

# DOWNTOWN NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS: A CASE OF CREATIVE PLACEMAKING IN THE UNITED STATES

MASSACHUSETTS, USA

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*“Yeah, you could take a walk with me, talk with me,  
as we take a tour of New B...  
Take a walk with me down 13 mile road,  
memories meant to hold in the city's cobblestones,  
Visitors from all over the world,  
to learn about  
Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, Rotch Jones... Duff.”*

*"Walk with Me"*

*~ Lyrics by New Bedford teens in the Youth Ambassador Program,  
a collaboration between the National Park Service and 3rd Eye  
Youth Empowerment Inc.*

## **The Place, Its History and Social-Economy**

New Bedford, Massachusetts is the setting for the opening of Herman Melville's internationally acclaimed novel *Moby Dick*. Portraying the adventures and dangers for whalers in the 19th century, Melville highlighted the economic relevance that whaling and international trade had to New Bedford.

In a time with no electricity, New Bedford “lit the world” (New Bedford Whaling Historical Park 2013) through whale oil burned in lamps across the globe. Many of its whalers came from the Portuguese Islands of Madeira, the Azores, and at that time Cape Verde. New Bedford became the world's “richest city per capita” (City of New Bedford 2013) and, more importantly, conveyed cultures to and from countless foreign ports. Today, the sea still plays an essential role as New Bedford has become the nation's number one commercial fishing port in value of

landed catch (New Bedford Whaling Museum 2013).

No less important than the sea are the city's remarkable mills built in the late 19th century, when the textile industry grew, bringing another source of wealth to New Bedford. Once thriving, however, this city experienced economic decline during the Great Depression and the fading of its textile industry. Today, with a population of 95,183 (U.S. Census Bureau 2011) as many as 22.7% of its community lived below the poverty level in 2010 (SouthCoast Urban Indicators Project 2013) which only touches on the challenges facing New Bedford.

Despite adversity, though, an extraordinary resilience characterizes this community whose bold vision has created a vibrant renaissance in New Bedford's downtown district. As the lyrics of the song above suggest, this is a place where stories emanate from the cobblestoned streets.

### **Downtown New Bedford Today: A Vibrant Creative District**

Considered by Richard Florida the seventh most artistic city in the US for artists per capita (2011), this creative district rises up from its waterfront wharfs, spreading roughly across 38 blocks crowned with Greek Revival structures and captain's homes dating to its whaling days. Today, creators from printmakers to aerial dance artists occupy the city's historic spaces.

There's a pulse in this downtown. And as that pulse beats, café and pub owners have begun to locate in refurbished waterfront buildings. The New Bedford Art Museum curates world-class exhibitions in a 95-year-old converted bank, drawing visitors from Boston and Providence. Midsize and boutique galleries invigorate the district, bringing color and excitement like ArtWorks! recently “yarn bombed” water fountain or Gallery 65's exhibition which included vintage refrigerators converted into stylish couches. It is not unlikely to see the phrase, “I 'heart' NB” on skaters' T-shirts hanging out at any number of downtown eateries.

New Bedford as a ‘brand’ goes back decades when Elaine's Black Whale retail started printing the city's unofficial mascot, a whale of course, on various apparel. Today, love of place spawns urban art projects such as UGLYgallery's “#wheresthelove?” which brings murals to abandoned corners and begs viewers to look longer, harder at this city.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation even named the city one of the nation's "Dozen Distinctive Destinations" in 2011 for "dynamic downtowns, cultural diversity... historic preservation, sustainability and revitalization" (2011).

What draws people to this creative place? Perhaps it is the feeling of place itself. For, all the above efforts are grassroots and therefore, together they create a uniquely local personality. Within that local framework, longtime residents as well as new arrivals eagerly shape the identity of New Bedford by adding their voices to its evolving story.

### **The Groundwork for Placemaking**

New Bedford is a multilayered case where place is viewed as a whole, calling diverse members to inspire and form this community. "When you think about placemaking, it's really about people," says Lee Heald, Director of AHA!, the city's free monthly arts and culture night and collaborative organization interviewed on March 19, 2013. "It's everybody's stories and it's told from their point of view... it's powerfully local."

AHA! emerged from a Regional Community Congress in the 1990's, whose vision was to make New Bedford "an arts and culture hub" (AHA! Project 2013). Today, AHA! has 66 partners that include galleries, restaurants, shops, cultural organizations, museums, churches and universities who all agree to provide free themed programming once a month on AHA! Night.

"It's basically a community organizers model from the bottom up," says the Director of AHA!. "It's allowed small owner operated businesses and large organizations to come together and have equal footing."

According to Heald, approximately 3000 visitors descend on downtown on an average AHA! Night. They naturally stimulate the economy, both during AHA! and by returning to support local businesses.

