

The Impulsive Traveler

Fun and funky on South Boston's shore

BY NANCY TREJOS

The cutout letters pasted to the window of a red brick building seemed highly ironic: Urban Renewal, they spelled.

I spotted the words as I was strolling through South Boston's Fort Point — once an industrial center near Boston Harbor, now a budding residential and commercial neighborhood that's wary of too much change coming too soon. Five years ago, as Boston began developing the 47-mile HarborWalk, a public walkway along the shoreline, the city was touting the Fort Point Channel as the "next great place." Then the recession hit, and developers scuttled plans for luxury condos and offices. And many longtime residents are just fine with that.

I can see why. So unique are the area's late 19th- and early 20th-century lofts and warehouses, that it would have been a shame to redevelop them hastily and haphazardly. Some of the buildings, originally designed as storage spaces for wool and other fabrics, house artists and their studios, giving the neighborhood a bohemian vibe.

That vibe was particularly strong at the Channel Cafe in the Artist Building on Summer Street, where I dined on my first night in town one recent weekend. With its high ceilings, mismatched furniture and wacky art, it felt more New York than Boston. After my meal, I toured an exhibit called "Exquisite What?," a collection of small, delicate metal sculptures enclosed in containers, by local artists Ian Henderson and Clint Fulkerson. Openings on each side of the containers beckoned visitors to touch the sculptures (plastic gloves are available). I couldn't figure out what the objects represented, so I let my imagination run wild. Was it a snail? A dragon? "This one looks like a crab or a lobster," I overheard a woman say to her friend.

The next day, I took in some more art at the volunteer-run Fort Point Arts Community Store, where you can buy local artists' works — paintings, photos, furniture, jewelry and more. Each piece of Don Eyles's "Supersymmetries" consisted of four panels that could be combined in 512 configurations. Who knew that art could be so much fun?

"I think we're really stabilizing as a community," said Lisa Greenfield, acting president of FPAC. "The store has really brought us together."

Art isn't the only attraction at Fort Point. The neighborhood is family-friendly, thanks to the Children's Museum, which underwent a multimillion-dollar renovation a few years ago. Outside the museum are tables and benches and a new park, where you can eat while admiring the channel. I did just that, grabbing a box lunch consisting of a mozzarella and tomato sandwich from Sportello, renowned chef Barbara Lynch's year-old contribution to the neighborhood. It was 70 degrees and sunny, and joggers, families and couples were out in force, bringing an energy with them that I couldn't help absorbing.

As I gazed out at the water and the relatively new Intercontinental Hotel, I



NANCY TREJOS/THE WASHINGTON POST

On a beautiful day, families flock to the picnic area outside the Children's Museum in Boston's Fort Point neighborhood.

wondered what the view had been like before the Big Dig, the years-long construction project that removed the old elevated Central Artery and replaced it with an underground highway.

"It's idyllic. It really is," Boston resident Rebecca Miller, who was sipping Dunkin' Donuts coffee at one of the tables, said of the Big Dig's results. "I love the tranquility of it."

Like Miller, I found it hard to pull myself from my perch by the water, but I had more exploring to do.

I stumbled upon the Boston Fire Museum, where Dan O'Neill, chairman of the Boston Fire Museum Committee, was more than happy to describe to me — and to all the kiddies running around — the evolution of firetrucks, some of which were parked in the former firehouse (including a 1792 Thayer hand tub.) O'Neill was obviously pleased to have such a large audience. "Ten years ago on a Saturday afternoon, there was hardly anyone down here," he said.

Continuing my tour, I spied a group of young girls standing in front of a warehouse. Curious, I went inside to find jewelry and clothing designers selling their creations at a discount while customers drank blue cocktails out of champagne flutes.

Browsing through Nehal Shah's whimsical T-shirts (one had "Recession-ista" printed on it), I asked him what he liked about Fort Point. "Over the last few years, it's come and gone and come back again," he said. "What it offers is a lot of space and character. As the city grows, this will be a cool spot."

