Redevelopment and Smart Growth at Assembly Square

by

Alice Savage

S.B. in Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2005)

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master in City Planning

at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 2006

© 2006 Alice Savage. All Rights Reserved

The author hereby grants to MIT permission to reproduce and to distribute publicly paper and electronic copies of this thesis document in whole or in part in any medium now known or hereafter created.

Author

Alice Savage

Department of Urban Studies and Planning

May, 2006

Certified by

Professor Robert Fogelson

Department of Urban Studies and Planning

Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by

Professor Langley Keyes

Ford Professor

Chair, MCP Committee
Abstract

The story of Assembly Square is not yet finished. To tell the complete story of Assembly Square would require much more time to write than I had, and more time to read than the reader would likely care to devote. An earlier work by class of 1984 M.C.P. student Steven Landau covers the development of the mall at Assembly Square, and begins to look at its subsequent demise. My thesis picks up almost where this earlier work leaves off, but focuses on the time where there is the greatest uncertainty surrounding the site’s immediate future. This period roughly coincides with Dorothy Kelly Gay’s term as Somerville mayor, and ends when a new mall is opened and re-tenanted. During this time, public opinion and political will at the local level moved first against and then towards developers’ vision of the site. My thesis follows this shift and attempts to explain why a smart growth advocacy group found itself in the bizarre position of fighting one of the cornerstone’s of Governor Mitt Romney’s smart growth plan for Massachusetts, and why public opinion was first with then against this group. I conclude that the rhetoric of Smart Growth is inconsistent with its practice.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor, Prof. Robert Fogelson, for shepherding me through 3 of my 5 years at MIT.

I would also like to thank Lynn Fisher, who very generously agreed to be my reader, even though she is on leave.

Finally I would like to thank my friends and family, for all their love and support.
Table of Contents

Introduction................................................................................................5

Chapter 1. Anatomy of a Standard Project..................................................7

Chapter 2. Smart Growth Catches On.......................................................12

Chapter 3. Working with the Developers.................................................16

Chapter 4. Some Inconsistencies in the Rhetoric..................................20

Chapter 5. The Difficulties of Duplicating the Back Bay.......................26

Chapter 6. A Tentative Resolution..........................................................31

Conclusion...............................................................................................36
Introduction

Once an arcane term used primarily by city planners and academics, ‘sprawl’ has recently merged as part of everyday speech. From every direction, Americans are bombarded by the message of anti-sprawl reformers. They are told that sprawl threatens to destroy open space, consume agricultural land, drive up utility costs, undermine urban social life, heighten inequalities, deplete natural resources, and damage the environment. And, by the way, it is ugly. 1

—Robert Bruegmann, Sprawl: A Compact History

In the late 1990’s a movement to change the definition of “standard development” practice gained support across the country among suburbanites disenchanted with the rapid pace of development going on around them, or baby-boomers longing for the disappearing landscapes of their childhoods. Popular books with titles like “The Geography of Nowhere” and “Suburban Nation” excoriated the state of standard development—generally described as “sprawl”—which they characterized with equal rancor as mind-numbingly bland and wasteful in terms of public funds and natural resources. At the same time, they offered an alternative development strategy in the movement of Smart Growth, in variations incarnations also known as New Urbanism, neo-traditional development, or Transit-Oriented Development.

The EPA defines “smart growth” as, “development that serves the economy, the community, and the environment. It changes the terms of the development debate away from the traditional growth/no growth question to ‘how and where new development should be accommodated.’” 2 Under the masthead of anti-sprawl, concerned planners, architects, and citizens found a voice to share their dislike of common development

2 EPA website
practices and simultaneously address a myriad of urban problems. The built environment, in the language of anti-sprawl, is the cause of and solution to all urban problems.

In Somerville, Massachusetts, planners and concerned citizens worked with developers to create a New Urbanist development at Assembly Square, the site of a failed shopping mall. However, the advocacy group which formed to promote Smart Growth at Assembly Square, the Mystic View Task Force, was paradoxically responsible for preventing the development from going forward, in the process exciting a great deal of controversy. Furthermore, Smart Growth literature contends that obstacles like developer greed, government intransigence, lack of public transit, or consumers unwilling to give up their cars are responsible for the sprawling development pattern. However, at Assembly Square, developers were willing to build a mixed-use, transit-oriented development, and even to cover the costs of building a new T-stop. The State was willing to provide money to provide the new T-stop, and the Governor himself gave the project his full backing. Local governments had approved the permits, and banks were ready with financing. Why, then, was Assembly Square ultimately not developed as a new neighborhood, the final frontier of Somerville, but as a strip mall?

The case of Assembly Square highlights several inherent paradoxes of smart growth that make it more complicated to practice than its common-sense rhetoric would suggest.
Chapter 1. Anatomy of a standard project

The redevelopment of the Mall at Assembly Square did not begin as a controversial project. Newspaper coverage of the events was minimal, and limited to whatever might routine business reporting and the ironies of offering a mall for sale on mall grounds. Unlike more divisive development proposals, the mall was not located on environmentally sensitive land (the mall was built on the site of a former industrial complex) or in a residential neighborhood, where construction might bother neighbors or, worse, displace residents. The mall’s lack of customer base was the main reason for the proposed redevelopment, so not even many former customers would be inconvenienced at the mall’s closing. That the redevelopment of Assembly Square evolved into one of the most hotly debated issues of the region, prompting a debate that has only begun to taper after ten years, thus comes somewhat as a surprise. However, it may have been the very routineness of the project that allowed it to become the target of a movement whose aim was to change the practice of development as usual.

