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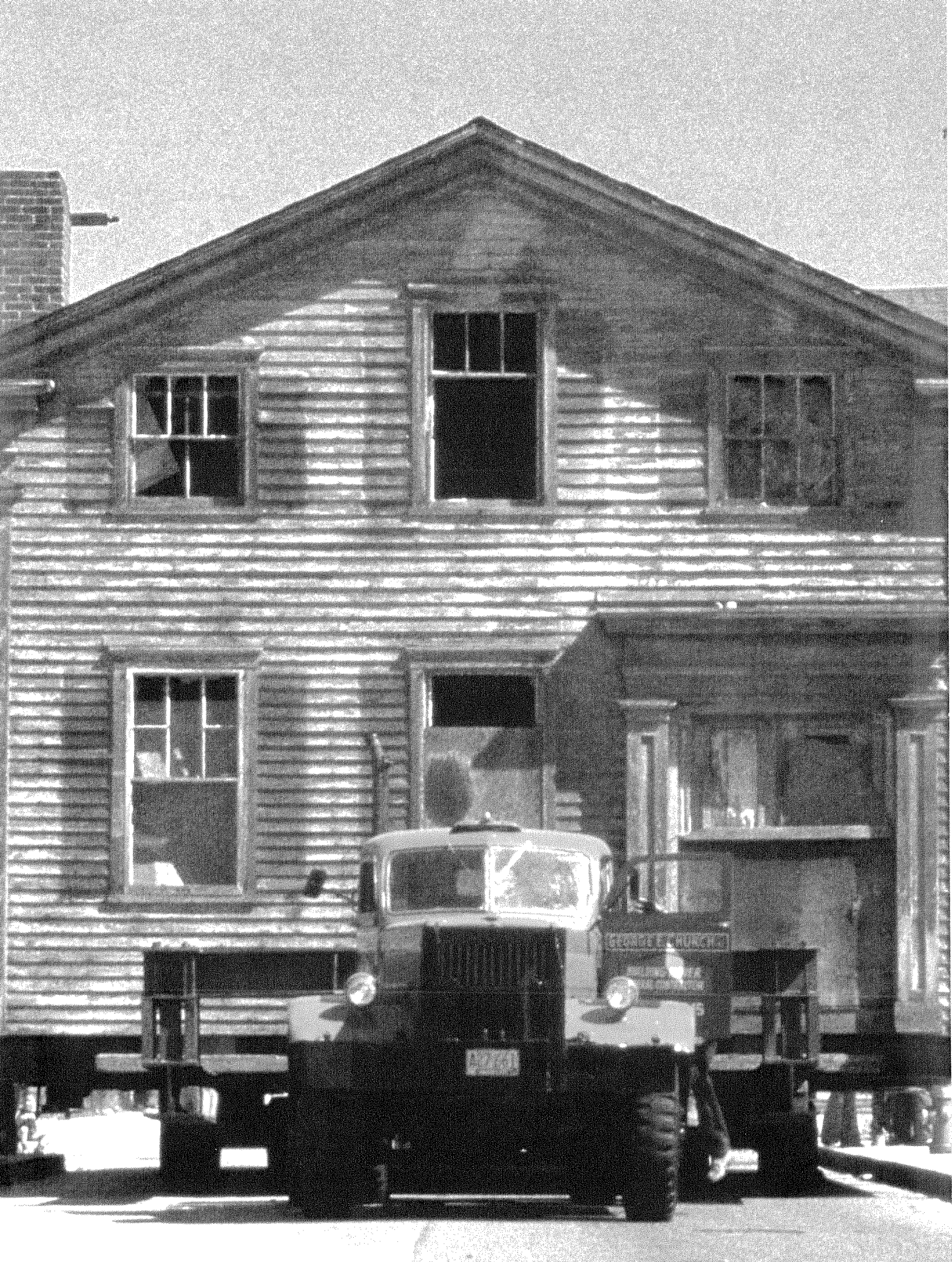
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The Specialty of Place

There is no question about the importance of places; they even rate their own journal. But are places so important that a person can specialize in them? Or, put another way, can a person create a profession — and a career — based on a single place?

This question was the subject of a thesis I submitted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1974 in pursuit of masters degrees in architecture and city planning. And it remains the subject of my professional life in my particular place — my city of New Bedford, Mass., a working-class, mostly Portuguese seaport of 100,000 people, the city in which I was born.

The longer I test the hypothesis that one can specialize in a place, the more important I think it is for the future of small cities. I remain worried, however, that the professions and the schools that are concerned with cities are not confronting this issue.

I knew the path I chose was not well travelled when my proposals were met by puzzled looks from my professors at MIT. I had enrolled in MIT's architecture program but soon realized that to understand my city I also needed an education in city planning. I proposed a joint program with a joint degree, but to my surprise this had never been done. To me, architecture and city planning intersected at my desire to shape and improve New Bedford. But this did not coincide with the traditional intersection, called "environmental design," so my teachers did not know what to do with me. Showing the toleration of eccentricity that makes MIT such a wonderful place, the

The following articles by John K. Bullard and Peter Clavelle are adapted from remarks they made at the Mayors Institute for City Design meeting held in Charleston, S.C., last October, in conjunction with the annual meeting of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The preparation of these articles was assisted by funding from the National Trust.



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For a place to survive, people must make a commitment to it.

This house in New Bedford, Mass., was scheduled for clearance under a redevelopment program. It was moved to a nearby lot and turned into an office and store.

Illustrations courtesy City of New Bedford.

faculty let me invent my own joint program, joint thesis and unusual career. I shall always be grateful to them for that.

I had two influences in my decision to specialize in a specific place. First my very strong attachment to New Bedford. In his provocative book *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky advised middle-class activists, “We must begin from where we are if we are to build power for change.” I feel a connection to New Bedford that is infinitely more powerful than that which I feel to any other place because it comes from my family, my history, my heart and my gut, not just from my head.

My second influence was the tendency of technological innovations to eliminate roots. As the design and planning professions become more specialized, and as long-distance communications and travel become so much easier, people have less of an imperative and fewer opportunities to put down roots. Professional schools are creating nothing but Paladins — “Have Gun, Will Travel.”

I wanted to stay in one place so that I could really learn how it worked and who made it work. To have meaning for me that place had to be New Bedford. In a city of this size, I realized, if the place were to be the constant in my career, then my profession would have to change from time to time. If I were to specialize in a place, I could not specialize in anything else.

My first efforts in New Bedford focused on a problem that was not the most difficult to solve (another suggestion of Alinsky’s) but still needed to be addressed: revitalizing the waterfront historic district. I developed a citizen-driven revitalization plan in my MIT thesis and then filled the job that the thesis had created, working with three non-profit community organizations for 11 years. Those three groups, with considerable support from city government, transformed the historic center of this world-famous whaling port from a dilapidated 15-block civic embarrassment into a thriving and successful area. The district simultaneously serves as the support base for the nation’s most productive fishing fleet and attracts visitors because its historic character has been preserved in a first-rate manner.

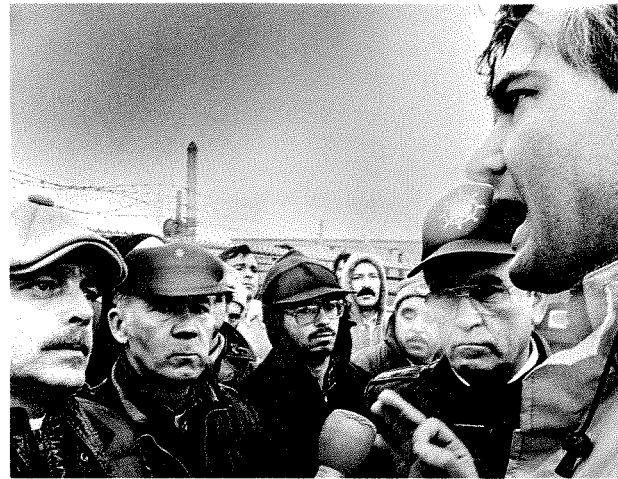
My task, both as a student and with the non-profit community organizations, was to elicit a vision for the waterfront — one shared by the people involved in this community and by city government. I spent a lot of time asking people, “What do you want to be?” Too often they responded by offering comparisons: “We want to be like Mystic” or “We want to be like Newport” or “We want to be like Nantucket or Boston.” It took deeper digging to find a vision that was rooted in New Bedford. The vision was to maintain the waterfront’s function as a working support system for our fleet,

yet recognize that it is a historic district, a national landmark.

If those of us who were working on the revitalization had a guidebook, it was Kevin Lynch's *What Time Is This Place?* We wanted New Bedford to possess many times, to show that history is a continuum. There is nothing artificial about this historic district. It is not fancy or self-conscious. Our people work in the historic buildings doing what they and their ancestors have done for more than two centuries: outfitting New Bedford's ships. This is the way all seaports should be, but places like this are now very rare.

Once people began to be conscious of this vision, my role was similar to that of a trolley conductor. I tried to keep everybody on board pointed more or less in the same direction and, as we built momentum, to make sure that city government and everyone else kept going in that same direction.

New Bedford has been a working seaport for two centuries. Preservation has meant conserving both its architectural heritage (opposite page and below) and making sure its commercial fishing operations continue to thrive. At right, Mayor Bullard talks with striking fishermen.



As the success of the district's revitalization gained attention (my thesis advisor had said it was impracticable and would not work!), people said to me, "You must be a preservationist. Where are you going after you finish with New Bedford?" Clearly my idea of specializing in a place was not in general currency!

Revitalization is something that never starts or ends; it is a continuing process. But when we had reached a certain level of success — having restored major buildings and establishing that our working waterfront could

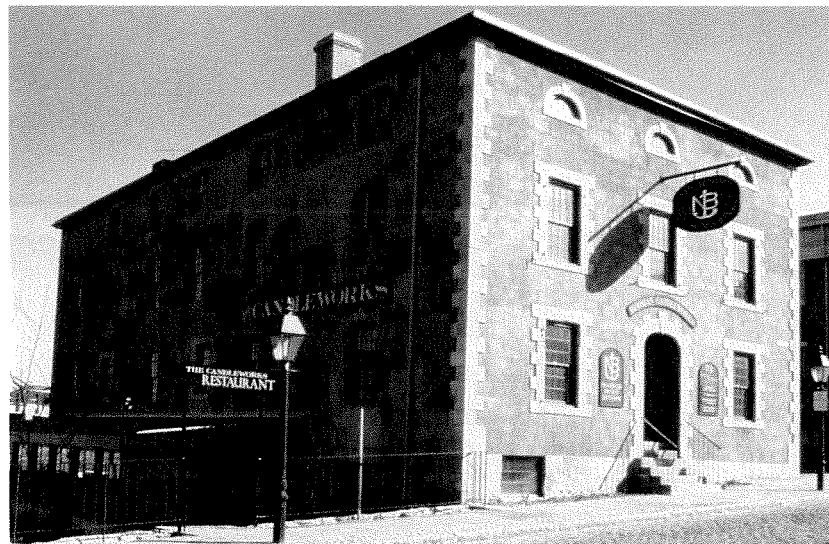
co-exist with historic preservation — it seemed that the time had come for me to move on. My "profession" as "preservationist" had to change, and it did. A good and popular mayor had retired to assume a judgeship, and people in the city said they wanted me to do for all of New Bedford what had happened in the historic district. So I became a "politician" and was elected Mayor of New Bedford in 1985. That a Yankee preservationist could be elected mayor of a city like New Bedford speaks volumes about our people's desire to recover the pride and attain the high standards that had once been intrinsic to our city.

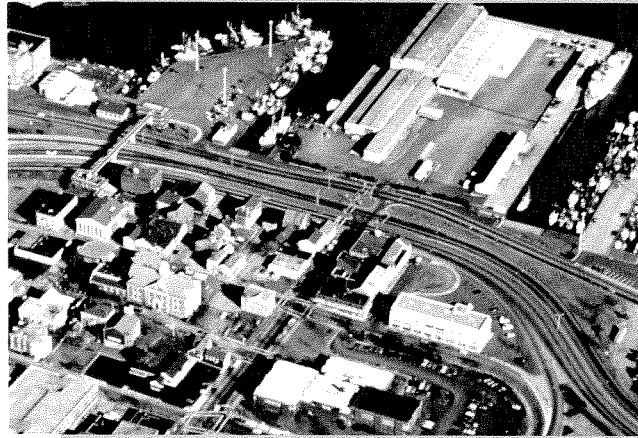
As mayor, the history about which I learn seems mostly to concern sewer lines, and the preservation in which I am involved is more about children's lives in an atmosphere clouded by drugs, violence, AIDS and economic hardship. But the lessons I learned as a preservationist in New Bedford are very useful as I work today in the world of politics. And the people with whom I developed good relations based on trust and performance are the same people with whom I work today.

My role, of course, is somewhat different. Being mayor is like being a



Neighborhood improvement works one building, one decision, at a time.





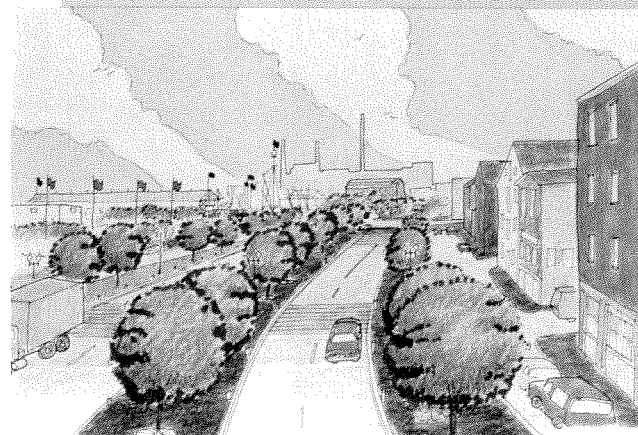
I have professional training as an architect, so even without having participated in the Mayors Institute on City Design I would tend to focus on the physical design aspects of a mayor's responsibilities.

But I do not think that any of us mayors believe we are experts in design any more than we think we are experts in education or drug treatment or sewage treatment or firefighting or any of our other responsibilities. We are students; we want to learn. The message of the Mayors Institute is that whether we want to or not, we will affect the physical legacy left to our citizens and their descendants. It is an important responsibility that we take seriously.

The case study problem that I brought to the Mayors Institute was how to connect downtown to the waterfront. New Bedford's waterfront is a working waterfront; three hundred fishing boats are still fitted out along the water's edge. It is unfortunate so many American waterfronts no longer fulfill their historic role, but in New Bedford, competition for space along the waterfront is very intense and, therefore, we place an emphasis on water-dependent as opposed to water-enhanced uses.

But New Bedford has made some of the same

New Bedford's historic seaport has been cut off from downtown by a six-lane surface highway. The city is trying to tame the traffic and create stronger pedestrian links.



mistakes other cities have made. In a period when fishing was in decline and people thought waterfront property was not very valuable, we built a highway along the water's edge, separating the working waterfront from the waterfront historic district and our central business district. The waterfront is the source of our history, the source of our character, but we are cut off from it by that highway.

We are now planning a heritage park and want to reconnect the historic downtown to the waterfront. But how?

We talked about eliminating the highway, but this approach would have presented difficulties for the industrial areas south of the city that need access to a highway. We talked about burying the highway, but this approach would have been expensive, and if people do not like to admit mistakes when it is cheap to correct them, they really do not like to admit mistakes when it is expensive to correct them.

We talked about leaving the highway at grade and adding intersections in five or six places; Mayors Institute advisors counselled against major changes like these because they can create upheaval and cost a lot of money.

So we are planning less elaborate changes that are

more practical and will provide a better result. We are keeping the highway at grade but turning it into an ordinary street with ordinary dimensions — narrower traffic lanes, no shoulder and much wider sidewalks. We are adding a single intersection with traffic signals.

These changes will slow the traffic and shift the balance between automobile and pedestrian toward the pedestrian. People will no longer feel they are taking their lives in their hands to cross the thoroughfare. This solution need not be costly, yet it will return the street to the scale to which we are all accustomed.

— *John K. Bullard*

shock absorber. Everyone else is allowed to fly off the handle. The mayor absorbs all the shocks and keeps the ride smooth. But if I felt as if I were conducting a trolley before, now I am like the captain of a ship. I have to move the ship forward, but care for and protect the welfare of the passengers and the crew while I am at it. The ship is big and slow to turn, but it is an exhilarating ride.

People now ask me: "Oh, you're a politician! What are you going to do after you finish with New Bedford?" So the test of my hypothesis continues. I don't know how, or when, my profession will change again, but I know it will. There are all kinds of professions in which I could work towards my goal: making my city — New Bedford — a better place.

Although I am only 17 years and two different "professions" into this test, I can draw some conclusions that are important for others who might be considering similar paths.

First, there is no security in this approach. The feeling that I am on a career path occurs less frequently than the feeling that I am alone in the woods. There are no mentors, no examples. Long-range career planning seems impossible. There do not even seem to be followers who could lend an encouraging notion that this is a credible approach.

Second, the rewards of staying in one place and making it a career are immense. One sees every day the improvements for which one has been responsible. There is a connection to time, place and people that serves as an anchor in an uncertain world. I understand the meaning of my life.

Third, if small cities are to survive, and thrive, more people must chose this path. We do not really need any more architects or planners in Boston



Even after this building was nearly destroyed in an explosion, New Bedford preservationists fought to keep it standing and to rebuild it.

or San Francisco or even in Cambridge. But in New Bedford, Fall River, Lawrence, Chelsea, Brockton and the hundreds of other small and poor cities in America we are in desperate need. A single committed person willing to stay and become part of such a community is more important and has a greater positive impact than a hundred hired guns.

We need people to choose this path. Cities such as these can fail without causing the national concern that is expressed over the tribulations of Philadelphia, New York, or Detroit. They can vanish without a whimper, except, of course, from the people who live in them.

The question we ought to ask is not whether a person can make a career of a single place. People can, and it is imperative that they do so. The question should be: What are the professions and the schools doing to encourage young people to meet this need?