LOST IN SPACE
An Examination of the Varied Valuation of Space within Boston’s South End

by

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Class of 2013

An essay submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Anthropology

Middletown, Connecticut April 2013
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Introduction—Welcome to the South End

It is 5:26pm. I’m on the Green Line T towards Heath Street anxiously awaiting my stop at the Prudential Center.¹ I’ve gotten out of work early today to make this Neighborhood Coordination Meeting at 5:30pm, and I am hoping to only miss a few minutes. The meeting was meant to be an arena to discuss the final plans of the Concord Baptist Church on the corner of West Brookline Street and Warren Avenue before the developers would begin their renovations. My boss at the South End Historical Society thought that I would be interested in this meeting because I had expressed interest before in the Church. I had never attended the services, but as it was on my street and I passed it and its members nearly every day on my way to work, I found it fascinating that this space was soon to be transformed to condos.

I’ve switched my dress shoes to sneakers. Finally, we arrive at my stop—Prudential Center. I push my way out of the overcrowded rush hour train and head up the stairs that lead to the bustling intersection of Huntington Avenue and West Newton Street. The transition between the Prudential Mall entrance and the South End is noticeable to the pedestrian—or at least I think it is for Boston residents. The mall area is overflowing with businesswomen and men and tourists because it is situated near the Prudential Office Tower, the Duck Tour hub, the reflecting pool, and the Colonnade Hotel. But once I make it across Huntington Avenue and the five lanes of traffic, I’m surrounded by the familiar Boston flat-fronted brick façades.

Once I pass the Southwest Corridor Pathway, I’m in the South End.²

¹ The Green Line T is one of the five subway lines in Boston. The name “T” stands for Transit.
² When the Elevated Street Railway was destroyed and rebuilt underground (which is now the Orange Line T), the Southwest Corridor Park was built on top of it in 1987 (HAER, n.d.). A “three-year battle against the South End Bypass ended in 1972
There is something striking about these towering, nearly identical brick structures, one after another.\(^3\) The Victorian buildings feel proper; it’s as if the buildings are coated in history. The bow windows, which stretch almost from floor to ceiling, allow the resident to peer down both ends of the street. Interestingly enough, they also allow the passerby to easily peer inside the home. It is as if the building is on show, or as if there is a wisp of a connection between the public street and the private home. But the windows are also similar to a museum showcase, creating a display—an invitation to look—that also establishes a divide.

I’m hoping that I will only be a few minutes late to the meeting. I pass a sprawling green park, Titus Sparrow Park, which is packed with young women and men with their toddlers—the recent settlers of the South End.\(^4\) The South End is comforting to me after the crowds and noise and sterile architecture of the Mall—a city neighborhood transformed into a small town. I wave at a few neighbors that I’ve only met briefly before on their front stoops. When I see the Union United Methodist Church, I take a left and cut through the Harriet Tubman Square.\(^5\) \(^6\) I trip over the when Governor Francis Sargent canceled construction plans for the highways into and through Boston. Subsequently, federal highway funding paid for the relocation of the Orange Line MBTA from Washington Street to the railroad tracks\(^2\) (TSP 2012).  

\(^3\) In 1793, Brick was first introduced to architecture in Boston with Charles Bulfinch’s creation of the Tontine Crescent. Before this structure, most buildings were constructed primarily with wood (Smith 1976, 133). Bunting Bainbridge also explains that “The first important example of this [English] pattern was Bulfinch’s Tontine Crescent of 1793 on Franklin Street where a group of sixteen houses was built as a unified composition along one side of a crescent-shaped park” (Bainbridge 1967, 67).

\(^4\) The space where the Titus Sparrow Park is today has an extensive history. This park is located between the Union United Methodist Church and the Southwest Corridor Park. In the past, there were row houses converted for multiple uses such as the Evangeline Booth Memorial Hospital and a Salvation Army Home. The church at that time had taken up some of the space, but also it was situated next to the former Elevated Street Railway. Thus, this area was often full of soot. In the decades around the 1960s, mostly African Americans inhabited the surrounding row houses. Many of them were a part of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. With urban renewal in the 1960s, the city planned on reconstructing a large highway on top of this park (as well as the Southwest Corridor Parkway). The homes were torn down, however, nothing was rebuilt. Finally in 1972, the plans changed (see note 2 regarding the Southwest Corridor Park), and the individuals living in the area around the Union United Methodist Church planned this park, which was opened in 1976. Its creation involved the Pilot Block, St. Botolph, and Cosmopolitan neighborhood associations (The Friends of Titus Sparrow Park 2012).

\(^5\) This church moved into the South End in 1949. The Union United Methodist Church is the “oldest church that worships in the African American tradition of celebration in the New England Conference” (UUMC 2012).

\(^6\) In the South End, a park and a house are dedicated to Harriet Tubman. Within this triangular square park between Pembroke Street and Columbus Ave. stands a large statue of Harriet Tubman helping slaves escape from the South. The Boston Art Commission describes: “Although Tubman never lived in Boston, she had links to the city through her network of abolitionist friends, one of whom opened the Harriet Tubman House as a settlement house for black women who had migrated from the
uneven brick sidewalk and nearly fall flat on my face. Luckily, only a few cars and pedestrians are nearby to witness my clumsiness. I cross Warren Street and I’ve arrived at the Concord Baptist Church. It’s only 5:41 pm. The side door is propped open with a brick, and I slip inside.

_I hear one prominent voice—it’s the developer. Instantly, I feel pity for him as he has about forty South End residents silently judging his every move. He has decided to turn the space into condos. Recently, this has become a common occurrence in the South End. However, this church in particular holds a beloved part of South End History. Originally constructed in 1869 in the Byzantine and Gothic style, the church has seen many congregations. It began as the Church of the Disciples then became the First United Presbyterian Church in 1905, and finally it changed to the Concord Baptist Church in 1947 (Shannon 2010). It is one of the “city's largest and most historic black churches” (Bayles 2010).

_I sneak to a folding chair on the side near the front of the room. The developer flips through his PowerPoint slides of the architectural plans and the computer-generated images of the new condos. They had spent over two years in the planning stages working with the housing authority, the historical society, the Boston Landmarks Commission and other various committees to ensure that the design fit within the regulations. For the most part, residents asked questions about minute details such as the number of parking spaces or the location of access entrances to the building, yet there were a few residents who focused on the more intricate

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7 Walter Whitehill describes the Concord Baptist Church: “James Freeman Clarke’s Church of the Disciples founded in 1841, moved from Freeman Place on Beacon Hill to Indiana place, near the Boston and Worcester tracks, and finally in 1869 built on the corner of Warren Avenue and West Brookline Street” (Whitehill 1968, 132).

8 In the 1950s, when Martin Luther King Jr. was studying at Boston University, he often came to this church (Bayles 2010).
elements of the spaces: such as the design of the windows or other exterior elements that would change the integrity of the building. One longtime resident of the South End, an elderly white male, voiced his concerns that rebuilding the structure from the inside out would cause the currently bowing masonry walls to collapse. From the strain in his voice, it was clear that he worried about the developers having to demolish the entire building. While I knew that he never attended this church, as the former congregation mostly lived outside of the city and was composed of African American families, I knew that this man was one of the main proponents of historical preservation. He had helped the original transformation of the neighborhood into a historical and landmark district and it was clear that he was afraid to let go of a clear marker of historical architecture.

After over ninety minutes of discussion, the conversation waned and the meeting came to a close. On my walk home, one of my neighbors, who is an architect that has lived in the area since the 1960s, questioned, “Why do these committees always insist on an exact, historically accurate replication rather than a modern interpretation of the building?” Places like the Concord Baptist Church are constantly the focus of attention and debate in the South End. There is a question as to whether this building, and others like it in the South End, has a meaning or significance enough to preserve. Some argue that this building should always be remembered as a church first and that its new identity as a luxury condo building should remain secondary—an addition to its previous and true identity. Others argue

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9 The church decided to move because most of the congregation had moved outside of the city. In addition, the building maintenance costs were burdensome and increasing significantly each year. From various residents, I have learned that the congregation members were happy to move the church out of the city, especially because it would make it much easier for many of the older members to attend services. Unfortunately, I was unable to personally speak with any members of the congregation about this move. In the Boston.com article, Rev. Dr. Conley Hughes Jr. explains, “we need more space… We need more classroom space, we need more meeting space and areas for more pews, plus we don’t have parking” (Bayles 2010).
that it could be seen as another decrepit space awaiting renewal to become a place with a new meaning.

