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Change photo

City of Cambridge

CENTRAL SQUARE Development Guidelines

Central Square
Development Guidelines

Table of Contents

- I. PURPOSE
- II. BACKGROUND
- III. DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES
- IV. DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES
 - A. Stores and Storefronts
 - B. Housing
 - C. Parking and Service Areas
 - D. Streets and Sidewalks
 - E. Elements of Form
 - 1. Height
 - 2. Scale
 - 3. Massing
 - 4. Streetwalls and Setbacks
 - 5. Exterior Treatments
 - a. Renovations
 - b. New Construction
- V. CENTRAL SQUARE DISTRICTS
 - A. Central Square Edge District
 - B. Heart of Central Square District
 - C. Central Square to MIT District
 - D. Transitional District

Appendix

Central Square National Register District

CENTRAL SQUARE DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES

I. Purpose

The Central Square Development Guidelines have been compiled to assist residents, property owners, developers and the City in reviewing proposed development projects within the Central Square Overlay District. These Guidelines in conjunction with the Central Square Action Plan, November 1987, will establish the criteria by which development consultation review and review of applications for special permits and variances will be reviewed.

II. Background

Central Square, one of Cambridge's oldest commercial areas, is located at the junction of four economically and socially diverse Cambridge neighborhoods: Neighborhood 4; Mid-Cambridge; Cambridgeport; and Riverside. It contains a varied mix of retail, eating and drinking, office and residential uses. The Square's concentration of commercial activity is located between two major institutional nodes. One of these nodes includes City Hall, the YWCA, the YMCA, the U.S. Post Office, the Division of Employment Security and various religious organizations and is the western boundary. The eastern boundary and second institutional node is defined by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Central Square is centrally located in Cambridge between Harvard University and MIT and lies along the City's main thoroughfare, Massachusetts Avenue. The Square is within minutes of both the Mass Pike and Route 93. Public transportation is provided by numerous bus routes and the MBTA Red Line subway.

The Square's business activities are concentrated along Massachusetts Avenue from Inman Street (west) to Main Street (east), and between Bishop Allen Drive (north) to Green Street (south). Beyond these boundaries exists a scattering of commercial uses and a rich fabric of residential structures.

The dramatic changes in the real estate market and development plans throughout the City sparked a concern by the residents, City and business community that Central Square's future as a neighborhood retail area may be threatened. As a result of a two year long planning effort, the Central Square Action Plan was adopted by the City Council in 1988 as a policy document to direct and control change in the area. Changes in the zoning with the creation of an Overlay District allows community input into the future development plans of the square.

III. Development Goals and Objectives

The main goal of the Central Square Action Plan is to strengthen the retail environment while maintaining a culturally and economically diverse neighborhood shopping area. The plan recommends:

1. That new development reflect the existing neighborhood by providing a mix of affordable housing opportunities;
2. Preserve structures which contribute to the historical fabric of the Square;
3. Maintain an active streetscape both during the day and evening;
4. Promote compatibility with existing uses; and
5. Improve the overall physical and visual environment.

These design guidelines are written to promote to the extent possible through physical design the attainment of the Action Plan's goals and objectives.

IV. Design Principles and Guidelines

A. Stores and Storefronts

Storefronts should be oriented to the pedestrian and provide visual interest both day and night along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street. Pedestrians should be encouraged to window shop by the provision of varied and interesting display areas. Every effort should be made to facilitate access into the store and to create an individual building or store identity.

The following elements are encouraged:

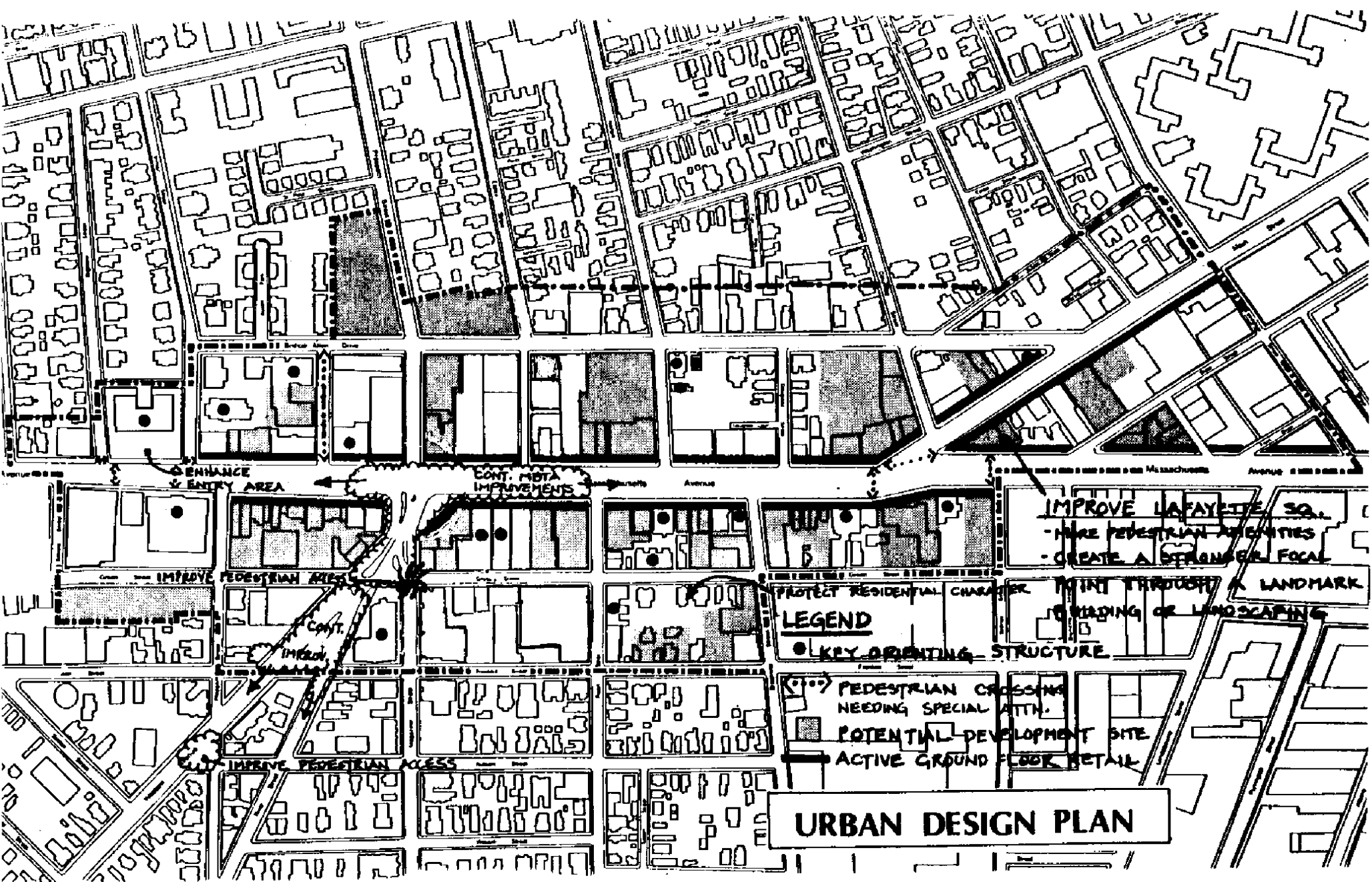
1. large window areas for display or for looking into a store with lighting to facilitate night viewing
2. awnings and/or canopies
3. signage which is attractively integrated into the window area, awnings, canopies and architecture of the building
4. street grade entrances which continue a strong linear edge along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street
5. window boxes
6. restoration of details in historically contributing or significant buildings
7. retail businesses should provide rest room facilities for customers
8. small projecting signs which are compatible with the architecture of the building

