

People's Tours: A social history of the South End



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Text and photos by Tim Devin, except for photo on next page by Kristin Parker. Walking tour researched and executed by People's Tours (Dave Taber, Heather McCann, Kristin Parker, Neil Horsky, and Tim Devin).

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People's Tours group: Heather McCann, Tim Devin, Neil Horsky, Dave Taber. Behind the camera: Kristin Parker. Photo by Kristin Parker.

In early 2012, a group of artists, activists and assorted other odd balls got together to form People's Tours. The idea was to give walking tours in the Boston area. Standard enough. But instead of the usual history, we would talk about social justice, contested spaces, important protests, and shady corporations.

A social history of the South End

On June 17th, 2012, we gave our first "Social history of the South End" walking tour. It was part of the Common Boston festival, which helped get us a nice crowd of people. Afterwards, we had a discussion about public space, activism, and research, which Artists in Context put together.



The plaza on the corner of Stuart and Dartmouth, where the new Copley Place development will be built.

The Copley Place development

The tour got going at 1:45 pm. Dave led us over from the starting place at Back Bay Station to Copley Place, where developers were planning on building a high rise. Locals weren't too happy about the plan, since the building would block a lot of the natural light that the surrounding buildings and plazas get. Dave told us about how these locals had been fighting against the project through a series of protests and sit-ins. Unfortunately, all of this action had no effect; after briefly stalling out in 2012, it looks like the development will be going through anyway.



The Tent City housing development, across from Back Bay Station on Dartmouth.

The Southwest Corridor & Tent City

Heather then led us over to the Southwest Corridor park, where she told us about the history of the adjacent Tent City housing development. In 1968, the city demolished a group of homes in order to make a parking lot. At the time, the Boston Redevelopment Authority didn't provide new homes for people who were forced to relocate due to development. This meant that hundreds of people were now without a place to live because the city wanted more parking. A number of community activists, including Mel King, established a tent city protest. Over the following three days, dozens of people camped out in the empty lot. This action called enough attention to the situation that the plan was scrapped. After a delay of 20 years, an affordable-housing development opened up on this site, and was named "Tent City" after this protest.



The Southwest Corridor park—part of a roughly 9-mile corridor of parks and railway lines.

Neil told us about the history of the Southwest Corridor park itself. In the middle of the 1900s, during the rush to build more intercity highways, a 9-mile-long corridor of residential buildings was demolished for a proposed highway. The community had fought the demolitions and lost, but finally managed to block the highway itself. The land was then used as a park, and a path for the Orange Line subway.



Harriet Tubman Square, at the corner of Columbus and Warren.

Harriet Tubman Square

Next on the tour was Harriet Tubman Square. Kristin told us that, inspired by Harriet Tubman, a local abolitionist named Julia Henson had created a settlement house for African American women nearby in the early 1900s. This house was part of a growing settlement house movement. Kristin also spoke about the area's small press publications, which helped spread minority viewpoints and alternative ideas. The section of the city was home to a number of such newspapers, such as *The Liberator* and *The Boston Guardian*, and was later home to the left-wing *South End Press*.



54 to 102 West Newton Street, the site of the Puerto Rican Rent Strike. In the 1960s, this entire block was owned by Ferdinand Arenella, a well-known South End slumlord.

Villa Victoria, the Emergency Tenants Council, & Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción

From there, we walked down the street to Villa Victoria, where Heather told us the history of that affordable housing development. In the late 60s, the area's Puerto Rican community was heavily engaged in making their section a better place to live – including a rent strike to protest poor living conditions, an attempt to force the city to remove a trash facility, and a fight against urban renewal. Banding together, they succeeded in getting the city to remove the dump and build the 435-unit Villa Victoria affordable housing development. A number of community and cultural organizations were born during this struggle, including the Emergency Tenants Council (ETC) and Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA) — organizations that are still an active force in the South End.

