use of lower-cost materials, lack of architectural beauty and less-than-desirable locations, they will likely deteriorate quickly and once the investors are paid, decline in desirability and become lower-income housing.

Sociologically speaking, low-income housing does not create a safe living environment. For single people, it can result in loneliness, alienation and displacement, as we saw during the pandemic. For families, it can mean lack of privacy and for young adults, it can lead to undesirable and even dangerous peer relationships. This same type of housing was built during the 1950s and 1960s, now commonly referred to as "housing projects" that have since developed many negative associations. The fact is that few people who grew up in a housing project during that era recall it as a positive experience.

So why are we re-creating a housing model that has become a symbol of urban blight? Why use a type of housing that has verifiably led to broken families and youth crime? We need to find another solution. We need family-friendly housing.

One example might be the town house construction, where a unit may consist of two stories and usually abuts a number of other units of like construction. This model affords privacy for a couple or family and usually has some green space that children can use to play. Currently, real estate developers are not inclined to build this type of housing because it costs more and as such is less profitable for their investors. However, if we factor in the social costs of low-income housing, in the long term, the benefits are inestimable.



**TOWN HOUSE MODEL**

Another possibility is converting existing structures. So far, most such conversions have resulted in luxury condos but there are many as-yet unoccupied buildings in the downtown area that are former office buildings housing companies that either went out of business or moved during the pandemic. Other spaces are vacant because the company's operations were downsized. Some of these spaces might be converted to residential units.

A third option is expansion of the urban landscape. In Massachusetts, this happened during the 1960s and 1970s with the growth of businesses and office parks lining Route 128. Perhaps a similar course should be considered for other areas in Eastern Massachusetts that might be viable for the expansion of housing and businesses.

And most of all, we must consider the effects of climate change, which has already begun to certainly affect Boston and surrounding communities. Because Boston is a physically small coastal city, will likely be more impacted than other regions, and if we are going to maintain a city that will be livable in the future, we must think very carefully about the choices we make.



**HOTEL-STYLE ARCHITECTURE**