The following elements are discouraged:

1. small window areas that do not promote or encourage viewing into the store
2. overpowering signage
3. alcoves or recesses in the building wall that encourage loitering
4. loading docks along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street
5. parking entrances and exits along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street
6. below or above grade store entrances
7. non-retail uses on Massachusetts Avenue

B. Housing

Housing is an important element to ensure activity throughout the day and night. There are several residential structures within the commercial area and a strong tie to the adjacent neighborhoods. The development of housing in combination with retail/commercial uses and or alone is desirable. New housing should continue to reflect the diversity of the area by providing a mix of unit sizes and occupancy opportunities and should be available to a wide range of income groups.



ENHANCE & ENTRY AREA

CONT. MDTA IMPROVEMENTS

IMPROVE PEDESTRIAN ACCESS

CONT. IMPROV.

IMPROVE PEDESTRIAN ACCESS

IMPROVE LAFAYETTE SQ.
 - MORE PEDESTRIAN ACTIVITIES
 - CREATE A STRONGER FOCAL POINT THROUGH PLANNING OR LANDSCAPING

PROTECT RESIDENTIAL CHARACTER

LEGEND

● KEY ORIENTING STRUCTURE

⦿ PEDESTRIAN CROSSING NEEDING SPECIAL ATTN.

■ POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT SITE

→ ACTIVE GROUND FLOOR RETAIL

URBAN DESIGN PLAN

The following elements are encouraged:

1. renovation/reuse of existing structures
2. creation of affordable units
3. windows should overlook the street below
4. units should face adjacent residential units especially on Green Street and Bishop Allen Drive and be sensitive to the scale of adjacent units
5. use of federal, state and or local incentives for affordable housing units
6. secure private yards or open space for tenants

The following elements are discouraged:

1. private yards or open space along Massachusetts Avenue or Main Street
2. units geared to a single income group

C. Parking and Service Areas

Presently there are limited opportunities to provide off site service areas and as a result streets and sidewalks are frequently obstructed. Service areas are to be located to allow vehicles access onto the site and off of the public ways and away from residential windows.

Central Square is well served by public transportation facilities. It is strongly encouraged that commercial tenants take advantage of this opportunity and therefore reduce the need for on site parking facilities. When parking is constructed in conjunction with a development it should be screened from all public view. Parking facilities should be constructed so as to allow maximum use of ground floor space for retail activity especially along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street.

Entrances to both parking and service areas must be constructed to minimize disruption to adjacent uses. Entries should be kept away from street intersections as much as possible.

D. Streets and Sidewalks

Renovations to the MBTA Red Line in Central Square were confined to a few blocks at the center of the Square. It is strongly recommended that new developments incorporate similar improvements into the public ways adjacent to their projects and to fill in areas untouched due to the existence of vaults.

Suggested improvements include:

1. Fill in private vaults within sidewalk areas

2. Street trees
3. Bicycle racks
4. Trash containers
5. Washington Post lights or other fixture as approved by the City along Massachusetts Avenue
6. Kiosks
7. Paving and materials to be consistent with the MBTA improvements
8. Widening sidewalk areas on side streets to a minimum of eight feet connecting Bishop Allen Drive and Green Street to Massachusetts Avenue and improve the condition of existing sidewalks.
9. Upgrade lighting along Bishop Allen Drive, Green Street and the streets connecting them to Massachusetts Avenue

E. Elements of Form

1. HEIGHT

Height of buildings should be consistent within the overall context of the surrounding properties. Whenever possible the greatest height and bulk of the building should be placed on Massachusetts Avenue with a diminution in height and bulk as the project approaches the lower residential uses in abutting areas. Height and bulk should also be arranged to protect sight lines of significant historic structures. In street wall situations it is desirable to relate architectural elements of new construction to the significant architectural elements including cornice heights on adjacent buildings.

