Ironically, it took the election of conservative Republican Ronald Reagan in 1980 to breathe new life into the plans for redeveloping the public housing project at Columbia Point. The administration was voted in under the rallying cry of “let’s reduce government.” At the time, Columbia Point was costing the government money; the feds were only too grateful to anyone who offered to help solve the public housing problem—and to take it off its hands. Sensing that the new political environment might be favorable to its plan, Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison dusted off their three-year-old proposal for redeveloping Columbia Point. Knowing that their first step had to be local, CMJ approached Boston Housing Authority receiver Harry Spence.

Like other public housing advocates, Spence had philosophical objections to converting public housing to private, mixed-income housing. Low-income housing, they argued, was desperately needed, and there was no inherent reason why a low-income, high-rise project shouldn’t work. After all, they argued, Columbia Point had worked well enough in the 1950s and early 1960s—until the BHA stopped maintaining the project, screening applicants, and enforcing the rules. Spence feared that CMJ’s proposal to sell a federal public housing project to a private developer for the first time in history might establish a bad precedent, one that would allow the government to retreat from its commitment—in his view, its fundamental responsibility—to provide public housing to those who needed it. Columbia Point originally provided fifteen hundred units of low-income housing; CMJ’s proposal was for a community of twelve hundred units, only four hundred of them low-income. While Joe Corcoran saw this as a net gain of four hundred livable low-income units, Spence and other public housing advocates saw it as a net loss of eleven hundred urgently needed low-income units.

Harry Spence articulated these reservations in a speech entitled “The Plight of Public Housing,” delivered on April 23, 1980:
The so-called mixed-income approach is not, in truth, a solution to the problem of public housing; it is largely an elimination of the problem of public housing. It begins by withdrawing from 75 percent of the task—for the redevelopment plan usually reduces to one-fourth of their original number the units available for low-income occupancy. The mixed-income alternative is roughly 25 percent more sophisticated than the argument of those who say to me, “Tear it all down and get rid of those people.” The private, mixed-income model may be appropriate in certain unusual and specific circumstances. But let us not seek false comfort in illusions that we are solving the problems of the poor by displacing them.

Spence met with Joe Corcoran in 1981 to discuss CMJ’s 1978 proposal for Columbia Point. At the time, though, Spence preferred to keep public housing public; he persisted in believing that, given enough money and support, it could be viable. Accordingly, he rejected CMJ’s proposal, inviting the company instead to submit a bid for modernization at Columbia Point. CMJ didn’t want any part of it. “Do that and you’ll have another disaster,” Joe Corcoran argued. “You’ll have to come back in ten years and pour all that money back into it again, because structurally the BHA doesn’t have the ability to manage it. Public housing authorities have demonstrated in virtually every city in America that they cannot manage family housing. It’s a bad idea to put all low-income families with all their social problems all together in one place. You just repeat the mistake.”

Undaunted by Spence’s rejection, Joe Corcoran took his proposal directly to the regional office of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The new regional director, James DiPrete, a Republican appointee, was intrigued with the idea of redeveloping Columbia Point as a private, mixed-income community. After touring King’s Lynne and talking to the tenants there, DiPrete, the former mayor of Cranston, Rhode Island, was sold on the concept. He invited Joe Corcoran and Joe Mullins to come to Washington with the Columbia Point tenant leaders Ruby Jaundoo and Roger Taylor to present the proposal to his superiors at HUD. At this point CMJ also enlisted the help of Washington lawyer and former Massachusetts senator Edward Brooke to press for redevelopment of the public housing project. Reagan administration officials embraced the concept. They recognized that this was an opportunity to demonstrate that private enterprise could provide housing for the poor while reducing federal expenditures and the government’s role. As Joe Corcoran sums up HUD’s response, “They liked the plan, probably for the wrong reasons, but they liked it.”
When Harry Spence heard that CMJ had taken its proposal to Washington after he had turned it down, he felt that the developers had done an “end run” around the BHA. Joe Corcoran explains: “I had no intention of letting Harry Spence kill a plan that could give the city and the residents a jewel instead of a desperate ghetto.” And Corcoran knew that HUD would be the banker for any further investment in Columbia Point, whether by the BHA or a private developer.

When HUD indicated that it would not make money available to the BHA for Columbia Point if it were to be used only for modernization, Spence reluctantly had to face the fact that a private, mixed-income complex was the only solution. The next challenge, as he saw it, was to make a case for privatization and converting Columbia Point to mixed-income without at the same time appearing to condemn all of the other low-income, high-rise projects in the city:

We said, look, every other development in this city exists in some kind of a neighborhood context. Columbia Point was established as an exile community, with no relationship to any existing neighborhood or community. You cannot sustain a pure public housing development in that measure of isolation. . . .

