
**North Massachusetts Avenue
Urban Design Guidelines Handbook**

**Cambridge Community Development Department
Wallace, Floyd, Associates, Inc.**

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North Massachusetts Avenue Design Guidelines

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1.0 Intent

The purpose of this report is to establish a set of design guidelines for the North Massachusetts Avenue corridor.

It has been prepared in response to both public and private concerns about the quality of the environment along North Massachusetts Avenue and its relationship to the neighborhoods surrounding it.

The corridor has been undergoing rapid redevelopment due to increased market pressure resulting from the opening of the Porter Square Transit Station and the business climate of the Boston Metropolitan area in general. The City of Cambridge has conducted an urban design and land use study of the corridor. The results of this study are set forth in the North Massachusetts Avenue Urban Design and Land Use Study as prepared by Wallace, Floyd, Associates Inc. (WFA). Material used in this report has been taken, in part, from the North Massachusetts Avenue Urban Design and Land Use Study. The latter study was undertaken to prepare recommendations for specific changes to zoning regulations affecting the study area.

2.0 Study Area

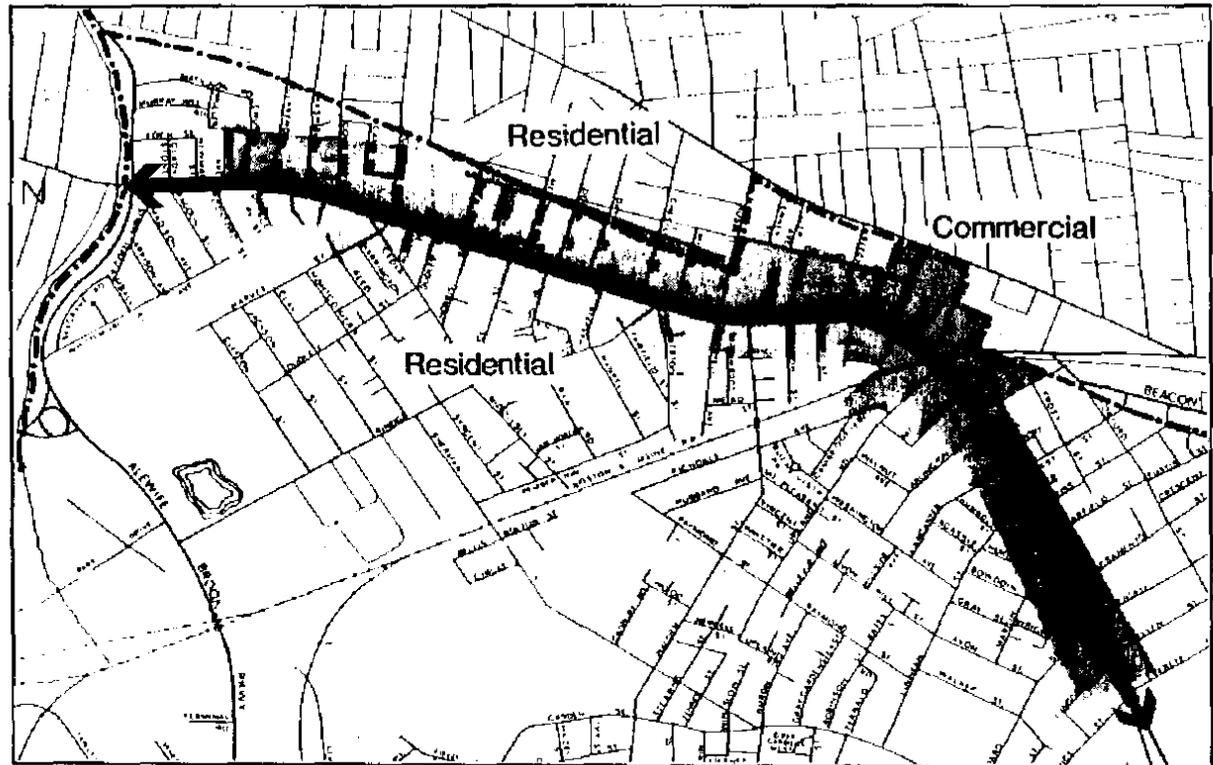
The study area for this report extends along Massachusetts Avenue from the Cambridge Common to Alewife Brook Parkway at the Arlington line. It includes all of the zoning districts through which the Avenue passes.

The study area corresponds to the study area as identified in the Urban Design and Land Use Study as prepared by WFA.

2.1 General Objectives

Massachusetts Avenue, which passes through a diverse group of Cambridge places, is more a reflection of these places than an entity in itself. At any location along the Avenue, a mix of local and city-wide uses can be found. This mix varies as the Avenue links up with other major features of Cambridge such as the MBTA Red Line, Alewife Brook Parkway, Harvard University, etc.

This report is intended to reinforce the mixed-use nature of the Avenue while encouraging a general level of quality in new and rehabilitated construction throughout the corridor.



The overall goals for this study are as follows:

1. Maintain a sense of diversity in use and physical character along the Avenue.
2. Encourage any new development to be compatible in scale and character with abutting residential neighborhoods.

3. Improve pedestrian environment. Encourage active uses at the ground level and physical improvements to the streetscape.
4. Set forth general architectural guidelines for both infill and larger scale development.
5. Encourage the retention of existing historic structures.

• **Landscaping** - as mentioned above, landscaping can be used to screen parking, loading areas, or other undesirable areas of the site from the passerby. Along much of the Avenue landscaping in the form of small front yards can be used to break up the hardness of the Avenue edge and to keep a sense of the front lawns of earlier houses. Landscaping can also be used to help make the larger buildings along the Avenue compatible with the neighborhoods beyond; in addition, plantings can help screen the light and noise of these buildings from the neighborhoods.

• **Parking** - wherever possible a parking lot should be situated so that its entrance and exit do not add traffic to the residential streets behind the Avenue. In order to improve the pedestrian space of the Avenue, parking lots should be screened from the sidewalk by landscaping, a low wall, or both. Parking lots should not be placed in front of buildings or on corner lots where they will not be screened by buildings. Front yards can be landscaped or added to the sidewalk where they might serve as a place for a cafe or some other sidewalk related activity. Buildings should not be raised up on stilts or sit on blank walls in order to accommodate parking.

The Building

The existing buildings along the Avenue contain a variety of shapes and details. Regardless of their age, the buildings which contribute to a lively streetscape have two common features. These features are the use of a variety of building surface textures and the use of small scale architectural articulation. Both of these ideas can be used to break up the mass of repetitive buildings, relate newer buildings to older ones, and to make larger buildings along the Avenue compatible with smaller ones in the neighborhoods beyond.

These two ideas are explored further below:

Architectural Articulation

- **Bay windows** - use of projecting bays on the front or side walls is encouraged.
- **Facade modulation** - portions of the building can be set back at different depths from the property line to break up the mass of longer buildings or to emphasize a special part of the building such as an entrance.
- **Building massing** - buildings along the Avenue should be designed to step down

to residential areas beyond so that they do not overwhelm the smaller structures in the neighborhoods.