2. SCALE

The heavy pedestrian activity in the Square must be recognized in renovations and new construction projects. Treatment of the ground floor plane should relate to the human dimension and be rich in detail to enhance the pedestrian experience.

3. MASSING

Continuation of a strong linear retail frontage is critical to preserving the strength and historic character of the commercial district. Building fronts should maintain a strong unbroken linear edge along Massachusetts Avenue. Adjacent structures should build to a common party wall; alleyways between buildings are not encouraged.

4. STREETWALLS AND SETBACKS

Building walls along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street should be maintained at the property line with alcoves minimized so as not to create unsupervised areas which encourage loitering. Setbacks along narrow sidestreets are encouraged to provide expanded sidewalk widths; a minimum of eight feet is desirable to allow the planting of street trees.

5. EXTERIOR TREATMENTS

a. Renovations

Contributing and historically significant buildings should be renovated whenever possible. Materials should be consistent with the materials used when the structure was originally built. Original details should be preserved and restored whenever possible.

b. New Construction

Pedestrian level treatments must be rich in detail and help to reinforce human scale through the use of architectural elements such as trim, sills, lintels, awnings and canopies. The use of durable materials, granite or limestone will help to add interest and variation to facades. Windows should be large and illuminated from within to create interesting display or viewing areas for retail space.

New construction should be compatible and sensitive to adjacent historic structures with respect to scale and massing. Use of stucco, or stucco style panels and concrete blocks are discouraged. As a general rule, new buildings should be faced with wood or masonry with "punched" operable windows to complement the older structures in the Square. Brick should be a full size brick with a color which is compatible to adjacent structures.

The building walls above the ground floor should be articulated with bays, setbacks, cutouts, flower boxes, balconies, etc. to eliminate "boxy" type structures. Care should be taken to insure that automobile headlights and street light glare are shielded from residential windows.

Signs should be designed to fit on the building and to be integrated with windows and awnings and not overlap or cover building details. Signage should be legible, unobtrusive and not overpowering.

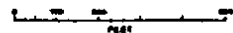
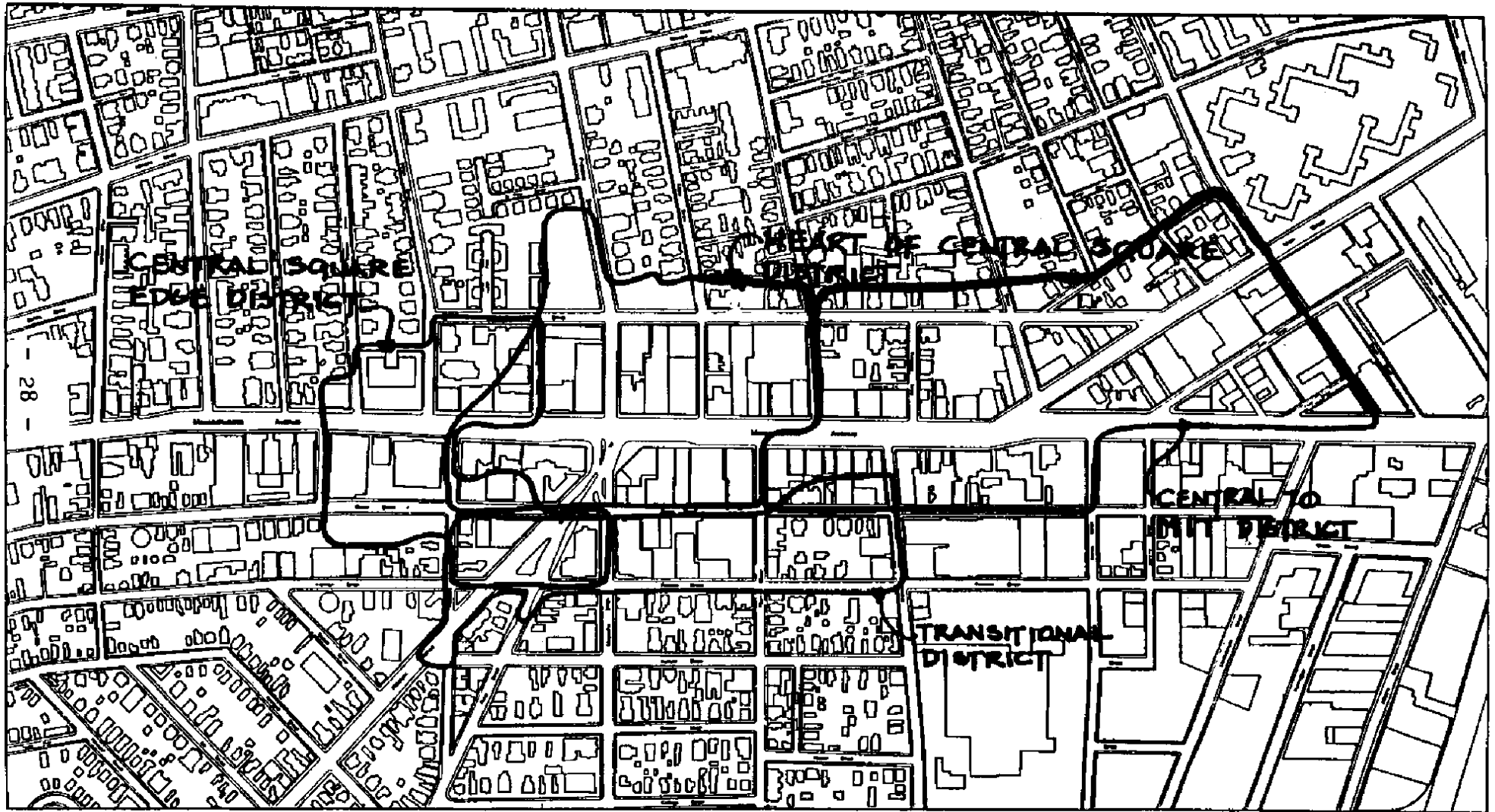
The use of color should be appropriate to the historic character of the Square, such as subtle highlighting of details on awnings, signage and trim, etc. Overpowering, gaudy, or "trendy" colors are discouraged.