The housing advocates were saying that because we were giving up Columbia Point, we were giving up on the whole public housing program. We argued that in fact those other high-rise developments were salvageable because they had some neighborhood context. And that neighborhood context provided some hope for saving them as public housing developments with some significant changes.

Finally, the process of privatization and revitalization at Columbia Point was under way.

On September 12, 1982, a formal document, Columbia Point Peninsula Request for Developer Proposals, was issued by the BHA and the BRA, “in partnership with” the Columbia Point Community Task Force. The selection of developers, as part of the entire redevelopment process, was to be jointly run by the three parties. The BRA was given the task of overseeing the process for selecting a developer. The agency issued a request for proposals that required submissions by February 1983. The only proposal submitted by the deadline was CMJ’s, proposing a legal joint venture with the Columbia Point Community Task Force. As Joe Corcoran observes dryly, “Nobody else wanted any part of it.” CMJ was elated. Harry Spence, however, was not. Declaring the process flawed because there were no other proposals, he complained vehemently to BRA.

director Robert J. Ryan, and Ryan decided to extend the deadline for another three months. Spence backed up his insistence on additional proposals with a declaration that the BHA, which held title to the land, would refuse to convey it if CMJ’s was the only proposal.

Ryan recalls how complex the issues were. All of the players had their own concerns and their own constituents to answer to. The federal government had never sold a public housing project before. The Boston Housing Authority had to answer to a Superior Court judge. The Boston Redevelopment Authority had jurisdiction over some of the questions involving Columbia Point, but not all. Ryan explains: “All of those things were out there. We told Joe [Corcoran] we were going to put all this into the mix. Even HUD said, ‘Look, we’re not going to designate this on a sole source basis to one developer and off you go and do it, because there may be a whole host of people who want to get involved in this.’ Getting HUD to the point were they felt comfortable that this was not going to tear apart some existing policy within the federal structure was an issue, too.”

By the spring of 1983 two more development teams came forward and submitted proposals. In June the task force published an impressive Summary of Proposals for the residents of Columbia Point, including a clear time line of the entire redevelopment process and a detailed explanation and comparison of the three different plans, with respect to design, finance, phasing of construction, plans for relocation of existing tenants, management, the role of the task force, and employment.

The three proposals are markedly different. CMJ’s design, by the Boston architectural firm of Goody, Clancy & Associates, was organized around a broad central mall leading from the entrance directly to the water. The mall formed the “main street” and central gathering place for the development, with a variety of housing arranged on a rectangular grid of streets, all with views of downtown Boston in one direction and the water in the other. In the second, from Columbia Associates, Boston architect Sy Mintz proposed a dramatic redesign of the site, with a series of new waterways that would literally bring water and water views into the community. In addition, Mintz’s plan called for raising the site in several places, creating a hilly, modulated landscape instead of the totally flat one at Columbia Point. The third proposal, from Housing Innovations, suggested a design dominated by two elements: four 35-story tower complexes and a central green parallel to Mount Vernon Street, including a “town center” area of shops and community buildings near the main entrance.
The Columbia Point Community Task Force’s summary of the three proposals to redevelop the housing project submitted by Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison; Columbia Associates; and Housing Innovations. Courtesy of Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison.
Columbia Associates was a partnership initiated by Sy Mintz. It included Bob Kuehn, a Boston developer; Ed Fish, who owned Peabody Construction Company; former attorney general Edward McCormack, a well-connected real estate lawyer and Kevin White confidant; Thomas Finnerty, the law partner of Senate president William Bulger; John Cruz, a minority contractor; and the National Housing Partnership (NHP), a private, for-profit corporation chartered by Congress with the goal of building low- and moderate-income housing. By 1982 NHP was the largest owner of multifamily housing in the country.

After the Housing Innovations proposal, with its high-rise towers, failed to make the first cut, a major political storm began to break around the two remaining proposals. Both developers left in the competition had formidable support. While the Columbia Associates team had the strong backing of Harry Spence and the BHA, the Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison team had the explicit backing of the tenant task force. The selection process was headed for a standoff.

Harry Spence charged that CMJ was playing unfairly because the partners had begun meeting with the Columbia Point tenants well before the request for proposals was issued. In addition, Spence believed that CMJ had the support of the mayor and, through the mayor, the BRA. “We actually believed the thing was wired by the BRA for Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison from the start,” he says. Chronically skeptical of Mayor White’s commitment to housing, Spence threw his support behind Columbia Associates, believing that NHP had the deep pockets that would be needed to see the project to completion. Spence recalls: “The residents supported CMJ. We took the position with the support of the court that we...
thought that was nice but not determinative. They were a small number of people—this was an enormous project. And frankly, we felt they’d been wined and dined by CMJ rather successfully.”