• **Roof forms** - use of a variety of roof forms to add interest to the skyline of the Avenue and avoid the monotony of rows of flat buildings. These forms include turrets, detailed cornices, roof shapes, dormers etc., and are currently found in great variety along the Avenue.

• **Small scale elements** - elements such as porches, entrance ways, balconies, and awnings are encouraged as a way of relating the architecture to its inhabitants and helping to give the Avenue a more human scale. This is especially true along commercial frontage where a long uninterrupted wall could be enlivened by a number of the above elements without harming its function as a retail facade.

Building Materials

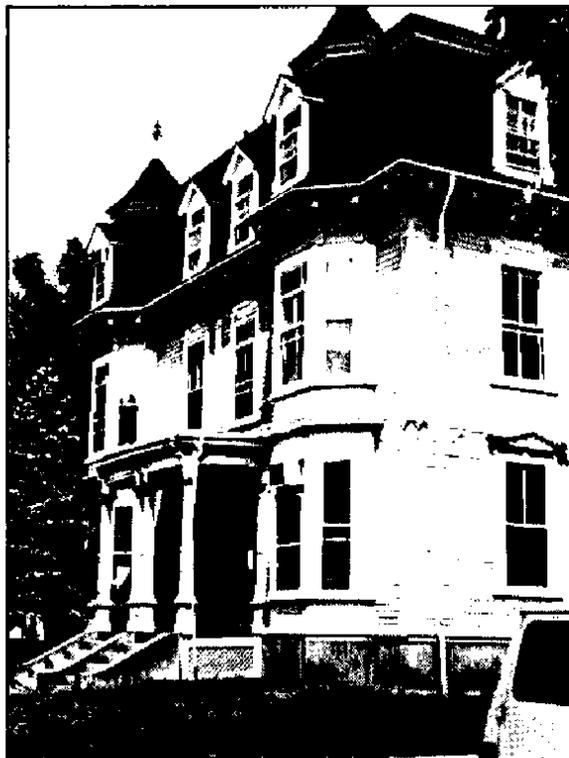
• **Traditional materials** - materials such as brick, stone or wood should be used to relate to the existing context of the Avenue. These materials should be used to highlight architectural features of the building such as bays, etc. This could be achieved by breaking up the larger surfaces of a building (as string cornices and other types of molding might do), or by dividing the

building into several pieces (as a stone base might do). Large blank walls of any materials should be avoided.

- **Glass area** - glass openings should be kept similar to the traditional types which can be seen along the Avenue. These include a variety of proportions, but in any case the windows should be seen as distinct elements within a wall and should not blend together into a "window wall." The only exception to this might be the ground floor of a commercial building. Reflecting glass should not be used regardless of the window size or shape.

North Massachusetts Avenue Context

The design elements above have been taken in part from the existing context of the Avenue. Below are several examples of these elements as they are found along the Avenue.



A Victorian building with large bay windows, a porch, and an abundance of details along the roof.



Apartment building in traditional materials broken into several smaller pieces by the use of setbacks of various depths and entrance porches. Small lawns help relate this building to adjacent smaller houses.

Multi-use buildings with a variety of traditional window openings, small signs, and a horizontal cornice.

2.2

Design Elements

The character of Massachusetts Avenue varies greatly as one moves along the Avenue. In places, it is a pleasant tree-lined boulevard; however, at other places, it is dominated by strip development and parking lots.

The whole of North Massachusetts Avenue could become a tree-lined boulevard with a lively pedestrian streetscape. This boulevard, anchored at Porter Square with the MBTA Station, could be supported by a variety of local uses along its length. A strong residential presence along the Avenue would be important in order to encourage pedestrian traffic and to insure compatibility between the activities of the Avenue and those of the neighborhood beyond. The newer buildings along the Avenue should take account of the rich architectural language and the attention to detail which characterize many of the older structures along the Avenue.

This vision of North Massachusetts Avenue would be realized as a product of many individual decisions rather than as the product of an overall design plan for the Avenue. This section is intended to serve as a reference catalog of most of the design elements along North Massachusetts Avenue. It can be used for a guide-

line for making design decisions concerning various aspects of the Avenue. These elements make up the context of North Massachusetts Avenue and are described in the three categories below. Several examples of this context follow to illustrate these elements as they can be found along the Avenue.

The Streetscape

The streetscape of North Massachusetts Avenue should be an inviting place for pedestrians as well as an efficient route for autos. Its present character varies greatly as one moves from the Cambridge Common to the Arlington line. Several aspects of the streetscape could contribute to make all of the Avenue feel like an inviting boulevard. These are listed below.

- **Street trees** — used wherever possible to provide shade, as a relief to large areas of pavement, and as a way to provide a continuous rhythm as one moves along the Avenue.
- **Street lighting** - can do more than provide illumination. Smaller scale light fixtures can be used along with street lights to relate to the pedestrian and tie the architecture along the Avenue to the public space of the sidewalk and street. Architec-

tural features can also be lit as landmarks, contributing both to their own image and that of the overall streetscape.

- **Signage** - signs which are in character and scale with their surroundings can be used to enliven the streetscape as they convey information. Examples of signs which are worked into the architecture of the Avenue abound. Larger signs, billboard types, and freestanding signs should be avoided.

- **Paving** - uses of small scale materials for paving all non-traffic areas such as parking spaces, median strips, and crosswalks could further enhance the pedestrian environment of the Avenue. These materials include brick, stone, and small concrete pavers.

The Site

The land along the Avenue which is not covered with a building is generally used for either landscaping or parking. Traditionally, buildings along the Avenue were either built up to their property lines or surrounded by landscaped yards. This historic sense of place can be maintained with sensitive site planning while still accommodating today's need for parking. Below are several suggestions for ways to approach this situation.

2.3

Historic Preservation

The structures along North Massachusetts Avenue represent a broad span of Cambridge history. Although some have been maintained in their original condition, many have been razed or altered substantially.

A study is currently underway to identify those structures which may qualify for historic designation.

Although relatively few structures may be designated as historic properties, the historic character of the Avenue is drawn from all of the structures along it. Any changes made to existing properties should demonstrate sensitivity toward the historic quality of the property and its surroundings regardless of its status as an historic property.