Somerville is a city plagued with the sorts of problems typical to small cities of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Increased expectations of city life led the public to demand more of city services. At the same time, small cities faced tight budgets, due to cuts in state and federal funds and a tax base eroded after years of local retail and industrial decline. Moreover, the once blue-collar city had been undergoing substantial gentrification, beginning in the 1980’s. This combination made Somerville an especially attractive site to put the theories of Smart Growth into practice.
Background

In 1980, the Mall at Assembly Square opened its doors, along with a separately owned and operated 6-screen cinema which shared the parking lot. The site of the mall had previously been the home of a Ford Edsel Assembly Plant, and a food manufacturer, First National Stores. The project was "Somerville’s answer to the suburban mall," and was part of the city’s urban renewal plan to increase the tax base and diversify the economy. The mall made a fair contribution to Somerville’s tax base in the first decade of its existence; however, the development’s performance fell well short of the expectations of many.

The mall was never a great success. The recession of the 1980's and then competition from newer, regional malls (especially Cambridgeside Galleria and Medford’s Meadow Glen) slowly ate away the Mall at Assembly Square’s customer base. Aetna Insurance, which held the mortgage on the property since 1988, tried unsuccessfully to get Shearson Shopco—the New York-based development company that built and owned the mall—to make improvements to the facility which might have brought back customers. But perhaps because the company was embroiled in a lawsuit elsewhere, no such improvements were made and revenue continued to decrease. By 1996, Shearson Shopco had defaulted on the mortgage, and Aetna foreclosed on the loan.

In contrast to the public furor over later developments in the mall’s history, newspaper

---

coverage of the mall going out to auction takes on a humorous tone, as if the idea of
going to the mall to buy a mall is newsworthy only insofar as it could be seen as ironic.

"Just in time for Christmas and, perhaps, the die-hard shopper on your list - an entire
shopping mall is scheduled to go up for auction Dec. 20" declared the headline in the
Boston Globe. Even the mall’s sellers seemed to strike a jovial tone. "'We won't hold it
right in the front entrance," he said. "I think that anyone showing up with a million-dollar
check in hand," the deposit required to bid, ‘will be able to find us wherever we are.’"

The First Redevelopment Plan

Taurus International Development is a local real estate development company known for
buying failed retail projects, turning them around financially, and then reselling them for
a hefty profit. In 1997, Taurus International Development joined National Development
as the Assembly Square Limited Partnership (ASLP) to purchase the mall property, with
intent to refurbish and resell. By that time the mall was down to just one successful
anchor, K-Mart, after the mall’s major department store, Macy’s, vacated its spot.

Considering the many advantages of the site at Assembly Square—notably, the easy
access to downtown and a location convenient to I-93—it is easy to see why it was
widely believed that the developers would make few changes to the site, and leave it
much as it had been, only a little bit healthier financially and better as a shopping
destination.

One year later, a little more than 10% of the mall’s rentable spaces remained vacant.
Despite repeated attempts to lure more upscale anchors to Somerville, no progress was
made in trying to fill Macy’s spot. In October 1998, Jack O’Neil of National
Development announced a new tactic to bring business back to the mall, stating that in addition to an anchor to replace Macy’s, he was looking for “category killers” to attract customers back to the mall, i.e. sports or houseware stores like Modell’s or Bed, Bath, & Beyond. “Category killers” are so called because they sell everything imaginable related to the category or goods they purvey. They are also called this by those who oppose them, saying that they kill up to dozens of mom-and-pop stores in whatever category they compete. Without any threat of opposition, it was predicted that the project would be occupied by the spring or summer of 2000.

However, between 1997 when the mall was sold and redevelopment was first publicized and 1998 when new tenants had still not been found, a subtle shift in public opinion towards the development, and about the practice of real estate development in general, had taken place. The shift was palpable both in the media coverage of the development proceedings, which began to attract increasingly critical review, and in the actions of Somerville’s public officials. Alderman Bill White voiced the first dissent, saying that big-box development leads to traffic, low-paying jobs, and little revenue for the city. In July of 1998, he proposed a moratorium on development at Assembly Square until a master plan for the area could be produced. Although he soon withdrew this provision in the face of opposition from local business owners, his plan to spend $10,000 of Somerville money to study the development possibilities was passed, even in the midst of looming fiscal crisis.6

In the first two years of the redevelopment process, almost no complaints were voiced in

print or apparently otherwise, but that was all about to change. The Smart Growth was growing nationwide with the goal of radically changing the standard practice of development, and suddenly the routine revival of a failed mall seemed less like an exercise in real estate resuscitation than a chance to change Somerville’s future for the better, or condemn it to a long future of urban ills with their roots in urban form.
Chapter 2. Smart Growth Catches On

In the words of Mystic View Task Force (MVTF) President Bill Shelton, “A new way to think about developing Assembly Square emerged in the late 1990s.” The idea of “smart growth” and, perhaps in particular, “New Urbanism,” had caught hold of concerned citizens nationwide, and in 1998 the idea came to Somerville. As Shelton recalls, a single member of the community attended a lecture on New Urbanism, and brought the concept to Somerville. Anne Tate, a professor of Architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design, was invited to speak at a State House presentation on New Urbanism, which was attended by Somerville resident Pat Jehlen. Unrelated to the happenings at Assembly Square, a group of concerned citizens had begun to meet in Somerville to discuss ways to combat a variety of problems and more effectively utilize funding. In the summer of 1998, the group invited the public to take part in these discussions, as part of a community-visioning project, called SomerVision. Pat Jehlen brought the message of New Urbanism to these meetings, and it created enough of a stir that a separate task force formed to think about ways to apply the lessons of New Urbanism to addressing Somerville’s problems.