The city is hoping that the new Institute of Contemporary Art building will up that coolness factor. I toured the museum in its three-year-old home on



LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST

the harbor, starting with the Roni Horn exhibit, which included "Pink Tons," a glass sculpture shaped like an enormous cube that benefited from the natural light streaming through the building's many windows.

Krzysztof Wodiczko's "Out of Here — The Veterans Project" was much darker. I entered a room with a projector beaming images of windows onto three walls. Outside those windows, you could see helicopters flying and black smoke from

explosions. Soldiers' voices competed with a call to prayer.

Feeling disoriented after that, I decided to decompress at Drink, another one of Barbara Lynch's additions to Fort Point. (The final installment, an upscale eatery named Menton, opened earlier this month.)

Drink is appropriately named, because all there really is to do there is drink. Well, drink and watch the bartenders make your drink. There's no cocktail list, which means that you have to have a conversation with the bartender to figure out what you'll get. Josie, the bartender during my visit, asked what kind of spirits I like. I told her I was partial to vodka, so she whipped up a concoction with vodka and apricot liqueur. It was refreshing; not too sweet but not too tart.

Drink is the type of place that can suck you in. But it would be unwise, I decided, to let that happen, so I headed back to my hotel, the relatively new Fairmont Battery Wharf. It hadn't seemed so far away on my morning jog, but after a couple of cocktails it seemed like a trek.

Recalling that I'd seen signs for a water taxi, I walked down to the pier and called one. What better way to enjoy the new and improved harbor? "I'll be there in seven minutes," said the person who responded at City Water Taxi.

Ron showed up promptly and thanked me for choosing his boat. There's lots of competition for customers, he told me, though it's not as fierce as it used to be. "It was war out here," he said.

The water taxis are at peace now, and so was I, enjoying the cool wind sweeping across my face.

trejosn@washpost.com

More Travel this week



Traveler listens to Spartanburg, S.C.'s story of reinvention, in *Travel*.

FRIDAY

Escapes rolls through a homegrown carriage museum in Blackstone, Va., in *Weekend*.

NEXT SUNDAY

The Impulsive

IF YOU GO

Want to take a spur-of-the-moment trip to Boston? Here's what you need to know for the weekend of April 23-25:

GETTING THERE

Southwest and JetBlue fly nonstop from BWI to Boston, with fares starting at \$174.

WHERE TO STAY

Hilton Boston Financial District

89 Broad St., 617-556-0006
www.hilton.com

Located in a 1920s art deco skyscraper. Rooms start at \$200.

Fairmont Battery Wharf

Three Battery Wharf, 617-994-9000

www.fairmont.com/batterywharf

Overlooking Boston Harbor. Rooms start at \$349.

WHERE TO EAT

Sportello

348 Congress St., 617-737-1234

www.sportelloboston.com

Boston chef Barbara Lynch's casual restaurant, with pastas such as polenta rustica starting at \$18 and entrees such as dayboat scallops at \$23. Drink, Lynch's bar, is in the basement.

Channel Cafe

300 Summer St., 617-426-0695

www.channel-cafe.com

Casual restaurant in a building with art galleries. Entrees such as chicken paillard start at \$17. Sandwiches and burgers from \$9.

Flour Bakery and Cafe

12 Farnsworth, 617-338-4333

www.flourbakery.com

Bakery serving breakfast and sandwiches such as roasted lamb with tomato chutney and goat cheese, starting at \$7.50.

WHAT TO DO

Institute of Contemporary Art

100 Northern Ave., 617-478-3100

www.icaboston.org

Contemporary art museum on the harbor. Open Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday and Friday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Admission \$15.

Boston Children's Museum

308 Congress St., 617-426-6500

www.bostonchildrensmuseum.org

Open daily 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Fridays 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Adults \$12, children and seniors \$9.

Boston Fire Museum

344 Congress St., 617-338-9700

www.bostonfiremuseum.com

In a former firehouse. Open Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Free, donations welcome.

INFORMATION

The Boston HarborWalk

www.bostonharborwalk.com

Greater Boston Convention and Visitors

Bureau of New England

www.bostonusa.com

— N.T.

All flight and lodging information valid as of press time Thursday.