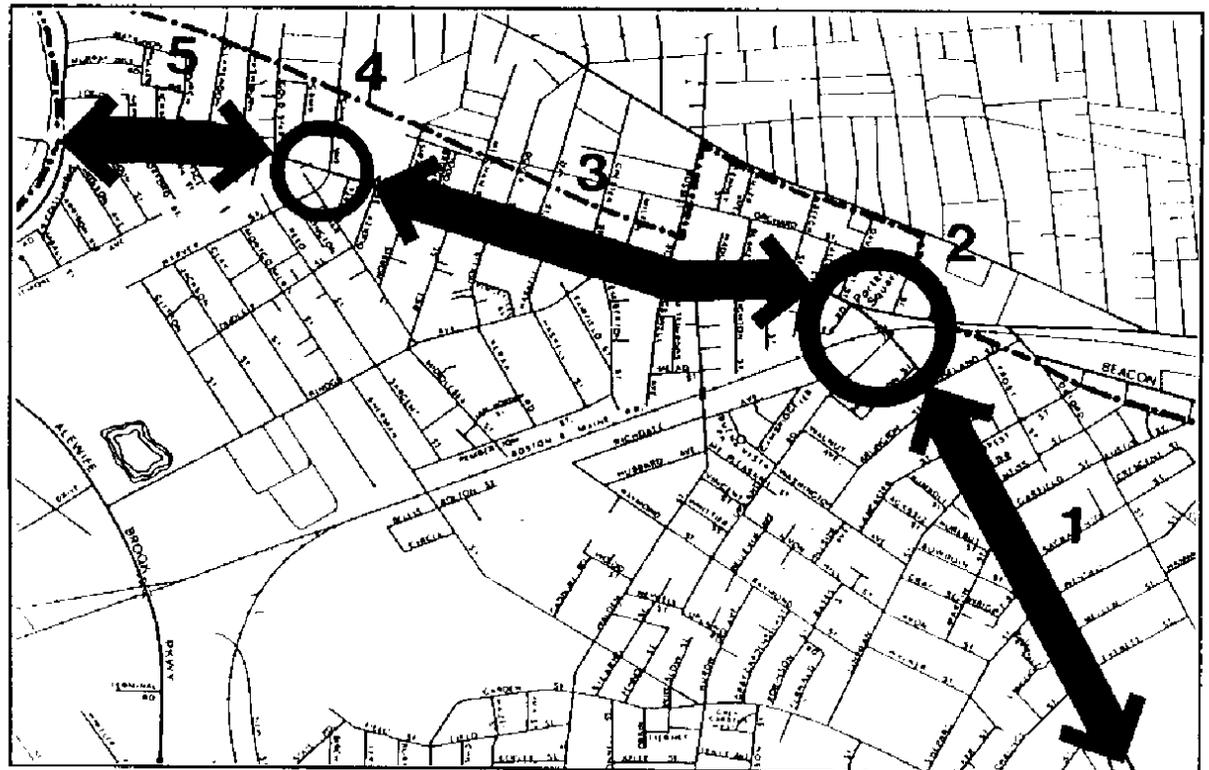
3.0 Sub Areas and Design Guidelines

The corridor can be broken down into several sub areas. In each case the divisions have been determined by the general character of the Avenue and therefore do not necessarily correspond to the present zoning boundaries along the Avenue. They are consistent with, but somewhat different from, the areas defined in the Urban Design/Land Use Study, to relate to existing zoning.

The sub areas are as follows:

1. Cambridge Common to Porter Square
2. Porter Square
3. Porter Square - Trolley Square
4. Trolley Square
5. Trolley Square - Alewife Brook Parkway

These sub areas delineate two nodes, Porter Square and Trolley Square, which include larger parcels along the corridor otherwise characterized by small parcels.



3.1

Area 1 - Cambridge Common - Porter Square

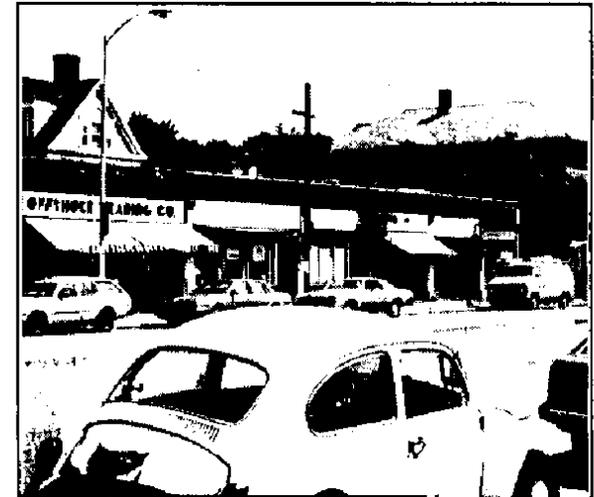
General Description of Existing Conditions

Use - this area is primarily a residential area with some local shopping.

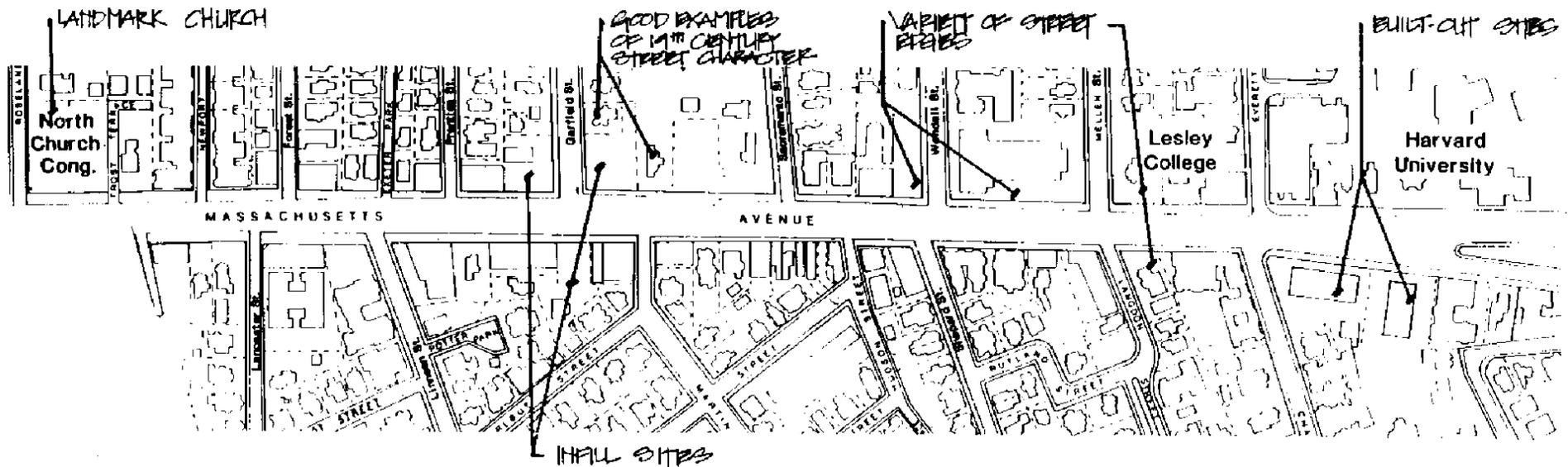
Physical Characteristics - except for the lower end (along the Cambridge Common), the area is fairly open. A loosely defined streetscape is maintained by one-story commercial rows and several free-standing houses.