All mechanical penthouses and other projections should be integrated into the building form. These projections should be faced with the same building materials and not detract from the buildings overall appearance.

V. Central Square Districts

Four sub-districts have been identified within the Central Square Overlay District; Central Square Edge District; Heart of Central Square District; Central Square to MIT District; and, Transitional District. The following guidelines have been developed to complement the general guidelines for the Overlay District by summarizing the most distinctive aspects of each sub-district and by suggesting how new projects should be considered in regard to these special attributes.

The drawings show the general location of each district. Since each sub-district is a part of the whole business district, boundary lines are illustrative and are not meant to isolate design concerns in an arbitrary fashion.



CENTRAL SQUARE DISTRICTS

A. Central Square Edge District

This district is substantially developed and has a strong institutional and architectural presence and therefore provides a stable edge to the business district. City Hall, Saint Mary's and the YWCA are included in an existing National Register District. The buildings are characteristic of the "Beaux Arts/City Beautiful" character and contribute substantially to the historic architectural quality of the Square.

1. PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT

Although this district is substantially developed, several development possibilities exist and are the most likely to be affected by future development pressures. These potential sites include several parking lots and two single story commercial structures.

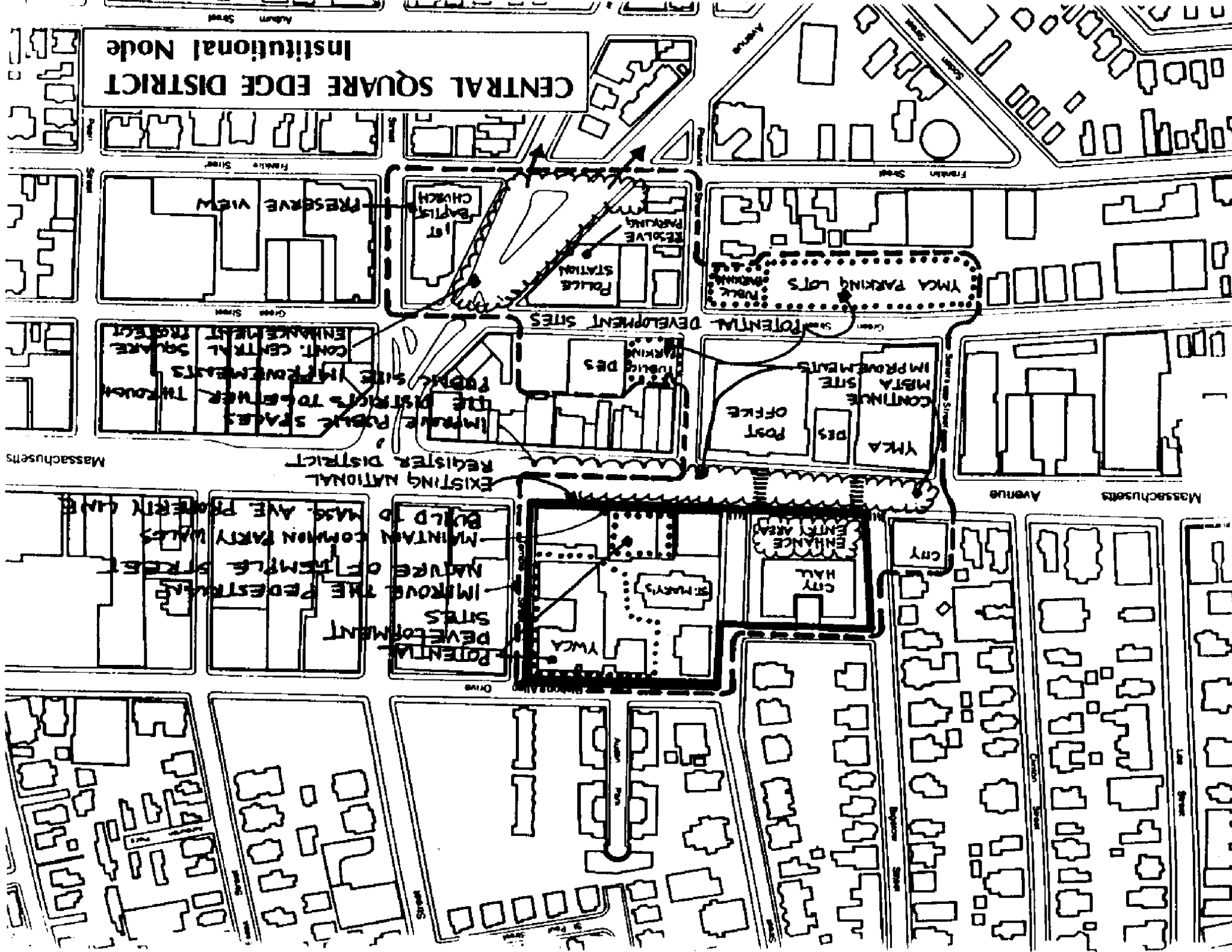
The YMCA and YWCA have been falling on difficult financial times. Their presence in Central Square is important and every effort should be made to perpetuate their continued existence here. However, in light of the limited financial assistance available, if these properties are sold or redeveloped for other uses, then maintenance of the architectural integrity of the buildings should be encouraged. Developments adjacent to or in addition to their existing facilities should reflect their structural dominance within the district, but not detract from their architectural character. The presence of public parking facilities adjacent to or near the parking lots owned by the YMCA and the DES site may offer a unique opportunity for the development of affordable housing units. Any development in this location should consult with the City to determine the feasibility of a partnership.