The Mystic View Task Force formed in the summer of 1998 with the goal of creating a New Urbanist-style neighborhood in East Somerville. That they named themselves the “Mystic View” Task Force instead of the “Assembly Square” task force is emblematic of just how far their vision departed from the reality and perceptions of the place at the time. The Mall at Assembly Square, contrary to the name, was not a mall built in a

---

neighborhood called Assembly Square, but in fact named for the old Ford plant which had once occupied the same spot. The neighborhood which was later envisioned by the MVTF and others was named after the mall, and not the other way around. The “new way” of thought Shelton wrote about was to think of the mall as belonging to neighborhood, one which happened to be as of yet unbuilt.

To demonstrate the degree to which the idea of “smart growth” caught hold during the years that Assembly Square was most hotly contested, consider the following: Between 1993, when the first Congress for New Urbanism was called with 100 members in the audience, to 1997 when the mall revitalization plan was called, the term “New Urbanism” appeared in major Northeastern newspapers 84 times. The term “smart growth” appeared only 24 times. “Transit-oriented development” appeared only once.\textsuperscript{8} Over the next five years, years in which the battle over Assembly Square would be fiercely contested, “transit oriented development” appears 35 times, “New Urbanism” 341, and “smart growth” too many to count.\textsuperscript{9} In sum, the debate over land use and appropriate methods and patterns of development and urban growth became a salient issue with the general public at the same time that developers were prepared to go ahead with what would have otherwise been considered a rather routine redevelopment effort. The story of the growing salience of “new urbanism” and “smart growth” at the national, regional, and local level is part of what turned a mall into a neighborhood in the public eye, what turned the Assembly Square Mall into a mall built in Assembly Square.

\textsuperscript{8} Based on Lexis-Nexis searches of Northeast News Sources for each of the terms “New Urbanism”, “Smart growth, and “transit oriented development” in the full text of any article between 1/1/1993 and 12/31/1997.

\textsuperscript{9} Literally—the search for “smart growth” in the electronic depository for all major Northeastern regional newspapers, Lexis-Nexis, returns an error message saying more than 1,000 documents have been found to match the term “smart growth,” and that it is too many to count.
An excellent test case

The concerned citizens of Somerville in the MVTF chose to focus their efforts on Assembly Square because it promised to showcase how their newfound planning tools could be used to solve a myriad of urban problems. The Assembly Square Mall was not just the largest parcel facing redevelopment in Somerville, it was the largest such parcel in the entire Boston area. Furthermore, Assembly Square lent itself to New Urbanism because many of the most common obstacles to creating New Urbanist developments were absent, and the most coveted advantages—waterfront, potential transit access, infill site, water and sewer—were present.

Setting the stage for a fight

While the Mystic View Task Force was contemplating alternative visions of Assembly Square with the City, developers continued to move ahead with their immediate plans. As of July of 1999, the Assembly Square Limited Partnership (ASLP) had not found a way to retenant the mall in its current form. Instead, they proposed razing the mall and rebuilding it in order to accommodate ten big box stores, the previously mentioned category killers. In common parlance, what ASLP proposed was a strip mall, unequivocally classifiable as sprawl.

Dorothy Kelly Gay was elected mayor four days before the Mystic View Task Force held its first public meeting to discuss the future of the newly conceived neighborhood of Assembly Square. Kelly Gay been elected at least partly on the strength of her “smart growth” stance. Shortly after entering office, she demonstrated her seriousness of purpose
by blocking the permits requested for the newest version of the ASLP plan.

By July 1999, a full-scale political campaign was on. In August, the Mystic View Task Force (MVTF) organized to develop and advocate for an alternate vision for the Assembly Square site, which it then called Mystic View in a nod to the feeling that the waterfront view was an important amenity. Its self-proclaimed mission is “to enforce existing zoning and environmental legislation in order to protect the environment and community, and to gather the necessary and related environmental and scientific information needed to perform this task.”\(^{10}\)

At this point, the Assembly Square project morphed from a plan to revitalize what is essentially a suburban-style mall, completely separate from the urban fabric of the rest of Somerville, into a battle to determine the fate of a new neighborhood. Perhaps the name itself, in a city where every neighborhood is a defined by a square, helped to booster the illusion that Assembly Square is a neighborhood already.

\(^{10}\) Mystic View Website, (www.mysticview.org)
Chapter 3. Working with the Developers

IKEA, the cult-inspiring Swedish home furnishings retailer, purchased the lot adjacent to the Assembly Square Mall in September of 1999. The company hoped to open their first New England branch of international chain store in Somerville in summer 2001. However, as "just the sort of large, retail, car-oriented establishment many city officials and residents want to keep out of Assembly Square,"11 the path to development would not prove to be so clear. MVTF vigorously disapproved of the plan, claiming that big-box retail engendered too much traffic for too little tax revenue, and offered only low-paying, dead end employment opportunities. Mayor Kelly Gay called for a roundtable discussion in October 1999. Present were the 15 East Somerville property owners included in the Assembly Square study area, including representatives from IKEA and ASLP, members of the business community and MVTF, and Somerville city officials. During the meeting, the Mayor called for developers to wait for the results of the comprehensive plan—which had been recently commissioned from the Boston-based Cecil Group—before resubmitting plans for review. Developers, however, were eager to begin construction, and soon submitted revised plans anyway.