Through an exploration of the South End’s history, I plan to investigate the ways in which people value space in the South End. To begin, I will consider the ways in which places can be imagined (and reimagined) as well as constructed (and reconstructed) to suit the ideals of those in power. Through this framework, I will then examine how people situate filth and beauty in space within a predetermined concept of order. Next, I will assess the way in which nostalgia affects people’s beliefs regarding their ideal space. Finally, by using an example from the South End’s history, I will demonstrate how marginalized residents are capable of defining places in a manner distinct from the conception of order created by those with political and economic power.

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The Metamorphoses—“the most beautiful slum in the world”” (Lukas 1986, 168).

In “How to get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time,” Edward S. Casey asserts that space is “a neutral, pre-given medium, a tabula rasa onto which the particularities of culture and history come to be inscribed, with place as the presumed result” (Casey 1999, 14). In other words, people ascribe spaces with meaning, thereby transforming them into place. By ascribing historical value to spaces like Boston’s South End, we demarcate them as places with a particular imagined social and political meaning. As Tim Cresswell contends, this process creates a “normative landscape”—a sense of “what is right, just, and appropriate” for a specific place (Cresswell 1996, 8). Conversely, once a space becomes a place, there
is an expectation to maintain a specific order within that place. When there is a transgression of the “expectations of [a] place,” the result is something “out of place” (Cresswell 1996, 10). As Cresswell argues, order becomes the mask behind which those who possess economic and political power can enforce their own ideal of an exclusive “normative landscape” (Cresswell 1996, 10). Thus, the dominant spatial ideology—held by those with political power—appears as the only correct answer when conflicts arise over the value, use, and meaning of a place. Therefore, Creswell determines that “social power and social resistance are always already spatial” (Cresswell 1996, 11).

The history of Boston’s South End reflects Cresswell’s belief that powerful institutions construct (and reconstruct) places according to their own definitions of a “normative landscape” in a process that is both imagined and political. For example, in the 1960s, those in power targeted Villa Victoria and the Concord Baptist Church as spaces in need of renewal in the South End. For those interested in gentrifying the South End, these locations were reimagined as spaces that were out of place—including value that marginalized inhabitants ascribed on these spaces. Thus, during Boston’s period of urban renewal, the city erased the value that was previously ascribed to these places and reimagined them as blank slates within which they could ascribe their own ideal of an orderly “normative landscape.”

One hundred and seventy years ago the South End was a tidal marsh, which only connected Boston to Roxbury by a very small amount of land referred to as the Boston Neck (Smith 1976, 1-5). In the mid-nineteenth century, the city decided to build on top of the marsh to create more homes for city residents as Boston expanded
(Bainbridge 1967, 65). In Common Ground, Anthony Lukas reveals that the “city fathers” worried that central Boston would become an Irish ghetto. Thus, the city attempted to demarcate the South End as a fashionable place to attract the upper-middle class (Lukas 1986, 164). The city of Boston wanted to balance the increasing numbers of immigrants with wealthier citizens. By marketing an attractive and orderly new neighborhood, the city hoped to appeal to a wealthier population and to maintain Boston’s status as one of the leading cities in the nation.

It was very apparent that the city plans for the neighborhood marked the location for the wealthy through the architectural construction of the space.\textsuperscript{10} In her dissertation, “Between City and Suburb: Architecture and Planning in Boston’s South End,” Margaret Supplee Smith describes how the city officials implemented this plan during the 1850s. They wanted to make a new community in order to attract the “prosperous citizen” by using “parks, fountains, schools, and other urban amenities” (Smith 1976, 21). In addition to these attractive elements, the city chose to create row houses because it accommodated an increasing population density within the city and it was the most economical use of space.\textsuperscript{11} The styles in the South End stemmed from earlier styles of Charles Bulfinch.\textsuperscript{12} The architectural plans stressed “intimacy and privacy” (Smith 1976, 10). For example, the streets were purposely planned so that the vehicles would mostly travel on the larger avenues, leaving the majority of the row houses situated on quieter streets. Squares were also built into the street plan in order to reinforce the comfort and the privacy often found in English towns (Smith

\textsuperscript{10} The plans in the South End were some of the first evidence of city planning in the country (YVSP 2010).
\textsuperscript{11} Smith also explains how this was common in cities throughout the United States in the 1800s (Smith 1976, 132-133).
\textsuperscript{12} Smith explains Charles Bulfinch’s significant architectural influence in Boston: "It represents the last instance of the type of residential planning favored in Boston since the days when Charles Bulfinch transformed the city into a provincial adaptation of Georgian Bath" (Smith 1976, 10-11).
However, in *Houses of Back Bay*, Bunting Bainbridge explains that the South End lacked a sense of continuity, despite the planning efforts of the city: “Nor is there spatial unity here… no focal points and no dominant and predictable order” (Bainbridge 1967, 65).

In *Boston: A Topographical History*, Walter Whitehill argues that the South End never actually attracted the upper class as the city had hoped, noting that “when Abner Forbes and J.W. Greene published *The Rich Men of Massachusetts* in 1851, … only three [out of the five hundred] appeared to be living in the new South End beyond Dover Street” (Whitehill 1968, 136). Whitehill believes that the failures were tied to the Panic of 1873, when the housing market crashed. Whitehill cites Professor Albert B. Wolfe’s explanation of the Panic of 1873 and the subsequent “flight from the South End” (Whitehill 1968, 119). Wolfe claims that it began with the housing on Columbus Avenue, where the city started to build inexpensive housing starting in the 1870s. After the Panic, many homeowners defaulted on their mortgages, and the banks sold the properties for far less than their original value (Lukas 1986, 165). Wolfe concludes that “the banks sold them for what they would bring, and the result was an acute drop in the value of Columbus Avenue real estate, and in the character of the immediate locality. The shock thus felt on Columbus Avenue with such force gradually had the effect of disturbing the equilibrium in the rest of the South End” (Whitehill 1968, 137). The crash affected the South End so greatly that the neighborhood had almost completely shifted to rooming houses by 1885. Wolfe

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13 Bainbridge explains that the city’s choice to build the South End primarily in the older Victorian English styles, as it had done before in other sections of Boston, failed because it was not the new design of the time (Bainbridge 1967, 65).
describes that in 1902, seven out of the fifty-three private row houses were left in Union Park (Whitehill 1968, 137).

After this crisis, the city demarcated the Back Bay as the new district to attract the wealthy class. Smith analyzes this relationship and the Back Bay’s ultimate supremacy in terms of architectural space. She argues that people tend to imagine the Back Bay as a more comprehensible layout. This is in part because the Back Bay contains some of the most famous sites in Boston including the Public Garden, Newbury Street, and the Charles River (Smith 1976, 8). On the other hand, people often regarded the South End as its own distinct neighborhood with a consistent Victorian style, but also as a neighborhood that was easy to get lost in, as it lacked any clear landmarks (Smith 1976, 8). The Back Bay was built when "Boston was exchanging her provincial 'town' ways for the sophistication and accouterments of a city", whereas the South End was marked by a persistence of earlier architectural techniques that were first in Boston's Beacon Hill (Smith 1976, 10). Bainbridge explains that rather than following the English styles of the past—as the South End had—the Back Bay was designed in the modern French styles. This style incorporated large boulevards, and a “more sophisticated unity” (Bainbridge 1967, 69). Once the Back Bay was constructed, it attracted the majority of the wealthier Bostonians. In reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s work, Cresswell writes, Bourdieu “shows how certain orderings of space provide a structure for experience and help to tell us who we are in society” (Cresswell 1996, 8). The fact that those in control marked the Back Bay as the place of wealth and the South End as the place of

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14 Interestingly enough, Bainbridge explains how the state planned to orient the Back Bay towards the public—as it “was willing to devote more than 43% of its total land holding… to streets and parks” (Bainbridge 1967, 64).
15 Bainbridge also describes the vague boundaries of the South End: tracks of the Boston Providence Railway, Dover Street, Massachusetts Avenue, and Harrison Street (Bainbridge 1967, 65). The tracks were the only definitive boundary of the area.
disorder reveals the social hierarchical structure of space in Boston. In addition to the architectural downfalls of the South End, the Back Bay and the South End were separated by railroad tracks, which created “an almost impenetrable barrier” with access points only at Dartmouth and Berkeley Streets (Smith 1976, 95). Whitehill reveals that this barrier not only affected the physical geography of the space, but it also affected the area socially and psychologically (Whitehill 1968, 178). The South End was seen as the place on the “other side of the tracks.”

