Central Square: Nurturing culture and community in Cambridge’s downtown

Central/Kendall Square City Council roundtable . Goody Clancy . March 27, 2013
Central Square Plan roundtable

- **Process**
  - Foundations
  - Public engagement
- **Community-based vision**
- **Framework**
- **Vision goals and strategies**
  - A place for living
  - Public places to build community
  - Retail, cultural and non-profit diversity
  - Connecting people to the square
  - Leveraging investment
- **Next steps**
Red Ribbon Commission process

Conduct analysis (land use, building form, urban design, public space, transportation)

Develop draft plan strategies for each area of analysis

Vision

Executive summary by Advisory Committee

More than 20 Advisory Committee and public meetings

ZONING RECOMMENDATIONS

NON-ZONING RECOMMENDATIONS
VISION: community goals

• Preserve and enhance the Square’s appeal to people from every walk of life and neighborhood.
• Celebrate and maintain the mix of old and new.
• Generate added diversity through more varied housing choices.
• Enrich the Square’s public realm as place that invites community interaction at many levels
VISION: statement

Central Square is Cambridge’s downtown and a center for nearby neighborhoods; a vibrant cultural district; a sustainable urban environment that invites people from all walks of life to shop, live, enjoy entertainment and the arts, find community together; and more.
FRAMEWORK

- Character areas
- Potential for change
- Land use
- Public places
Context: character areas

Mixed-Use Downtown
Intermediate scale
cultural/retail/office/
housing emphasis

Neighborhoods
Smaller scale
housing emphasis

Mixed-Use district
Larger scale
office/research/
housing/academic emphasis

Osborn Triangle
Housing/retail/office/
research emphasis
connecting to neighborhoods

Potential change site
Character areas: revised concept

• Heart of Central Square
  – Mass Ave core
  – Green Street neighborhood edge
  – Bishop Allen neighborhood edge

• Osborn Triangle
  – Core area
  – Area 4 neighborhood edge
Sites with most potential for change

• Many sites less likely to change due to:
  – Actual or potential historic designation
  – Small size/fragmented ownership
• City parking lots are valued...
  – As potential (and current) public places
  – As potential housing sites
  – For potential to leverage other community benefits
  – For parking

Greater development potential

- MIT-owned
- Other owner
- Other owners (multiple)
- Parking: city-owned
- Parking: privately owned
Vision framework: land use

- Add or enhance **ground floor active edges** where needed
- Accommodate a lively **mix of uses**
  - Prioritize housing on upper floors
  - Encourage non-profit office/business use
  - Generally limit large-scale research uses west of Windsor Street corridor
- Accommodate comfortable use and scale **transitions** between study area and adjacent neighborhoods
VISION GOALS & STRATEGIES

VISION

A PLACE FOR LIVING

CONNECTING PEOPLE TO THE SQUARE

PUBLIC PLACES TO BUILD COMMUNITY

RETAIL/CULTURAL/NON-PROFIT DIVERSITY

To achieve the vision goals, LEVERAGE FUTURE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC INVESTMENTS, as appropriate.
**Goals**

**A PLACE FOR LIVING**

Increase housing stock and support community diversity through more varied housing choices

**OBJECTIVE**

- Expand housing stock and increase the range of housing choices to serve a broad spectrum of incomes, ages and household sizes
Encourage new mixed-income housing

• Reduce obsolete parking requirements for housing and commercial uses to enable infill development
• Continue inclusionary housing policy
• Add middle income housing incentives
• Encourage more housing in Osborn Triangle and on former Quest block, with sensitive neighborhood connections
Objectives

- Establish Massachusetts Avenue as a great public place
- Add and improve public spaces to invite a broader range of community activities
- Intensify programming of public spaces within the Central Square Cultural District to provide opportunities for community activity, celebrating cultural diversity and the arts
- Ensure positive relationship of new development to public space
What makes a great community place?

- A place to sit
- Outdoor dining
- Festival
- Parks
- A place to sit with a friend
- Enjoying public art

MORE INTERACTIVE → → MORE PERSONAL
A network of active public spaces anchored by one great downtown street

Opportunities to improve, expand public spaces

• Existing sidewalks
  – Mass Ave core area
  – Side streets

• Existing parks and plazas

• New park/plaza opportunities
  – City parking lots
  – Private redevelopment sites, through incentives

• New “public room”
Public realm framework

- Major spaces and squares
- Mass Ave.
- Public room
- Programming
- Parklets
- Improved edges and streetscapes
Major spaces
Major spaces: Carl Barron Plaza