ASLP proposed a plan to leave 8 acres of their parcel undeveloped, pending the results of a new comprehensive plan for the area. They hoped to begin to see a little return on their investment with the immediate construction of a new, freestanding McDonald’s and an expanded Home Depot (one already existed on an adjacent parcel). IKEA proposed to build a 280,000 square-foot store, which like all IKEA’s would include a daycare and

11 Fishman, Sarah. “Somerville mayor urges time-out on mall, and all parties agree” The Boston Globe. September 19, 1999, CITY WEEKLY; Pg. 1
food court. Both requests were presented to a very underwhelmed public, and Mayor Kelly Gay sent both developers back to the drawing boards.

Six months later, the Cecil Group master plan was released. The plan used the Back Bay and Post Office Square in Boston as examples of mixed-used development with open space as the kind of place that could be built on the whole of Assembly Square. Notably, the plan also endorsed the construction of big-box retail as compatible with housing and office use, as long as it was “sensitive” to “context.” To the dismay of MVTF activists, the plan specifically included both the IKEA and the Home Depot expansion projects. Another important highlight of the plan was that it called for an Orange Line stop between two existing stops at the edge of the Assembly Square Mall site, to be the center of the new neighborhood. The Orange Line and the commuter rail tracks already ran through the site, but neither stopped there. In the months (and years) to come, the Orange Line stop would be described as key to “unlocking the potential” of the site on numerous occasions.

MVTF proponents continued to argue that any plan that included any big-box retail would prevent the realization of Assembly Square as a new neighborhood. The low density of development, as well as the nature of goods sold in the stores proposed, would prevent the practicality of serving the area by mass transit. Without a T stop, the site would have to be developed to accommodate a large number of cars, and the result would inevitably classify as sprawl. However, in May 2000 when the group asked an MIT urban planning studio to weigh in, the students also found that big-box retail could play some role in Assembly Square’s future.
Under public pressure and eager to reach an agreement, both developers proposed increasingly elaborate plans for mixed-used developments at Assembly Square. The Assembly Square Limited Partnership eventually proposed a mixed-use development, including a new, expanded Home Depot adjacent to the existing K-Mart, a hotel, an office building, a waterfront park, a parking garage, and surface parking for 1,100 cars. The plan also included money to perform a feasibility study to build an additional Orange Line stop at the site. Satisfied with the scope of the project, and perhaps encouraged by the results of both the student-led and the professional planning studies, Kelly Gay signed the deal in November 2000.

By the time the City finally reaches an agreement with IKEA, the furniture giant had agreed to build a 250,000 sq. ft. store, 27,000 sq. ft. of additional retail space, 200,000 sq. ft. of office space, 20,000 sq. ft of restaurant and an underground garage. The plan also called for amenities including 5 acres open space and an apple orchard, totaling to $3.4 million in community benefits and municipal improvements, not including future tax benefits to the city. To have convinced IKEA that it was in their best interest to invest in this massive project is especially impressive because IKEA is not a real estate development firm—they only develop their own stores because their layout is part of their marketing strategy.

MVTF responded to both approvals with lawsuits. Wig Zamore, MVTF’s spokesman, maintained that IKEA would generate too much traffic. Their continued hope was that IKEA would subsidize shipping so that customers can come and buy furniture on the
proposed nearby T-stop, since “people don't usually go shopping for a couch or 
Sheetrock on the Orange Line.”

---

12 Doug Foy quoted in: Healy, Patrick. “Assembly Square Plan Clears a Legal Hurdle,” 
Chapter 4. Some Inconsistencies in the Rhetoric

When asked why he continued to fight for his project in the face of such prolonged opposition, Peter Merrigan, the developer for Taurus New England, said, “This is really city-building as opposed to a real-estate development.”  

The stakes for this project assumed epic proportions because both developers and their opponents saw in this project not just another real estate venture, but a chance to shape the future of Somerville for the next generation. By 2001, the conflict over development proposals at the Mall at Assembly Square had morphed into a battle for the “heart of the city.”

At several points in the conflict, city officials, MVTF members and developers entered into mediation with the Consensus Building Institute (CBI) in an attempt to resolve the dispute without lawsuits. However, each time mediation was unsuccessful. What is most striking about CBI’s report about the conflict is that the mediators found that most parties agreed on what the site should look like. Ultimately, there was not a dramatically dissimilar vision about what should be done with Assembly Square. Instead, the report concluded that “even though there appears to be general agreement on the long-term vision for Assembly Square, there are substantial gaps in the parties’ beliefs and expectations with regard to the best way of meeting short-term needs in a way that will move toward the long-term vision.”

Luana Evarts, a resident of the Ten Hills neighborhood adjacent to the development site,

---

14 CBI Report
filed suit against the Somerville planning board in January of 2001, alleging that noise, pollution, and traffic would diminish her quality of life and property value and that the city had improperly issues a permit to ASLP without due process. Luana Evarts was not an abutter to the property (an abutter is presumed by law to have standing to sue for breach of zoning), so her claim to have standing rests on a specific claim that traffic from the mall would prevent her from being able to get from her house to I-93, which she takes to commute.

Evidence that quality of life was not really the issue

Evarts refused a $2 million settlement offer from the developers, even though her lawyers claimed that her principle complaint was that she would have difficulty merging onto I-93 if the development proceeded as planned. Presumably, if her real intention was to further her immediate self-interest, the potential increase in traffic would be more than offset by the generous settlement offer. However, this is not how Evarts evidently saw things. The settlement, she said, would be analogous to accepting a bribe. As if the fate of Somerville depended on her integrity, she said, “My conscience would bother me if I took $2 million and let an unlawful development proceed. Getting this development right is very important to me.”15 While commendable for her principles, the fact the Ms. Evarts would choose to forfeit $2 million dollars that would go exclusively to her is indicative of the sense that much larger issues were at stake: Evarts filed suit on the grounds that the mall would impede her quality of life, but surely not more than $2 million would improve it. “At heart, her case is a battle over who decides what becomes of city land: citizens, government or business.”16 Practical issues at Assembly Square were subsumed by an

---

15 Grillo, Thomas. “Activist rejects $2M to end suit” Boston Globe. 10/30/2002 pg. C1
16 Smith, Daniel B. “A very long assembly.” Boston Globe. 5/12/2002 CITY WEEKLY, pg 10
ideological battle, making stakeholders unwilling to compromise.

