

# **CRITTERS AND MAPS ALONG THE EDGE**

Welcome! Come along with us as we unfold the political, ecological, and infrastructural histories of the Harbor View neighborhood waterfront and together create a vision for reconnecting and reimagining the edge condition.

## GETTING SITUATED

*This pamphlet is one of four documents created by graduate students in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT. These pamphlets can be read alone or together. They discuss East Boston's power and decision making processes, offer storytelling as a way to understand East Boston's past and future and propose new visions for Condor Street in Eagle Hill and HarborView in the Belle Isle Marsh.*

*We acknowledge Indigenous Peoples as the traditional stewards of the land, and the enduring relationship that exists between them and their traditional territories. The land of East Boston and the land on which this project was produced is the traditional unceded territory of the Wampanoag Nation and Massachusetts Peoples. We acknowledge the painful history of genocide and forced occupation of these territories, as well as the ongoing processes of colonialism and dispossession in which we and our institution are implicated.*

*Beyond the stolen territory which we physically occupy, MIT has long profited from the sale of federal lands granted by the Morrill Act, territories stolen from 82 Tribes including the Greater and Little Osage, Chippewa, and Omaha Peoples. As we honor and respect the many diverse Indigenous peoples connected to this land from time immemorial, we attempt to deconstruct Western knowledge and ways of doing urban planning by drawing from Indigenous and Black planners. - Adapted from MIT 11.S938 Indigenous Environmental Planning course.*



This project responds to the existing and changing conditions of East Boston's Belle Isle Marsh. The edges of the marsh are sites of conflict between nature and society—fault lines where tensions between human use and ecological use come into contact. With climate change and rising sea levels, the marsh is drowning. In order to make room for the marsh, this pamphlet contains proposals to help East Bostonians live in harmony with the marsh. Let's start preparing now rather than later!

We establish five themes that inform how we imagined what futures the edge conditions of the Belle Isle Marsh could hold. These themes inform our suggested designs for the edges of this site. These edge conditions - as unique as they are to East Boston and the HarborView neighborhood - speak to futures on other cherished lands in greater Boston. We hope that in presenting these suggestions, East Bostonians can continue to re-envision the futures of these areas.

Understanding ownership is a key way we can empower ourselves in the planning process. Ownership information can be found on the Massachusetts Interactive Property Map.



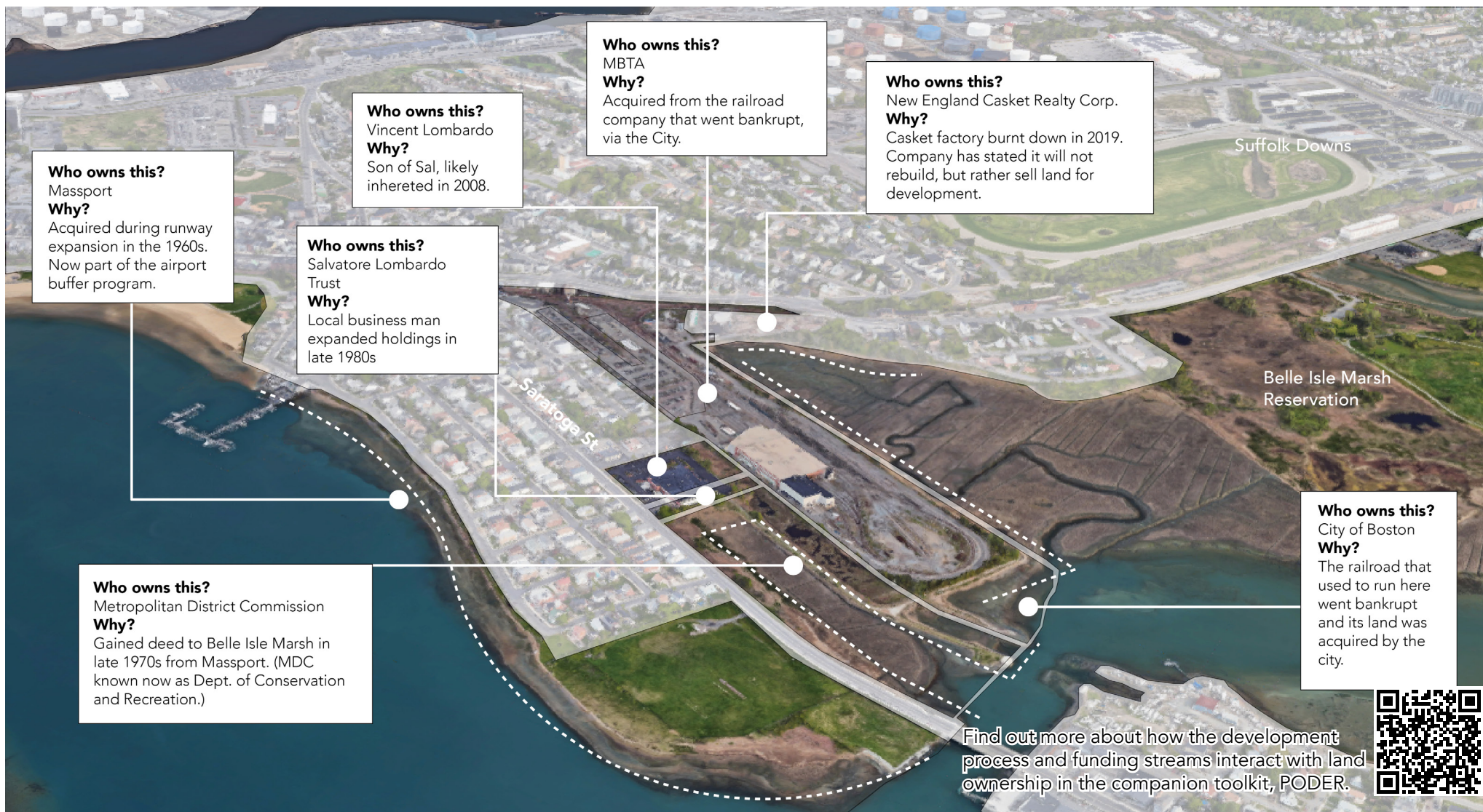
Check out the Massachusetts Interactive Property Map map here



