

Flexibility
Keeps
Revitalization
Afloat
through
Recession

THINKING OUTSIDE

THE BOX

BY DEB MICHENER



SITE PLAN AND SIGNPOST: STANTEC

IT'S A FAMILIAR STORY:

a once-booming industrial area falls victim to the shift in America's economy, leaving a swath of abandoned factories and manufacturing sites that remain a blight to the community for decades.

Such was the case for the city of Chelsea, Mass.—a primarily working-class community bordering East Boston and Charlestown. The city had once been a thriving manufacturing town with an abundance of worker housing, including an area known as the “Box District” because of the prevalence of cardboard box makers. But as industry waned

and shifted to other places, the district became run down, lying largely dormant since the 1960s when most of the neighborhood manufacturing plants closed. The city was faced with the challenge of finding a way to reestablish a healthy alternative for the area. The question became whether to focus on recruiting new industrial tenants or on fostering a new model for residential development.

“For as long as I can remember, people have been talking about that area and trying to figure out if it should be industrial or residential,” says Chelsea City Manager Jay Ash, a native of the city, “but the old industrial uses were no longer a fit.” Besides, “Truck traffic, noise, odors—those are no longer the things people who live in cities will tolerate,” he adds.

Opportunity Knocks

By the late 1990s, the city had decided the area should focus on residential development, but city officials had no set direction on how to achieve that goal. Efforts never really took off until the city engaged Chelsea Neighborhood Developers (CND), a local nonprofit that focuses on encouraging affordable and mixed-income housing opportunities in the city. In 2004, the city alerted CND that one of the remaining active companies in the Box District, Janus Metal Fabrication, was going out of business and selling its property. CND purchased it, kicking off its commitment to the new residential idea. But a real plan for what the neighborhood should be was not yet in place.



The rental units at Janus Highland Apartments are helping to maintain affordable housing options in the transformed Box District.

GREIG GRANINA





The building that used to house the bedding factory has been transformed into Atlas Lofts condominiums.

At the same time, a number of other factors fell into place that supported the hatching vision of the city and CND. For one, the state established a new loan program to encourage Smart Growth and transit-oriented design (TOD) initiatives. Chelsea was able to garner \$3 million of that funding because of its strong bus network and proximity to a commuter rail; the boundary of the Box District features access to five bus routes that lead throughout the region. As a result, the area received TOD funding for a mix of infrastructure improvements, including sidewalks, street trees and lighting.

During this same period, a fire destroyed one of the remaining former box factories, opening that parcel. At the same time, the city was able to offer tax incentives to another company in the district, Atlas Bedding, to encourage them to relocate to an area of the city outside the district. With three more parcels on the triangle-shaped Atlas Bedding site now available for redevelopment, opportunity was knocking.

With this piecemeal start, the city and CND determined that a gradual, progressive approach—rather than a prescriptive master plan—might be the best way to move forward within the 10.5-acre Box District.

Even though a detailed plan was not in place, “We defined specific outcomes we were trying to achieve,” says CND Executive Director Ann Houston. “We wanted a mixed-income, mixed-tenure neighborhood that encouraged connections among neighborhoods, community resources and transit options. We also wanted to be able to take advantage of opportunities along the way that would get us to that end,” without being locked into a particular type of housing for specified parcels, she adds.

To get redevelopment off the ground, CND took control of the former Atlas Bedding site and invited bids from private developers for a portion of the site, forming the basis for strong public-private partnerships that continue to shape the Box District.

Transformation Begins

The CND began to undertake redevelopment of the two properties with three separate initiatives. The former Atlas Bedding site was split into parcels. One parcel was selected as the site for 20 units of the planned 41-unit Janus Highlands Apartments (all affordable units). One parcel was dedicated to a new, 26-unit affordable and market-rate condominium complex, Box Works Homes. A third parcel, which contained the former historic Atlas

Bedding factory building, was slated to be renovated into market-rate condominiums. Meanwhile, at the former Janus site, the remaining 21 units for the Janus Highlands Apartments were planned.

While CND took on responsibility for the Janus Highland Apartments and Box Works Homes, they worked in concert with private developer Mitchell Properties on the adaptive reuse of the Atlas Bedding factory building into the new Atlas Lofts condominium complex.

With its dense, urban setting, redeveloping the Atlas site was undoubtedly going to be a challenge. Site planners and landscape architects from Stantec worked with the developers and architects from ICON architecture and The Architectural Team to match the changes planned for the site to the urban character of the neighborhood. To do so, the design/planning team focused on maintaining the historic structure of the original building including post and beam construction elements, origi-

nal stairways, and reconstructed fire doors. At the same time, they added both private and community green spaces and found ways to accommodate parking.

“The most challenging thing was figuring out how to get everything on these sites that was needed,” says Nancy Ludwig, president of ICON, the architects for new construction. “To get a dense enough unit count so it was affordable for the developer to build there and add parking; open, landscaped space; a children’s play structure; private patios and decks for an many units as possible—was like trying to fit 10 pounds into a 5-pound bag.”

The team accomplished this feat primarily by using grading changes and retaining walls to define the variety of new spaces. With an existing 15-degree grade change on the site, the design plan used the building itself as a retaining wall. Without the need for additional construction of retaining walls on the steep site, more units were accommodated. The design also created private yards for lower-level units as well as public green spaces. Upper units have balcony decks, as well as universal access to the community spaces.

