



Joel Sklar

**EDITORS' NOTE** Since 1998, Joel Sklar has been a principal of the company with primary responsibility for overseeing strategic planning, capital raising, acquisition and development activities. Prior to Samuels & Associates, Sklar served as Director of Latin American Development for New England Development. Prior to this, he practiced law as a Partner at Goulston & Storrs. Sklar is a member of the International Council of Shopping Centers, is on the Board of Directors of NAIOP, Chairs the Board of the Boston Main Streets Foundation, and is on the Board of Nuestra Comunidad Development Corporation. He is an honors graduate of University of Florida and holds a J.D. from Harvard Law School.

**COMPANY BRIEF** The seasoned in-house team at Samuels & Associates ([samuelsre.com](http://samuelsre.com)) is focused on place-making and development initiatives, leveraging their expertise in site selection and market demographics; property acquisition; permitting; project management and construction; retail merchandising and leasing; finance; property management; residential leasing; and marketing to create successful projects. Their management experience ranges from small neighborhood retail centers and grocery-anchored necessity shopping centers, to power centers and urban mixed-use projects.

#### How has this firm evolved to where it is today?

With its roots in a three-generation family business, Samuels & Associates has evolved to a highly professional firm.

Steve Samuels grew up in the real estate business, establishing Samuels & Associates in Boston as a real estate management company. He looked for his own smaller deals, but did the management and leasing for his family real estate portfolio. The firm was originally focused on suburban shopping centers in Ohio and throughout New England. They also owned a chain of national grocery stores.

The sale of the grocery chain to a Dutch company offered the resources necessary to grow

# Growing Boston's Fenway

An Interview with **Joel Sklar**,  
President and Principal, Samuels & Associates

the real estate business to become a leading shopping center developer, in partnership and with an exclusive joint venture.

In 1998, all the shopping centers in the family portfolio were sold to a group in North Carolina. More importantly, he shifted his focus to growing as a professional organization.

I had been a partner at a downtown law firm doing real estate development work at the time, and I had worked with Steve a few times. I was persuaded that he had a vision for the future of real estate that I wanted to be a part of so I joined the firm.

Working with a small crew, we pursued a trend we knew well – the bread and butter of the grocery-anchored shopping center world. But what we really wanted to do was “go urban,” applying our experience to the trend of people migrating back to the urban core.

We viewed urban Boston as a growth vehicle. Steve had completed the first urban shopping center development in Boston years earlier, working with the mayor and bringing together diverse residential communities in Boston, which had been at odds.

The success of South Bay Center created a national example of how retailing could come back to the inner-city in a big way. The project established Steve as an urban retail specialist and solidified his relationship with local communities, elected officials, and retail partners.

As successful as South Bay was, we saw an even greater opportunity in creating mixed-used developments and thinking big picture about place-making.

One of our next deals in Boston came from someone who had tied up a two-acre site a few blocks from Fenway Park to build a grocery store. This was the beginning of our work as a mixed-use developer.

Working collaboratively with the neighborhood and the city, we came up with a shared vision for creating a new urban village in the Fenway. The area has a huge traffic flow but at the time, it wasn't a thriving area.

#### What is the vision for Samuels' work in the Fenway when it is completed?

The area of the Fenway where we have been focused is essentially a triangle formed by Boylston Street, which starts in the Back Bay and goes into the Longwood Medical Area, and Brookline Avenue, which goes from Kenmore Square, past Fenway Park, and ends in the Longwood Medical Area. Previously, these two main thoroughfares

were filled with one-story, limited use buildings – including a number of gas stations and garages. To the Samuels team, it was like the hole in the center of a donut and a huge missed opportunity.

We were fortunate to have this opportunity just as the community was embarking on a comprehensive master planning process. By participating in this exercise, we collaboratively developed a vision for the future that was solidified into a rezoning of Fenway's main corridors in the early 2000s. By allowing for greater density and height, we knew we could literally transform Brookline Avenue and Boylston with new mixed-use projects that prioritized active streets.

That process mapped out the scale of the neighborhood to become, instead of one-story and three-story buildings, 23 to 25 stories at the highest zoned gateway parcel to as low as 12 or 13 stories.

The work we have done over the past decade plus (and will continue for likely the next decade) has already begun to transform the area into a new 24/7 mixed-use district, evenly split among residential, office, and retail uses. All the streets have wide sidewalks, planting zones, dining areas, and pocket parks. We're creating a seamless, walkable district that will connect the Longwood Medical area to the Back Bay, so you can walk from one to the other without experiencing a gap in street life. To date, we have completed Trilogy, a 600-unit apartment building with 40,000 square feet of retail grade and three levels of parking below and 1330 Boylston, a 200-unit apartment building with 15,000 square feet of retail and the 100,000-square foot Fenway Health community health center.

#### What is on the horizon for the firm?

There is still a lot to be done in Fenway – we're building Van Ness, which will house a City Target, smaller and independent retail, new spec office space, and additional residential units. Ambitious plans for the expansion of an existing building in our portfolio – Landmark Center – will continue our ability to activate the street level with new uses, including the first urban Wegmans. We're excited for this work to continue.

The Samuels team has also begun to focus on new neighborhoods, like Barry's Corner in Allston. We've partnered with Harvard University to create the first private development on Harvard-owned land, adjacent to their evolving Allston campus. We hope this will be the first of several projects that bring new housing, ground floor experiences, and retail to another underserved neighborhood. ●