Land can be owned by various entities—not just individuals. These include corporations, city agencies, and public authorities. Each landowner will be involved in the planning process and regulated in different ways. Some types of landowners, like the City of Boston, have more flexibility and can propose experimental ideas, but might not have funding. Other types of landowners, like Massport, may have the resources, and power based on their role in the community, but might lack initiative to change the way the land is used. It's important to know who owns the land and why they own it. Asking “why”—and being able to answer it—is an empowering exercise that arms us with information

that can be used in advocacy. To figure out who owns Harbor View and why requires looking at old maps and imagery to piece together the ownership story.

The land that borders the Belle Isle Marsh is owned by Massport, the City of Boston, and by private landowners. Each of these landowners have different ways of implementing interventions on their properties. If we are going to propose something new for this land, it's important to develop a flexible strategy that accounts for this fragmented ownership.



**Who owns this?**  
Massport  
**Why?**  
Acquired during runway expansion in the 1960s. Now part of the airport buffer program.

**Who owns this?**  
Vincent Lombardo  
**Why?**  
Son of Sal, likely inherited in 2008.

**Who owns this?**  
Salvatore Lombardo Trust  
**Why?**  
Local business man expanded holdings in late 1980s

**Who owns this?**  
MBTA  
**Why?**  
Acquired from the railroad company that went bankrupt, via the City.

**Who owns this?**  
New England Casket Realty Corp.  
**Why?**  
Casket factory burnt down in 2019. Company has stated it will not rebuild, but rather sell land for development.

**Who owns this?**  
Metropolitan District Commission  
**Why?**  
Gained deed to Belle Isle Marsh in late 1970s from Massport. (MDC known now as Dept. of Conservation and Recreation.)

**Who owns this?**  
City of Boston  
**Why?**  
The railroad that used to run here went bankrupt and its land was acquired by the city.

Find out more about how the development process and funding streams interact with land ownership in the companion toolkit, PODER.

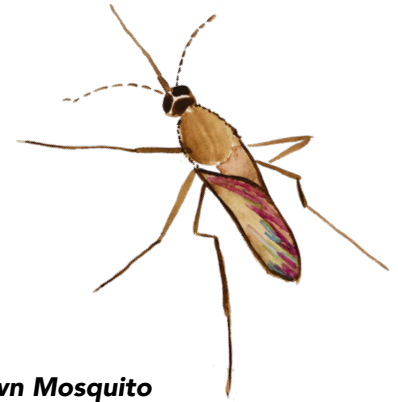


## MARSH ENCOUNTERS

Belle Isle Marsh is alive! The humans of East Boston are neighbors to the non-humans of the marsh and greater landscape. The Green Crab is not native, but welcome and edible! The Brown Marsh Mosquito is a little pesky. The delicate Lesser Yellowlegs forage around with the small minnows; who bring in the mighty Glossy Ibis and Osprey. They remind us of the power of earth. We can pay attention to these critters, both the plants and animals to learn from their way of life. How do they move with the seasons? How do they build worlds? And what stories do they hold? Can we hold room for them in the physical landscape but also in our minds?