Rooming houses

Dave was up next, telling us about how the area's numerous rooming houses had provided affordable homes that drew African Americans, who needed housing near their jobs. These houses also provided a safe space for the burgeoning gay community. Both communities would have a lasting impact on the South End.



The corner of East Berkley and Tremont, where food riots took place.

Community improvements, community dilemmas

Next was my turn. I brought the group down Tremont. We discussed how many of the improvements that the community had fought for (parks, preservation of historic buildings) had led to astronomical increases in housing costs and the displacement of long-term residents. The rooming houses, which had provided affordable housing for so many for so long, were now million-dollar homes. As a group, we talked about ways to make your community a better place without losing your own home.

The Food Riots

At the corner of East Berkley and Tremont, Kristin told us about food riots that took place in 1917. After World War I, food prices rose dramatically. In New York, women began rioting; this soon spread to Boston, where women picketed in front of a nearby slaughterhouse, among other places. Protests and pressure from women's groups led to governmental inquiries into higher food prices, and an embargo on the export of food..



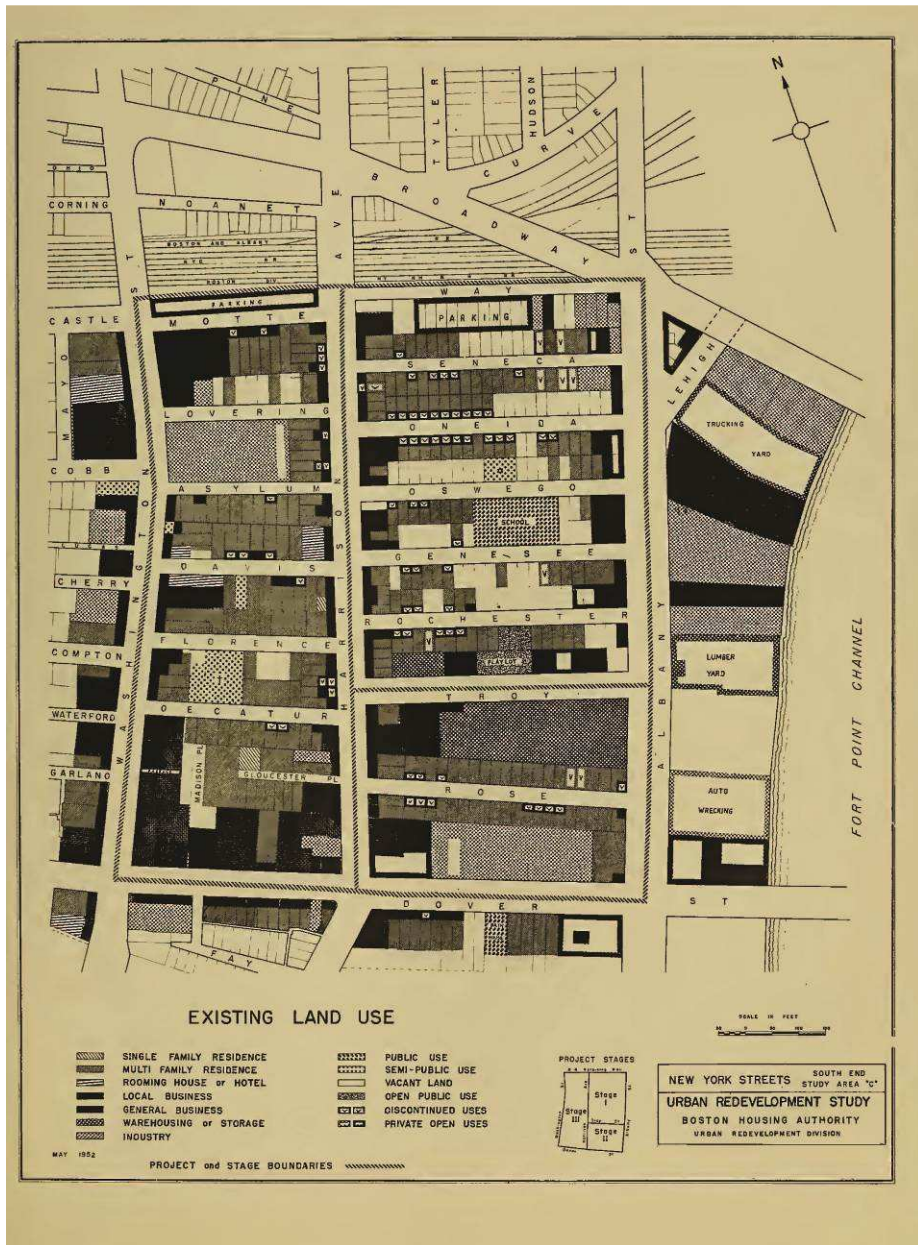
The Castle Square housing development, seen from the corner of East Berkley and Tremont.