Less than two decades later, the neighborhood was given new meaning: the South End became a home for immigrants and minorities. Many of the homes were converted to rooming houses after the exodus from the city. Instead of the original large single-family homes, developers broke these buildings into multi-family apartments so that these residences would be more affordable for the working class (Lukas 1986, 165). New immigrants to America settled in the South End and re-ascribed the meaning of the neighborhood as a place: “Well into the twentieth century, the district was a classic port of entry that gave immigrants their first lesson in the American experience” (Lukas 1986, 167). Within this period, there were many ethnic groups who moved into and out of the neighborhood beginning with the Irish and eventually groups such as Jews, Chinese, Lebanese, Greeks, Armenians, Syrians, Blacks, and Puerto Ricans (YVSP 2010; Lukas 1986, 167). Each of these groups ascribed their own history onto the South End, which those in power almost completely erased when they used terms such as “slum” to demarcate the space.

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16 This is a comment about the division between the South End and the Back Bay that I have heard from many current residents of the South End.
17 “By 1900, with 37,000 lodgers, the South End was the nation’s largest rooming-house district—a drab, dismal quarter which one social worker called ‘the city wilderness’” (Lukas 1986, 166).
Ultimately, it was the fact their values diverged from the people in power that resulted in their marginalization.

Before the 1960s, there was little acknowledgement of the neighborhood by the affluent living in other parts of the city or in the suburbs, other than affirmations of its status as a “rundown place.” In October of 1941, The City Planning Board published “Building a Better Boston: A General Statement of Rehabilitation and an Analysis of Existing Conditions in the South End.” The title in and of itself reveals the city’s negative view of the South End; they wanted to “recapture” the South End “through private enterprise with municipal cooperation, or otherwise” (CPB 1941, 5). Ultimately, the City Planning Board considered this neighborhood as “out of place.” To them, it could have easily been imagined as a “space,” which in itself is a manifestation of the power and politics within the city. This one hundred-page document describes the procedures and the long-term plan that the City of Boston had for this area and Boston in general:

Boston is the economic hub around which the life of the metropolitan wheel revolves, and upon which the entire area is dependent. It is the most essential, therefore, that the heart of this vast organism be repaired and kept in a high degree of efficient and economical performance, even though major operations become necessary, lest the health of the entire body be jeopardized (CPB 1941, 8).

From the city’s point of view, the South End needed to change in order for Boston to flourish as a city. The city masks its desires for a powerful, wealthy city, with its references to its desires to maintain the “heart of this vast organism” within which one will find stability and efficiency. The City Planning Board argues that the state of this neighborhood will ultimately affect the wealth of the city and thus, the entire state.
Therefore, in the mid-twentieth century, when the period of urban renewal began in the United States, two prominent views emerged in response to the reconstruction of this neighborhood. This neighborhood has become a site of class stratification within the city, which led to the conflict between the diverging values of the meaning of South End. On one side, there were the developers and the city planners, who craved city beautification and felt that the only solution was to demolish the neighborhood’s buildings. In their eyes, there was little to be lost in terms of memory. On the other side, the historical preservationists sought for the protection of this neighborhood because the South End consisted of ornate, historical architecture. The Boston Landmark Commission outlines: “For any property located within the boundaries of the landmark district, the commission must approve all exterior alternations” (BLC 1999). It has been established as a place worthy of protection. While these perspectives are clearly different, both have the same goal of re-ascribing this area with meaning.

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**The Body** – “labeling something filthy is a viscerally powerful means of excluding it”

(Cohen 2005, ix-x).

In a recent conversation with a longtime resident, I learned about the state of the South End prior to the 1960s: *The alleys were chalk full of rubbish; in years before, people would turn on the oil heat, and then, they used to dump their ashes in the alleys. You would get lots of puddles when it rained. Lots of rubbish—an enormous number of the buildings were lodging houses, so a lot of people were in the*

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18 The South End is currently registered on the National Register of Historical Places because of the SEHS. Today, it is the largest Victorian row house district in America (SEHS 2012).

19 In 1983, the South End became a landmark district in Boston and it became a historic place as according to the National Register of Historic Places (BLC 1999).
habit of throwing their trash out the window, lots of yards full of rubbish and debris and the manner in which the city would pick up the rubbish was horrible, outside everything was sloppy (David Sprogis, pers. comm.).

The shifting perceptions of the continual transformation of the South End reveal what is considered valuable within the neighborhood. Today, many residents, historical preservationists, and even the City of Boston appreciate the South End for its order, cleanliness and overall attractiveness. However, these perspectives have shifted significantly over the past two centuries. The majority of the architecture has been maintained since the latter half of the 19th century. Yet for all of these years, the city—along with many who wrote about this neighborhood—largely did not consider this area to be valuable. Cresswell describes that “the geographical classification of society and culture is constantly structured in relation to the unacceptable, the other, the dirty” (Cresswell 1996, 149). Filth or ‘dirt’ can take the form of something out of place. Thus, those who determine what is proper and acceptable, classify what is out of order or out of place (Cresswell 1996, 149). This intertwines with the idea that what is disorderly is also dirty. These classifications provoke sites of contestation and put into question what and when something becomes valued.

In the eyes of Mary Douglas, “nothing is inherently dirty; dirt is simply ‘matter’ that, within a particular framework appears in the wrong location, and so violates a sense of the order of the world” (Cohen 2005, xi). Douglas defines dirt as “matter out of place” and as something that disrupts the order (Cohen 2005, xi). The definition of order evolves to serve whatever fulfills the desires of the people in power—revealing the arbitrarily defined notions of order. The call for order seems to
relate to a call for stability or peace or justice; however, it actually relates to a call for power. This concept has been present in the South End since its inception.

Originally, Boston defined the neighborhood through its privacy, comfort, and order. Once the South End evolved to become a neighborhood that the city had not expected or desired, the city and other wealthy Bostonians deemed this place as a slum or “skid row” (Lukas 1986, 166). It was not that this place was “inherently dirty” as Douglas explains, but rather that the neighborhood had taken on new meaning—a meaning that to many non-residents, the neighborhood was considered as “matter” out of place.

In William Dean Howell’s often-reproduced story within *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, a South End family packs up and leaves for Beacon Hill once they see that someone across the street is wearing “short-sleeves” (Howells 1996). This story reveals that, to the upper classes, the South End had lost its demarcation as a wealthy district. The area had changed, and these high-class individuals were unfamiliar with the differences of this new emerging population within the South End. It became clear that these new residents of the South End did not match their definition of propriety—in other words, former residents viewed these newer, poorer people as “out of place.” In *Filth, Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life*, William A. Cohen explains that “labeling something filthy is a viscerally powerful means of excluding it” (Cohen 2005, ix-x). For some people, deeming a place as filthy became a way of deeming *those who inhabit that space as filthy*. Sometimes, individuals will fail to differentiate between social status/race and notions of filth.
In “From the Dirty City to the Spoiled Suburb,” Paul Watt describes the notion of imagined landscapes of the “filthy” city versus the “pure” suburb, and the differences between the people that inhabit each space. The filth of a city can extend beyond its grime to a fear of risk and distress. During the end of the nineteenth century, this process of suburbanization was very apparent in Boston, especially as more immigrants moved into the cities. He cites Sibley in making this point:

> The ‘purified suburb is dominated by a ‘concern with order, conformity and social homogeneity,’ a concern that is mobilized around securing its spatial boundaries. … the appearance of ‘dirt creates abject feelings of anxiety and disgust because it signifies the presence of low status ‘others’, prominent in cities, who threaten the purity of suburban space. The dominant place image of suburbia, especially in Anglo-American culture, remains one of order based on social homogeneity, whiteness, heterosexual couples, political conservatism, materialism, and insular self-satisfaction (Watt 2008, 81).