Activity - except for the lower end (along the Cambridge Common), the area is fairly busy because of its intense retail activity and its location between two subway stations.

Development - due to the size and configuration of the sites, most new development is likely to occur on a parcel by parcel basis in an infill manner. There are few available sites along this stretch of the Avenue.



A variety of building typologies with small scale articulation & details.



Area 1 Strategy

Maintain this area as a local link between the Common and Porter Square. This includes:

- encouragement of infill development which faces directly on to Avenue.
- the use of small scale architectural elements such as balconies, porches, and roof forms to maintain compatibility with the neighborhood behind, especially where older Victorian houses are to remain.
- the use of some setbacks with room for landscaping or outdoor seating would be appropriate here to maintain the diversity which currently exists along the street fronts of this part of the Avenue.

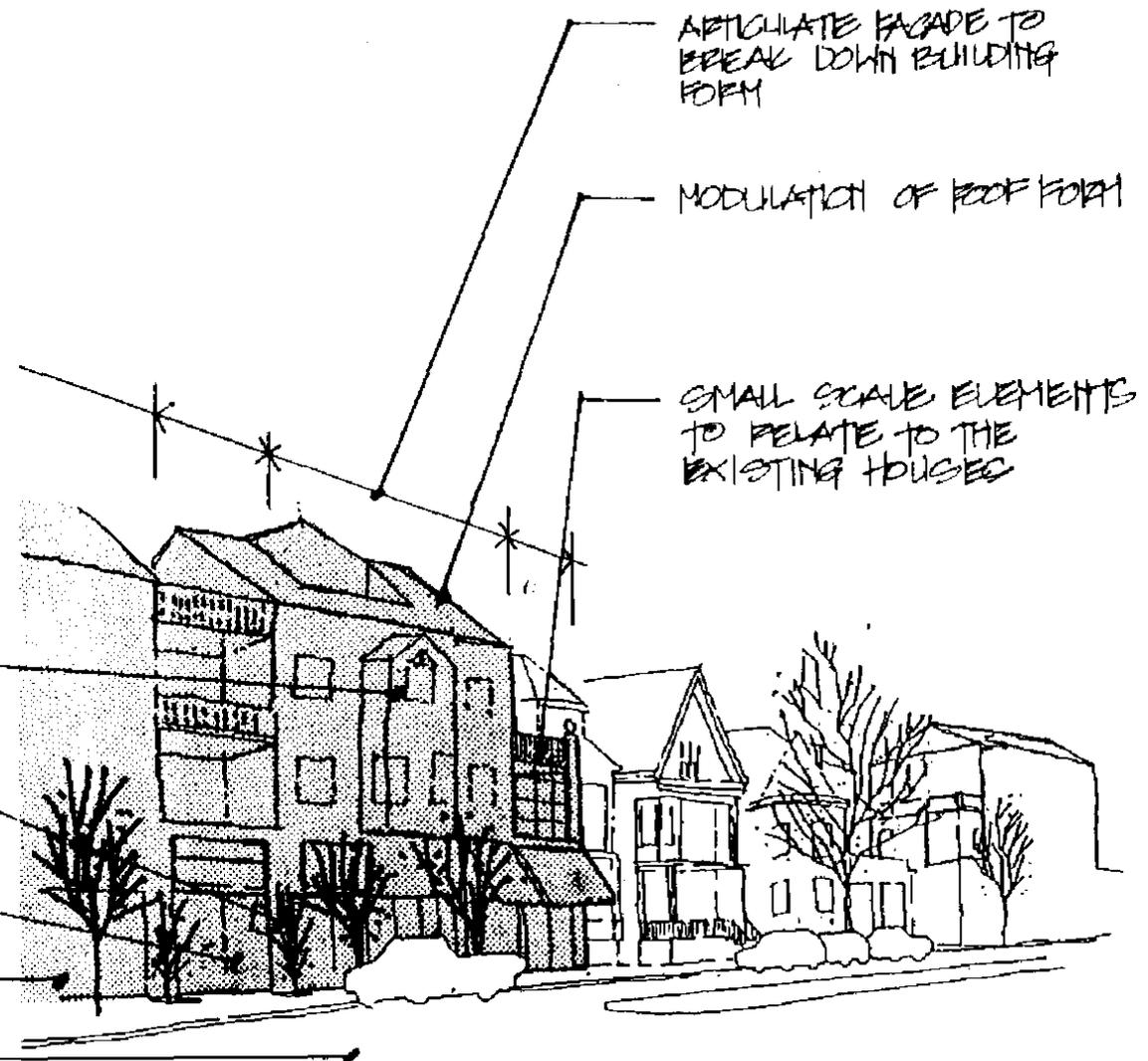
USE OF BAYS & OTHER 3-DIMENSIONAL ELEMENTS TO REFER TO SMALLER SCALE

SOME LANDSCAPING AT SETBACKS

ACTIVE GROUND FLOOR USES CONNECTED TO THE STREET

NO PARKING ALONG AVENUE FRONT

MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE



3.2

Area 2 Porter Square

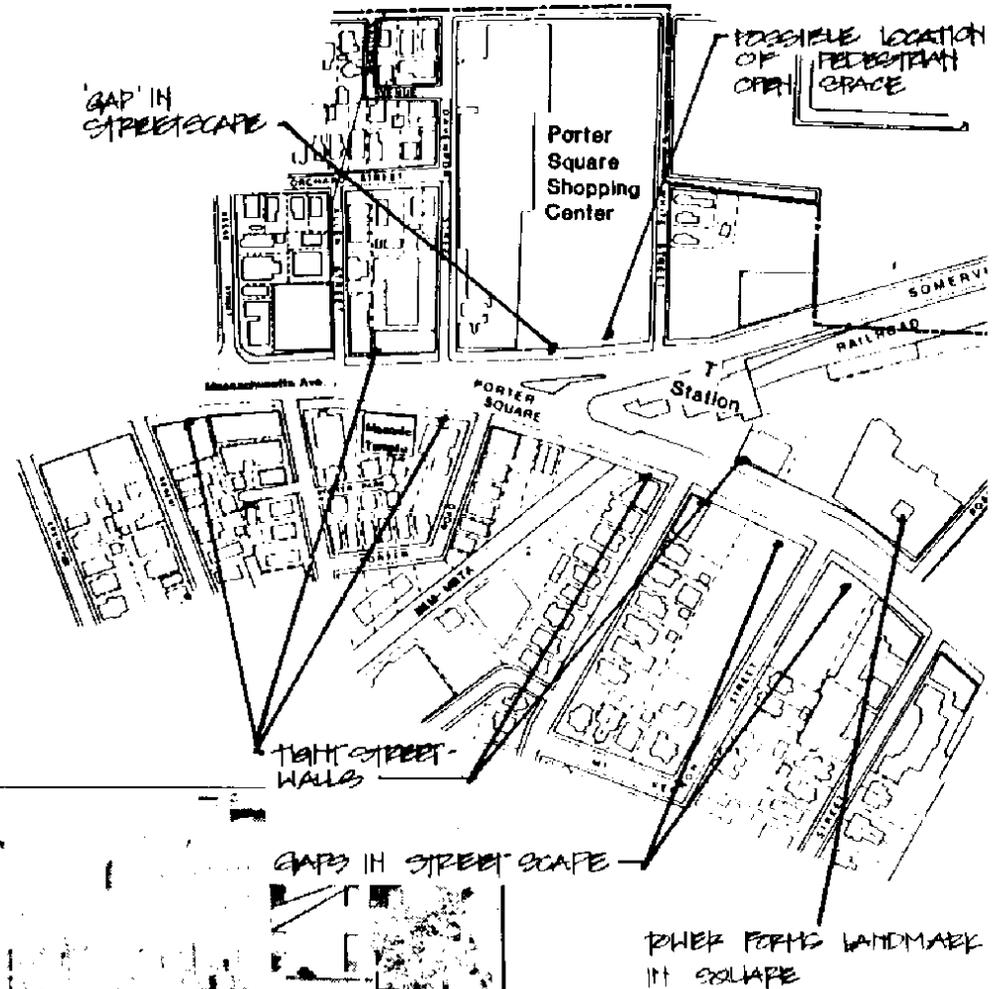
General Description of Existing Conditions