**Glossy Ibis**



**Brown Mosquito**

## DRAW YOUR OWN CRITTER!



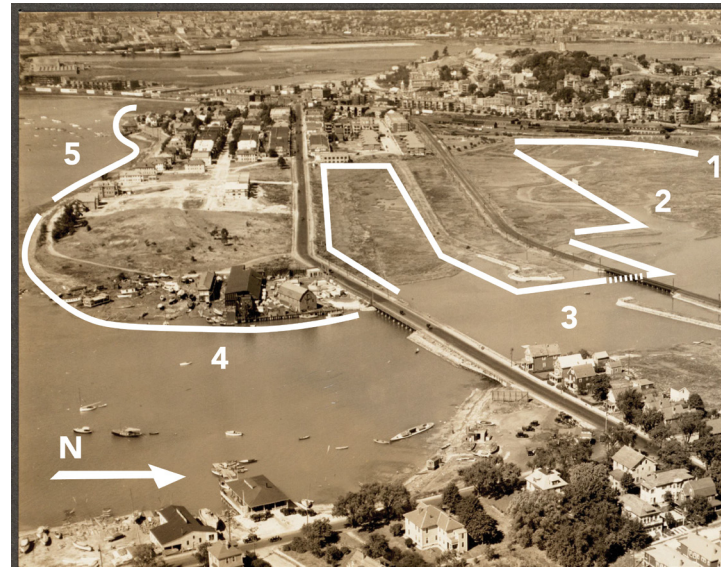
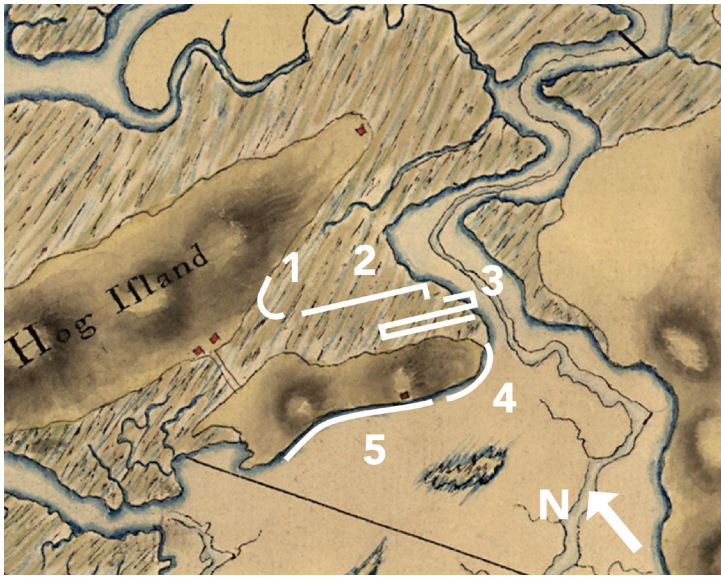
**Green Crab**

The marsh already serves as a site for recreation for the people of East Boston. The marsh can do more. It can be a site for learning, healing and a place to earn an income. We can work with the marsh to unlock its full potential! We can also think of streets, lawns, and parking lots as the historic sites of animal and plant life. These can be sites for gardening and restoration, a chance to invite the natural world a little closer to our personal living spaces.



**Minnow**

**Kelp**



Find out more about how East Bostonians have interacted with these changes and advocated for their own visions of the future in the companion toolkit, HISTORIAS.

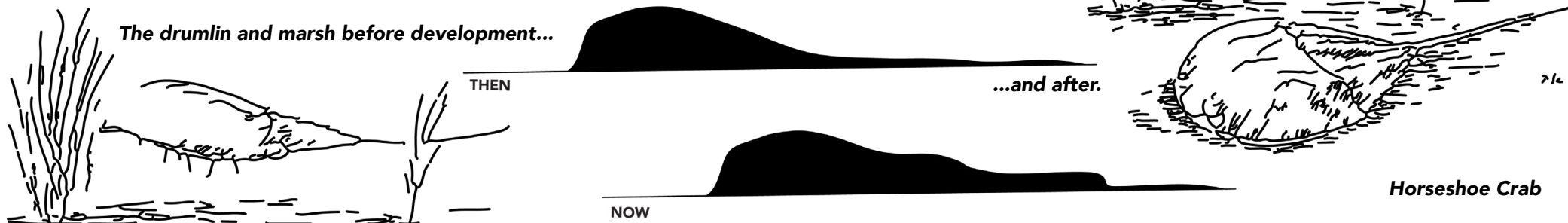


### 1770s

Harbor View is built on a small hill just south of the much larger hill of Orient Heights. These hills are sometimes called “drumlins.” They were formed when the glaciers from the last ice age retreated, and have been home to humans for thousands of years. The native Massachusetts people, who lived around Boston Harbor for tens of thousands of years, fished and caught shellfish around these drumlins in the spring and summertime. White colonists arrived in the 1630s and brought with them foreign notions of private ownership of land. These drumlins and marshes then came under white ownership, and settlers established permanent built structures and farmhouses there. These early developments followed the natural shape of the land. People couldn’t—and didn’t want to—build on the wetland marsh area!

In the early 1900s, residential development occurred at a faster pace as Boston’s population boomed. But still, development followed the natural shape of the land, as the main residential road was built along the ridge of the hill. For the most part, it was not houses that were built here, but rather rail infrastructure! The narrow gauge railroad that connected East Boston to Revere and Winthrop ran along the edge of the marsh. The tracks to Winthrop gave a straight and iron edge to what used to be spongy and squiggly marshland.

By the 1950s, the narrow gauge railroad had gone bankrupt, and its tracks to Winthrop were taken over by the MBTA as a rail yard. This completed what had been established in the early 1900s: two segments of the marsh, disconnected from each other. On the other side of the hill, the cliff along Bayswater came under ownership of an expanding Logan Airport as Federal Aviation Administration regulations required airports to own land in the path of runway approaches.



