Boston's new gilded age

December 20, 2019
The Boston Globe
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By any measure — from job and population growth to construction everywhere — Boston is having a moment. The crane may not emerge as our favorite urban bird, as wags said of China during its recent decades of unprecedented urbanization, but construction cranes are a steady, visible reminder that Boston, like much of urban America, is recovering from decades of disinvestment.

Boston is among a handful of cities, however, whose growth is producing existential threats. Recently ranked the most congested in the United States, our housing costs are rising faster than incomes, and wealth disparities are increasingly stark. The benefits of growth are distributed unevenly. Plus, as a coastal city, we're especially vulnerable to how global growth continues to distort the climate.

Boston's recent planning efforts have highlighted the problems we need to solve today. Yet, in conversations from board rooms to living rooms, there is an increasing sense that we're not capturing our momentum to make Boston work for everyone. Twenty years into our boom, we have no regional plan or dedicated funding stream for climate protection; we haven't marshaled the political will or resources to shift travel behavior away from cars; we struggle to maintain, much less expand, our transit system; and we're only chipping away at the density aversion that is among the greatest inhibitors to housing production. Most glaring, outside our "creative class" innovation clusters, is the steady rise of inequality of opportunity.

But these are not unprecedented challenges. As Mark Twain is believed to have said, history never repeats itself, but it often rhymes. Some have begun to refer to Boston's current growth spurt, not always with enthusiasm, as a new Gilded Age.

In the final decades of the 19th century and the first-or-so decade of the 20th, during what historians refer to as America's Gilded Age, American urbanization was at its furnace stage of growth. Industries tied to emerging technologies were expanding heatedly. Immigration from unprofitable farms and, more often, from across oceans was fueling explosive urbanization. Vast wealth was accumulating in the hands of the few — then labelled Robber Barons. Social and economic inequalities were drastically increasing as well.

But the first Gilded Age was also an age of wildly ambitious social planning, investment, and dreaming. Consider the outpouring of utopian literature and progressive activism — that era's Green New Deal. By one historian's account, some 160 utopian narratives were published between the late 1870s and 1900, as astonishing an amount of aspiration as produced during any era. These works envisioned futures of civility, cooperation, equality, and health — conditions becoming scarcer by the day on the swelling and sweltering streets of late-19th century urban America.

Other writers focused on political and managerial change as the path to improving urban conditions. Henry George, in "Progress and Poverty" and later in "The Menace of Privilege," implored America to move away from private land ownership and embrace land as a shared social good. Henry Demarest Lloyd steadfastly campaigned against industrial monopolies in "Wealth Against Commonwealth" and other publications. Helen Campbell exposed the mistreatment of women in sewing industries, and by extension all menial laborers, in her 1889 "Prisoners of Poverty."

Perhaps most consequentially, Jane Addams — reformer, teacher, co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, pacifist, Nobel Laureate — was building settlement houses to integrate immigrants into society and establishing a tradition of social work. In "Twenty Years After Hull House," Addams wrote: "If it is natural to feed the hungry and care for the sick, it is certainly natural to give pleasure to the young, comfort to the aged, and to minister to the deep-seated craving for social intercourse that all men feel."

A few pages later she recalled a thought from her childhood: "the good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by any one person or any one class . . . but we have not yet learned to add to that statement, that unless all and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having." Such sentiment may even have nudged Congress to establish the federal income tax in 1909, ratified as the 16th amendment to the Constitution in 1913.

One of that era's most inspirational projections imagined a future Boston. Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward: 2000-1887" was a tale of a just society arising from a just national economic system, replete with material comforts. In contemporary terms, it went viral — for a time outselling the Bible, which was then and long after, by far, the most widely read and distributed book in America.

The story's narrator, Julian West, is a young, wealthy Bostonian living in luxury but chagrined by the state of affairs for those less privileged. He falls into a 113-year-long slumber and awakens to a Boston that is astonishingly transformed. Inhabitants of the new Boston are peaceful, cooperative, well-educated, healthy and happy, knowing nothing of crime, poverty, congestion, or competitive behavior. Freed of the dirty factories and slums of the industrial era, Bellamy's future Boston consists of "miles of broad streets, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings," unsullied by soot or sewage.

