

Culture, atmosphere draw crowds to the waterfront

By James Sullivan

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The young couple sprawled on a blanket on the immaculate lawn adjacent to the ICA. They watched as their two children toddled aimlessly in the deep grass. A tiny pair of green Crocs lay next to the blanket.

From a distance, their son pointed out to the water and hollered for his mother, Britta Hiester, to look. His favorite boat, one painted to look like a great white shark, was chugging into port.

Because Hiester and her husband, Samuel Hurtado, live in a South Boston house with a small yard, they take full advantage of city's public spaces, Hiester said. The Colorado native and Boston resident for more than a decade remembers when the waterfront was not nearly so inviting.

"We've seen this whole area transform," she said. "We used to walk along the harbor when it was just parking lots."

The arrival of the Institute of Contemporary Art on Fan Pier in 2006, coupled with more recent developments such as the nearby opening of Louis Boston, has helped reacquaint Bostonians with the waterfront that enticed the city's original settlers. In particular, the museum's free Thursday nights have attracted a steady stream of visitors.

In summer, many bring picnics to enjoy outside. In August, others were lured by an eclectic summer concert series — reggae, bluegrass, Brazilian pop — on the plaza beneath the museum's striking cantilever. Some just come for the profound serenity of the oceanfront view, minutes from the quitting-time bustle of downtown.

On Thursday evening, groups of couples and friends chose seats up and down the plaza grandstand, giving each other respectable distance. A cluster of Italian students sat, joking, then moved on with their chaperone.

Most conversations were hushed, rendered inaudible from even a short distance by the sound of the breeze, the faint whoosh of the unseen expressway traffic and the occasional whine of an airplane banking out of Logan. The flag at Anthony's Pier 4 stiffened northward, anticipating the predicted arrival of Hurricane Earl.

As dusk began to settle, the number of bicycles being locked to the railing outside the museum's entrance grew.

The museum was getting crowded, said two emerging visitors, Massachusetts native Tom Brien, who works across the way at Thomson Reuters, and his niece, 29-year-old Leah Gioseffi, who has a job in Cambridge. With bags slung over their shoulders, they strolled along the boardwalk.

With her Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses propped on her forehead, Gioseffi struggled to keep her red cotton dress from swirling skyward, Marilyn Monroe-style, in the sea breeze.

"Good thing he's not a photographer," teased her uncle, motioning to a reporter.

When the wind settled, smaller sounds were apparent. The floorboards along the Harbor Walk creaked. Water lapped against the hulls of sailboats tied to their moorings.

A quarter-mile or so out, a party boat edged out to sea, momentarily filling the harbor with the synthesizer riff and exuberant bellowing of Usher's "Yeah!"

Two more patrons exited the ICA's front door. Bladimir Hernandez, a 20-year-old who works at the New England Aquarium's IMAX Theatre, and his 18-year-old friend Brian Mata, who is taking classes toward his GED in Cambridge, said they had come to see the exhibition of work by a renowned Mexican tattoo artist.

Sitting on a high-backed bench across the green, the bespectacled, curly-haired Hernandez clutched a bag from Newbury Comics, where he had just bought the Beatles T-shirt he was wearing. He explained that he had visited the ICA twice during its landmark show by the print artist Shepard Fairey.

It was the first visit for Mata, clean-shaven and wearing shorts and a loose-fitting plaid shirt.

Before heading back to their homes in Chelsea, the two friends sat listening to the music from the atmospheric speakers hidden in the bushes along the edge of the lawn. In an odd fit for this serene moment along Boston's refurbished waterfront, they were serenaded quietly, almost subliminally, by Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York."

Further up the boardwalk, a family sat in their boat at dockside, bantering in the descending darkness. Diners on the second-floor deck of Sam's, the new restaurant at Louis, carved their entrees beneath the canopy of the downtown skyline. The smell of sizzling steak wafted from the kitchen's exhaust fans.

Somewhere in the brush, a lone cricket chirped.