Essentially, he delineates that the privileged people started to imagine the suburbs as an orderly, stable place. It is a desire for a familiar location, and with this is also a desire for familiar people. Once again, we revisit the idea of the social and the spatial; in the eyes of the suburbanites, it seems that the people inhabiting the place become inextricably linked with the demarcation of the place.

The attraction of the suburbs was very relevant to prospective residents of the South End. As Watt describes, the wealthy classes valued order and homogeneity, and many city dwellers and suburbanites shied away from moving to the South End because of the innumerable rooming houses that emerged in the late nineteenth century. These homes were considered temporary housing as new waves of immigrants continually transitioned in and out of this space. One’s class rank was intertwined with one’s level of stability. It was a luxury to not have to worry about having to move. As Holleran explains: “The lowest classes in their tenements experienced little stability in the physical environment, as the real estate market
continued treating their homes as a transitional phase on the way to some more profitable land use…” (Holleran 2001, 51). In the eyes of the wealthy non-residents of the South End, the purpose of these housing units was purely functional. Many wealthier residents of the Back Bay and the suburbs perceived these South End residents as careless homeowners, blaming them for the neighborhood’s transition to filth. In reality, oppression from the wealthy class contributed significantly to the state of the South End. King explains that:

This systematic denial of jobs, housing education and political representation by the Boston power structure came to full development in the creation of the ‘ghetto,’ for the image of the ghetto allowed the ruling elite to blame the Black community for what they had systematically imposed on us (King 1981, 26).

It is those who have the means to renovate or maintain the state of a building who determine and reinforce the definition of when something becomes beautiful. By demarcating the South End as filthy, they not only impose a mark on its residents as filthy, but they refuse from them any sense of stability.

Watt depicts the city as an overwhelmingly crowded and filthy place that is “characterized by risk and unpredictability” (Watt 2008, 81-82). These risk factors only worsened the repulsive nature of the city for many non-city dwellers. For example, Watt explains that the “spatial signs of risk” such as the “youths on the street corner” frighten certain individuals from living in specific places like the South End (Watt 2008, 82). Ben Campkin summarizes Watt’s work: “Exclusionary metaphors conflate physical degradation and contamination with race and class-based prejudices” (Campkin 2008, 65). At the beginning of the twentieth century, filth in the South End took the form of literal grime, but also that of drugs and prostitution.

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20 It is important to note that maintaining a previously determined level of attractiveness of an area is not a cheap request by any means.
The perceived filth of these illicit activities spread to mark all of the buildings, even to those in which generations of families did not partake. Filth defined the South End, and only those who possessed the power were capable of redefining this space.

Although we often claim that we have moved on from past prejudices, this notion of filth is still very apparent within the South End. In the following account, it seems that this woman conflates these teenagers—who are minorities, living in what she would refer to as the “ghetto” of the South End—with the contamination of the neighborhood resulting from recent crime.

Recently, I was talking to an acquaintance about a Neighborhood Association Meeting in the South End. There had been numerous robberies in the area over the prior weeks and the police were taking precautions by holding a meeting to discuss ways to help protect your home. The acquaintance described how one woman raised her hand and said that the police needed to make sure they were breaking apart the groups of teenagers from the ghettos standing around the stoops on Tremont Street. The woman claimed that these teenagers were clearly the problem and that they were ruining the safe environment of the neighborhood.

Filth stands in the way of order and has affected the ways in which we have situated the South End in the past. However, this notion of filth as “matter out of place” still exists in the South End today. While many of the areas of the South End have been renewed or regulated, there are a few that stick out as unusual and disorderly. While the home described in the following account may be beautiful in one context, in the South End it breaks the continuity of the red brick Victorian row house.
There is one house near the edge of the South End. It is covered in white paint, from the building itself to each statue in the front lawn and the arched front gate. It is a striking row house among the rest of the brick of the building. After walking past the innumerable brick Victorian row houses, this structure is unsettling. It looks as if it has been uninhabited and untouched for over 20 years. Often, this house will arise in discussion and South Enders do not hesitate to sneer at its hideous appearance: “It does not fit in” or “How did that get to be in this neighborhood?”

My original thought process was why has this particular building not been limited to the specific restrictions, as have the other buildings. I even asked one of the South End Historical Society members. No one has had a clear answer and they simply say that the structure was “grandfathered in” to the city plan. Residents are often repulsed at the look of this place amongst the rest of the South End’s beauty.

While subtle differences are occasionally praised, any deformity or significant architectural differences are often considered ugly—as in the case of this residence. An appreciation of uniformity pervades within the city. In all truth, this seems not to stray too far from our society’s perception of beauty. Perpetually, there is judgment and distinction as to whether certain structures fit the mold (similar to the way we view fashion models). There is something about this beauty in the South End that is mysteriously powerful. It dominates us. It makes us lose some sense of rationality. Over time, universal notions of beauty have been created and allow for the city to use beautification as a synonym for betterment. These notions of beauty have been reinforced throughout history as the root of rebirth and stability. This revered Victorian style of the South End has become associated with power. This is a global
phenomenon. In *The City at its Limits*, Daniella Gandolfo cites Bernabé Cobo in situating beauty within Lima, Peru: “the power and importance of orderly cities and of beautiful or magnificent architecture … implant[s] … lasting ‘memory’” (Gandolfo 2009, 78). Peru is thus yet another example of the power of the organization of beauty within architecture, and the role that it can play in history—in this case, in maintaining memory. In the South End, the definition of beauty based in a valued past has evolved to a similar status, whereby those in power strive to maintain order. More often than not, order is often used as a tool to mask self-interested goals through beauty.

*Over the summer, I met a coworker, who lives in the South End, for coffee.*

*On our way to the local coffee shop, The South End Butterly, we walked down Union Park Street. As with most of my friends or acquaintances in the South End, we ended up in a discussion about the history of the South End. As we walked down Union Park Street, it is difficult to focus on much beyond the architecture. Neither of us is well versed in the technical terms of architecture, so our conversation was limited to the incomplete architectural jargon or our reflections. Because of the larger width of Union Park Street, there is a garden running down the center enclosed by a cast-iron fence. It is hard to walk down this street and ignore the massive front stoops and the grandeur of each building. It is one of the most expensive streets in the South End, and arguably the most beautiful. We agreed that if we were heading to a location nearby this street that we would adjust our route just so that we could walk down this street. The beauty is so mesmerizing that I was barely able to pay attention to my*
coworker for a moment. There is something all-powerful about this street, an air of puissance, and an air of mystique.

The beauty that my coworker and I noticed was in the grandeur of the homes. Naturally, only wealthier families can maintain and showcase the opulent architecture of the South End, as renovation and maintenance are expensive. Architectural beauty finds its derivation in the harmony and unity of buildings, but ultimately in relation to power. At the same time, the city’s viewpoint of beauty is rooted in its ability to attract wealthy residents, thus intrinsically linked to the wealth of the city.

In Lima, Peru, Gandolfo explained how Mayor Andrade had chosen to rally the citizens around the beautification of the city. By establishing these universal desires, he was able to convince these individuals that these were positive changes within the city, while also making them historically relevant as these changes incorporated qualities that have been valued over many centuries. Gandolfo situates Andrade’s power in Lima in terms of Elizabeth Povinelli’s consideration of social power and practice in what she defines as the “practice of commensuration.” Andrade united the city around certain values through a shared sense of what is beautiful, clean, and organized. Gandolfo cites Povinelli, who claims:

Social practices and forms of social power that are employed to make those radical worlds commensurate with the idea and norms of civil society without the use of repressive force. … the notion of ‘public reason’ and its deployment to effect forms of communication (between ‘free’ and ‘equal’ citizens) and nonviolent judgment that are assumed to give way to a shared cultural and moral community. Finding justification for actions on the existence (or possibility) of this shared community, Povinelli remarks, universalizes historical reason through appeal to consensus as the basis of nonviolent means of commensuration diverging moral and epistemological worlds (Gandolfo 2009, 82).

