

Volpe Working Group Meeting – Notes

April 6, 2017, Cambridge Police Department

- Attending:
 - Volpe Working Group: Steve LaMasters, Hugh Russell, Gerald O’Leary, Esther Hanig, Kathy Born, Peter Crawley, Chris Barr
 - CDD staff: Suzannah Bigolin, Stuart Dash, Daniel Wolf, Jeff Roberts, Iram Farooq, Erik Thorkildsen (consultant)
 - MIT: Sarah Gallop, Kathryn Brown, Steve Marsh, Hunter Kass, Anthony Galluccio, David Manfredi
- Introduction:
 - Jeff Roberts
 - Five meetings in April and May
 - Next meeting focused on built form, including building scale and character
 - In May will shift to sustainability and transportation and approaching synthesis
 - Steve Marsh (MIT): update
 - MIT holding meetings with East Cambridge Planning Team, 303 3rd St condo owners, Community Development Department
 - Reaching out to Port and Wellington-Harrington neighborhoods to establish dialogue
 - Dialogue with co-chairs of Ordinance Committee
 - Anthony Galluccio
 - Intention is to listen to group, and MIT will file zoning petition
- Presentation by Erik Thorkildsen (part 1): Overview of principles discussed so far and comparative districts
- Discussion:
 - Cambridge Research Park
 - Not the same vibrancy as Assembly and Seaport
 - Skating rink is a major civic draw, good for families, already seems too crowded
 - Plaza when rink is taken away is a vibrant space at lunchtime, lots of tables, helps restaurants by providing space for diners
 - North-south chain of open spaces works well
 - Future double-loaded retail near canal (MIT plan) will be a bonus
 - Residential uses help activate the area
 - University Park
 - Feels sleepy; one big open space; nothing blended into it
 - Should be an extension of a neighborhood but it isn’t, doesn’t draw people in – compare to Jill Brown-Rhone Park / Lafayette Square which has tables and a retail edge to drive activity there
 - Lacking good entries from neighborhood to west
 - Park feels private, for the private office buildings, because it doesn’t have public access on all sides
 - Perhaps more ground-floor activation along Sidney Street would have helped the open space
 - Assembly Row
 - Seems vibrant at all times

- An island – severed from surrounding neighborhoods; made for driving to it to some extent
 - Well used place; good programming; lots of draw: movie theater, LEGO Land, nice play space for kids (but sort of on the edge of site)
 - Everything on interior is very commercially focused - mostly food drink and retail; but the place works well
 - Huge parking lot towers, hard to get around
 - Open space is peripheral, not central
 - Shops are tacky
 - Scale of streets is fine, but not enough structure/variety
 - Streets feel comfortable for pedestrians, human scale, traffic moves slowly
 - Seaport District
 - Feels vibrant, lots of pedestrian traffic
 - Buildings blend into park area, walkways, waterfront
 - Somewhat isolated, island connected by a causeway
 - Lots of tall buildings, not much is interesting
 - Feels cold all the time because of wind
 - General
 - Examples show that just because a large open space exists doesn't guarantee it will be successful – need to think about how the space will be used
 - Public parks that have good visibility and connectivity to surrounding streets increase the public's sense of ownership over a park – on the Volpe site, suggested a park along Broadway and Third to connect beyond the site
 - Activation doesn't need to be all bars and restaurants – with interactive seating (e.g., chess boards) people will come together and share ideas
 - Intersectionality – convergence of different kinds of people creates vibrancy (people working, living, playing)
 - A great civic magnet would draw people in – e.g., recreational use, like skating rink
 - A space will be popular with people if there are people there
 - You can't count on office buildings to activate open space
 - Spaces interact with the surrounding activity - it can compound on itself
 - Given level of density we're likely to have here, taller buildings make sense to create more open space – but can step height away from main pedestrian areas
 - Opportunity for MIT to use technology to creative interactive experiences and active spaces/corridors
 - Hope that this could be a punctuation point for Cambridge, where building intensity really goes up – highest elevations in city
 - District should be original, full of people, with lots of ways to get around – the comparison sites are fairly conventional
- Presentation by Erik Thorkildsen (part 2): Three potential approaches to the site (site plans):
 - Site plan #1: north-south park along Fifth Street
 - Site plan #2: park at Broadway and Third Street
 - Site plan #3: internal park on Fifth Street and public square on Broadway (also, a variation, with enhanced connection to Third Street from internal park)
- Discussion:
 - Site plan #1