Horseshoe Crab

Parking lots are all along the edge of Belle Isle Marsh. They are large swaths of nature covered by a sticky, black tar-like material. Asphalt, or bitumen, is a highly viscous semi-solid petroleum product. Even though the material looks completely unnatural, it is a product of nature. It comes from organic animal material deposited by water and buried deep under the earth's surface. To become parking lot material, this organic material has to be excavated, vacuum distilled, and mixed with sand, gravel and crushed rock. All these materials are carried on ships, trains and highways from land far away from Belle Isle Marsh.

To construct the parking lot, machines and people have to move earth to level the land. Once the land is graded, and all the plants and trees are removed, the asphalt is heated and poured out into a toxic sheet, releasing a rubber burning smell. Then heavy rollers press the material down to make a smooth lot.

Parking lots are *impervious*, which means that their surface does not absorb water. When it rains, water

runs over the asphalt, collecting pollutants, before reaching the nearest body of water. Parking lots also contribute to higher temperatures in cities, an effect called *urban heat island effect*.

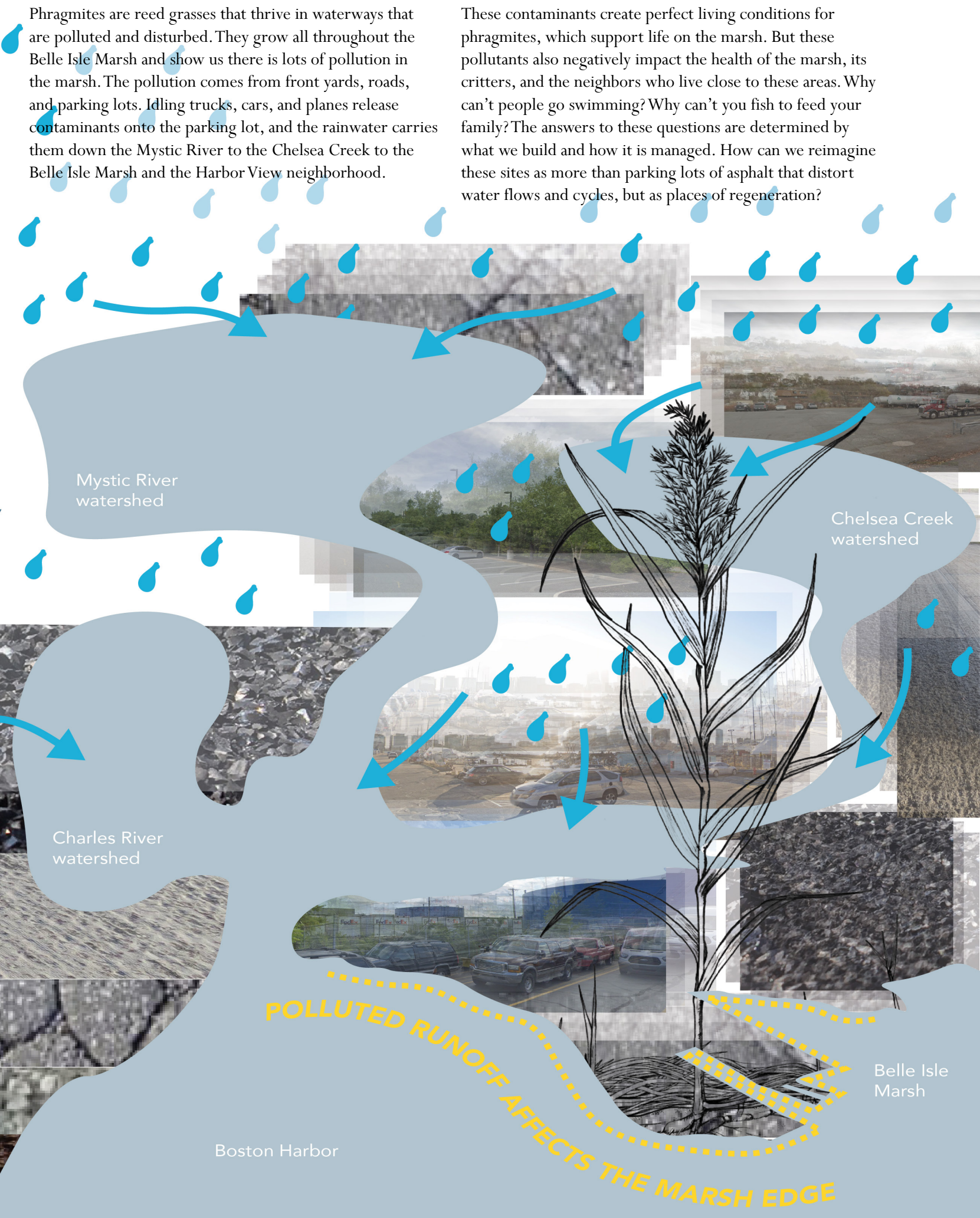
Nature resists parking lots. With time, water freezes and thaws and chips away at the lot. Weeds and trees wrestle with the new material, trying to find their way back home. All of this happens silently underneath and next to commuters who leave their vehicles for their day. These lots aren't just empty spaces. In the evenings after vehicles leave, kids bring their skateboards or bicycles to ride around the lots, and frequently end up hitting potholes. Birds feed on worms that accidentally crossed the lot without shade. The lots are places for some people to pass through, but many residents and beings in the landscape accommodate the lot, even as they sometimes make use of and resist it.