Possible concepts

• More open layout for flexible programming (city)
• Widen Magazine St sidewalk (city initiative, MBTA coordination)
• Expand programmed events (city/CSBA)
• Improve active uses across Western Ave. and Green St. (parklets; city coordinate with Western Ave. streetscape improvements)
• More active occupancy along Holmes Building (city work with owner to add interim or permanent active use)
Major spaces: Jill Brown-Rhone Park

Possible concepts

- Continue/expand **programmed events** *(CSBA, CAC etc.)*
- More **active occupancy** along former Quest frontage, and across Mass Ave and Sidney Street *(condition of redevelopment)*
- Add **spatial element** *(e.g. trellis, stage)* toward Sidney St to buffer traffic, add human scale, host programmed activity *(city/CAC)*
Major spaces: University Park Common

Possible concepts

- Continue/expand programmed events, including kids’ activities (*CSBA, neighborhoods, Forest City...*)
- Add wayfinding signage from Mass Ave and other directions (*city/CSBA*)
- Promote more active ground floor uses along Sidney Street (*city, CSBA work with Forest City; leverage proposed 300 Mass Ave redevelopment*)
Mass Ave

Possible concepts

• Add **signature design elements** through plantings, signage, lighting etc.

• Add **outdoor dining and parklets** in underutilized spaces and/or through redevelopment

• Add **public art** including opportunities for play and signature transit information signage

• Incent consistent edge of active and small-format **retail storefronts**

• Add **trees and/or flowers** in planters where in-ground planting impossible
Public room

- Programmed events
- Informal use
- Potential for market stalls
- Active street edge
Programming

- Events programming in major spaces, from buskers to festivals (CSBA, CAC, others)
  - Central Swings
  - Taste of Cambridge
  - Street festivals
- Public art and play installations (CAC, CSBA, cultural organizations in the square)
Parklets

- Compact area: 10-20 feet to any side
- Quickly installed, limited cost
- Funding, management, design and inspiration by potential business/organization partners
Improved edges and streetscapes

- Mass Ave and Main Street: active ground level uses where lacking
- Trees/flowers in planters where in-ground planting not possible
- Occupied spaces and/or green edges along parking lots
- Green walls along parking structures, other blank walls with southern exposure
Goals

RETAIL, CULTURAL AND NON-PROFIT DIVERSITY

Expand retail & entertainment opportunities while celebrating and nurturing the mix of old and new, venerable and funky businesses and cultural institutions.

OBJECTIVES

• Reinforce the Central Square Cultural District as a vibrant retail and cultural destination for nearby neighborhoods and the city

• Support an attractive and vibrant walking environment by keeping retail storefronts continuously occupied with active uses
Size new retail for small and local business

- Exempt new ground floor retail space from counting toward density limits
- Size at least 1/3 of space for small businesses, and no more than 1/3 of space for larger businesses
- Prevent “formula retail” chains by discouraging deeper floorplates, use of disposable serveware etc.
- Remove “fast food cap” to enable more small food/beverage shops
Encourage side-street retail and services

- On selected side streets, require ground floor space to be **convertible to retail** (adequate ceiling height, accessibility, services, storefront)
- Where retail has limited market potential, encourage child care, arts uses, non-profit office space and similar **community-serving uses** by exempting these ground floor uses from density limits
Create market stalls

- Provide small and local businesses a low-cost presence in the Square
- Verify costs, feasibility and management of small market stall rental to merchants
- Locate the market stalls in a highly visible, marketable area with significant passing pedestrian traffic, possibly integrated with Public Room
- Consider expansion of current farmer’s market/winter market program.
- Consider using temporarily vacant storefronts per winter market precedent
Continue façade improvement grants

Before

After
Proactively keep storefronts occupied

• Require property owners to work with city, CSBA and/or local non-profits to fill storefronts vacant 6 months with public art, temporary or “pop-up” retail, non-profit business use, or other occupancy that contributes to overall economic prosperity and character of the Square
• Establish convenient mechanisms to help temporarily fund insurance, utilities and/or related costs that may impede short-term occupancy

Temporary retail

Winter market in former Blockbuster store
Continue, expand CSBA initiatives

• Promote Cultural District identity through branding, events, streetscape etc.
• Connect customers/visitors to businesses, organizations and events
• Organize public events featuring local businesses, organizations, artists
• Monitor/share data on retail occupancy, inventory to aid priority tenanting
• Explore feasibility and desirability of Business Improvement District to enhance management capacity
Goals

CONNECTING PEOPLE TO THE SQUARE

Enrich neighborhood walkability and livability with safe, green streets and improved access choices.

OBJECTIVES

• