People often say that Portland, Maine’s Franklin Arterial is a challenge to cross. A four-lane, high-speed roadway that was once a simple urban cross street, cars now whip down the corridor at speeds of up to forty-five miles per hour. As an experiment, I tried crossing the arterial at various points. There are very few crosswalks, and I had to cross two lanes of traffic, descend and ascend the median, and cross two more lanes. The whole process was quite nerve-racking and exhausting. The arterial, and other development projects, are a point of contention for many Portlanders, and they represent a broader question about how the city should develop and who should be included in the development process.

My thesis explores the social and environmental history of Bayside, a small, urban neighborhood on the fringe of Portland’s downtown Old Port. Ever since Portland officials created Bayside out of earth and rubble, they have made changes to its physical landscape with little concern for what they were altering and with limited, if any, resident participation in the process. In so doing, they created both an environmentally- and socially-marginalized neighborhood. Thus, for its entire existence, Bayside has been either changed by non-residents or passed over completely, and was never worthy of deliberate planning that engaged the entire community.

In the mid-1800s, Bayside was created with earth from Munjoy Hill, and its first expansion came from rubble created by the 1866 fire. Thus, while areas destroyed by the fire were rebuilt in brick and stone, Bayside was expanded with dirt, an imbalance that set the stage for further inequalities. The city’s next stage of reshaping Bayside’s physical landscape came in the form of urban renewal, a government-led project that did not consider the input of Bayside residents. In 1970, at the conclusion of this process, Bayside was split into two sub-neighborhoods by an expanded Franklin Street and had a housing shortage; these problems were similar to the ones it faced before renewal.

In the late 1990s, the city attempted to reshape the neighborhood’s physical landscape once again. For the first time, the public challenged this New Vision for Bayside with their own visions for the neighborhood’s future. However, this newfound public consciousness was not homogenous, as not all of these residents agreed on what Bayside’s future should entail, and certain types of residents were left out of the process completely. For these reasons, middle-class, leisure-based interactions with nature became the norm in Bayside, even though the neighborhood contains some of the city’s poorest.

In order to avoid the mistakes of the past and make Bayside a site of deliberate planning efforts that engage the entire community, those who seek to change Bayside’s landscape today must acknowledge the neighborhood’s layered history and include residents of all types in their plans for the neighborhood’s future; because of Portland’s small nature and developing urban character, this is possible. Other cities could then follow Portland’s lead with regard to their own “Baysides,” or neighborhoods on fringes of downtowns, and this course of action will allow such neighborhoods to transcend the public perception that they are only home to undesirable people and industry.

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