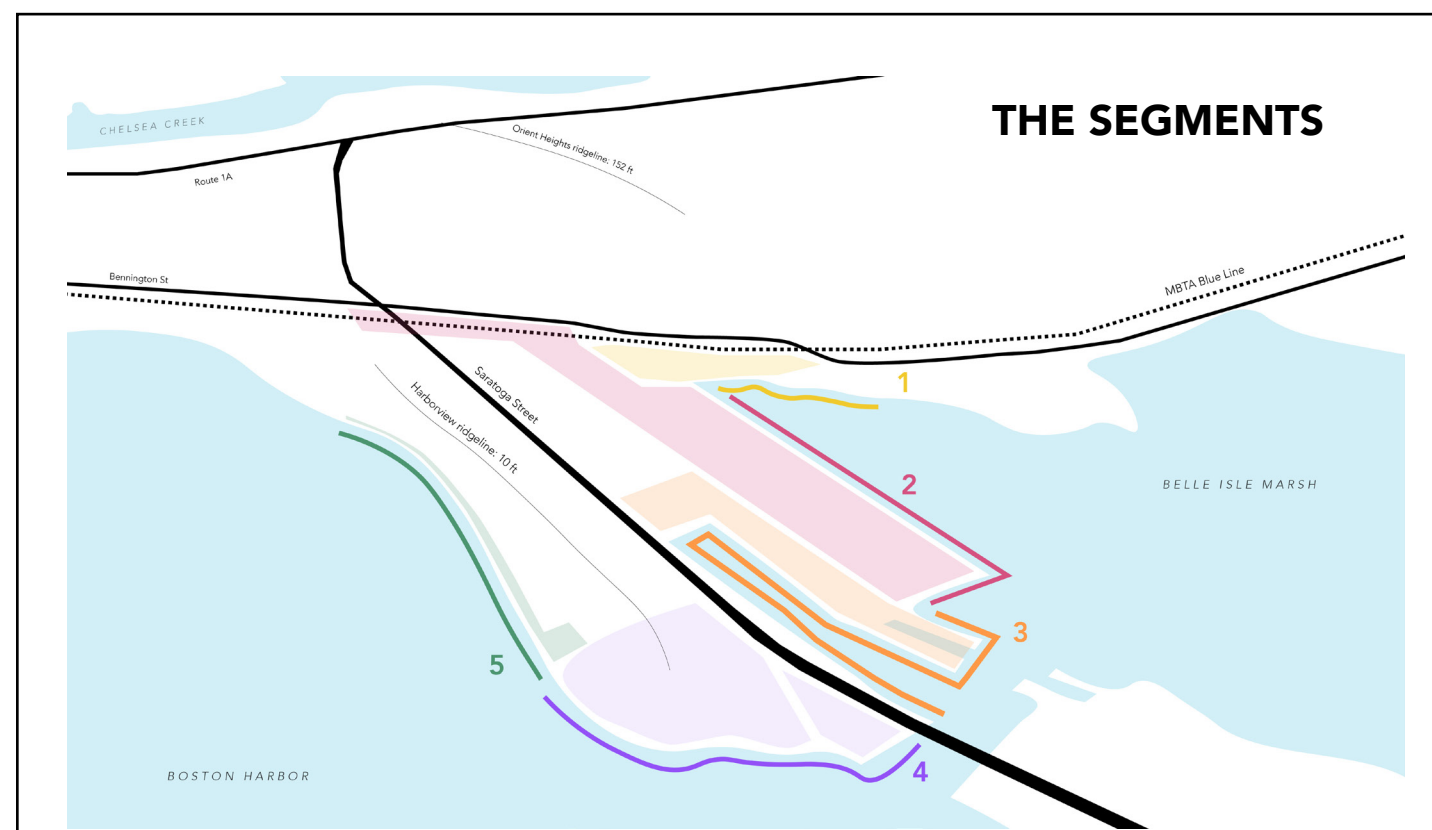
WHEN IT RAINS WATER RUNS AND DIRECTLY INTO THE WATER OVER THE DIRTY ASPHALT

Phragmites are reed grasses that thrive in waterways that are polluted and disturbed. They grow all throughout the Belle Isle Marsh and show us there is lots of pollution in the marsh. The pollution comes from front yards, roads, and parking lots. Idling trucks, cars, and planes release contaminants onto the parking lot, and the rainwater carries them down the Mystic River to the Chelsea Creek to the Belle Isle Marsh and the Harbor View neighborhood.