Use - this is primarily a commercial area with some nightlife which draws on a larger surrounding than its immediate neighborhood.

Physical Characteristics - present under-developed land gives this place an open feel - however a traditional urban character has been set up by streetwalls and building typology on most of the developed parcels along the southwest side of the Avenue.

Activity - there is intense pedestrian and auto activity due to the Porter Square T Station which serves the Subway and Commuter lines, and the intersection with Somerville Avenue.

Development - the future use of several large parcels such as those on Mount Vernon Street and the Porter Square Shopping Center is likely to change the character of this area.



Dense urban character of Porter Square

Area 2 Strategy

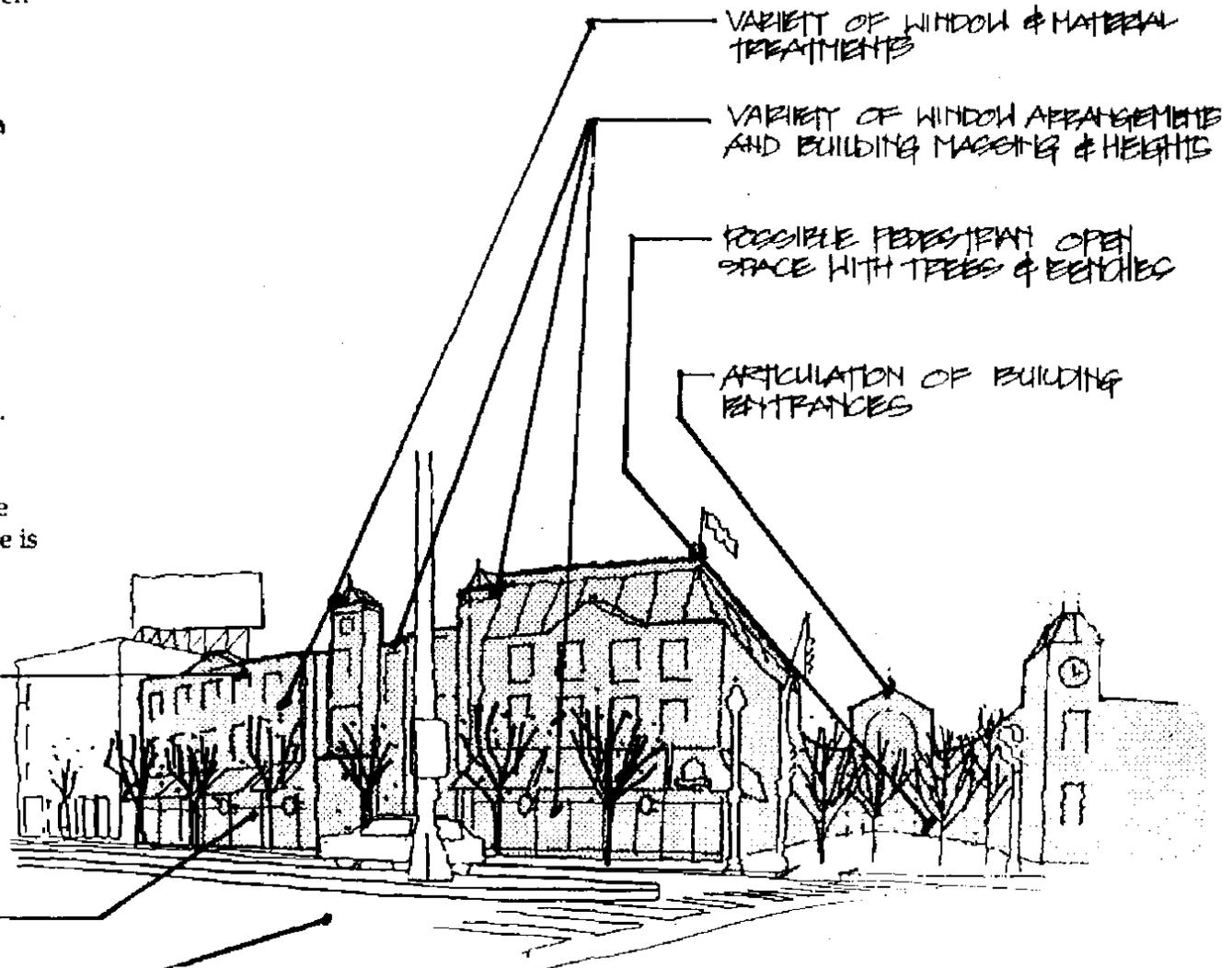
Maintain Porter Square as a commercial node along Massachusetts Avenue in the tradition of other Cambridge squares such as Harvard Square and Inman Square. This includes:

- encouragement of an active retail area which could serve local interests.
- development of a physical fabric to support pedestrian activity such as strongly defined street edges with shop entrances or outdoor cafes. A variety of building heights will complement the existing landmarks such as the Porter Exchange and the MBTA Station mobile.
- Construction of a small pedestrian square. Presently the area does not have many pedestrian amenities and therefore is not an inviting place for pedestrians to linger.

STREET WALLS - NO SETBACK

ACTIVE GROUND FLOOR
USES CONNECTED TO THE
STREET. USE OF CANOPIES,
SIGNS, ENTRANCES, ETC.

MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE



3.3

Area 3 Porter Square - Trolley Square

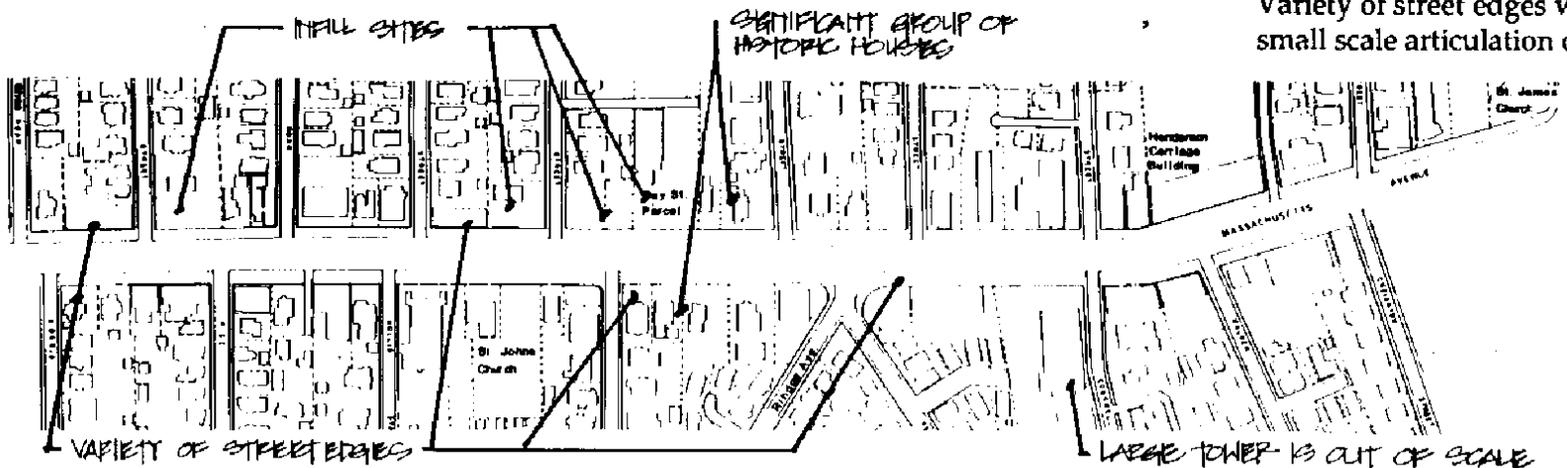
General Description of Existing Conditions

Use - the area contains a mixture of residential and local business uses.

Physical Characteristics - except for one or two residential towers this open area is characterized by low scale buildings. A loosely defined streetscape is maintained by one story commercial rows and several houses which are set back from the street. The most notable feature of this area is a group of large Victorian houses between Rindge Avenue and Haskell Street.

Activity - pedestrian activity tapers off here as one moves away from Porter Square toward the less developed blocks between Rindge Avenue and Trolley Square.

Development - several infill sites and a larger site at Day Street are available. New development is likely to occur on a parcel by parcel basis.



Variety of street edges with small yards and small scale articulation of buildings.

Area 3 Strategy

Maintain this area as local link between Porter Square and Trolley Square with a variety of street edge conditions. This includes:

- encouragement of infill development which faces directly on to the Avenue.
- the uses of small scale architectural elements such as balconies, porches and roof forms to maintain compatibility with the neighborhood behind the Avenue.
- the use of some setbacks with room for landscaping or outdoor commercial uses in front of buildings would be appropriate here to maintain the diversity which currently exists along the street front of this part of the Avenue.

