
Design institute brings mayors and city planners to MIT

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For a few days last week, a select group of mayors came to the MIT campus for an opportunity to think big about their communities--and even to dream a little.

Their honors were in town for the Northeast Mayors' Institute of City Design, which MIT hosted this year for the fifth time.

Seven mayors from across New England and New York came together around a conference table in the Stella Room (7-336) with an interdisciplinary resource team to brainstorm solutions for their urban design challenges.

Armed with maps, photographs and other documents, each mayor presented his or her issue as a case study, with a list of specific questions to be answered. They came from communities as large as New Bedford, Mass., population 100,000, and as small as Cooperstown, N.Y. (2,032).

The discussions took place in an "off the record" environment where the mayors were free to explore ideas with the resource team, which included not only such MIT faculty as J. Mark Schuster, director of the Mayors' Institute and professor of urban studies and planning, but outside professionals as well.

For John Bell, mayor of Gloucester, Mass., the challenge was "making connections"--connecting a successful Main Street to the harborside Rogers Street, which has less foot traffic and general activity.

After he made his presentation, questions and suggestions flew around the table: Could Rogers Street be renamed to something more evocative--Front Street? Water Street? Can visual cues be given so that pedestrians know they can cut through from one street to the other via cross streets? And what is that brick wall doing there?

For Scott Lang, mayor of New Bedford, the issue was what to do with a large parcel of industrial waterfront land, including a large disused power station, at a time when the fish processing industry is in transition, but fresh fish continues to be very important--"our brand," as Lang put it.

The mayors were encouraged to think long term--to think of master plans going out 10 or 20 years--and not to underestimate the energizing effect that a clear vision of a community's future can have. "Maybe your master plan will be your flagship project," Susan Silberberg, lecturer in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, and associate director of the Mayors' Institute, suggested to one mayor who was eager to find the next big thing to catalyze revitalization.

The resource team also stressed to the mayors the importance of community narrative. "Remember that the built environment is a representation of the story you tell," Dennis Frenchman, professor of the practice in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, **told the group.**

"When you look at the traditional streets and buildings of your community, don't think of them as bricks and mortar. Think of them as stories that together make up the unique character and narrative of your town. In an information economy, good narratives can be hot properties," Frenchman said.

The Mayors' Institute is a 20-year-old program of the National Endowment for the Arts, the United States Conference of Mayors, the American Architectural Foundation and collaborating universities.

URL: <http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2006/mayors.html>