These contaminants create perfect living conditions for phragmites, which support life on the marsh. But these pollutants also negatively impact the health of the marsh, its critters, and the neighbors who live close to these areas. Why can't people go swimming? Why can't you fish to feed your family? The answers to these questions are determined by what we build and how it is managed. How can we reimagine these sites as more than parking lots of asphalt that distort water flows and cycles, but as places of regeneration?



POLLUTED RUNOFF AFFECTS THE MARSH EDGE



We are looking at the edge of the Belle Isle Marsh and the Boston Harbor, where these water bodies meet land in the East Boston neighborhood of Harbor View. Segment 1 is along the edge of the Casket site. Segment 2 is the edge of the MBTA rail yard. Segment 3 traces the marsh to the CVS site, and back out to the bridge. Segment 4 braces the Massport-owned end of Harbor View. Segment 5 runs along Bayswater. The varying conditions along this edge are representative of edges across East Boston, ranging from industrial, commercial, and natural.

We may think of edges as the place where land meets water. Because we're working in the marsh, that line isn't always so distinct. We're embracing the wetland characteristics of the edge, and thinking both beyond the shoreline and across property lines.

1

**SIGNAGE**

Much of the natural world works in cycles or seasons. Belle Isle Marsh also moves in a cyclical way. From the back-and-forth tides to migratory patterns of birds to the salty breeze at dawn, the marsh has its own beautiful cycles. While we have our own 24-hour clock, the marsh has multiple clocks—each on their own set time and space. The marsh's weather, temperature, tides, and seasons all change throughout the year. The marsh has its own way of keeping time with cycles, rituals, and repetition.

The new development at the Casket site should have multilingual signage along the marsh edge that describes these cycles. Posting this information publicly can help people to interact more with the marsh's land, tides, living beings, and changes.

The developer and landowner at the Casket site seem to want to engage with the marsh—in documents, they have centered restoration on their site and on the neighboring MBTA site. We're excited to see this, and encourage people to continue to advocate for the marsh's inclusion in the project plans.



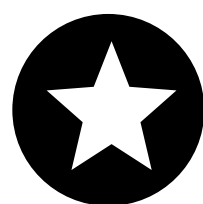
Signage at the marsh edge

2

**RESTORATION**

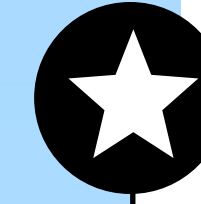
Access to much of the marsh is restricted or extremely limited. Sites like these are a great opportunity to explore restoration. The MBTA yard offers space to explore a few key ideas:

1. We recommend starting with passive restoration along the site edges. Passive restoration means allowing nature to grow without—or with very little—active management by humans.
2. We suggest having a cleanup day—inspired by the Friends of Belle Isle Marsh cleanup days in the 1980s—along the edge owned by the City of Boston to help clear trash and debris.
3. In the trainyard, a ditch can be built along the edge to catch runoff and prevent it from entering the marsh.
4. We suggest managed, spontaneous growth of plants in the train turnaround. Right now, the land there appears empty and unused, paved with asphalt. Restoring this to a permeable surface will help address the runoff problem, by catching the rainwater where it falls. Our inspiration is the Naturpark Südgelände in Berlin, a patchwork of second-growth meadows and woods on an abandoned rail yard in southern Berlin.



**WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SEE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD?**

Mark the edge that you're most interested in on this collage, and use the space below to describe and draw your vision for this place.



**EXPRESS YOURSELF!**

Write a poem or draw a picture about how you interact with nature in your daily life, along the marsh edge or anywhere!

Check out an approach to imagining East Boston's future rooted in a neighborhood's history of solidarity and resistance in the companion toolkit, LATINO FUTURES FOR CONDOR STREET.



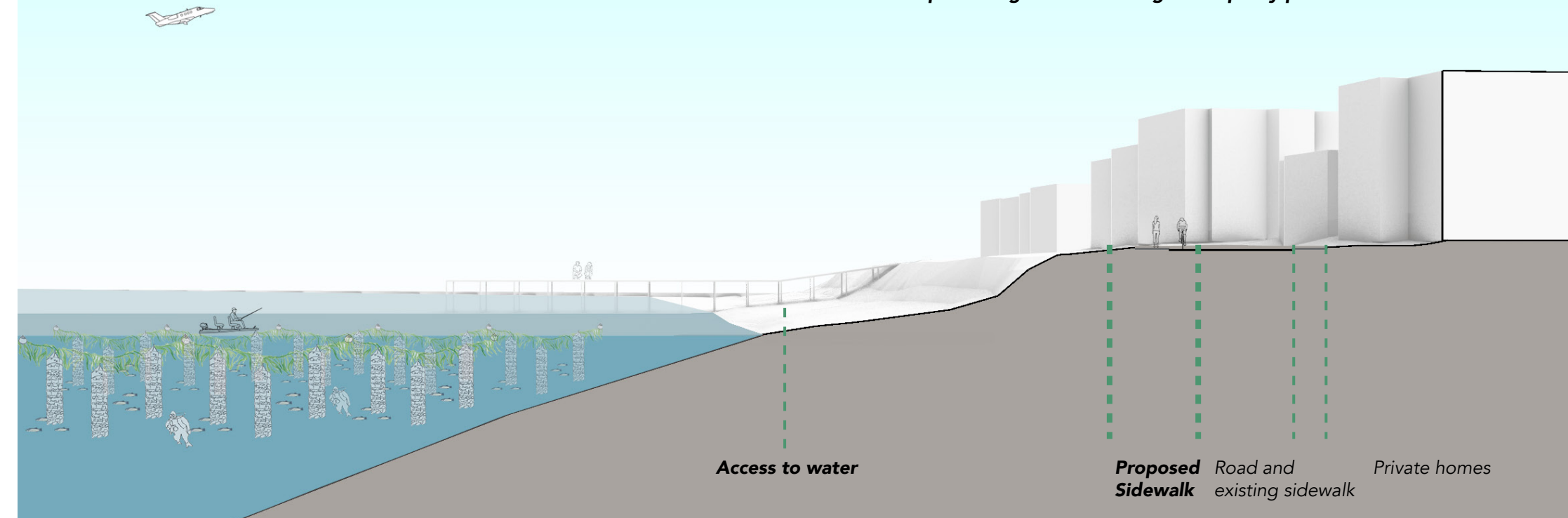
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**COLLABORATING WITH NATURE FOR LIVELIHOODS**