**Class Issues**

Neighborhoods lionized in New Urbanism as most deserving of replication (Georgetown in Washington, D.C., and the Back Bay here in Boston) are more often than not among the least affordable neighborhoods in the cities they grace. This would seem to indicate that Smart Growth, and in particular New Urbanism, is marketed to the rich, or at least to the upper middle class.

One thing that comes up several times throughout the story of Assembly Square is the feeling that there is a class bias in the attitude that the best thing for the city will be a research or office park with attendant high end housing and retail. Assembly Square, outside the mall, was home to several successful businesses which would have trouble finding new locations elsewhere in the region, let alone the city, because they are land intensive and make for obtrusive neighbors. A brick factory, a taxi company, and Central Steel (a steel warehouse and distributing center) were among the non-retail functions still in operation in the planning area as defined in the 2000 Assembly Square Planning Study. The plan to build a new Orange Line stop to service the new neighborhood included the presumption that all three businesses would be taken though eminent domain and removed. As an historically working class city, with a track record of lamenting the loss of industry, it seems curious that the City should be behind getting rid of some of the last industrial uses in an industrial area.

Tellingly, one MVTF-supporter is quoted in his reason for not backing pro-development

---

mayoral candidate Joe Curtatone as saying, “Curtatone will take Somerville back to an era decades before most of us ever thought of living here.” Somerville was once a manufacturing city, populated by blue-collar workers in densely built row houses and triple-deckers. When the Red Line was extended to reach Davis Square in Somerville at the same time that housing prices skyrocket in Boston and Cambridge, it became feasible for professionals to move across the border in search of cheaper housing still within commuting distance of higher-end jobs outside of Somerville. The “us” Joe Beckman refers to in his quote is presumably those upper-middle-class migrants who crossed the border starting in large numbers in the 1980’s. Thus, in one interpretation, Curtatone is being accused of trying to reconnect the city to its working class routes.

The *Boston Herald* also highlighted class struggle inherent in the debate over the fate of Assembly Square with the headline, “Class Warfare in Somerville,” in an article which chronicles the ousting of Dorothy Kelly Gay as mayor amid discontent at her lack of progress in moving the Assembly Square projects forward. The assumption of this piece is that the anti-development faction is representative of the upper-middle class, while lower-middle-class Somerville residents would more likely prefer to see development of discount good purveyors go through unimpeded. An urban village of the type advocated for by the MVTF would likely become home and shopping center to upscale clientele. There is also the assumption that there are distinct class-based notions of what the “good city” is: one being something that looks like the Back Bay or Beacon Hill, another that looks more like Levittown, or is at least more affordable.

---

18 Macero Jr., Cosmo “COSMO’S WORLD; Small biz money safe bet for Travaglini” *The Boston Herald*, November 2, 2003, Pg. 027
19 Macero Jr., Cosmo “COSMO’S WORLD; Small biz money safe bet for Travaglini” *The Boston Herald*, November 2, 2003, Pg. 027
For example of the class-based version of good development, take then-mayoral candidate Lafuente’s comment, “The biggest problem now is that no one wants to live or work in an area looking down at two giant box stores.” Is, or was, it really true that no one wants to live near big box development? What if it were cheap and convenient?

While it is reasonable to assume that most people would certainly prefer to live near a park than a parking lot, all things being equal, it is rarely the case that such a choice, where all things are equal, is available. Especially when one’s means are limited, choosing an inexpensive apartment near the city and a strip mall or an expensive home with a better view, many might choose to suffer a dismal view and a harsh morning commute. Especially in a climate of a housing crisis, then to achieve one of the admirable goals of smart growth – housing choice – one should in fact build near a strip mall.

Furthermore, if it were true that no market for such housing exists then the likelihood of a developer risking millions of dollars on building it seems remote. The question then, is who makes up such a housing market? The answer is not likely to be urban professionals of considerable means.

The rhetoric of New Urbanism is that smart planning benefits everyone, which is part of its appeal. However, in Somerville, the development scheme advocated by New Urbanists was appealing to only one segment of the population. Smart Growth and its associated increased land values serve to benefit and protect current residents to the exclusion of newcomers, home-owners to the exclusion of renters, and those who can afford to pay higher taxes associated with increased land values to the exclusion of those who must find cheaper accommodations elsewhere. In other words, what the supporters
of MVTF, and what supporters of smart growth in general often fail to take into account, is that there is a high cost associated with smart growth, and it is not one that is equally borne. The New Urbanist scheme therefore ultimately lacked enough popular appeal to generate the political will necessary to overcome the political and bureaucratic barriers to deviating from standard development practice.
Chapter 5. The Difficulties of Duplicating the Back Bay

...there's a simple reason few traditional downtowns have been built in America since World War II: In effect, Main Street has been outlawed.  

