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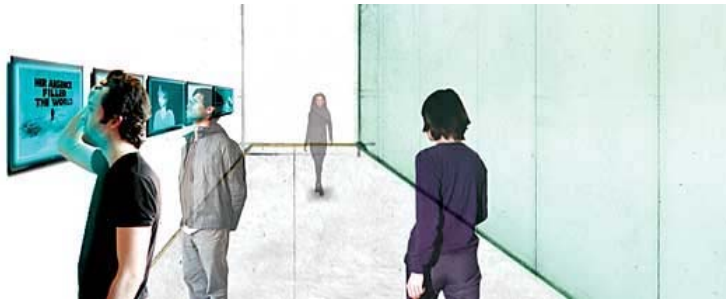
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ON THE WATERFRONT

As Boston buries the past, a new wave of design surfaces.

By Charlene Rooke

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Ducking down a side street off Boston's Downtown Crossing shopping district, skirting the edge of Chinatown, I arrive at the impeccably retro Dainty Dot Hosiery Building feeling like I've travelled through time. Until recently, this area was an urban wasteland, shadowed since 1959 by an elevated highway. Today it borders a brand-new scythe of green space – reclaimed land from the Big Dig, which over the last decade removed a massive elevated highway and replaced it with underground traffic tunnels.

A vibrant orange window banner beckons me down Kingston Street to the Vessel design store. Curvy modern tableware and furniture items (the company is best known for its ingenious Popsicle-reminiscent cordless Candela lamps) flesh out the high-ceilinged vintage-warehouse bones of the space. Peeking behind a partition, I can see a studio and busy operators taking phone orders in the back.

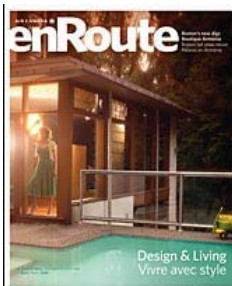
"You can smell the ocean today," says Stéfane Barbeau, one of two Canadian founders of Vessel as we emerge from the building a few minutes later. As we set off on a walk of the neighbourhood, the irony of his comment hits me: From most of downtown Boston – even here, just a stone's throw from the Inner Harbor – you can't see or smell the waterfront for which Boston (think Tea Party) is traditionally known.

Vessel co-founder Duane Smith explains that architects and photographers are neighbours in their building, many of them installed in the last couple of years as the Central Artery was dismantled and the area made habitable again. "[The Big Dig] has opened up some streets that have been closed for a long time," Smith says.

Visionaries like the Vessel guys are what drew me here: a hyper-aware new generation of architects and designers who are weaving contemporary threads into Boston's historic fabric. It's as if the grand act of civic courage required for Boston to take apart and bury its downtown highway – a \$17.6-billion, 15-year project – has been an inspiration for its creative class. "You can see Boston has finally broken through. The shackles have come off," Charles Renfro of Diller + Scofidio architects said last year, when his firm first began building the striking new glass-box Institute of Contemporary Art in the neglected Seaport district. Hip *Dwell* magazine even posed the question "Is Boston the Next Bilbao?" comparing the formerly staid New England city to the old Spanish port revitalized by the startling architecture of Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava and others.

"The best cities are the ones where you have the historic as well as the new and zany," architect Keith Moskow confirms for me. He jumps up and grabs a portfolio to show me a building lobby he designed with a clever pull-down Murphy desk. As Moskow darts through the office, pointing out project models and explaining wild conceptual designs (like an innovative sidewalk shelter and an elevator-style car park), I see the link to his work: It's fluid, mobile and kinetic, like Moskow himself.

