

# Exclamation point on the Dot

Transit, housing, and retail development amplify the revival of Dorchester's Peabody Square



*Chris Douglass, who won renown for his South End restaurant, Icarus, helped bring new focus to Peabody Square with the opening in 2005 of Ashmont Grill (left). (JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF)*

By Linda Laban, Globe Correspondent | August 19, 2007

Another old part of Boston is trying to be new again--but in a style true to its genuine Dorchester character.

Peabody Square, where Ashmont Street and Talbot and Dorchester avenues intersect, isn't one of those newly created neighborhoods dreamed up by realtors to push sleek developments. It's been a neighborhood since the late 1800s and quite a desirable one at that. On one side is Ashmont Hill and its gracious Victorians, the other the Carruth Street area with its equally fine homes, and elsewhere around solid middle-class housing.

But Peabody Square does have sleek new development. With the addition of a new Ashmont MBTA hub and, perhaps more pertinently, the adjacent six-floor mixed-use Carruth building, Peabody Square is being hailed by both its developers, Trinity Financial, and residents as a new reason to sport the bumper sticker that reads DBC -- Dorchester by Choice.

The blocklong Carruth, which will be finished and fully occupied by January, according to Trinity, will have one

and two-bedroom condos on the top two floors, running 680 to 1,380 square feet and priced in the high \$200,000s to high \$300,000s. Below will be four floors of similar-sized apartments, and retail stores on the ground level side bordering Dot Ave.

The building, however, is not the newest beachhead of the creeping gentrification that has turned over neighborhoods such as the South End. The apartments are income restricted, reserved for families earning around \$50,000 a year, and a single person making around \$35,000. The rents are expected to be \$900 per month for a one-bed and \$1,100 for the larger, two-bedroom units.

The Carruth is a "transit-oriented development," said Trinity's project manager, Abby Goldenfarb, showing off the construction in early August as the units were just getting drywall and windows. Indeed it is. Not only does the rear of the building look over the new Ashmont station, but Goldenfarb said the building, in part, shares a foundation with the T facility.

Residents will have to like trains. Still, all of the condos will include one parking space in the heated garage. So even though you are steps away from the T station, you have the convenience of a car.

Right now the square is something of a chaotic jumble, owing in part to the dislocation caused by the construction on the T station. Buses terminate right outside the Carruth at multiple stops, adding noise and exhaust fumes to an intersection already choked by traffic.

"The city needs to focus on traffic on the avenue," said Brian Piccini, owner of hip restaurant and lounge, dbar, further up on a grimier part of Dot Ave. "The systems of traffic control are highly ineffective and defunct. I've spent many days on the avenue in 'parking lot' conditions."

But even now Peabody Square holds surprises for the wandering eye.

To one side the Elizabethan-style Peabody apartment building, with its ivy-covered brick, and next to it, the stone gothic revival All Saints Church, which was built in 1892 and marked the birth of the square. Just a couple of streets away is the quiet, pretty Ocean Avenue, with its magnificent mansion upon mansion earning it number 16 on Boston Magazine's recent list of best streets to live on in Boston.

North up Dot Ave. is a more typical Dorchester: triple deckers and plain-looking apartment buildings, with sundry convenience stores and a helter-skelter street life. Often touted as "coming-up," Dorchester more regularly is known for gang and drug-related violence.

"I'm in real estate. I'm not supposed to say Dorchester has a high-crime rate," said Larry Gettings of Dorchester-based At Home Real Estate, which is marketing the Carruth. "But, I live here, it's around us, there's no denying it. It's the same as any inner city. I wouldn't go strolling down the street waving my iPod. But I've never experienced anything like that. Neighbors watch out for each other, there a strong sense of community."

The breakthrough in Peabody Square's latest act was the 2005 opening of the Ashmont Grill, the stylish eatery opened by Chris Douglass, who made his name in food circles with the South End restaurant, Icarus. From day one, Ashmont Grill was embraced by residents, including the increasing numbers of gay and lesbian residents moving here, and as a resident of Ashmont Hill, Douglass seemed to understand exactly what his neighbors wanted.

"I love that almost every time I walk in there, which is at least twice a week, I know half the people in there," says Ashmont resident Joyce Linehan, 43. "I love that Chris employs neighborhood kids from a culinary arts program. Plus it has WiFi and, anytime there's work going on at my house, that's where you'll find me."

Next will be the retail outlets launched with the Carruth building. And not just any old retail, but, as real estate broker Gettings put it, "tenants that fit the profile." That is, carefully chosen retailers such as fair-trade coffee company Flat Black, which will pair up with progressive lender, Wainwright Bank & Trust, to create a unique bank/café where baristas will work almost side-by-side with bank tellers. On one corner will be Tavolo, a 3500-square foot pizza and pasta restaurant, also run by Douglass.

Piccini, who like Douglass has a stylishly designed, landscaped patio in his establishment, thinks that Peabody Square's facelift will redound positively through Dorchester.

"I've lived in Dorchester for eight years, two of which with dbar," he said. "I can't not embrace such a positive redevelopment. It will bring more goods and services that are much needed by all communities in Dorchester."

Linehan, who has lived in Ashmont Hill for 15 years, is thrilled she can finally walk to a bank.

"Not only will there be a bank within walking distance of my house for the first time since I've been here, but it's also a bank that has a proven track record of community involvement," she said. Though it will change the landscape considerably, she's excited about the Carruth.

"I know it's big," Linehan acknowledged, "but I think the square needs a bit of density to bring it to life."

© Copyright 2007 Globe Newspaper Company.