New York Streets & Castle Square

I then talked about two adjacent neighborhoods that were leveled for redevelopment in the mid-1900s: New York Streets and Castle Square.

The first leveling a disaster, where thousands of people were displaced to make room for a plant for The Herald Traveler (as the Boston Herald was known at the time) since the Traveler was making noises about leaving the city of Boston. Interestingly enough, now that the Boston Herald has finally left town, the site has come full circle – almost. The city is backing a plan to build a high-end residential building on the now-empty plot.

The second redevelopment ended in a better way: the demolition still went through, but the buildings were replaced with a large affordable housing development, after considerable protests by residents.



Left: A page from the Boston Housing Authority's 1952 report, "The New York Streets Project," showing the streets and buildings to be demolished as part of the project. The report is a good example of the planning literature of the time period's mix of paternalism and undisguised concern for business development.



The empty lot at the corner of Columbus and East Berkley that was to be part of the Columbus Center. It is now, once again, being used as a staging area for nearby construction.

The Columbus Center

We then started heading back to Back Bay Station. Before the bridge over the Massachusetts Turnpike, I gave a short overview of the failed Columbus Center development. The community had fought against it, only to see the city give the developers a green light anyway. After a series of dirty dealings that were brought to light and financial set-backs, the development stalled out. Which was good for the neighborhood – except for the fact that the building site was never cleaned up by the developers. Residents then fought the city over this. This time, they won.

From there, we went back to the Corridor park, where we had a discussion about public space, activism, and research, which was put together by Artists in Context.

Here's to past & future successes

One of the things that made us interested in creating this tour was the fact that the South End has seen communities band together to protect themselves over and over again – and that this has happened even as the demographics of the community change.

Of course, part of what makes this story so dramatic is that so much has happened in such a compact area. But the fact is that these types of dramas happen all the time, everywhere: people band together with their neighbors to fight for something. They fight to keep their homes. They fight to have a dump relocated. Or to keep large developments or outside interests from coming in and changing what they love about their homes. They fight to turn blight into beauty, or to make the already-beautiful even better.

And these attempts succeed. Sometimes. When they do, it's often a larger success than anyone realizes at the time. Beyond achieving any immediate goals, the very act of organizing often lays the groundwork for successful, longstanding partnerships and community organizations that then go on to do even more good things for the community.

Of course, it's not always rainbows and puppy dogs. Popular attempts can fail sometimes, too. Or when they do succeed, the very success can create even larger problems – just look at how rents went up in the South End after the community fought the Southwest Corridor highway and got the city to build a park in its place.

But the important thing is to be aware of it all: all the past successes, and all the past failures. Without having seen what happened to the New York Streets, for instance, the residents of Castle Square would not have been able to do what they did. And that was what really drew Dave, Heather, Kristin, Neil and me to this subject. We wanted to remind ourselves, and everyone else who came to the tour, that individual action really can make a difference – and that your chances are a little better if you spend some time learning about the past.