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TINA BROOKS: RETHINKING NEW ENGLAND TRADITION

by Marty Bell

The inspiration for Tina Brooks was those weekend family field trips. But for her family in West Philadelphia, the destination was not amusement parks or museums. “My father was a little pickup truck contractor. He poured cement,” Ms. Brooks says. “On Sunday mornings he would pile my brothers and me into his truck and take us to construction sites to see the curbs and sidewalks he poured. I was surrounded my whole life by construction. Every morning at 6, the crew started their day in our living room.”

Her father’s goal was to encourage one of his sons to join him in business. But the older became a trumpet player and the younger sells cars. It was the middle child, the only daughter, who developed the passion for community development. The daughter, Tina, has had an impressive career with stints as director of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation in Boston, at The Community Builders in Boston and Philadelphia, and at Paramount Financial, leading to her current position as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ housing policy chief. Officially the Undersecretary of the Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development. Tina Brooks’ career will be celebrated and she will be honored on October 18 with the National Housing & Rehabilitation Association’s 6th annual Vision Award as part of the organization’s Fall Developers Forum in Boston.



“My career wasn’t in a straight line,” Ms. Brooks says. The first member of her family to attend college, she graduated from Cornell in 1971 with a degree in landscape architecture. After a year sojourn spent painting in Aix En Provence, she returned to a job laying out lots along golf courses for new subdivisions. But she was uncomfortable with the limited options landscape architecture provided. “This made me feel like I had to be closer to the developer subset,” she says. She was accepted into the masters program at M.I.T where she was awe-struck by a lecture by Pat Clancy of Greater Boston Community Developers (reorganized as The Community Builders in 1988). Clancy

spoke on the transitioning of neighborhoods and the impact it could have on children. “That was exactly what I wanted to do,” Ms. Brooks says. So she arranged an appointment to see the lecturer and that day, Clancy’s partner, Peter Munkenbeck, offered her a job.

This was the beginning of a peripatetic career that would keep circling back to Massachusetts. She was appointed to her current position by Governor Deval Patrick with whom she shares the philosophy that housing should not stand as a silo but be linked to economic development. “Every \$1 of housing development generates an additional \$1.27 in economic activity, more than health care or retail can generate,” she recently reported in a lecture at Salem State University.

Upon accepting the role of the driver of Massachusetts’ housing policy, Ms. Brooks found herself faced with the second oldest housing stock in the nation and a huge supply gap. This seems paradoxical in a state with a reputation for progressivism and a buoyant building community.

The roots of the problem, Ms. Brooks found, lay in the commonwealth’s structure of local government as well as in an outdated way of thinking.

“County government does not really exist in Massachusetts,” she says. “We have 351 communities each with their own local officials and working together is a radical notion to them. A typical county government might be big enough to support two or three housing professionals who would organize regional issues. But we don’t have that.”

“Instead we have people who tend to think about housing nostalgically. They want to bring back the experience of their youth when they had a backyard and went to the movies for a quarter and went to Mr. Brown’s bakery on the corner. The fact that single family housing can now cost \$200,000 out of their price range does not enter into their thinking.”

“Neighborhood presidents say to us, ‘Don’t bring me another one of those (multifamily) tax credit deals. We want home ownership. We don’t want people in the neighborhood who don’t have skin in the game, personal investment, sweat equity.’”

This mindset has left the Commonwealth 10,000 to 15,000 new housing units short per year.

To address the problem, Ms. Brooks, on behalf of the Governor’s administration, is depending on taking a lot of time and investing a good deal of money in education.

“We need to develop expertise at a local level,” she says, “to convince people that multifamily housing may look different, but it gives you the same quality of life. We need to educate people, to help them see that with good design, careful planning and strength in management, high density can be great. Government has to provide the resources for communities to develop this expertise.”

To accomplish this, the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (M.H.P.) convenes an institute once a year to teach communities how to develop a housing strategy and create a

zoning overlay to encourage developers. The gathering also gives local officials who have been resistant to working together the opportunity to build relationships.

Ms. Brooks has also organized an in-house team—the Office of Sustainable Development—that offers to come into communities, look at their assets, and help them figure out what is possible. “In the past, our Commonwealth’s government waited for communities to come to them with plans.” Ms. Brooks says. “But now we say, here’s an office with expertise in zoning, in downtown revitalization, in technological and design changes, and we’ll work with you.”

Ironically, this effort has been accelerated by an unsettling but motivating partner—recession. Small towns that have not considered working together in the past have been forced to by the downturn in local revenue. And so, for example, the Devens’ area has towns sharing school resources, fire and police departments and housing planning.

“We need to continue to make the case that housing is not social welfare,” Tina Brooks says. “Rather it is at the core of economic stability for the Commonwealth. Here in Massachusetts we can have the same modern, energy efficient, environmentally supportive housing as the rest of the country.”