What Harry Spence dismisses as “wining and dining,” Joe Corcoran characterizes as establishing a relationship with the tenants, explaining their vision of what could become of Columbia Point, and encouraging the tenants to educate themselves in every aspect of redevelopment precisely so their opinions could not be dismissed by the experts and politicians as “nice but not determinative.” In fact, Corcoran makes no secret of having cultivated a relationship with the tenants at Columbia Point—“Guilty,” he says—or that the relationship was a positive factor in the tenants’ choice.

As Eleanor White, deputy director of the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency at the time, observes, “Joe Corcoran was smart enough to have made incursions at Columbia Point—that is the only way to describe it—and to have befriended the tenants. It was a brilliant stroke. He was really ahead of his time in that.” What’s more, CMJ’s was the only proposal to include partnership between the developers and the tenants. According to White, “It was probably the first time that a private developer wanted to share that much power with a tenant group.”

Ruby Jaundoo, one of the most influential voices on the task force, explains how she viewed the two proposals. The members of the Columbia Associates team “were very adamant about the fact that they were in the housing business,” she says. “They run the housing, and the tenants live in it.” But the tenants were determined to be partners in redeveloping Columbia Point. “We had already gone that route,” Jaundoo explains. “We were living in a housing development and that’s all we did. We just lived there. We had no say in what went on. Having an equal say in what goes on here . . . was the key to selecting CMJ, and then their track record.”

Spence’s charge against CMJ was a matter of some controversy—one that played out prominently in the pages of the Boston Globe. On August 13, 1983, a Globe article entitled “Rebuilding of Columbia Point Threatened by Dispute over Developer” reported that the BHA, the BRA, and the tenant task force “appear headed toward a bitter confrontation and quite possibly a deadlock.” In the article, Harry Spence charged that David Connelly, a social worker who at the time was working to provide social services at King’s Lynne, where CMJ was the developer, had been meeting with the Columbia Point tenants and “coaching” them to choose the CMJ pro-
posal—in violation of an agreement among the developers that none of them would approach any of the three parties involved in selecting a developer during the process of requests for proposals.

Although Connelly was indeed under contract with CMJ to provide social services at King’s Lynne at the time, his work with the Columbia Point tenants was as an independent contractor on the BHA payroll. Connelly insists that Spence’s charges are entirely false. “I told [the tenants] they ought to fight for partnership, that it was important that they forced whoever they chose to go into a partnership with them,” Connelly explains, “whether they chose CMJ or NHP or Ed Fish or whoever.” What about the fact that CMJ’s was the only proposal that included tenant partnership? Connelly says that the tenants could have gotten some kind of a partnership from any one of the developers: “They were in a much stronger position of power than they knew they were.”

According to the Boston Globe, Joe Corcoran was furious at Spence’s charges:

Corcoran says the reason his proposal got the nod from tenants is, first, that they judged it superior, and second, that he had been discussing with tenants the possible redevelopment of Columbia Point for 15 years and that they know his commitment to the place. He accuses Spence of being self-righteous and something of a conspiracy theorist. “Harry does not have a monopoly on integrity,” he declares.

Another element in the drama was the long-standing antagonism between Harry Spence and Mayor Kevin White. “We had an irresistible force meeting an immovable object,” Spence explains. “The judge and I weren’t going to move, and the mayor wasn’t going to move.” It’s a good thing that such an important effort wasn’t derailed by this “high noon” scenario; far more important issues were at stake than whether the receiver or the mayor would be the first to blink.

Fortunately, the political pressure to find a solution to Columbia Point superseded the clash of egos. All of the players—Harry Spence, the mayor, HUD—were united in feeling the heat. As Harry Spence explains: “We believed it was terribly important to get Columbia Point not only off of the back of the public housing program in Boston—because it stood like a kind of endless indictment of the public housing program in Boston. But in those days it was constantly cited nationally—along with projects like Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis and the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago—as an example of what a disaster public housing is. So we wanted to move forward.”
Meanwhile, the task force, fearing that the BHA and the BRA were going to choose Columbia Associates as the developer, took its case to the streets. “We got ourselves together,” Esther Santos recalls, “went to the JFK building [where HUD’s regional office was located], put up our signs and made some noise.” The task force argued that the redevelopment agreement and subsequent memorandum of understanding, which was drawn up for the developer selection process, had made it clear that all three parties—the BHA, the BRA, and the task force—had to agree on the developer. The tenants weren’t about to let the city’s public officials break another promise. Esther Santos explains their indignation and their determination to make the BRA and the BHA stick to their word: “Are you saying to us that our thoughts, our work, everything means nothing, that once they choose the developer we’re going to sit back and say nothing? Not after we’ve fought for fifteen years before the whole thing came together. We said, ‘Absolutely no, we will have a say.’ We wanted to be a part of what was going on from beginning to end, so we took it to the mayor.”

