

The character of cities



In this course we have learned that a city's character is " a legacy for seeing, interpreting, exploiting, and transforming its social, cultural and political opportunities as a physical community. " How is it possible for a city like Boston to have character? Well, the institutional and cultural continuity along with the resistance andreconstructionofculturehas allowed the character of Boston to be defined simply by the underlying idea of conflict.

Through J Anthony Lukas' Common Ground and Richard Broadman's Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston, we can see that the catalyst for this sense of conflict has been social dissensions between classes and races. These dissensions are clearly detailed through both the Urban Renewal plans of Mission Hill in the 1960s and 1970s and the school busing case of 1974.

When looking at the character of Boston one must understand the amount of controversy our city has encountered as well as the way they have identified and resolved these crisis's.

Through this deduction along with my ownpersonal experienceof living in Boston a step towards finding a distinct character of Boston may be possible. When analyzing conflict as the character of Boston, you will find that conflict is triadic not dyadic. This means that there are three parties involved instead of just two parties. This is important when looking at the two issues of urban renewal and busing. The concept of conflict includes established insiders with many options, struggling insiders with some options and ascendant outsiders with few or no options.

When comparing this information to both urban renewal cases and the busing you will see that Boston does in fact have three parties for each of its

conflicts. The politicians play the role of the established insiders; the white race plays the role as the struggling insiders and the minorities especially the African-Americans play the role of the ascendant outsiders. An alliance between the established insiders and the ascendant outsiders caused the isolation of the struggling insiders and this provides us with the busing case of 1974.

When these groups form alliances or make certain deals the health of the city especially Boston may be disturbed. Boston has always been an ambivalent city when it comes to looking at new issues. This ambivalence has caused much friction and has brought much confusion and anger to the citizens of the city of Boston. For example, In Richard Broadman's Mission Hill Miracle of Boston, you see a detailed look at the urban renewal plans for Mission Hill in the 1970s.

Could it be possible that Mission Hill would end up like the West End? There was no chance that Mission Hill would end up like the West End because of the interaction and care the citizens of the Hill had for its neighborhood.

Many of the people of Boston especially the Irish-Catholics had been oppressed for so long, for example the slogan, " Irish need not apply! "

However when James Michael Curley came to office as mayor of Boston he gave the citizens of Boston a new hope. The conflict during his reign existed between the Yankees and the Irish.

The Yankees owned the city while the Irish ran the city politically. The variance of the Yankee world of Harvard University, the Back Bay and Beacon Hill from the lives of a typical Irish Mission Hill citizen was pretty substantial.

With the reign of Curley a sense of confidence in the Irish-Catholic community existed long after his term in office. Even though Curley was not reelected the atmosphere that he created in Boston lingered on and trickled down throughout the next two decades.

From Mission Hill once being “ an industrial neighborhood part of thriving industrial city,” is now today “ an area torn by racial conflict with many burned and abandoned houses and factories with large open spaces where homes once stood. ” From this 1974 quote you can get a sense of the aftermath of the urban renewal and flight of the African-American population into the projects. When the Urban Renewal Act was first presented, the citizens of the Hill were adamant about their disdain for the Act.

There is “ no way are they gonna take any property on Mission Hill because if they take one street then it was the beginning of the end; Mission Hill would no longer be. ” The sense of community in Mission Hill was fantastic. The sense of togetherness and fight was combined and created into a massive force of angered citizens. The Urban Renewal Act was halted when the families of Mission Hill marched on the State House coming in droves of people. But the conflict between the citizens and the politicians would take a new turn when Harvard University and the hospitals would enter into the battle.

New conflict, new problems. The idea of “ who cares about the people only the land is important” was very evident. Before in 1941 when the first small projects were built, an affordable, easy cost of living was accessible. The difference between these projects and the ones built later in the 1950s was

that you had voters and political pull actually living in these projects. So the projects were kept safe, new and beautiful. However, when the political pull was lost and the projects lost its importance blacks were forced to live there.

Whites felt that Blacks were forced on them because of the Urban Renewal plan. Before this the Blacks and the Whites never really crossed paths and never had much conflict. And Harvard's involvement had been trying to buy out the Mission Hill area since 1960. They have tried to buy it out piece by piece like a puzzle. The citizens of the Hill feel that " they are letting the neighborhood go to the dogs. " This conflict has been such a problem that some people believed in the 1970s that Mission Hill might one day not exist because of the growth of the hospitals.

Boston according to J Anthony Lukas is the " cradle of liberty, no city in the nation can boast so many revolutionary events. "(Lukas, 315) When talking about conflict and the city of Boston the most recent case would be the school busing case of 1974. There is no bigger case concerning the desegregation of schools in the city of Boston. The reaction from the citizens of the city especially the citizens of South Boston and Charlestown have made Boston famous for its volatile reaction. In June of 1974 Judge Arthur Garrity found the city of Boston guilty of de facto segregation of the public school system.