Povinelli argues that the creation of “public reason” manifests as a non-violent form of social power. It is a way in which those in power can justify their desires for a space through a shared communal notion. Then, it becomes a commonality for
everyone that what is beautiful or orderly is what is right. Similarly to Povinelli, Cresswell cites Antonio Gramsci, author of *Prison Notebooks*, who reveals that the “concept of hegemony insists that people are not simply imposed upon by dominant groups but are convinced that the ideas of dominant groups will also benefit subordinate groups. Domination thus occurs through common sense” (Cresswell 1996, 18). Gramsci follows a similar path to Povinelli, as he directly highlights the fact that these “subordinate groups” are told that they will benefit from these changes. This concept has been perpetually reproduced in many cities, and the South End is yet another example. The people living in these areas—who are often marginalized—are persuaded that changes will benefit them; however, often it becomes an economically and politically charged strategy that benefits the enforcing class.

Povinelli’s argument of “public reason” and the establishment of commonality as a non-violent form of suppression relate to both the urban renewal and historical preservation movements within the South End. Both have established a similar notion of rallying behind beautification and order. Therefore, this has both reinforced the link between beauty and power and established a site of contestation—thus, began the fight between urban renewal and historical preservation.

The city of Boston began urban renewal in the South End in 1960. Its goal was to both redevelop and reinvent the South End (and other parts of the city) in order to improve economic growth (CPB 1941, iv-v). While the city planned to destroy all of the buildings within the South End and rebuild, they softened this notion to avoid contestation by describing it as a movement of renewal of order within the city. They voiced that their objective would be to maintain all existing residents, while also
welcoming in new residents (CPB 1941). The city attempted to rally all citizens, regardless of class or race, around a notion of order that would be shared by the entire neighborhood. Nevertheless, this was a deceptive call for commonality—a call that was not unique to the South End. For example, in Mel King’s Chain of Change, he describes the first evidences of urban renewal in South End’s New York Streets. Light industry was struggling to find adequate and affordable space in downtown Boston. Therefore the city decided to aid these industries: “This undertaking is proof that renewal can serve as a vehicle for private industrial and commercial development. This is the classic partnership of city officials and private interests aimed at improving the economic base of the city” (King 1981, 20). In reality, as King explains, the focus of urban renewal was to increase the wealth within the city. The city’s efforts were (and still are) primarily based in the self-interest of the wealthy businessman (King 1981, 22). King describes that when his family was told that they needed to leave the “‘slum’” where they lived in the South End, the city did very little to help his family. Instead the newspapers framed the issue in a depersonalized way: “Labeling those streets as slums depersonalized the issue, and blocked out any understanding of the impact of urban renewal would have on the lives of the people, like my family and friends living there, and provided rationale for replacing ‘undesirable’ elements of Boston with less troublesome ‘light industry’” (King 1981, 21). Urban renewal falls within Povinelli’s description of “public reason.” It claims to benefit the people, when in actuality it is a false commonality.

21 Mel King is an author and resident of the South End. His parents came to the United States after the civil war from Guyana and Barbados. They moved to the South End and he grew up in the neighborhood (King 1981, 9).

22 Interestingly enough, King illustrates that because the city could not find a developer for the area, the New York Streets were demolished and left untouched for many years. Eventually, the New York Streets became the home to the Boston Herald Newspaper (King 1981, 21). The streets are now referred to as the Ink Block—in reference to the newspaper offices that used to be there—today, they are planning to rebuild this section of the South End and turn it into a “residential and shopping complex” (Marstall 2012).
In her interview with the South End Historical Society, Anne Alison Barnet discusses the Boston Redevelopment Authority’s (BRA) objective in the South End during the period of urban renewal: “I mean, I think that they wanted to change this area over completely which of course was a lot of profit for a lot of people” (Barnet 2011). She continued to explain how the BRA was pushing for more gentrification.

The city of Boston had found a substantial basis in the notion of beauty in terms of urban renewal. This was evident in the City Planning Board’s document, “Building a Better Boston:” “The problem facing the City of Boston is the need to rehabilitate the deteriorated areas so that the ravages of depreciation may be overcome; and so that attractions may be substituted which will counteract the forces of decentralization” (CPB 1941, 9). The city rallies the population around a common goal of beautification, which in turn, becomes the shared objective of the community. For example, they mobilized the community by incorporating articles about urban renewal in the newspaper New South End. In the February 1966 issue, the title is “IT’S ALMOST HERE” with articles describing the process of urban renewal. In addition, on the second page, there was a note specifically about staying informed about the process. The city found ways to instill a sense of rebirth in the city, as if it was renewing the beauty and the order that existed before in the South End.

Homosexuals were the first wealthy re-settlers of the South End, who were the instigators of the neighborhood’s return to opulence (Lukas 1986, 168). After this transition, many wealthy young people, specifically architects and painters, entered the South End. It was a neighborhood where middle class residents could find decent

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23 Lukas defines gentrification as “a British term for the resettlement of working-class neighborhoods by more affluent young families” (Lukas 1986, 168). It originally occurred in Georgetown in D.C and then spread all over the country. This term is often applied to what occurred in the South End in the 1960s.
and affordable homes. Many of the residents that live near my home have lived on this street since this period—most of them bought their homes for less than $20,000. Lukas reveals that banks were reluctant to give out mortgages until they learned that the city planned to prioritize renewal within the South End (Lukas 1986, 169). While it was clear that the city was bettering the space in terms of their own values of order and economic growth, they overlooked two very crucial concepts: preservation and people.

By contrast, historical preservationists fought against the city’s plans for urban renewal. While both groups wanted to restore order within the South End and eliminate what they considered to be “filth,” the preservationists aimed to protect historically significant places. They argued that preservation would benefit the city, the current residents, and future visitors to the South End. In 1966, the South End Historical Society began to contest the plans to destroy the neighborhood’s row houses (SEHS 2012). The South End Historical Society promotes this goal of historical preservation in the South End. The mission of the South End Historical Society is the following:

The purpose of this organization shall be to engage in historical research; to collect and preserve data and real and personal property that may have value for the future; to encourage historical research and protect and promote interest in historical buildings, monuments and sites, all with particular regard to the South End of Boston, to conduct educational and other events, to create and foster education and public awareness of the South End of Boston’s history and architectural significance, and to preserve the architectural integrity of the South End through outreach, advocacy, intervention and special projects (SEHS 2012).

I spent the summer of 2012 volunteering at SEHS. The South End Historical Society (SEHS) is located in an old row house, with an interior design to match the time of its construction in the late 1800s. They use the parlor and the garden level for the business of the historical society and they use the rest of the building to rent out as apartments. This building definitely shows its age, but it has an aged sense of beauty that evokes nostalgia. It is not an impeccable museum. In fact, it really is not a museum. It is littered with books, maps, photos, and all sorts of miscellaneous objects covered in dust. Until very recently, the parlor and garden levels were just filled with boxes. Their collection has never been inventoried or archived. Finally, this past year, the Society has been sorting through this collection in an attempt to transform the office into a place for research.
Like those interested in urban renewal, those who value preservation mobilized neighbors around a communal history found within historical preservation. The society provides memberships to anyone living in the area, and distributes membership flyers to new residents. In addition, they hold events such as the South End Historical Society’s Annual Ball and House Tour. In the eyes of Povinelli, it is interesting to consider how these events may cultivate a notion of building a community based on shared values. These values are based on the desire to create and maintain a clean and orderly community, which also have withstood the test of time.