This proposal is about going beyond the edge, seeing the water as an environment for productive ecosystems and human livelihoods. Bayswater runs along the slope of the former drumlin, or ridge, 10 feet above the water, with a steep cliff down to the edge. Most of the residences are single-family houses with yards. Bayswater Street lacks a sidewalk on the water

side. We propose installing a sidewalk, with access points down to the water, thereby creating an opportunity to interact with the ocean through kelp farming and subsistence fishing. The sidewalk will allow residents of Harbor View to enjoy water views safely.

*Bayswater, looking toward the Yacht Club. We propose a sidewalk along the water-edge of the street (owned by Massport) and points of access down to the water. There is opportunity here to farm kelp and create habitats for oysters, critters who protect against storm surges and purify polluted water.*



4

**AN ACCESSIBLE EDGE**

This lot is a vacant, grassy lawn owned by Massport. The agency argues that they have to keep it empty because it is in the landing path of planes landing at runways 22L and 22R at Logan Airport and is home to some important landing equipment and monitors. In its current condition, it is a landscape with few signs of life. It's not permitted, apparently.

We suggest a use that would allow the land to stay in the lifeless state Massport supposedly requires while providing space for

human use as well.

We think a walkway, built out into the shallows, would create spaces for humans and critters to walk and enjoy the views of the Harbor, while keeping them far away from the sensitive equipment on the site.

We also suggest signage on the fences along the site. Massport should let people know why they are not permitted on the site.