In that, he tried to get the school committee to adopt a plan for integration but they refused. He was forced along with the state Department of Education to devise a plan that would integrate the Boston public schools. This plan entailed busing black students to nearby white schools in order for

the black students to receive an equal opportunity of education. When these black students arrived to class on September 12, 1974 they were greeted with stoned buses, people shouting racial profanities at them, and people hurling eggs and rotten tomatoes.

A typical day according to Phyllis Ellison, a black student who attended South Boston High School, included “ between 10 to 15 fights! ” “ Teachers were almost afraid to say the wrong thing, because they knew that it would excite the whole class. ” On December 11, 1974 tension ran high and escalated further. A black student at South Boston High stabbed a white classmate. This created such problems that black students had to hide in the principle’s office in order to stay free from any violent behavior towards them. Parents were forced to come pick their children up; some even carried their children out.

The scene in the schools was out of control. J Anthony Lukas explains how school would be canceled at least once or twice a week because tension was too high. Lisa McGoff Collins explains, “ I missed so many days of my junior year from walkouts and sit-ins and boycotts, I’m surprised I got promoted. ” In *Common Ground*, we are introduced to three very different families. Through Lukas’ extensive interviews with the black family, the Twymons, the white middle class family, the Divers and the working Irish class family, the McGoffs we are invited into the world of the desegregation case of 1974.

Lukas is able to present the ideas of the city of Boston (the school committee and the politicians) as well as the ideas of the three families from three very different lenses. Lukas’ book provides us with a valuable insight into the

American urban experience, as it makes clear that urban communities stem from the perceptions and fears of every type of urban resident. It is evident that the residents of South Boston fall into this category. Many students as well as their parents spent that first day of school out on the street pelting the buses with whatever objects they could find.

A boycott of the schools led to a 20 percent attendance record throughout that fall. South Boston residents were angered by the way this was being forced onto them. South Boston was a safe, industrious neighborhood that was being used to bear the brunt of the busing problems. “ Why should a kid from across town be forced to wear another school’s colors on the gridiron? ” This sense of competition and loyalty to your hometown was ever present and strong. People felt that Garrity being a WASP was getting his ultimate revenge on the Irish of Boston, “ busing would fix them. To understand what busing did to South Boston one must look at the numbers.

In the decade before busing only 3 black students had been enrolled in South Boston High School. By 1986, South Boston High still had the highest percentage of white students but it was down to about 30 percent. This is a great variance from the early 1970s. South Boston was changing and the city of Boston was changing. What has busing done to the city of Boston? It has given the city a better understanding of how to live with various ethnic races.

Also, it has woken the city up and gotten rid of the fright that many people lived with in Boston. The fright of the other races and the possibilities of what these “ races” could do to us. As the population grew and the sense of

loyalty to your hometown outgrew busing became more accepted. In a way the people of Boston have learned from this social experiment. I believe that in trying to desegregate the schools and using busing as a tool, that we have brought education in Boston to an ultimate low. However, the diversity and experiences kids are introduced to may someday help in their own personal lives.

Personally, coming from a prestigious school which is now addressing its own racial quota problems; I am glad I was introduced to many ethnic people. It was not only the minorities that enriched my life but it was the other white kids from Southie and Charlestown that I became intrigued by. I was interested in how a kid like me (that looked like me and had the same interests) acted even though he or she was from a different part of Boston. In some instances I had more in common with the black kid from Mattapan than the white kid from South Boston.

The issue of what type of education you want your child to be exposed to the central theme here. Do you want the prestigious scholastic education of a Boston Latin or do you want the diversity of a Snowden or South Boston High. Boston has done a pretty good job at identifying important issues for the city to deal with but the decisions they have made concerning the urban renewal and busing have left many people wondering what is going on with the city. Maybe these instances where city officials and politicians mess up help build the “character” of the city. What type of a city is Boston?

That is a question that has many answers. Is it the Athens of America or the home of Yankee conservatives who want to stamp out diversity? In an

overview one can see that Boston has built its reputation through the conflict that it has encountered. Whether the city has addressed these issues with the right answers or not it has made Boston a better place to be because it has already experienced so many things. From early revolutionary leaders to the fairly recent quota case at Boston Latin, Boston had seen its share of social dissention. Boston has resolved conflicts between different groups very professionally and orderly.

In the past thirty years since the busing case not many cases of racial problems have surfaced. I think Boston provides the country with a very detailed and specific look at its issues. It seems that all sides of the issue are looked at very carefully before a decision is made. Through the urban renewal case and the busing case of 1974 one can see that when finding a distinct characteristic one would find conflict to be it. This sense of conflict surrounds every issue and blankets the ideas expressed in the movie, Mission Hill Miracle of Boston and the book Common Ground.