Redevelopment of the properties fronting along Massachusetts Avenue should be done with strict attention paid to the adjacent National Register properties.

2. PUBLIC SPACES

As mentioned above municipal parking facilities are possible leveraging mechanisms for the creation of affordable housing. The City needs to investigate the appropriateness of possible developments and determine how or if parking is to be replaced.

Continuation of a strong site improvement program that will connect this district to the main commercial district, the Heart of Central Square District, is



CENTRAL SQUARE EDGE DISTRICT
Institutional Node

RESERVE VIEW

BARTON CHURCH

POLICE STATION
 POLICE
 STATION
 RESOLVE
 PARKING

YWCA PARKING LOTS
 PUBLIC PARKING

POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT SITES

IMPROVE PUBLIC SPACES
 THE DISTRICTS TO BRING THROUGH
 PUBLIC SITE IMPROVEMENTS
 CONT. CENTRAL SQUARE
 ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

YWCA
 DES
 OFFICE
 CONTINUE
 MBTA SITE
 IMPROVEMENTS

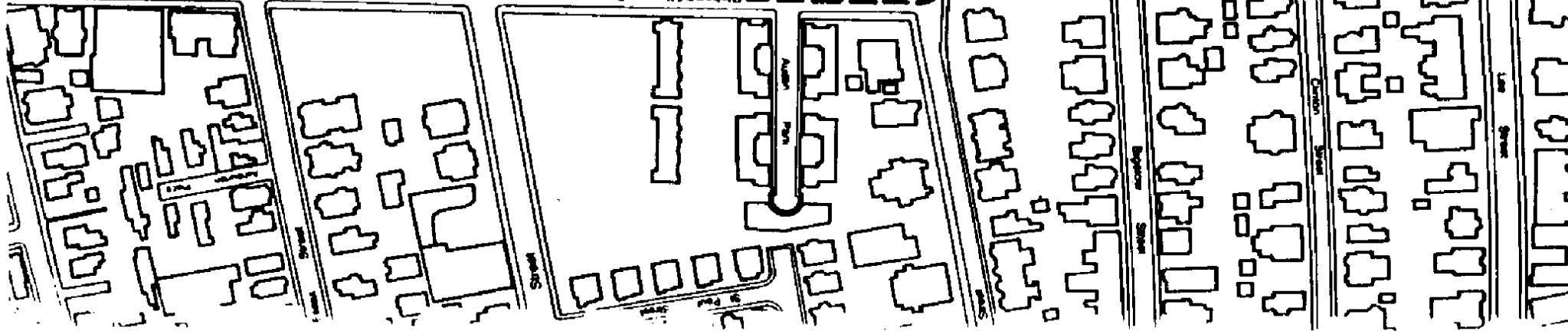
EXISTING NATIONAL REGISTER DISTRICT

Massachusetts

POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT SITES
 REMOVE THE PEDESTRIAN NATURE OF TRIPLE STREET
 MAINTAIN COMMON PARTY WALLS
 BUILD TO MASS. AVE PROPERTY LINE

YWCA
 ST. MARY'S
 CITY HALL
 ENHANCE ENTRY AREA

Massachusetts Avenue



needed. In addition, a paving system similar to the one used for the MBTA improvements will aid in unifying the institutional uses together and tie them into the Square.

B. Heart of Central Square District

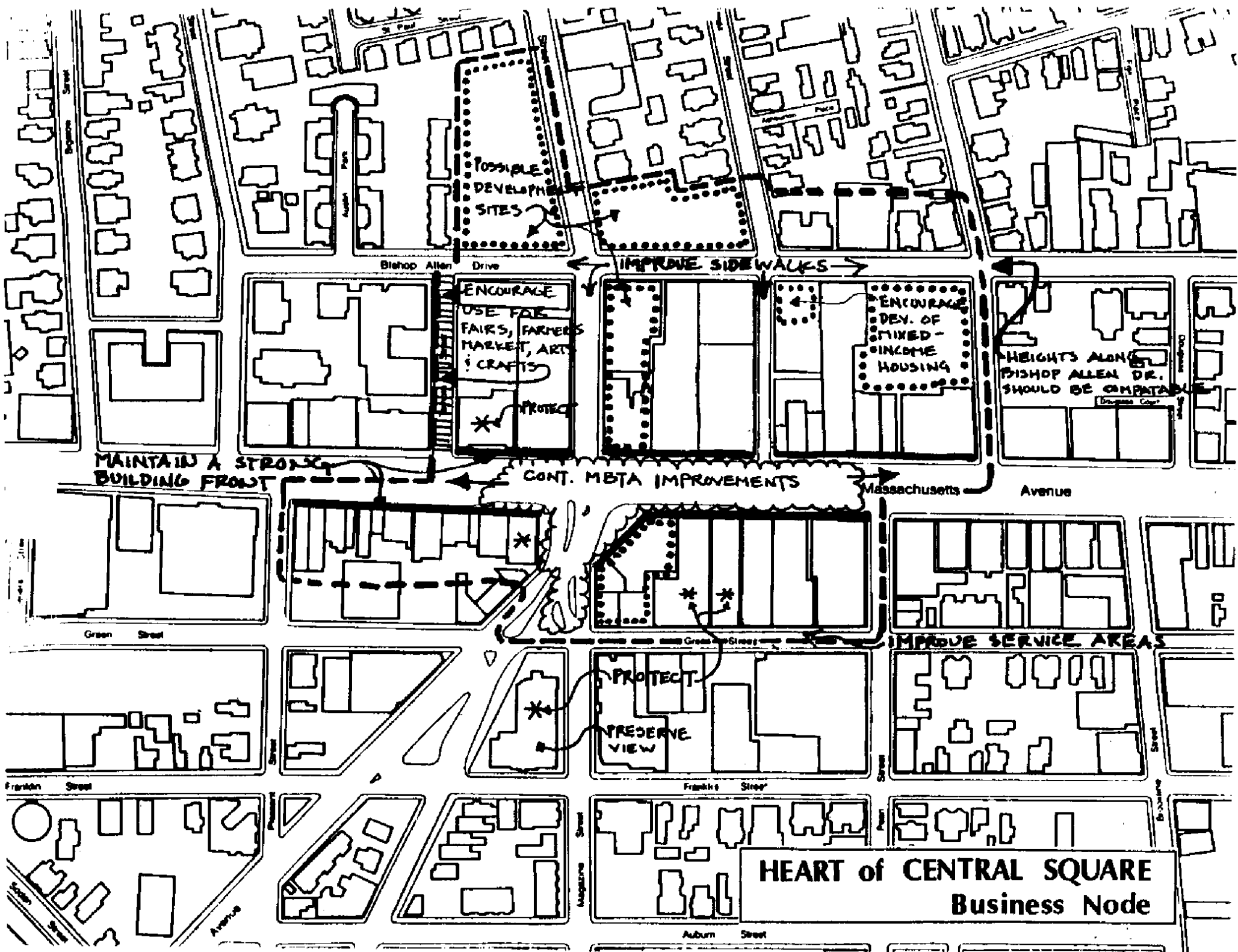
The "Heart of Central Square" is the area which contains the majority of the commercial uses and is what most people identify as "Central Square". This area contains a strong commercial use frontage with no voids in the building mass. Despite this strong frontage many parcels are "soft" and likely to be redeveloped in the near future. The soft buildings are primarily one to three-story structures. In fact within the entire district there are only six structures containing more than four stories. No property owners, at present, control an entire block, but there are some large parcel owners and the possibility of assembly is not unattainable. This district contains some of the largest individually owned land parcels in the Square.

1. PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT

Two significant possibilities exist for the development of housing. The parking lots at the corners of Prospect Street and Bishop Allen Drive are presently used for accessory parking for the office tower at 675 Massachusetts Avenue. Housing and the required parking could be accommodated on these lots. Townhouse development is preferred for the north-east parcel. Since vehicular turns on to and off of Prospect Street are difficult, commercial uses are not recommended. The height and massing of these structures should be complementary to the adjacent residentially zoned areas. Open space should be used as a buffer between the parking and adjacent residential uses.

The second housing opportunity and an opportunity to create affordable housing can be realized by using the City's parking lots along Bishop Allen Drive. These lots could be developed independently for housing and parking or in combination with one or more of the properties along Massachusetts Avenue. The City will investigate the appropriateness of development in these areas and how or if parking is to be replaced.

Commercial development is strong along Massachusetts Avenue and new development should continue this existing retail presence. The transition between commercial and residential uses has been strained by the incompatibility of certain commercial uses with residential uses especially along Green Street. There are a number of residential units which face the poorly maintained service areas of commercial buildings. Every effort should be made to minimize future land use conflicts by providing clean on site service and parking facilities.



POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT SITES

ENCOURAGE USE FOR FAIRS, FARMERS MARKET, ARTS & CRAFTS

ENCOURAGE DEV. OF MIXED-INCOME HOUSING

HEIGHTS ALONG BISHOP ALLEN DR. SHOULD BE COMPATIBLE

MAINTAIN A STRONG BUILDING FRONT

CONT. MBTA IMPROVEMENTS

PROTECT

PRESERVE VIEW

IMPROVE SERVICE AREAS

HEART of CENTRAL SQUARE Business Node

Bishop Allen Drive

Massachusetts Avenue

Green Street

Franklin Street

Franklin Street

Magazine Street

Auburn Street

Avenue

2. PUBLIC DEVELOPMENT

The MBTA has completed extensive renovations to the subway station and to the sidewalks in this area. A comprehensive maintenance program is necessary to ensure the longevity of the improvements. These improvements are limited to only a few blocks. Continuation of these improvements using the same materials and color palate throughout the business area will aid in unifying the area visually.

Sidewalk conditions including walking surfaces, sidewalk widths, street lighting and trees along Bishop Allen Drive, Green Street and the side streets connecting them to Massachusetts Avenue should be evaluated and improved where needed.

C. Central Square to MIT District

As you head east from Central Square towards MIT the strong retail pattern begins to break up and give way to office space. Property holdings are generally smaller than in the Center of the Square with the exception of land holdings by MIT, J. R. Fennell Realty Trust and the Salvation Army. Also, properties are less likely to run the length of the block from Massachusetts Avenue to either Bishop Allen Drive or Green Street.