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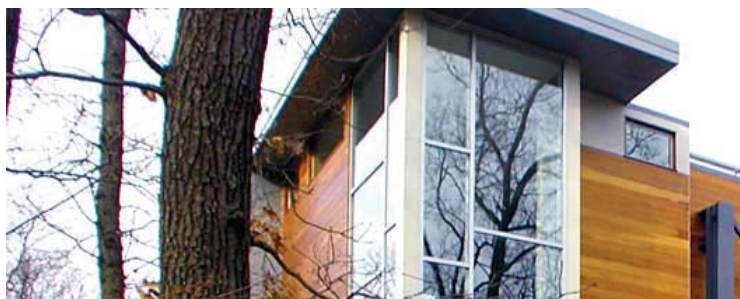
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With the wind-and-sun-kissed face of a native New Englander, Moskow is an unlikely urbanist. But his Urban Hookah, a piece of sidewalk furniture that spirals like a plume of smoke (and does, in fact, funnel cigarette smoke while providing protection from the elements) has attracted attention from local bars and restaurants and even the Vancouver International Airport. Likewise, his proposed Zipcar Dispenser is a Pez-inspired solution to the biggest challenge of urban car-share services. Using existing technology, his parking elevator stacks cars one on top of another and, when covered by a curving mesh scrim, weaves seamlessly into narrow infill lots.

Even though the elevated expressway recently rumbled right outside his own Broad Street office window, he doesn't really agree that the Big Dig is inspiring a design renaissance. "But it's a renewal," he admits, gesturing to the new ribbons of parkland created by the project. "You have all this space, all this opportunity to knit the city back together."

Having lived in more than one Canadian city without the will or resources to banish waterfront-wrecking highways, I appreciate his point. Boston is a city with will *and* resources; as Vessel's Barbeau told me, after San Francisco, Boston is the design capital of the United States. Much of that is cutting-edge industrial design for the technology, medical and other industries, the kind of jobs that initially drew Barbeau and Smith from Ottawa to the Boston area. It feels like all that creative energy and talent are surfacing with renewed inspiration now, a counterforce to the Big Dig burying the urban planning mistakes of the past.

The most obvious blossoming is the Big Dig house, a modern masterpiece that I saw rising last autumn on a secluded plot in the Six Moon Hill enclave of nearby Lexington, Mass. The house's structure is made of materials salvaged from the highway demolition. A Zen garden tops the flat garage roof. Unsupported concrete slabs elegantly jut out at perfect 90-degree angles, producing cantilevered decks in surprising places. Huge iron cross braces and posts on cement piles contrast with warm wooden siding. "The steel frame is so strong, the walls are just dressing; we can do anything we want with them," says the owner and builder, Paul Pedini, as he shows me around the unfinished house.

Pedini is a civil engineer and vice-president of Modern Continental, which completed much of the heavy work of dismantling the Central Artery. Huge steel support columns and 20-centimetre-thick reinforced concrete panels were going to be scrapped or sent to landfill. "It seemed ridiculous," Pedini says. "They were perfectly good materials. We needed a house, and we had all these materials..." His wife, Cristina, laughs and says in her Barcelona lilt, "When we first laid the slabs, you could still see the lines that had been painted on the highway."

With the expertise of Single Speed Design (led by architects John Hong and Jinhee Park), located across the river from Boston in Cambridge, Pedini conceived not only this house but two larger residential buildings holding condos and apartments. Considering that the frame of Pedini's house went up over just two days, I can't imagine why the housing project based on this efficient, modern building method hasn't received local development approval.

To get a final big picture of the Big Dig, I take a driving tour of its full length, whizzing through the impeccably white tunnels (including the Ted, as locals affectionately call the Ted Williams tunnel, beloved by airport commuters), with their tiled stripes of brown or blue, indicating whether you're under ground or water; gliding over the Leonard P. Zakim Bridge, its elegant white point echoing the Bunker Hill obelisk and the masts and sails of ships in the adjacent harbour; and, yes, wending my way through the inevitable detours and barricades and traffic chaos that has boondoggled Boston for the last decade.

Maybe that's why Boston residents seem to have "Big Dig fatigue," an exasperation with the never-ending project that colours local perceptions. Or why few of them think, like Pedini did, that its concrete and steel remains can be not only useful but beautiful in other forms. Was the Big Dig worth it? *You can smell the ocean today.* The answer is yes. ←