To break the logjam, the mayor suggested a joint venture and appointed Boston developer Arthur Winn, well respected by both sides, to serve as mediator. Before being called in, Winn recalls watching at a distance “what looked like a pretty sophisticated battle between two groups.” The Columbia Associates group was so strong, Winn explains, that “it could not be ignored by virtue of the quality of the partners, even if one wished to politically.” Likewise, Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison could not be ignored—not because of political clout, but because they had taken what Winn describes as “a softer approach” in forging an alliance with the Columbia Point tenants as they had done at King’s Lynne. In short, Winn says, it was like the nuclear deterrent: both sides had the power of mutual annihilation. “Both forces could have blown up the deal and both understood it,” Winn recalls. “It took them about a New York minute to recognize everyone had a gun. So if anyone pulled their gun, there was no deal.”

Winn maintains that Mayor Kevin White did not favor CMJ over Columbia Associates during the mediation: “Kevin was never shy, and I don’t recall Kevin, who could have communicated in many ways in those days, saying anything. [He] was amazingly neutralized either by the power of both teams or by the merits of the situation or by the stars. But, in fact, he never directed me. . . . Kevin was uncharacteristically hands off.”
BRA’s Ryan Objects to Spence’s Unilateral Decision

August 10, 1983

Mr. Lewis H. Spence
Receiver/Administrator
Boston Housing Authority
52 Chauncy Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02111

Dear Harry:

Your letter stating your preference among Columbia Point redevelopers, delivered yesterday, has caused me serious concern. It represents a departure from the process which you and I, together with the Columbia Point Community Task Force, have agreed to conduct.

That process, agreed to nearly a year ago, calls for the three parties to reach common agreement on the selection of a developer through joint consultation. Contrary to your letter, no such consultation involving the tenants has taken place.

Based on our agreement to seek consensus, and their confidence that you and I, together with the tenants, would reach shared decisions in good faith, three distinguished development teams chose to participate in the selection process. In reliance on our commitment, they expended considerable sums in responding to the extensive and costly requirements we imposed on them.

The process we have conducted has been lengthy and thorough. At each point along the way we have taken elaborate steps to see that we were working in concert and that no unilateral actions were taken.

As recently as last week, in the concluding interviews with the two developer finalists, you and I publicly agreed to meet together with tenant representatives, and through discussion seek a common opinion on the preferred developer. We agreed that it is essential to conclude these discussions this week in order to retain HUD funding and honor our joint commitment to the developers to do so. I am also aware that you intend to go on vacation next week. I am informed that the tenants’ Task Force prepared for these discussions by concluding their review in a meeting conducted at Columbia Point on Monday night.

It is therefore startling to me that, without consulting the tenants or myself, you delivered your “firm conclusion” in writing on Tuesday. You should understand that I can respect your preference for the Columbia Associates team. They are an impressive organization and have responded well to the challenge of Columbia Point. Many of your observations about them have merit.

I may not share completely your opinions regarding Columbia Associates. As you know, the independent development analyst we jointly retained, Minot, DeBlois, and Maddison, has concluded that the CMJ proposal is stronger financially and contains substantially less risk. I certainly do not feel comfortable with your characterization of the attitudes of CMJ. In fact, I asked to speak to you and the Task Force President directly on this issue last week.

My concern however is not with the quality of your opinions on the two developers. It is these opinions which you and I agreed to meet and share. There is considerable room for honest differences among us in evaluating these two outstanding proposals. What is critical at this juncture is that our respective points of view be explained and agreement sought through the cooperative process at which we have worked so hard during the past year.

By flatly declaring your conclusion and placing it in the public domain, a wholly unnecessary level of conflict has been created.
Bob Ryan says there might have been some confusion about White’s support for the CMJ proposal; it was the BRA staff, not the mayor, who favored it. Ryan recalls:

The BRA staff came out with a recommendation [for CMJ’s proposal], not because of Kevin White and not because of me. Just because Joe Corcoran did a good job of putting it together, he should get the designation. And Harry [Spence] had his people on the other side. And that’s when we had to work out an agreement ourselves. Had a cup of coffee. We’ve got a lot of people in the room. We’ve got a very good project and a lot of good resources. People have been in this game a long time. They know how to do this thing. This pie is big enough for everyone. So then along comes Arthur Winn as Madeleine Albright, if you will.