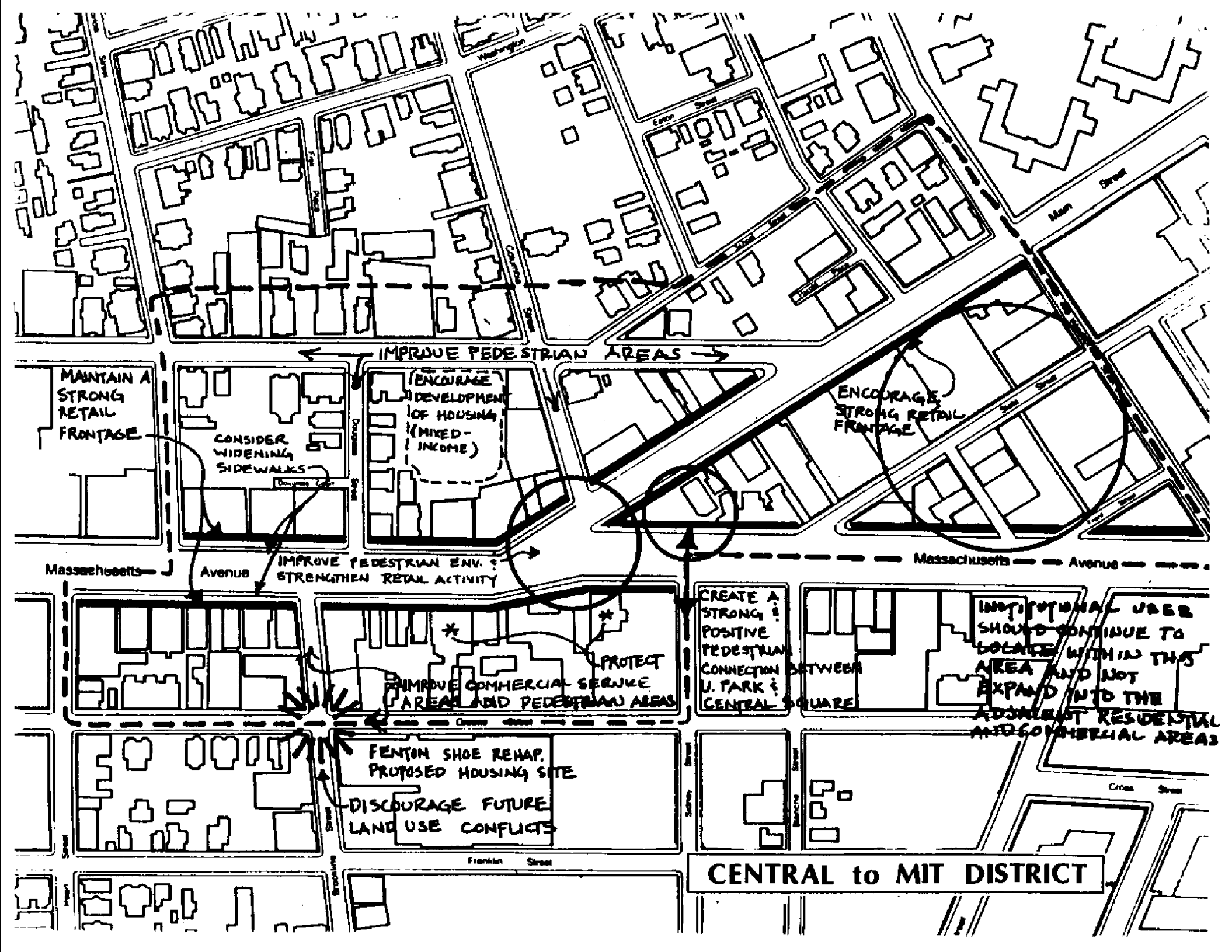
1. PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT

Blocks in this district are a combination of commercial and institutional structures mixed in with residential structures. This character is likely to continue because of the presence of rent controlled residential units and the protection of these units under the City's Rent Control Ordinance. Except for the large properties noted above, development in this area is not likely to be substantial unless several properties are combined. Despite this there are a number of sites determined to be "soft" because of the anticipated development pressures on underdeveloped land adjacent to the University Park development.

The area east of Lafayette Square has a strong institutional element of MIT housing and university related space. Continued use of this area for university related activities should be allowed but confined to the immediate area and not allowed to expand into the adjoining residential and/or commercial area.

The City possesses another site on which additional mixed income housing might be created in the municipal parking lot between Douglas and Columbia Streets. Combining this parking lot with land on either Douglas Street or Columbia Street would improve access to and from this site if it were to be developed. Consideration of this lot, or any of the other lots previously mentioned, for housing development may require replacement of the existing public parking within the Central Square Area. Further analysis is needed to determine the most cost-efficient way or best location to replace this parking.

In order to strengthen the weak pedestrian and commercial frontage active retail uses should replace ground floor office uses along Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street. An active commercial and pedestrian area is important to making a successful link between the Central Square business district and the ongoing University Park development.



IMPROVE PEDESTRIAN AREAS

MAINTAIN A STRONG RETAIL FRONTAGE

CONSIDER WIDENING SIDEWALKS

ENCOURAGE DEVELOPMENT OF HOUSING (MIXED-INCOME)

ENCOURAGE STRONG RETAIL FRONTAGE

Massachusetts Avenue

IMPROVE PEDESTRIAN ENV. & STRENGTHEN RETAIL ACTIVITY

Massachusetts Avenue

CREATE A STRONG & POSITIVE PEDESTRIAN CONNECTION BETWEEN U. PARK & CENTRAL SQUARE

INSTITUTIONAL USES SHOULD CONTINUE TO BE LOCATED WITHIN THIS AREA AND NOT EXPAND INTO THE ADJACENT RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL AREAS

PROTECT

IMPROVE COMMERCIAL SERVICE AREA AND PEDESTRIAN AREAS

FENTON SHOE REHAP. PROPOSED HOUSING SITE

DISCOURAGE FUTURE LAND USE CONFLICTS

Franklin Street

CENTRAL to MIT DISTRICT

2. PUBLIC DEVELOPMENT

Transportation improvements in combination with public space improvements should be made at Lafayette Square at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street. The increased traffic that will be generated by development in Cambridgeport will require that special attention be given to managing traffic flows, both automotive and pedestrian.

It is particularly important to tie the MBTA street and sidewalk improvements to this district. The breakdown of active retail uses especially around Lafayette Square has caused a weakening of the commercial strip. Unified public space improvements will visually tie this area together with the "Heart of Central Square District".

Sidewalk conditions including walking surfaces, sidewalk widths, street lighting and trees along Bishop Allen Drive, Green Street and the streets connecting them to Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street should be evaluated and improved where necessary.