Surrounding the site, new plantings and trees were added to take advantage of the limited opportunities to inject color

and new life to what had been a very pavement-intensive heat island. As many trees as possible were added to the streetscapes and parking areas, and perennial gardens line the sidewalks to successfully create the feeling of “home” and community.

Safety was another key design consideration for these new neighborhoods. The Box District area had developed a rough reputation because of its many dark, abandoned properties and the diminished residential nature of nearby areas. As the new design for the building and site took shape, designers were careful to make sure the front stoops on individual units were visible,



Janus Highland Apartments come in a variety of styles to meet different tastes.



Janus Highlands are some of the most affordable apartments in the Box District.



Box Works Homes are both affordable and market-rate condominium homes.

doors to the units were close to sidewalks and open spaces, with low plantings, provided better visibility to the public realm. In addition, lack of any shared doorways or common entries reduced unwanted gathering places. And while planners seeking to avoid a “boxed in” feel made sure private backyards at each ground-level unit were not closed off, those units were given small privacy fences.

Changing Course

While construction of the CND-developed properties proceeded throughout 2006-2007, the housing market crash was also occurring. And this was just as the new, privately financed Atlas Loft site was taking shape on paper. The result was that the Box District design/planning team had to rethink its initial vision for the market-rate condominiums. For example, the mixed-income

condos and apartments CND had spearheaded (Janus Highland Apartments and Box Works Homes) had already begun to fill up thanks to public financing secured quickly to get the project going. But the Atlas Lofts building plans hit a wall, forcing the developer, Mitchell Properties, to investigate more creative financing tools to keep the project moving.

The Atlas Lofts project qualified as a neighborhood stabilization effort, which made it eligible for federal stimulus funding. But the key to making the project financially viable after the housing market crash was to change the building usage from condominiums to apartments. This opened the door to federal and state tax historic tax credits, which were available only for property renovated that was then owned for five years, post rehabilitation. About 24 percent of the development costs were paid for by historic tax credits, according to David Traggorth, director of development at Mitchell Properties.

“Flexibility [in finding funding sources] was key,” he notes. “Looking at the availability of different financing mechanisms—what the state offers, what the city offers, if there’s a brownfield program, as there was in this situation—that is a big plus. Those who rely solely on private financing have had a hard time getting things going.”

With that creativity and a strong team of partners among city and state agencies, CND, and the project consultants, Mitchell Properties was able to move the project forward and shift from an ownership model to market-rate and affordable rental (47 market-rate, six affordable) apartments.

Still, after the five-year ownership requirement under the historic tax credit agreement expires, Atlas Lofts can be converted to what was originally intended—condominiums.

“Banks believe in the rental market right now. It’s underwriteable and strong,” says Traggorth. “We were always confident in Atlas Lofts, but were very enthusiastic about its acceptance in the local market. We opened for leasing in August of 2010 and it was fully occupied by November, which was much faster than our conservative 12-month proposed absorption estimate.”

Connecting the Pieces

Since the opening of the first apartment units in 2008, the Box District continues to thrive even through the stalled housing market. CND actually moved their offices into one of the reclaimed properties, the rental and condo units have filled up,

and state infrastructure grants have improved the streetscapes, enhancing the new look and feel of the neighborhood. Three parcels remain under development: one in the process of being transformed into a community park, another into a 32-unit apartment building (Highland Terrace) and the last slated for 45 rental units (44 Gerrish). The district now boasts about 250 new units of mixed-income housing, in addition to the 100 or so in the neighborhood before redevelopment began. A fourth parcel (22-28 Gerrish) is targeted for future condominium units.

The neighborhood is also poised to take advantage of its proximity to what's being touted as the future "Urban Ring" of Boston, a proposed planning initiative to create a 25-mile transit corridor around central Boston. This corridor will provide more direct trips to the city and surrounding towns and suburbs and improve connections between neighborhoods, employment centers and transportation mechanisms. Space has been reserved throughout the Box District to allow for connections to the Urban Ring, including a possible multimodal path.

That sort of flexibility and openness to what may come is precisely what all of the project partners cite as the key factor in the overall success of the Box District. "We had to see how the market would react to our vision first before setting out on too many phases," says City Manager Jay Ash. "That approach of having a general vision for the area but not tying it down to specific uses and timelines" gave the project the flexibility to succeed even when the market turned sour, he says.

Mitchell Properties' Dave Traggorth agrees. "What we started with five years ago is undoubtedly different from what we have today. By taking it step by step, remaining flexible, and keeping an eye on the end vision, we've been able to achieve much very quickly and in a down market."

What made that flexibility easier was the consistency of the project teams throughout the development of the various parcels. The key partners, which included the city, CND, the private developers, and their architectural, site design, and engineering consultants, have continued to work together on each additional site, making it easy to keep a consistent vision from one project to the next.

"If you have good partners at all levels who are working together and asking what they can bring to the table, you can still get projects done in this environment where lending for condominium development is still at a standstill," says Traggorth. "Making sure you're all on the same page and working toward the same goal is hugely important."

"Areas around the Box District have historically been some of Chelsea's toughest sells," Ash says. "The millions of dollars of investment, the infusion of new people, and the new energy and continued commitment of the city and development teams have caused a true rebirth for the neighborhood." **LD**

DEB MICHENER is a senior associate with Boston planning and landscape architecture firm Stantec and landscape architect for several Box District projects. She can be reached at deb.michener@stantec.com.



The community uses colorful plantings with year-round interest to transform an area that used to be largely pavement.