3

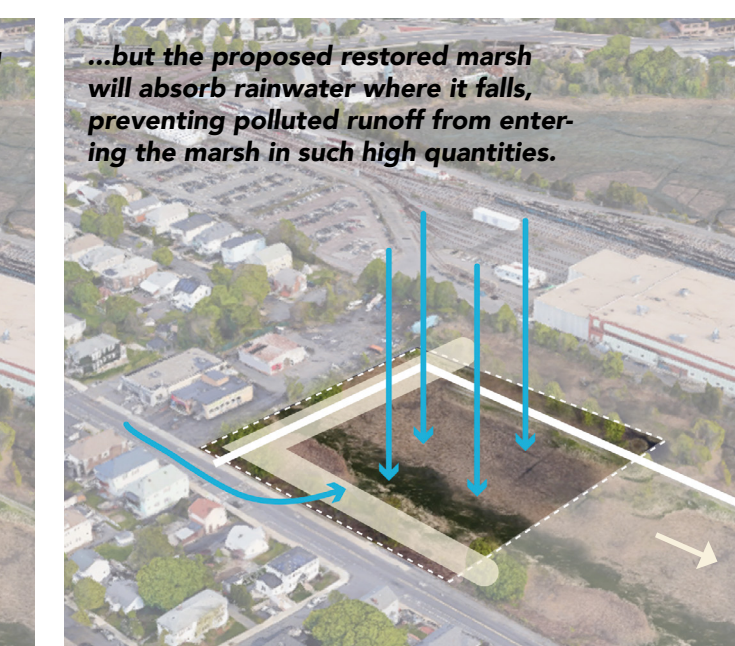
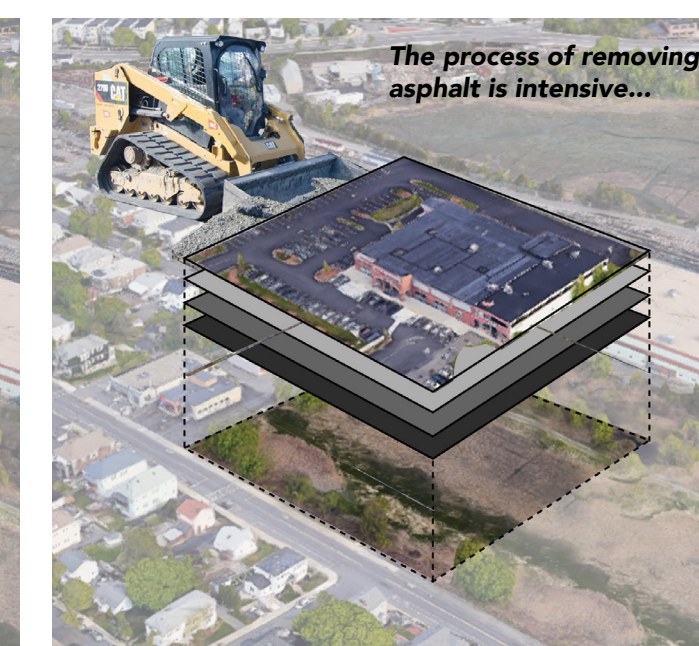
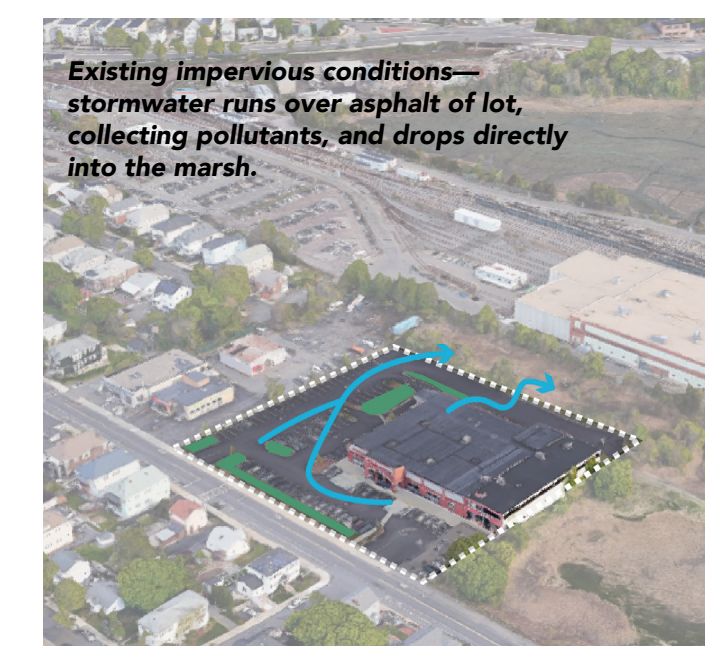
**LAND BACK**

Given the circumstances, we ultimately believe that it is worth considering turning all of the CVS site into its natural state of marshland. We arrived at this conviction through a study of the stormwater runoff. In the existing state, rainwater (represented by the blue arrows) runs over the paved parking lot, collecting pollutants along the way, before being dumped into the marsh along the back of the lot. Interestingly, the greenspace of the lot is placed precisely where the water doesn't go—it seems to be for aesthetic purposes only. The most radical response to this stormwater situation is

to relocate the CVS to another location on Saratoga Street, and restore the entire lot to its marshy state.

This initiative is a form of land-back, where it is literally giving the land back to the marsh and larger community. A similar project has occurred this year in Manhattan Beach near Los Angeles, in which beachfront land was stolen from a successful Black family and now rightfully returned to their care. Similarly, some of the land in East Boston, particularly waterfront land, can be given back to the community for management. However, we would

like to take this idea a step further by proposing for it to be returned to marshland. We would like to see a total restoration of the CVS and its parking lots into marshland. We reached this conclusion through a variety of considerations, such as climate change, encroachment of the marsh, species protection, and input from community members.



# WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SEE ON THE LAND ALONG THE EDGE?

## NOW WHAT?

Join the conversation on social media! Grab a snapshot of your animal drawing, personal marsh encounter story, and/or your vision for the Harbor View neighborhood and share using **#harborviewvision**

## MORE INFORMATION

Reference our 3 other toolkits in this series:

—To learn more about ways you can continue to share your stories and vision about your neighborhood, check out our *Historias* toolkit.

—To learn more about what it'd take to see through your vision that you've created, check out our *Poder* toolkit.

—To see a similar process of vision making for the Condor Street, check out our *Latino Futures for Condor Street* neighborhood toolkit.

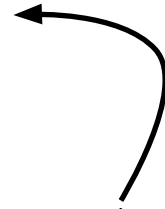
## REFERENCES

You can read more about **Naturpark-Süd-gelände** here: <https://bit.ly/2U4Vzd7> And about the **land back efforts in California** and across the country here: <http://bit.ly/Land-Back>. Walk along a boardwalk like we're proposing at **Cambridge's Broad Channel!** Learn about **kelp farming** on the "How to Save the Planet:" <http://bit.ly/Kelp-Farm>.

## ABOUT US

This toolkit experience was produced by Danielle Moore, César Garcia Lopez, Michelle Mueller Gámez, and Tess McCann as part of the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning practicum course in Spring 2021.

We'd like to thank our wonderful teaching team: Eran Ben-Joseph, Mary Anne Ocampo and Tanvi Sharma and many EB community partners who helped advise on this project.



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