This vision of human possibility was the opposite of the overworked, underpaid, unkempt crowds on the urban streets of 1887 called out by the day's reformers. Bostonians lived free of injustices and the seductions of property, sharing equally in the economic output of society. Science and technology abounded in this future, yet a transcendental spirit prevails as Bellamy repurposes a simpler New England past of public commons and gardens. The wealth of the community is not channeled into ostentatious private goods but rather into public works, arts institutions, and recreational amenities. "At home we have comfort," the narrator's host explains, "but the splendor of our life is, on its social side, that which we share with our fellows."

Many Bellamy Clubs were formed, reassured that this egalitarian future would not require the violent class struggle that Marx had predicted but would soon foment in other parts of the world.

Although Bellamy's utopian Boston did not materialize, amid a comparable concentration of wealth and social stress a century ago, Bostonians accomplished some remarkable civic improvements. Our cherished Emerald Necklace was nearing completion, after two decades of building. The Trustees of Reservations, formed in 1891, were acquiring thousands of acres of exurban land for conservation. Back Bay's monumental public library opened in 1895, "Free to All" proudly etched on the keystone above its main entrance. After opening America's first subway in 1897, the city's transit system was expanding. The Massachusetts Audubon Society was born the same year, to protect bird populations commercially hunted for women's ornamental hats. The acoustically unsurpassed Symphony Hall opened its doors in 1900, followed by Horticultural Hall in 1901 and Jordan Hall in 1903.

The same year, Isabella Stewart Gardner opened her home and art collection to the public, establishing the Gardner Museum. The present home of the Museum of Fine Arts opened in 1909, as did a grander replacement for the Opera House built just twenty years earlier. The Boston Embankment, the beginning of the Esplanade, was completed in 1910, as was the initial Charles River Dam, enabling the conversion of the banks of the Charles River for recreational enjoyment. Oh, and Fenway Park, a mecca for baseball fans everywhere, opened in 1912.

This staggering array of public-minded places, along with landfills, water and sewer infrastructure, and other public works, was being realized concurrently with Boston's tumultuous growth. Yes, a sense of noblesse oblige, then prominent among the privileged, produced the cultural institutions. But the first Gilded Age was versatile in how it met its challenges. Private investors contributed to the building of transit lines and undertook land-making campaigns; government built the parks, sewers, schools, and libraries.

What comparable civic endeavors accompany today's growth? The Big Dig, completed more than a decade ago, certainly qualifies, as do the earlier clean-up of Boston Harbor and recent expansions to the MFA, the Gardner, and the ICA. But is our hub-and-spoke transit system being adapted for our multi-modal city? Is a new necklace of urban greenways in the works that will provide a cost-free and car-free way to navigate the city? We're making strides in housing production, but are we producing enough housing across the income spectrum, or discharging our responsibility to our descendants to prepare for climate change? Boston is a magnet for private investment. Are we investing this wealth-building wisely, sufficiently focused on enhancing the public realm and spreading its benefits to all?

One must be cautious, of course, in drawing analogies across eras. Ours is an age of a much higher average standard of living. We live longer and healthier, and benefit from remarkable scientific and technological advances. Compared to a century ago, we have a stronger, if still far from perfect, social safety net. But our civic ambitions seem timid by comparison.

How can the flourishing enterprises that are causing such acute growing pains help provide the resources to address them? In the midst of a national debate about redressing the inequities of free markets, greater corporate social responsibility — the modern equivalent of noblesse oblige — can contribute to solutions. So can new forms of public revenue, such as congestion fees and value sharing, which recognize that public investments create private value that can be tapped to fund public facilities. Progress is incremental; bolder measures that align public and private resources

are called for. The solutions can be mutually reinforcing: coastal berms can create new open space for a growing population; transit investments can open up new housing and commercial markets; housing near transit can reduce auto emissions.

Can we channel the humanism of Jane Addams and the egalitarianism of Edward Bellamy to harness the resources, talent, and momentum of our era to shape the city for the future, as their generation did? Some historians have argued that the progressive reforms of that earlier era were a consequence of an urban society near despair. Let's not wait any longer for desperation to unleash Americans' inherent idealism.

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