Mitt Romney was elected Governor of Massachusetts in 2002, partially on the strength of his pledge to fight sprawl across the state. He appointed ex-Conservation Law Foundation lawyer Doug Foy to be the State Secretary of the Office of Commonwealth Development (colloquially known as the development czar). Foy was and is well known for his strong stance on environmental issues, which extends to a strong stance in favor of smart growth. Hoping she would “shape the broader anti sprawl agenda,” Foy tapped RISD professor and MVTF member Anne Tate (ironically the person who inspired the MVTF to subscribe to New Urbanist views, and was therefore indirectly responsible for creating the political morass she was now charged with handling) to consult with the State on what should be done to help Governor Romney follow through on his campaign promises to deliver smart growth to Massachusetts. The other projects with which Assembly Square began to be lumped, Telecom City in Malden, North Point in Cambridge, and more occasionally Fan Pier in South Boston—all waterfront projects with substantial existing infrastructure—all stalled because of local opposition and/or permitting delays. Tate was meant to get the ball rolling on all of these projects in order to accommodate Massachusetts growth in a “sustainable” way.

Tate favored dense, Back Bay-style development for Assembly Square, and was a

believer in New Urbanism. However, her involvement at the state level irked Somerville residents because 1) she was a member of MVTF and 2) her well-known views on the potential to create a New Urbanist development at Assembly Square and other large parcels near Boston were viewed by many (including the author) as unrealistic.

In fact the opposition to Anne Tate's vision meshes well with the observation of Kunstler, that traditional Main Streets have been outlawed in most communities, and Somerville is not an exception. From street widths to parking ratios, FAR to alleyways, nearly everything about the urban design of either Beacon Hill or the Back Bay is outlawed by fire and zoning codes. To recreate either neighborhood would require a massive overhaul of building and zoning codes. Many New Urbanists argue that fire codes are overly stringent, and that the risk of fire should be weighed against the risk of harm due to all factors (i.e., increased traffic accidents from having to drive farther), but the fact remains that it is no simple matter in practice to overturn the entirety of zoning and especially fire codes for any reason.

Also striking in the different circumstances surrounding development of those older neighborhoods and any new one is the very different role the local and state governments played in the development process. Both Beacon Hill and the Back Bay were explicitly built for Boston's wealthier, more established residents. In Back Bay, the city even went so far as to give discounts on land prices to the "right sort" of people. No one will dispute that these neighborhoods are among the nicest in the city, but the sort of blatant


class preference and assumptions about who those neighborhoods were and are for do not seem appropriate for priority in Somerville ten years ago, or today. Of course, arguments can be made that attracting upper income people and high valued property back to the city will increase the city’s tax base.

One way to ensure a more traditional layout for new development would be to follow a more traditional planning process. Low-rise residential development is not the most profitable development option for developers today; however, the Back Bay was built by a large number of small developers, building no more than a few parcels each. The land was restricted to housing with specific requirements for masonry, setbacks, a unified cornice line, but not architectural style. J. Charles Swift pointed out that developers would be more inclined to build office and retail under today’s development climate, or at least high rise housing, but if parcels were limited to 20 ft. by 100 ft., roughly the size a large row house with yards sized like those in the Back Bay, then either small retail and office spaces of the sort favored by smart growth advocates or housing would be more palatable to developers.

At Assembly Square, the land which had been the mall had been assembled into a large parcel since its first use as an assembly plant. By the time Assembly Square began to be described as a neighborhood, more than half of the 45 acres was still concentrated in a single 26-acre parcel, and 92% of the total land area was in parcels more than 1 acre in

size.\textsuperscript{26} The parcelization of the site did not lend itself to development by multiple parties. Unless the Assembly Square Limited Partnership could be convinced that the best return on their investment could be got from re-parcelizing their land and selling to multiple developers, this would have been an unlikely scenario.

In addition to smaller parcel sizes, another important difference in traditional city planning is that the City laid out the street network before developers built in those neighborhoods. One of the central theories of New Urbanism is that a thoroughly connected street network is more walkable, reduces the incidence of traffic backups, and is more efficient. However, it is a truism in development that the less access the public has to your site, the more profitable your project will be. Therefore, putting developers in charge of street layouts naturally puts their incentives at odds with the fulfilling the best public purposes of the roads. Developers want to build as few entries and exits to their site as possible, and in general in suburbia like to maximize the number of units on cul-de-sacs. Cul-de-sacs are anathema to smart growth as wasteful (they require one-third more land for streets),\textsuperscript{27} disorienting, and bad for walking on, and put more space between homes and destinations, but they are desirable to developers because homes built on a cul-de-sac typically sell for approximately one-third more than those built on through streets. People like to be able to take the most direct route to where they want to go, but not to have anyone else be able to take the most direct route if it goes on front of their home.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{26} The Cecil Group. \textit{Assembly Square Planning Study}. October, 2000. p. 6
Is design really the issue anyway?

Also in question is whether it is ultimately the design that is responsible for the success of failure of a neighborhood. Do these traditional neighborhoods survive because they have superior architecture and urban design, or because they have continued to be maintained by and for people of substantial means? The urban design and architecture of Beacon Hill is not substantively different from that in many of the poorest neighborhoods in Philadelphia or Baltimore, where burnt out Victorian row houses have been a feature of the landscape for decades (and are only recently experiencing a rebirth as both cities undergo a slow renaissance). This is all to say that those who associate the rise of sprawl as an architectural or urbanistic phenomenon with anything as grandiose as the “decline of the American Dream” do so at the risk of conflating design with a host of cultural, economic, historical, and political forces which may be responsible for the condition of a place at any given time.

However, to the extent that there is any validity in the claims of environmental determinists, it must be at the aggregate level. It is not one auto-centric project that clogs the highways, but hundreds. Regional issues are the result of the aggregate of local problems. No single project determines the fate of the region. While I interpret this to mean that compromise is acceptable, because many good projects are better than a few excellent ones, others seem to have interpreted this to mean that every project is practically a matter of life and death. In other words, if no project is enough to save the city, then every project is of critical importance.
Chapter 6. Everybody gets their way... sort of.