D. Transition District

The Transition District is the area that separates the main retail activity along Massachusetts Avenue from the strictly residential character of the Cambridgeport neighborhood. As a transitional area the character of the district is mixed from block to block, but it is predominately residential in nature. Very few "soft" development areas exist; except for a parcel along Brookline Street, assembly of several small lots would be necessary to achieve any sizeable development.

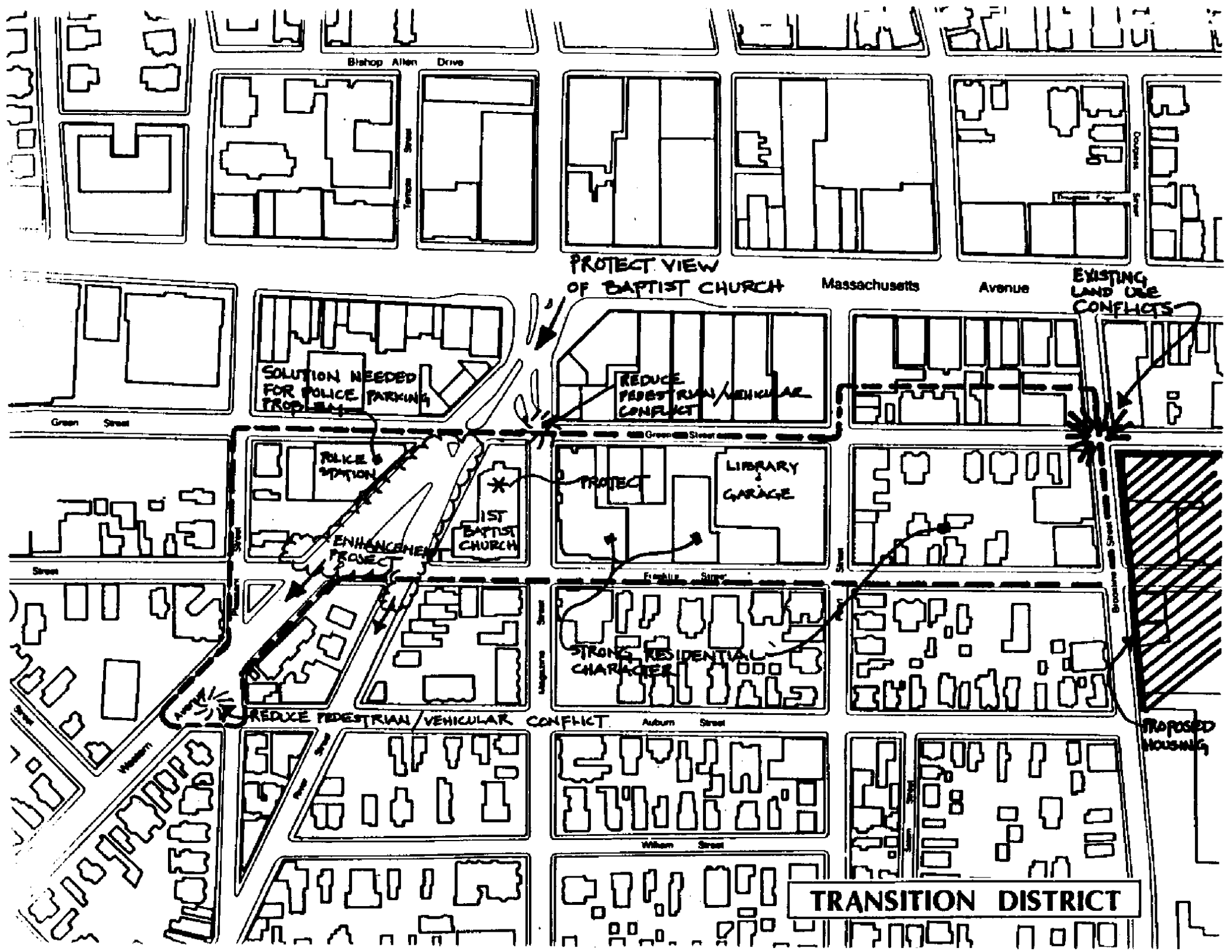
1. PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT

Development in this area should respect the scale of adjacent uses. Commercial uses along Brookline Street should be discontinued.

2. PUBLIC DEVELOPMENT

Since this district is predominately residential, public improvements in this area are developed to a level found in the surrounding residential area. Special attention should be given to Green Street, especially between Pearl and Brookline Streets, to signal the transition from commercial to residential uses. The open space improvements adjacent to the First Baptist Church need to be maintained and extended along River Street and Western Avenue.

Although two municipal parking lots and one municipal parking garage is located on Green Street, parking is a severe problem around the police station. Solutions to the police department parking problem need to be explored further.



Bishop Allen Drive

PROTECT VIEW OF BAPTIST CHURCH

Massachusetts Avenue

Avenue

EXISTING LAND USE CONFLICTS

SOLUTION NEEDED FOR POLICE PARKING PROBLEM

REDUCE PEDESTRIAN/VEHICULAR CONFLICT

Green Street

POLICE STATION

PROTECT

LIBRARY & GARAGE

Street

ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

1ST BAPTIST CHURCH

STRONG RESIDENTIAL CHARACTER

Auburn Street

REDUCE PEDESTRIAN/VEHICULAR CONFLICT

Proposed Housing

TRANSITION DISTRICT

Wilcox Street

CENTRAL SQUARE NATIONAL REGISTER DISTRICT

This map shows the boundaries of the proposed Central Square National Register District. Contributing buildings (shaded) are those which are architecturally or historically significant and add to the overall historical character of the District. Non-contributing buildings (unshaded) are those which lack significance or which are under the statutory 50 year age limit. Buildings less than 50 years old may be significant and will be considered contributing when they pass the 50 year mark.