Winn spent the month of October 1983 attempting to put together a solution that would allow everyone to lead with their strengths. Ed Fish’s strength, on the Columbia Associates side, was construction. Yet CMJ, as Winn saw it, was a company of “pure developers” who needed to have control over the project, including construction. CMJ had insisted on two things: that the tenants remain co-general partners with a 10 percent financial stake in the project; and that CMJ be designated the managing general partner. CMJ also wanted its private management company to manage the new mixed-income complex. The company believed that management control was essential to the ongoing viability of the new community.

Winn recognized that redeveloping Columbia Point was more than a real estate deal to Joe Corcoran: “This was a place he identified with personally as a Boston boy, and he wasn’t going to lose.” The deadlock was broken, according to Winn, when Ed Fish “took a step back and allowed the deal to proceed in the only way it could from Joe Corcoran’s point of view.” In the end, Fish agreed to let CMJ take primary responsibility for the construction of the project. According to Winn, Fish’s accepting a limited partnership was the key to resolving the deadlock, for which Fish deserves a tremendous amount of credit. As for his own role, Winn insists, “I had done nothing on the negotiation except provide a vehicle for this catharsis to play itself out without blowing up.”

In the end, the mayor officiated as a sort of justice of the peace in a “ shotgun marriage” between the two developers. In November 1983 Winn announced that the development team would be called Peninsula Partners, a limited partnership consisting of CMJ, Bob
Kuehn, the National Housing Partnership, Peabody Construction Company, Cruz Construction Company, and the Columbia Point Community Task Force. NIIP, unwilling to participate in a project that they didn't control, withdrew within the first six months.

As Joe Mullins explains, this marriage of both teams was cumbersome from the start: "There was a joke in town at one point: 'Anybody who is not involved in Columbia Point, please stand up.' . . . I liken it to Noah's Ark. There were two of everything. We had two architects, two sets of engineers, two sets of contractors, two sets of developers, and mini partners all around. It was a nightmare. But that was it: both teams, take it or leave it."

According to Joe Corcoran, the only way around this cumbersome partnership was to name a managing partner, regardless of the financial split. To CMJ, it was critical to be able to put its stamp on the project. In the end, Peninsula Partners agreed.

At the time, the estimated cost of the development was $150 to $200 million. By the time construction was completed, in 1990, that figure would exceed $250 million, which included $50 million in reserves. Funding for the project came from a variety of federal, state, and private sources. The Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency, under the leadership of executive director Marvin Siflinger, made a $151 million, 9.5 percent tax-exempt mortgage commitment. The federal government provided $21 million—$9 million remaining from HUD's 1978 Urban Initiatives grant and a $12 million Urban Development Action Grant. Seventy-five million dollars of private equity investment and $3 million from a Massachusetts Chapter 884 grant completed the financing.

CMJ had always envisioned the ideal mixed-income community as comprising equal proportions of low-income, moderate-income, and market-rate residents. This was the formula at King's Lynne, where mixed-income worked extremely well. When the planning for subsidized units at the new community that would be known as Harbor Point was put in place, however, there was no financial mechanism available for moderate-income subsidies.

By the time the development team was finally chosen, the first of many crises occurred: the federal Section 8 money, the key to subsidizing the 400 low-income units, had run out. The Section 8 program, developed by HUD during the Nixon administration, allowed low-income tenants to pay 25 percent of their income for rent, with HUD reimbursing the property owner for the difference. Howard
Cohen, a private attorney representing the BHA, came up with an ingenious solution. He knew that the BHA had set aside Section 8 money for 350 low-income public housing units at Franklin Field. So Cohen worked out a swap whereby Franklin Field would give Harbor Point its 350 Section 8 units, and Franklin Field would ask for modernization money that was still available for public housing but not for the privately owned Harbor Point. The remaining 50 units of low-income housing units at Harbor Point would receive a state rent subsidy under Chapter 707. The final decision on the “swap” was up to Harry Spence. He approved it, implementing Cohen’s plan and clearing the way for the redevelopment to go forward. Once the deal had been struck, Harry Spence and the BHA put their full support behind getting the job done.

Ultimately, the political imperative to do something about Columbia Point was greater than the ideological and philosophical differences among the major players. At last a development team was in place and the financing cobbled together. The way was clear for Corcoran, Mullins, Jennison and the Columbia Point Community Task Force to begin in earnest what they had first envisioned five years earlier: working together as equal partners to create a new community.

Sign points the way to Harbor Point, 1999.
*Maggie Turner.*