Certain architectural elements, such as the bow front, red brick, and the high stoop are seen as crucial elements of South End architecture. When the South End was originally created in the mid-19th century, these elements were included for aesthetic reasons. Smith explains how the bow front allows the buildings to have some distinction instead of a flat front that looks like a mass of rectangular brick (Smith 1976, 172-173). She emphasizes that these bow fronts also accentuate the height of these homes as well as the amount of light each homes receives. Smith argues that "the domination of Boston row house building by the bow front style occurred during the Greek Revival period when symmetry, regularity, and uniformity were the admired architectural ideals" (Smith 1976, 173-174). It is clear that beauty is a communal value in this neighborhood. At the South End’s inception, the beauty of uniformity was instilled in its identity. In addition, the similarity in the color and type of brick throughout the South End contributes to this uniformity, as “most South

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23 Bainbridge situates the architectural choice of the bow-front within the South End: “Houses of the New South End were designed with less thought for the street ensemble. The street is lined by a succession of relentlessly independent house units, each with its separate swell front, its own flight of front steps, its particular entrance porch” (Bainbridge 1967, 68).
End houses are built of dark red pressed Philadelphia brick (Smith 1976, 174). The high front stoop is another distinguishing element of the row house, which Smith describes as an architectural element found within the Renaissance Revival style (Smith 1976, 185). However, beyond its architectural value, the neighborhood has found communal pride in the maintenance and restoration of these spaces. While the values have not always remained the same, it is evident that the city and historical preservationists have instilled worth in ‘orderly’ places. Ultimately, this distinction of worth has been passed along to the community. Both the proponents of urban renewal and historical preservation suggest similar values in their “betterment” of the city: they determine values that are historically durable and based in order and stability.

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**Nostalgia**—“The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one” (Boym 2001, xvi).

The second time that I visited the South End was on Christmas Eve. My family had decided to spend the holiday evening walking around the neighborhood. In retrospect, this part of the walk was probably no more than twenty minutes, but I have this solidified image of this walk in my mind. It had snowed a few hours before so it barely covered the sidewalks and outlined the sidewalks and the front gardens—an almost too quaint and classic “winter wonderland.” It was chilly enough to remind you that it was winter. I walked slowly behind with my grandma. On Tremont Street, it looked pretty much the same as it did the first time I visited.  

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26 It was a very brief first visit when my parents were looking at a place to move. So we only looked at apartments, visited a bakery, and walked by Tremont Street.
this occasion, there were some storefronts framed with holiday lights or decorations, some people rushing to complete the rest of their holiday tasks, and some people relaxing in restaurants after finishing with their holiday arrangements.

Once we turned off Tremont Street onto a street somewhere deep in the South End, we found some solace. Honestly, I do not think I could locate the street that I’m describing even though I have a distinct memory of it. First, these streets look fairly similar with towering brick row houses one after another aligned in an imperfect grid. Secondly, the beauty of these homes is mesmerizing. On this particular street, the heavily outlined features of each row house transcended their normal attractive state and transformed these indisputably elegant homes. I found it hard to believe that people lived in these homes.

The street was almost empty, but our senses remained in high gear. A combination of appealing sites and alluring smells only furthered my idealization of the neighborhood. My grandma and I walked slowly behind the rest of my family to get a closer look at each home. The giant light-up reindeer or inflatable Santa Claus that frequented the front gardens of the town in which I lived at the time, were nowhere to be seen in this neighborhood. The street’s elegance surpassed anything that I had ever seen. You could tell it was Christmas when you peer into the street levels of these homes; the bay windows on each level are almost too welcoming to the wandering or spying eye. We stopped in front of one home and peered into their garden level: their dining table was covered with place settings that looked as if the person who set the table had used a ruler. The centerpiece of fresh autumnal flowers and maize dominated the table. We continued walking and passed many similar
homes each one with everything nearly aligned to perfection; yet each room had an individualizing factor. This serene neighborhood led me back one hundred years earlier—to some time that I know little about, except what I have seen in old movies and have read in books. Though a metropolitan neighborhood, the neighborhood acquired a quaint, communal feel. I almost felt as if I was supposed to see some sort of old-fashioned vehicle or carriage. My grandma and I hearkened back to these olden times as we walked. We imagined what was beyond the wreathed double wooden doors on the parlor level in the kitchen and how everything seemed so impeccable and harmonious. We were suddenly in the 1800s, maybe in Boston, maybe in London or maybe nowhere in particular. This was how we imagined it to be. Eventually, we reached the restaurant—a French bistro, called Petit Robert. This French family owned-business only contributed more to this “homey” feel. Instantly, I realized that the attraction of this place exceeded its physical appearance. Sometimes I wonder if I will ever find this perfect street again. I’m almost hesitant to ask my family if they remember where the street is located, because if I was to find it again, I’m afraid to learn about its current state.

In The Future of Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym describes the roots of the word “nostalgia,” in which we share algia (longing) and we individually possess nostos (return home) (Boym 2001, xiii). Boym frames nostalgia as a contagious disease festering within the individual that spreads throughout the entire community: “Possessed by nostalgia, he forgot his actual past. The illusion left burns on his face” (Boym 2001, xiii). Nostalgia takes over the individual and blurs the lines between the real and the imagined. We imagine a utopia in the past; we can more easily fathom
another utopia in the future. Nostalgia is considered both “retrospective” and “prospective” (Boym 2001, xvi). In other words, we cannot limit the nostalgia to the past. It is both how we imagine the past and how we project it onto the future. This is a vital connection to historical preservation; we desire to preserve this past, which makes us nostalgic in a collective fashion. Like romanticism, nostalgia allows the individual to escape rationality or reality. Realizing the possibility of existence, it allows the present to seem more manageable and provides a comfort to reality.

The notion of nostalgia as imaginative relates to the way the individual often considers the general image of Boston: "Bostonians have a rather vivid picture of old Boston as a district of winding streets and crooked alleys. Part of the city's charm, in fact, is ascribed to its seemingly haphazard and confusing street arrangement" (Smith 1976, 8). To extend Smith’s idea, I think that this extends beyond Bostonians to visitors of Boston, especially considering the many tourist attractions in Boston, and the way they are geared towards the city’s history. In this way, it seems that Boston finds its relation between itself and European structures, especially as Boston is one of the older cities in the United States. The age of the space along with its charming winding streets combine to create this fantasized space via nostalgia.

While walking in Boston along these crooked brick sidewalks, I can’t help but imagine the charm of this space. If they were to pave over all of these sidewalks with cement, as they have done on certain sidewalks in the city, much of the effect would be lost. The imperfect sidewalks lead you to believe that you are walking on sidewalks from the early 19th century (especially because sometimes it surely looks as if you are). It is comforting to think that not all cities have given in to modernity.
Thus, what gives it charm is the fact that there is something *special* or *unique* about this place—something that you can only find in Boston.

Boym observes nostalgia through the following: desire for utopia or at least a better world, as a unifying force, that became institutionalized in the mid 19th century.

The sense of historicity and discreteness of the past is a new nineteenth-century sensibility. By the end of the nineteenth century there is a debate between the defenders of complete restoration that proposes to remake historical and artistic monuments of the past in their unity and wholeness, and the loves of unintentional memorials of the past: ruins, eclectic constructions, fragments that carry ‘age value’ (Boym 2001, 15).

In comparison to other structures in the United States, the homes in the South End possess a significant amount of ‘age value.’ In comparison to structures outside of the United States, it is fair to assume that these buildings carry little age value.

In the summer of 2012, the South End Historical Society acquired the “HITE Radio and TV” sign that sat atop a recently closed used audio/video repair business that has been in the South End for over seventy years (Kaiser 2012). While in the South End News on Boston.com this store is described as a “South End landmark,” when it was originally created it was not intentionally built as a memorial—it was built for the purpose of repairing radios and televisions. It became an unintentional memorial as it has existed in the South End for a long period of time, but now the area has outgrown any real need for this business. The Executive Director of the South End Historical Society, Hope Shannon, reveals, “I’m sad to see the business go because it is representative of the South End of 30 to 40 years ago” (Kaiser 2012). Thus, this space becomes embedded with an important memory that now invokes a sense of longing for that past. The sign has now received that association as the South End Historical Society has added this item to their collection.
In further research in the Northeastern University Archives, I came across an article in *New South End* Newspaper, “Marie Antoinette and The Hardware Store,” written by Richard Card. He reminisced about the Deacon house, a mansion built in 1848 by Peter Parker for his daughter. He recalls: “The ground floor ballroom [today] is filled with iron racks of paint and wallpaper, and the sound of musicians is still, but perhaps—someplace down in her cellar—the once glittering lady of Washington Street still dreams of her youth so long ago” (Card 1966). We struggle with an *authentic* way to remember and represent our past. For the South End, there is a sense of pride within the architecture that is authentic as the majority of the row houses are the original structures, each only with internal renovations or approved external restoration. For example, neighborhood block associations might meet to discuss the choice of streetlights and decide whether the new lights will fit within the historically *authentic* identity of the South End. This procedure manifests in the same way with Boston Housing Authority and the Historical Society as they may meet about the transition of a church into a condo to ensure that its external authentic identity does not become obscured by modern renovations.