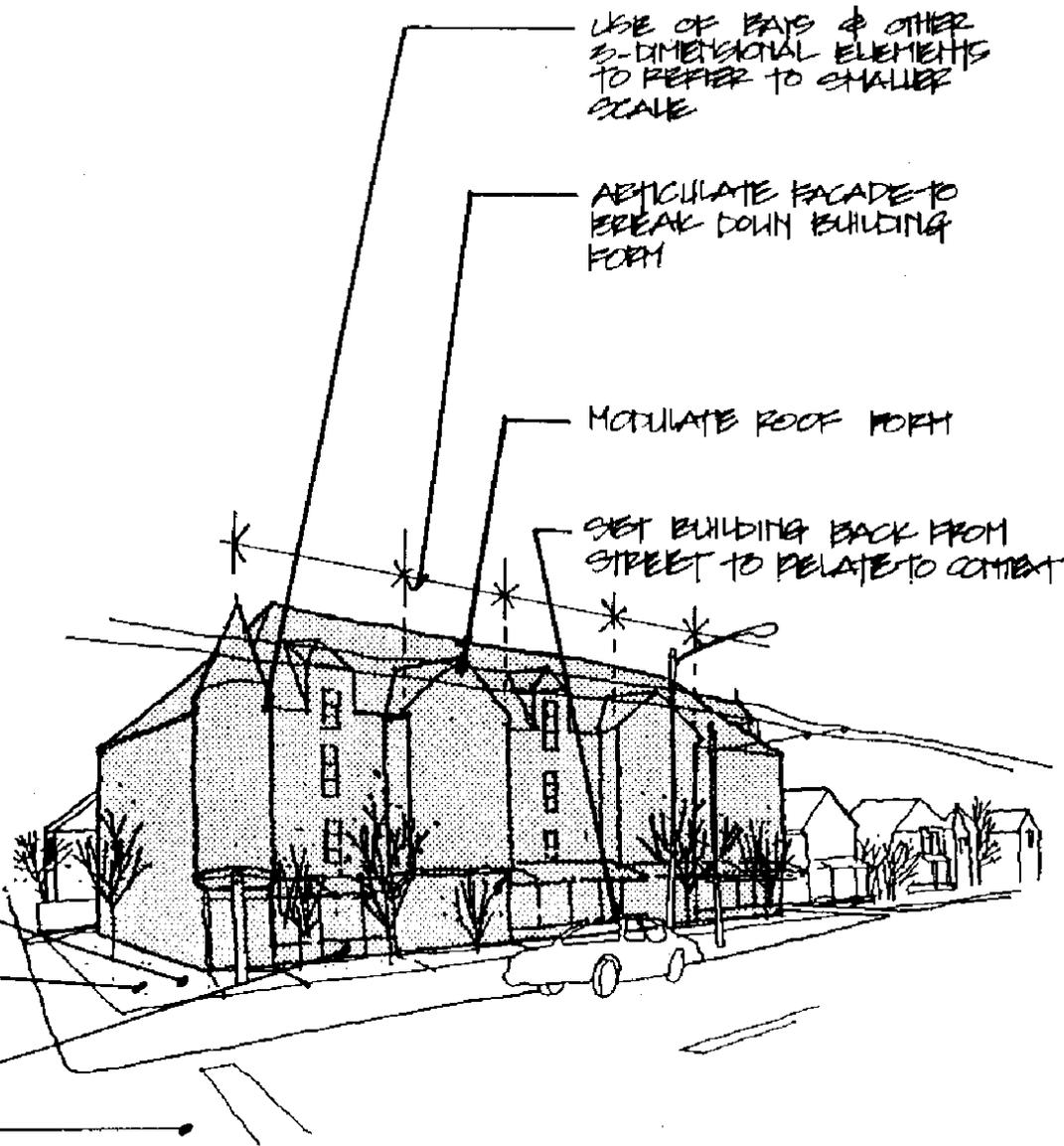
DAY STREET

NO PARKING AT CORNER OR IN FRONT OF BUILDING

LANDSCAPING AT SETBACKS

CONNECT GROUND FLOOR USES TO STREET

MASSACHUSETTS AVE



Area 4 Strategy

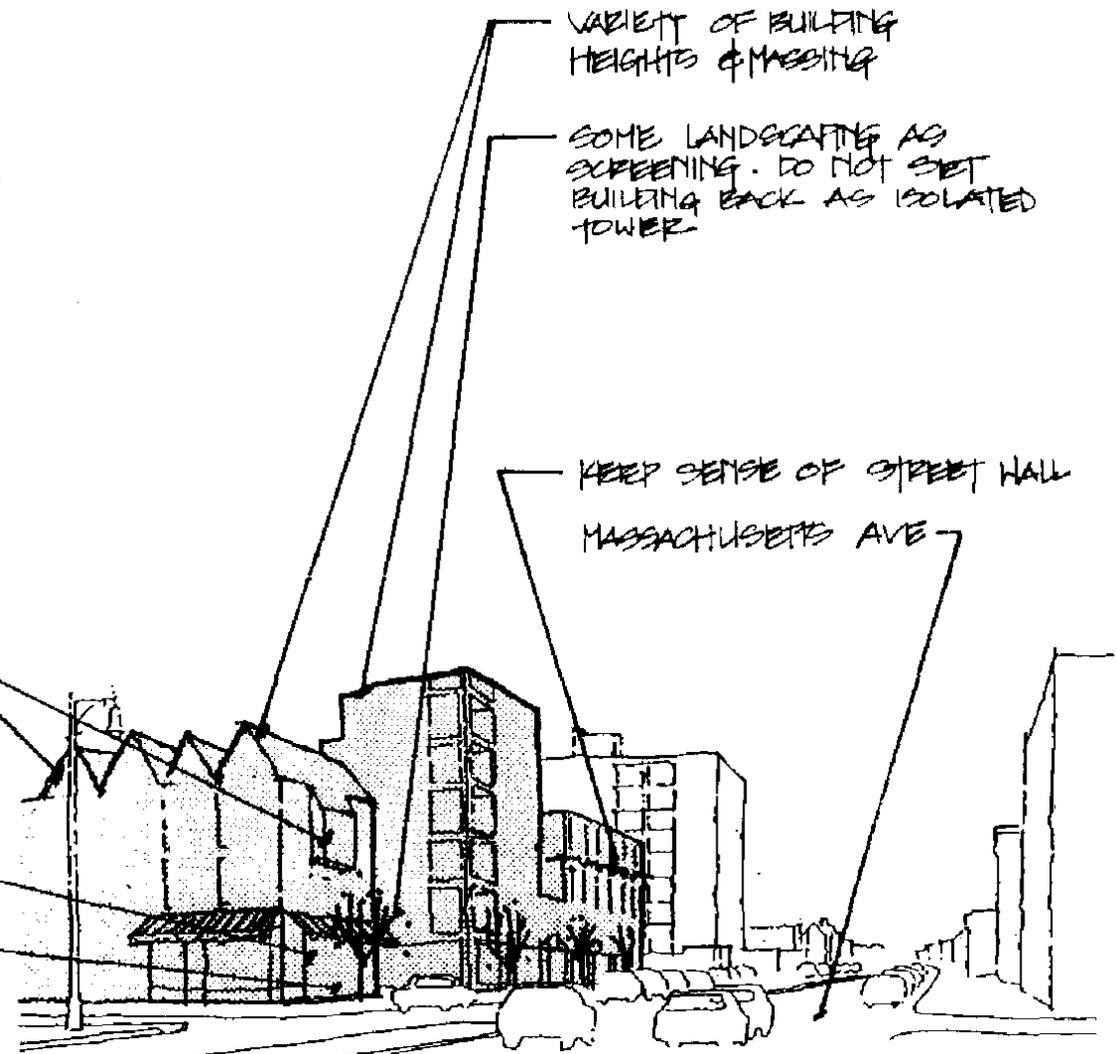
Allow Trolley Square to develop a strong neighborhood identity with residential infill along this part of the Avenue. This would include:

- development of links from the new residential fabric to the Linear Park.
- the use of creative massing studies to allow for higher densities and compatibility with the surrounding neighborhoods.
- development of a diversity of building forms along the Avenue which have small scale elements to relate to the pedestrian environment.
- some commercial uses at the ground floor of larger developments.

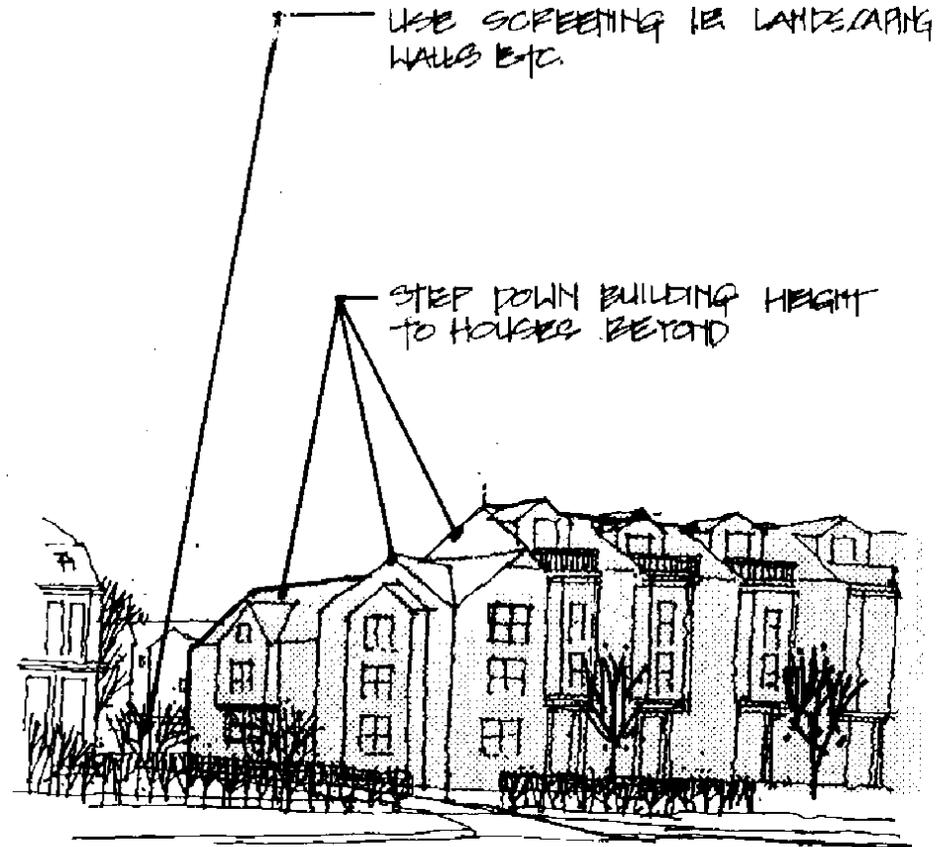
EXPRESS INDIVIDUAL DWELLING UNITS WITH MASSING & FACADE ARTICULATION

ALLOW SOME GROUND FLOOR COMMERCIAL USES

NO PARKING ALONG BUILDING FRONT



Small scale residential neighborhoods exist behind each sub area and at the north end of Sub Area 5 (pictured below). Careful massing and setback configurations should be used in all areas to minimize the impact of new construction along the edges of these neighborhoods as illustrated.