As the controversy raged on, the old mall quietly deteriorated. Eventually, with only K-Mart remaining, the main structure of the mall was boarded up. In 2002, the Assembly Square mall was featured in a *Boston Globe* article about creative responses to homelessness, because 25 people had taken up permanent residence in the abandoned mall’s parking lot. The settlers were well enough rooted to the spot to have invested in generators, water heaters, and even television sets. With little tax revenue generated from the site and the city facing the worst fiscal crisis in years, many people felt that the fighting had gone on long enough, and that it was time to build—anything—at Assembly Square.

State support for the project dwindled because no clear resolution was reached. It was politically expedient for Romney to attempt to solve a problem that appeared to be much in the minds of his constituents, but not to embroil himself in a situation with no clear solution and no defined exit strategy. Support from the MBTA also lost steam in the face of continued fighting. While seemingly at one time open to the idea of supporting a new Orange Line stop at the site of the abandoned mall, Doug Foy said that the T cannot front-end the development effort at Assembly Square. Fred Salvucci compared the site to Alewife, claiming that a failure to effectively plan resulted in the disjointed development that occurred there in place of truly transit-oriented development.

---

The City government, too, lost patience with advocates’ demands amidst worsening conditions at the mall and a continuing fiscal crisis and budget cuts from the state and federal government. Mayor Kelly Gay, previously cordial to and supportive of MVTF, began to release statements that she was fed up with their delaying tactics, especially the lawsuits preventing construction from going forward. Said a spokesman, “The city demanded a lot of Ikea, and there was a great deal of work done with them and the community. Ikea spent 3 1/2 years and millions of dollars jumping through hoops, and we felt this project was a good opportunity, given the amount of negotiations. But Mystic View has shown that they are not capable of compromise.”

In 2002, Somerville conducted an opinion poll in which two-thirds of residents responded that they favored immediate development at Assembly Square, but development was a long way off. In September of 2003, Somerville residents found a chance to voice their discontent with the state of affairs through the ballot box. Statewide, many incumbents had difficulty holding on to their seats in 2003 because a widespread fiscal crisis had resulted in a reduction of city services. Many in Somerville blamed Kelly Gay for the firing of a number of police and firemen and a perceived general decline in city services and morale. “It’s Slumerville again,” said one resident, who voted against Kelly Gay in the primary. However, the preeminent issue in the election was Assembly Square, and Kelly Gay was ousted in the primary for not being able to resolve the dispute between MVTF and developers.

---

31 Grillo, Thomas. “Somerville community group sues to block IKEA.” Boston Globe. 3/18/2003. C1
33 Ibid.
The final election was decided between Alderman Joe Curtatone and businessman and newcomer to politics Tony Lafuente. Both candidates argued in favor of a “smart growth” approach to development. “Over my dead body would there be a strip mall at Assembly Square,” declared Curtatone during his campaign. MVTF endorsed Lafuente, who said, “I want everything to be long-term. I don’t want any quick fix.” In a close race, Curtatone was elected mayor in November 2003. Despite his initial declarations against strip mall development, he took his victory to be a mandate. “The voters have spoken for change,” he said. “They want to get Somerville moving in the right direction.”

Natasha Perez, a spokeswoman for the developer, was especially prescient when she said, “What Mystic View doesn’t realize is how victorious they’ve already been: their activism stopped the site from becoming a strip mall. But at some point the win becomes the loss.” MVTF did improve the level of planning and the design for the proposed projects, but because they were never satisfied, the City, State, developers, and many members of the public lost patience, and effectively took MVTF out of the decision making process. In December, mayor-elect Curtatone proposed a zoning change that would “allow anyone to build just about anything at an existing building at Assembly Square without any review by the city or the public.” The proposal was specifically designed so as to prevent lawsuits from hindering development. Curtatone defended his amendment, arguing that the greater financial return for a mixed-use development would guarantee

developers would build something like the urban village envisioned by MVTF supporters. In fact, Curtatone’s amendment, more than 50 pages long, did not give developer’s complete reign. The amendment as passed supported the as-of-right construction of a mixed-use center with mid-scale retail, offices, and housing, but did not include a free pass for constructing large-scale retail, such as the new Home Depot proposed by the Assembly Square Limited Partnership in 1999. In light of the project’s exclusion, the ASLP withdrew its plan for Home Depot in early 2004; shortly thereafter, the ASLP sold all its holdings in Assembly Square to Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT), a national developer known for its “urban villages.”

The zoning amendment allowed construction to begin on a new 300,000 square feet shopping center, designed to support mid-scale big-box retail like Staples and T.J. Maxx. Under FRIT, the mall attained full occupancy in April 2006, nearly ten long years after the old Assembly Square Mall was first sold for redevelopment. IKEA maintains control over its adjacent parcel, and is currently under negotiation with FRIT to perform a land swap which would give the developer IKEA’s waterfront parcel in exchange for a piece of land with better highway access. As of this printing, Mayor Curtatone remains hopeful that the entire Assembly Square neighborhood will go forward soon, and that an Orange Line stop will still be built. Meanwhile, the MVTF continues to lobby against any big-box development. The future of Assembly Square remains to be seen.

