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Faneuil Hall Marketplace: Time to get creative again - by Carol Todreas

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Carol Todreas
Retail

It's time to get creative, especially about Faneuil Hall Marketplace. Too long sitting drearily in the middle of Boston, it is especially ripe for when the city becomes whole again, after the pandemic recedes.

Just to boost your memory: Faneuil Hall Marketplace consists of three granite market buildings constructed in the 1820s to house and market foods and other products most of which came by sea and unloaded at Long Wharf. It was the first "fulfillment" center and a prize for Boston. Eventually appreciated by the nation as a one-of-a-kind architectural wonder.

The historic buildings were revitalized in 1976 in a heroic effort by the city and The Rouse Company, then a bold and creative company with a C-suite of highly capable and imaginative execs who had the talent to pull it off. They were a mighty team inspired by the extraordinary architect Ben Thompson, whose vision for the buildings actually was the glue that held the whole thing together. It was pretty much a monumental effort combining vision, imagination, innovation, financing, and sheer will power.

Now the buildings seem to be caught in a cross fire between the city and the landlord, who both accuse the other of letting the ball drop. The result is a depressing scene of angry tenants, neglected maintenance and the total absence of a plan to return the buildings to their glory and place as a major destination for Bostonians and visitors alike.

Moreover, this is the time to fix it because when the pandemic is over, people will be entertaining, shopping, dining locally for quite a while and the pent-up demand for venues such as FHM will be stronger than ever. At the very least it is the time to recruit new tenants and give the buildings a facelift.

Regarding new tenants, the landlord should actively engage the Boston Planning and Development Agency in redefining the retail concept. Given the overall situation with traditional retail, the old notion of ground floor retail should be broadened to allow for diverse uses.

The majority of tenants should be local offering unique uses for today's market. Additionally, wine and beer licenses should be reasonably accessible for appropriate concepts. Spaces could be used for live theatre, jazz clubs, and other small musical venues. Others could be leased to test kitchens, maker-spaces for crafters, individual manufacturers, and pop-ups. There could be art studios with working artists, coffee shops and cafés with wine bars. There is no dearth of new ideas that could make FHM great again.

More easily, however, said than done. No doubt it will take grit and dedication. But if the City and Landlord partnered they could bring on other partners. They could get creative and just do it.

Carol Todreas is a principal at Todreas Hanley Associates, Cambridge, Mass.