3.5

Area 5 Trolley Square - Alewife Brook Parkway

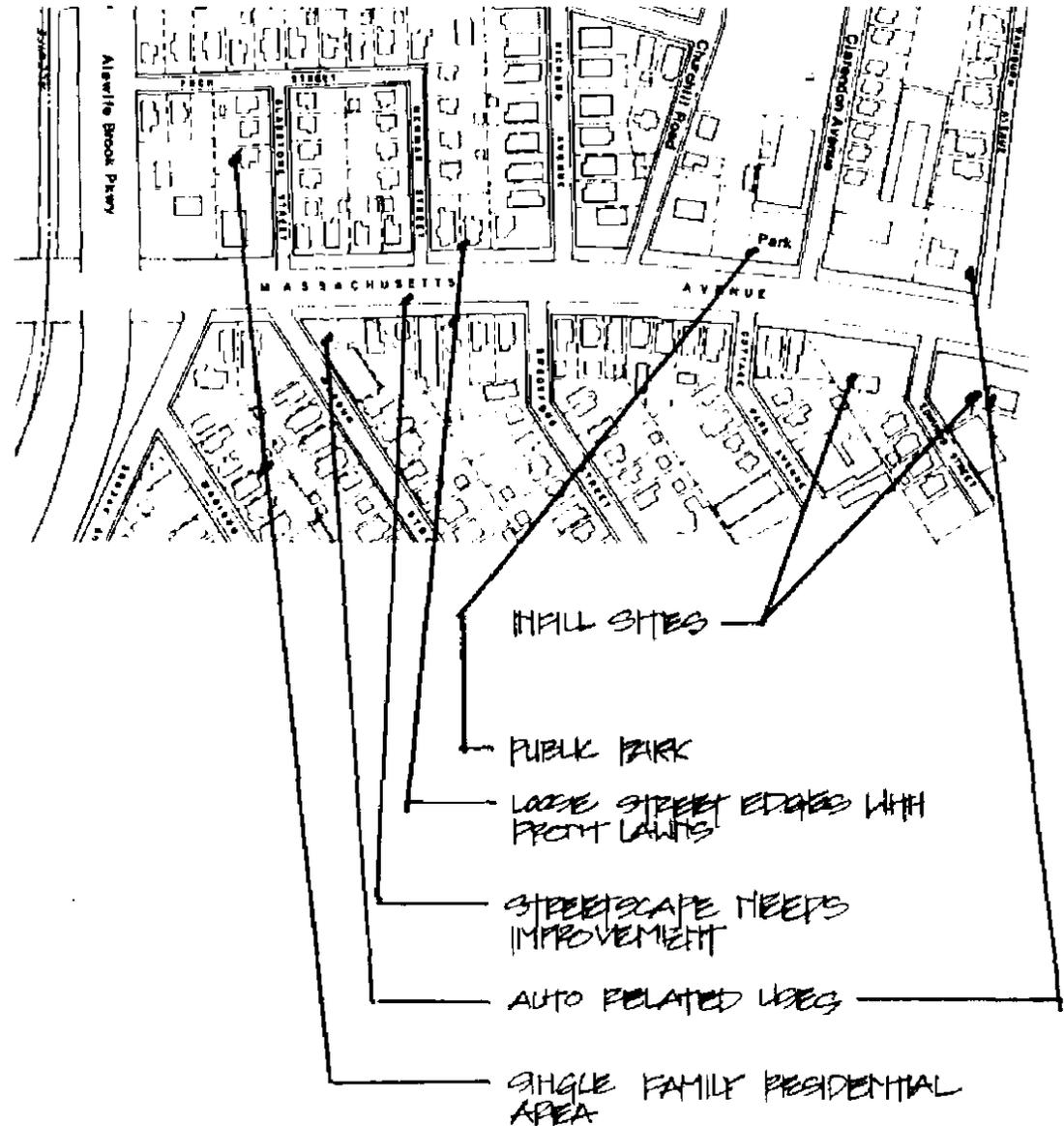
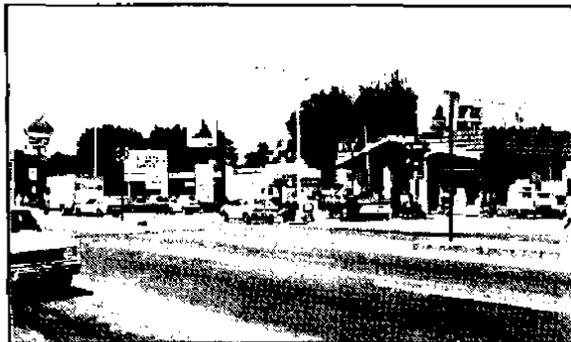
General Description of Existing Conditions

Use - a mixture of residential and auto related business uses are found here.

Physical Characteristics - auto service areas (such as gas stations and drive-in stores) dominate the character of the Avenue here. This area most closely resembles a suburban retail development with its low rise, loosely defined streetscape.

Activity - little pedestrian activity occurs along this stretch of the Avenue. The most notable exception is the park between Clarendon and Churchill Roads.

Development - due to the size and configuration of the sites most new development is likely to occur on a parcel by parcel basis in an infill manner.



Auto related uses dominate this area.

Area 5 Strategy

This area should form a transitional district between the single family structures at the Arlington line and the dense residential fabric of Trolley Square. This includes:

- upgrading the existing uses to be compatible with the residential uses in the surrounding areas.
- improvement of the public space by planting trees, repaving sidewalks, and providing street furniture.
- the uses of small scale architectural elements to tie new development to the neighborhoods beyond.
- the use of a variety of street edges, landscaping, and small front yards to soften the Avenue as it makes a transition to the residential neighborhood beyond Richard Avenue.

USE OF BAYS & OTHER
3-DIMENSIONAL ELEMENTS TO
RELATE TO SMALLER SCALE HOUSES

LANDSCAPING AROUND FREE STANDING
BUILDINGS

NO PARKING ALONG AVENUE FRONT
FRONT & SIDE YARD SETBACKS