- Openings are large enough to create visibility for the open spaces and draw people in
 - Formal gardens traditionally have a focal point and a small building at the north edge of the park could be that
 - Site plan #2
 - Park would see a lot of activity from people walking to and from T
 - Good access to sunlight, would feel inviting
 - Central location would give the district some cohesion help center and make sense of the area, and create a meeting point
 - Like Bryant Park, open on three sides to create openness and visibility
 - Maybe park doesn't need to be so big – perhaps smaller parks elsewhere too
 - Avoids the problem from University Park – feels less private, more welcoming
 - Would the east-west canal extension feel like it ends at the park? What would carry activity further through the site?
 - Site plan #3
 - Something wonderful about a partially hidden park; Hoyt Field in Riverside is similar – not visible from major streets; appreciate the element of mystery/surprise of not knowing where something leads
 - Internal parks work better when there is a programmatic draw
 - Conversely, a small hidden park might not achieve the goal of creating a “center of gravity”
 - Appreciate the romantic piazza concept and how it could relate to comfort, inclusiveness, civic participation, local ownership, etc, but nervous that a park in the middle of very tall private buildings won't feel comfortable, perhaps windy, too much shade
 - 6th Street walkway is connected to main open space
 - MIT is creating a double sided retail corridor along the canal – that should extend the energy into the shopping arcade concept
 - The version with a retail “galleria” approach connecting to Broad Canal Way is better because it draws people into the interior open space
 - General
 - Important to think about office vs retail vs. residential frontage around public space – how much “dead space” can be tolerated before the open space suffers?
 - A meaningful passage through the Marriot is important to provide a more direct connection – though it is outside the site, important to try to improve this condition
- Public Comment:
 - Distinction between squares and parks - very different; there's a place for both; a heart should be more of a square; think Cambridge Common vs Davis Square – Davis is surrounded by retail, does not abut all the streets, is between two T entrances, lots of streets coming together, mix of retail uses
 - Connectivity – should look at the broader context; necessity of connection to T, tying into future Grand Junction path, tying to Broad Canal out to river
 - In addition to principles, we should have mandates as well
 - Good to hear MIT is making the zoning proposal - adversarial process leads to better results; City does better when responding with critical eye to external proposals
 - Important to think about the Broadway edge

- Thinking about height, some comparables are: Copley Square, Park Plaza, the edge of Boston Common near Tremont and Boylston
- Lesson from Seaport: small changes can make huge changes to a district – Northern Avenue bridge closure; so strive for some adaptability in the plan
- Access to sunlight should be a principle
- Would be helpful to have rough heights proposed and to indicate in plan the intended uses (commercial, residential...)
- Uses should be 40% commercial and 60% residential, not the other way around – residential eyes on spaces is important
- Southern side of Broadway near Point Park is difficult to change because of MBTA access requirements due to substation
- Existing green spaces with very large oak trees currently near Broadway – what about flipping two western buildings into the park to preserve the trees
- Short portion of building across Broadway, good light access
- Good plan - continue success of canal into the site
- MIT response:
 - Steve Marsh
 - Loves elements of many of the schemes; looking at how to integrate a combination of the ideas
 - Focus on public realm, making it feel warm and inviting
 - David Manfredi
 - Erik's done a really nice job making tangible many of these ideas
 - Important to think about open space in different types - park vs piazza/square
 - Also important to think about sidewalks - how important they are as public spaces in themselves
 - What configuration will support retail?
 - Connection to surroundings
 - Important to have continuous retail, not when isolated
 - Anthony Galluccio
 - Sticking to golden rule of principles first, not getting mired in where things should go, because plans could evolve over time
 - In Kendall process - residential ended up replacing a site initially intended for office due to community desires - things can always change, will be guided by main principles