Within the South End, authenticity is often situated within the external beauty of the architecture, whereas the interiority is personal to the inhabitants. The city allows for the interiors of buildings to be gutted and redecorated in a modern or an old-fashioned style, as long as they receive the proper work permits. What matters to the housing committees and the Landmark and Historical District is the maintenance of the exterior of your home, including the red brick, cast iron railings, grayish brown front stoop, and front garden. To the public, these homes all seem the same, with
little individuality other than a slight change in the tint of the brick, the choice of
shutters, or the plants you choose for your front garden. These committees attempt to
maintain the authenticity of our historical past, while also highlighting the necessity
of upholding the *orderly* appearance to the public. It is interesting to consider this
authentic appearance as something imagined. By contrast, the interior of the home is
open to interpretation of its resident. This allows the inside of the home to be a
private, personal space that cannot be as easily read by the public. Therefore, it
suggests a tension between what the South End values and what the individual values.
It shows that while an individual can express individuality within their home, they
must value what the society considers orderly on the exterior.

Boym emphasizes the notion of looking internally, but also looking to the
collective. She eloquently determines that “nostalgia is about the relationship
between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between
personal and collective memory” (Boym 2001, xvi). Boym expands the individual’s
nostalgia to a collective mindset, which therefore allows for this past to seem even
more real. Once this past, imagined space and time has been confirmed and
reconfirmed as true by the collective, it becomes the reality. It justifies the imagined
utopia.

The South End struggles with the balance between the individual and the
collective. The South End Historical Society preserves the individual memories.
Piles of architectural plans litter the office. Homeowners have donated these plans,
but their use is unknown. It seems to benefit the individual alone. However, more
recently, they have been changing their office to incorporate a research library so that
it can become a space to learn about the area and contribute to the collective memory of the South End. “Somehow progress didn’t cure nostalgia but exacerbated it. Similarly, globalization encouraged stronger local attachments. … there is no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world” (Boym 2001, xiv). The South End has experienced many points of instability and self-consciousness as it switched from the city’s focal point in the 1850s, to the place rejected by the city, to a disputed site of either renewal or preservation, to what it is today. After many shifts within the South End, it is evident that there is a desire for continuity and a desire for stability that comes from sharing a common base, which in this case is a common past.

Boym also considers nostalgia not just “longing for a place,” but rather a “yearning for a different time.” It is “rebellion against the modern of idea of time, the time of history and progress” (Boym 2001, xv). Within the South End, this combination of nostalgia for time and place is very evident. The historical preservation within the South End is very unique—especially in the way that they consider the future. For example, on their House Tour brochures they emphasize “a glance at the past and a glimpse of the future” (Shannon 2010). They show how many homes on the tour have a new modern look. The leadership of the SEHS emphasize that we are moving forward so there should be a look to the past, but in combination with the glimpse of the future. They are nostalgic for this idealized past and they are hopeful for this idealized future. This perfectly exemplifies a “yearning for a different time.” We cannot just consider the present; we are always looking
forwards, backwards, and sideways. The past is so understandable and within our grasp. “Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values” (Boym, 2001, 8). It is nostalgia for something concrete. It is easier to imagine something that does not exist and find comfort in it rather than to try to figure out what reality is and then try to figure out where you fall within it.

There are thousands of stories floating around the South End of times when this area was not only marked by racial diversity, but also by a notion of community and acceptance: *There was a wedding reception and the family would block off the entire street, and everyone, regardless of their race, would be invited to join the reception. Everyone lived harmoniously. Maybe they didn’t spend time together frequently, yet there was an unspoken agreement of this mutually respectful and united community.* I have heard this story from non-residents at the time and from residents who lived in a completely different section of the South End. Where did they learn these stories? They have claimed a communal past that they may not have experienced—or it may not have existed. Loss of reason is a recurring theme when considering the effects of beauty and nostalgia on the individual. When we become dominated by the ideal, by some notion of perfection, which likely never existed, we wish for it almost irrationally.

There is a strong connection between nostalgia and what Povinelli describes as “public reason.” Historical preservationists aim to preserve what they imagine to be a communal past. Despite their varying objectives, the city strives for a similar past to that of historical preservationists. Ultimately, historical preservationists and
the city root their efforts in commonality or “public reason.” Through nostalgia, both movements can effectively create a scheme through which they can convince a community of individuals of what is correct.

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**Neighborhood**—“History isn’t old houses. History is people!” (Lukas 1986, 164).

After the investigation of the composition of space, the demarcation of filth, order, beauty, and nostalgia, we find ourselves at the root of all history: the people who compose it. Up to this point, I have primarily focused this paper on the space and the way individuals have chosen to interact with it. For this last section, I would like to examine how people have created and used the spaces and communities in which they live and, ultimately, are the primary focus of this history.

Putting aside buildings and composition of space, how are people valued in the South End? In *Power of Place*, Dolores Hayden reveals the depth of the urban space that has become mapped in race, ethnicity, gender, and class (Hayden 1997, 34). She reminds us that although the city creates the structure of the space, it is the people who live within it who shape it. She suggests that ethnic communities can claim space through festivals or parades, or other forms of art or traditions. She argues that for a long time urban history was lost to a “‘city biography’ that projected a single narrative of how city leaders or city ‘fathers’—almost always white, upper- and middle-class men—forged the city’s spatial and economic structure, making fortunes building downtowns and imposing order on chaotic immigrant populations” (Hayden 1997, 39). She explains how this is a past problem for historians. I do not find this to be the case in the South End and I do not think that the South End is an
anomaly. In 1999, King wrote *Chain of Change*, a detailed history of Boston’s black community beginning around urban renewal. In this book, King shows how marginalized groups mobilized and fought against the city—ultimately destroying that “city biography” which Hayden describes. However, although we now can talk about the successes in the past, classicist and racist notions still seep into our conceptions of society. While the neighborhood has taken a step forward, it has not completely left these prejudices in the past.

In two accounts, one from King, and one from Barnet, we realize the complexity of this issue and how it still permeates the South End. King provides his audience with perspective on Boston and the South End in the 1950s:

The Master Plan for Boston had begun its job of focusing Black people out of the South End into Roxbury and Dorchester in order to accommodate the commercial and residential needs of Boston banks, insurance companies and, of course, MIT and Harvard. This housing segregation went hand in hand with the gerrymandering of the Black population in such a way as to assure that they had no political voice (King 1981, 26).

While King shows us the effects of the city’s Master Plan during urban renewal, Barnet shows us the way that individuals ultimately regarded the *other* in this space. She explains, “Yeah, we had a bunch of churches that were torched… they really wanted to get rid of black people. These were mostly black churches and especially churches that were sponsoring low-income housing. They [these ‘mad men] wanted them [the African Americans] out.” Then she acknowledged, “We don’t have fires anymore because nobody wants to even damage these structures, right? …I mean, you have a fire, and then, you might be able to get three million for it” (Barnet 2011). Essentially, they are both saying that in the end, the *neighborhood* and the city
wanted to see the departure of the marginalized community. While the neighborhood claims to have moved past these ideas (and it has in some ways), it still harbors these notions of wanting a space without that “tainted other.” Whether it is through policy, increased property values, or setting fires to push “them” out of the neighborhood, it is clear that those dominant within the neighborhood wanted those “others” out of the neighborhood. The city and the more affluent viewed “them” as a drain on the city and wanted to move them out of the South End. This was the underlying idea beneath the city’s call for order. The powerful within the neighborhood imagined a space full of entirely unattainable values. They had imagined the marginalized as out of place because within this false history they had seen as untainted, beautiful, cleanly, and orderly utopia.