Ultimately, the unwillingness of the Mystic View Task Force to compromise resulted in their being responsible for a worse outcome than if they had not advocated at all. The passion of the debate stems from the fact that the actors believed that the built
environment has a profound, deterministic effect on both the social and economic integrity of the city. Smart Growth and New Urbanist advocates in general follow a line of logic where even aesthetic considerations may have far-reaching consequences. For example, it is emphasized in the literature that aesthetic qualities have transportation implications, because an attractive environment is one in which people are more likely to walk than an ugly neighborhood. Transportation decisions, in turn, are seen as crucial to protecting the environment, maintaining social integration, promoting neighborliness, reducing street crime, and even contributing to public health outcomes (walking can reduce risk of heart disease). With all of these outcomes at stake, it is no wonder that advocates would be unwilling to compromise; however, the initial and immediate concerns wrought by the development, such as mitigating the impact of the expected increase in traffic and increasing the taxable value of the property, were not adequately addressed in the final incarnation of the project.
Conclusion

Despite almost 10 years of fighting, state support, and strong wills, the Mystic View Task Force failed to realize their vision of a mixed-use, planned neighborhood at Assembly Square. The struggle revealed underlying ideological differences and class-based tensions which divide approaches to development. The rhetoric of Smart Growth has broad appeal because it suggests that a common-sense approach to regulating the built environment will have positive outcomes concerning a wide range of issues, but the specific set of planning guidelines and practices which align themselves under the heading of Smart Growth have proven to be less universally accepted than the name suggests.

Practical concerns, such as parking, transportation, and employment opportunities, were subsumed in an ideological debate, causing actors to be unwilling to compromise. The ultimate development at Assembly Square was shaped more by a desire to sidestep the possibility of further debate, rather than by the consensus of what should be built there that grew out of the debate that had already taken place. At heart, the fight over the future of Assembly Square was about who should control land use decisions, and who defines the "good city." While neither of those questions can be definitively answered, in the case of Assembly Square, it seems clear that all actors have limited power to control the shape and direction of growth.

Finally, despite all the furor to the effect that "sprawl kills," there is little evidence to suggest that in fact the pattern of development which encourages urbanization (intense
use of land) over a broad areas, interconnected with a diverse system of infrastructure including (yes) highways is not in fact supportive of ever increasing incomes and choice for all people. The central tenant of ‘smart growth’ is that growth should happen in a logical way, but in practice, it is too often translated as “don’t build it here.” But if we assume that built it will be, then pushing development out of wherever developers would prefer to build can only increase the distance between urban centers and centers of growth—that is, smart growth advocacy not only at best serves only to push “sprawl” from one location to another, it actually serve to increase sprawl by tending to push development further and further outward. The difficulty of defining sprawl and of defining Smart Growth, rather than hindering efforts to advocate against sprawl and for Smart Growth, actually helps coalitions to form among people who agree that they are for Smart Growth and against sprawl, but don’t necessarily agree on anything else. 38

Part of the outcry over sprawl has to do not with any appreciable public ill but with change itself. Change inevitably exerts some growing pains. It is important to recognize that ‘smart growth’ is not a return to traditional urban patterns of settlement, and in fact is an entirely new theory of public life, real estate development, and what the city is used for. The consumer city, one in which individuals choose to live in an urban setting not because of job opportunity or higher wages but because of the variety of amenities that urban living affords, is very different from the industrial city, born out of the necessity of bringing together large numbers of people in close proximity for the purposes of production. Smart growth does not represent a return to this earlier socio-economic system, even if it looks to its artifacts for inspiration.

38 This idea is paraphrased from a sentence in Robert Bruegmann’s Sprawl: A compact history. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. p. 5
If, as I have suggested, the lesson of Assembly Square is that we cannot recreate traditional urban neighborhoods even under the best of circumstances, we should not lose heart. As Bruegmann notes, part of what has recently attracted the affluent back to urban cores and their urban-suburban simulacra are the very ways in which urban life and urban form have changed: a century ago a family of 7 may have occupied a room now more comfortably shared by a childless couple; zoning by use means that slaughterhouses and other noxious uses no longer stand side by side (or even underneath) apartment buildings; amenity filled high-rises have replaced the once common cold water flats; even the decrease in transit use means that finding a seat on the subway is easier than it used to be. In sum, a variety of new or improved services and amenities not available to generations past and the rise of the consumer city make for much more pleasant living.

Finally, if the ultimate goal of smart growth development is increase freedoms—the freedom to choose to walk, or take transit, freedom from air pollution, maybe freedom from unnecessary tax burdens—then it stands to reason that a development pattern that offers the most people their first choice in housing and in neighborhood is the best. If sprawl is the development pattern that emerges when people are free to make choices, then perhaps low-density, unplanned development is smart growth.
Bibliography


Consensus Building Institute, The. *Conflict Assessment; On the future on Assembly Square.* 8/25/2003


Environmental Protection Agency website. [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)


Fishman, Sarah. “Somerville is focus of debate; 140-acre area is ripe for development.” *Boston Globe.* 8/22/1999, CITY WEEKLY; pg. 1

Fishman, Sarah. “Somerville mayor urges time-out on mall, and all parties agree” *The Boston Globe.* September 19, 1999, CITY WEEKLY; pg. 1


Flint, Anthony. “Somerville test case for growth city in spotlight after IKEA deal.” *B.
Grillo, Thomas. “Activist rejects $2M to end suit” Boston Globe. 10/30/2002 pg. C1


Luana H. Evarts v. Planning Board of the City of Somerville et al. n1 11/25/2002


Macero Jr., Cosmo “COSMO’S WORLD; Small biz money safe bet for Travaglini” The Boston Herald, November 2, 2003, Pg. 027

Mystic View Website, (www.mysticview.org)


Ranalli, Ralph. “A big-picture guy; Somerville mayor works to change city’s image.” Boston Globe. 6/7/2004 METRO/REGION, B1