According to a study from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's Center for Policy Analysis (2009), in 2009 AHA! spent \$289,093 with an economic impact of \$734,719. That's a 2.5-dollar return on every dollar spent. Operating in part with \$35,000 in state grants, for every state dollar invested in the arts and culture in New Bedford, that dollar leveraged an

impact of \$21 dollars.

“There really is a success story built on collaboration,” says Heald. “A rising tide actually does float all boats.”

### **Preservation's Roll in this Renaissance**

One extraordinarily early effort providing the setting for today's renaissance is the non-profit WHALE, short for Waterfront Historic Area League. WHALE was formed in 1962 by a group of concerned citizens who acted to preserve the heavily blighted downtown when much of it faced brutal demolition.

WHALE purchased and restored 150-year-old threatened structures, even moving buildings when the highways came through. This tremendous community effort left New Bedford with a distinctly unique feel, “where the past speaks out clearly and movingly” (McCabe & Thomas 1995).

In 1996 WHALE joined other intrepid citizens and the Old Dartmouth Historical Society – New Bedford Whaling Museum to accomplish something visionary. Together they lobbied Congress to designate 13 downtown blocks as the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park. According to Arthur Motta, Senior Director of Marketing and Communications for the museum, interviewed on April 1, 2013, the institution's 700,000 plus objects were crucial in this success as were WHALE's efforts in saving the buildings.

The 275,000 yearly visitors drawn to New Bedford because of the park spent \$12.8 million in 2010 alone and generated sales of \$17.6 million in the local region (Cook 2012: 9).

Another milestone in the district's renaissance was in 1998 when The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, in collaboration with State Senator Mark C. W. Montigny, took an unprecedented risk by renovating the historic center of downtown commerce, the dilapidated Star Store. When the district was still considered a ghost town after 5pm, the effort built critical mass by turning this 120,000 square foot 1898 building into a flagship arts campus for UMass Dartmouth's College of Visual and Performing Arts (CVPA) and a downtown campus for Bristol Community College (BCC).

“When we brought the Star Store in, we had a core for young artists to rally around. And when young people walk out the front door, they want to go somewhere,” says Senator Montigny, interviewed on March 27, 2013, who acknowledges that \$40 to \$50 million public dollars were earmarked for the project. Included were funds for market rate housing in converted adjacent buildings so people could live in the district.

Opening in 2001, the Star Store became an “arts incubator that has anchored the creative economy,” says the CVPA’s Dean, Adrian Tió interviewed on March 21, 2013. “Students assigned studios in the Star Store live in the immediate area. In return, the downtown... has grown into a vibrant district of arts, culture, and entertainment,” highlights Tió.

Bristol Community College has also established two additional buildings as part of the project, contributing to the critical mass.

By 2009, more than \$80 million in private investment had come to the surrounding blocks, along with redevelopment of more than half a million square feet of commercial space – over a third of downtown's available commercial space (Lyons & Whelan 2009). From vintage shops to wine bars to the refurbished 1200-seat Zeiterion Theatre, doors were opening to welcome new crowds.

“All of a sudden,” says Montigny, “the downtown becomes a magnet of culture for the entire South Coast of Massachusetts.”

## **Conclusion**

At a 2010 Gateway Cities Roundtable, Lee Blake, President of the New Bedford Historical Society, encouraged listeners to “see who’s not at the table... whose story needs to be told, and help people tell their own story.”

That call-to-action is as important today as it was in previous decades as New Bedford addresses its challenges. But for sure, its collaborative players have shaped a sense of place in this downtown – a shining example of the creative economy at work.

And those newest members who weave the city's cultural fabric – the young rappers in the Whaling National Historical Park's Youth Ambassador Program – say it well:

*“Wow, I thought New Bedford was just nonsense who  
woulda known that it'd be filled with so much  
knowledge...”*

*...I'm speaking it local you hearing my vocals...*

*So c'mon y'all come and take a walk with me...*

*...as we take a tour of New B.”*

Find out more about this renaissance at: [www.destinationnewbedford.org](http://www.destinationnewbedford.org)



Figure 1. "AHA! Night in New Bedford." Visitors gather for live music during AHA! Night at one of 66 partner venues. AHA! is a free arts & culture event which takes place on the second Thursday of every month in Downtown New Bedford. Photo courtesy of AHA! New Bedford.



Figures 2 and 3. (Above) “The New Bedford Whaling Museum and Working Waterfront.” The New Bedford Whaling Museum with today’s working waterfront behind it. (Below) “Mechanics Lane.” Mechanics Lane is one of New Bedford’s cobblestoned streets from its historical whaling era. Photos: Don Burton.



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