Mel King reminds us of a powerful history within the South End that speaks to counter the success of the dominant class. He explains that people started to mobilize, once they realized the imaginary order that those in power claimed (King 1981, 8). They came to understand the false commonality created by “public reason” that had so often imposed a need for order within their homes. As Cresswell argues, “Dominated subjects come to have beliefs about their being in the world by applying categorizations and schemes of perception that are produced by the dominant, and thus they refuse what they are refused—they define themselves according to established definitions” (Cresswell 1996, 19). King shows how what Cresswell describes was evident for so long, yet once they realized this scheme; they were able to start contesting these societal structures. King articulates, “The ‘ghetto’

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27 By neighborhood here, I am referring to those wealthier people who started to re-inhabit the South End in the mid-twentieth century.
28 By people here, I am referring to the marginalized individuals that have inhabited the South End since the end of the nineteenth century—in other words, the people who call the South End home.
was an image put on the Black community by the city, banking institutions and realtors, reinforced by cutting off resources to the area, thereby causing the deterioration of the buildings and the streets” (King 1981, 64). King explains that wealthier institutions used their power to “better” the area economically: by seizing the spaces, destroying dilapidated buildings, and forcing the residents to relocate without any help from the city (King 1981, 64). Thus, once the community realized the motives behind movements like urban renewal, they decided to mobilize. They demanded that the city should only temporarily relocate these communities and after the completion of their homes, they should be allowed to return to the South End (King 1981, 64). Unfortunately, it was not an easy process attempting to convince the Boston Redevelopment Authority to listen to both homeowners and tenants, as they tended to focus more on the former (King 1981, 65). King argued for neighborhood service agencies that could focus on the needs of the individuals and the families of the area rather than allowing the city’s bureaucracy to deal with the spaces as they please.

As mentioned earlier, it was clear that those in power would use a notion of “commonality” to mask the fact that their plans were falsely shared. Once again, Povinelli’s concept of utilizing “public reason” to benefit the dominant is related to this situation. However, the people came to realize the truth behind this false commonality, thus revealing a site of significant conflict. King explains that the neighborhood needed specific agencies in which marginalized groups would be represented. Thus, the emergence of the Community Assembly for a United South End (CAUSE) filled that role, serving as “a ‘vehicle for self-control and self
expressions’ [that] would ‘involve the residents of the community in the decision-making process in matters which affect that community’” (King 1981, 68). This Assembly was focused on ensuring that the BRA would not only focus on rehabilitating the physical buildings within the South End, but they would also maintain the many communities within the neighborhood (King 1981, 68).

Additionally, CAUSE supported the Emergency Tenant’s Council (ETC) by helping it protect Villa Victoria (King 1981, 71).

There is an incredible story about the creation of Villa Victoria, or Victory Village: a story that I have only read after significant research, a story that after all of the history that I have discussed with residents of the South End has not been discussed or retold. In the midst of urban renewal in Boston, the city had decided to knock down all of the dilapidated buildings in Parcel 19. The renewal of this neighborhood would beautify the city, however, it would in turn destroy all of the homes of the Puerto Ricans living in the South End. Around 2,000 Puerto Ricans would be displaced. In response, in 1968, a group of people from the community formed the ETC (NEA 1982, 28). It seemed that for the first time, a group was focused on the well-being of the people, instead of the progress of the businesses or state of the cast-iron fences. Its main goal was to ensure that people had their basic needs met (IBA). The committee admitted that the buildings were in need of repair, but their focus was on:

‘Combatting poverty and the deterioration of the community through the participation of the community in the planning and development of low cost housing…with the object of preventing the dispersal of residents, limiting the dislocation caused by Urban Renewal and in general improving the housing conditions of community residents (IBA).

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29 Parcel 19 is the current location of Villa Victoria.
30 Today, the Emergency Tenants Council is called the Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA).
Thus, in 1969, this committee faced the BRA’s Board of Directors in order to stand as Parcel 19’s sponsor (IBA).

They created a five-stage plan in which they could ensure that the community members would only be displaced temporarily (IBA). The architect John Sharratt worked closely with the community to determine the best plan for rebuilding this neighborhood (NEA 1982, 32). Sharratt was looking to prioritize the needs of the people, rather than the architectural plans (NEA 1982, 32). This committee and Sharratt worked relentlessly to ensure that the plan followed through, and they did everything in their power to not let the BRA take advantage of them (Small 2004, 39). For example, during any meetings at the city council in which they would be discussing Parcel 19, many people from the area would attend the meetings. Their motto, “No nos mudaremos de la Parcela 19” reveals how this community fought for its positioning (NEA 1982, 30-32).31 They challenged the suppressive processes that had marginalized them for so long. For once, this history started to read like one about the people.

The entire process was long and complicated; however, in the end they created many housing units for more than three thousand people designed in a style that mixed those of Aguadilla in Puerto Rico and the South End (NEA 1982, 36; Small 2004, 40-41). Sharratt represented Aguadilla through the bright colors painted on plaster, pitched roofs, and a large communal plaza, called Plaza Betances (Small 2004, 40-41). He incorporated the South End brick into the bases of the buildings with steel iron rails (Small 2004, 40-41). The entire neighborhood was built in a loop

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31 This slogan means: “We will not be moved from Parcel 19.” It is also written on the main plaza sign in Villa Victoria.
pattern—which emphasizes a community feel, especially as it was designed to reduce traffic for the large number of children in the area (NEA 1982, 28).

Mario Luis Small describes the achievements of Villa Victoria and the ETC, saying that many families returned to the South End after having to move out for construction (Small 2004, 42). “The Puerto Rican residents of Parcel 19 were among the few groups of residents of the South End who were able to remain in the South End after urban renewal” (Small 2004, 42). Ultimately, Villa Victoria, at one point a site of contestation, became a crucial example of how people can take control over their own value. Within the last few months, I found this story recorded in the Vejigantes restaurant menu. It celebrates the accomplishments of the community in its fight against the city: “What has resulted today is a community with a strong fabric, a model for others, a focal point of pride in Boston’s disenfranchised Latino community, and a catalyst of new innovation.” In this case, the mobilization of the community led to a balance of power of the city—in other words, the marginalized community was successful in their efforts against the city powers.

Unfortunately, this story was one of few of its kind within the South End. The majority of the residents who I have spoken to (even if they have lived here for an extended period of time) know little about this story even though it is a story that should be broadcast as an achievement of the Puerto Rican community. When I first moved here, I had learned people refer to it as the “Spanish Ghetto,” or just a place that I should avoid at night. Personally, I knew very little about its history until I searched through history books and archives to find more information about it.

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32 They pay between 25%-30% of their income to live in these homes (Small 2004, 42).
33 This quote is from the Vejigantes menu. This is a Puerto-Rican restaurant that recently opened in the South End’s Villa Victoria.
While it is a story in which a suppressed community successfully achieved its demands against the city, it is also a story that has not been well represented in the South End’s history. The South End Historical Society claims that this neighborhood is “architecturally rich” and that it wants to preserve its “unique architectural and cultural history” (SEHS, n.d.). If it claims this “architecturally rich” status, how has Villa Victoria’s history been almost entirely overlooked? The construction of Villa Victoria is an important piece of the South End’s history.\(^{34}\) Essentially, it is a need for more education in conjunction with the associations and residents within Villa Victoria to produce this history. As a vital piece of this history, this story needs to become shared knowledge—as it sheds light on a community that broke the normal patterns of the societal power structures.

By isolating the values related to the demarcations of space and place, order, filth, and nostalgia, we can better understand the way in which those in power often conceal their values within a fabricated call for commonality. Those with political and economic power hide their true agenda in order to deny subjugated peoples the manifestation of their own ideals. The South End stands as a prime example of a site in which those in power failed to acknowledge a conflict. Ultimately, we learn that we cannot claim a common past without the acknowledgement of these conflicting values. It is through the recognition of our past as imagined, and through the reproduction of stories like the one about Villa Victoria, that we can reframe the ways in which we think about and value the past—and so, we will no longer be lost in space.

\(^{34}\) It is important to note that it could be problematic in certain ways for the Historical Society to reproduce this history, because it would then own that history.
Works Cited

Anne Alison Barnet, 2011, interview by Hope Shannon, August 24, transcript, Long Time South Enders Oral History Project, South End Historical Society, Barnet’s Home, Boston, MA.


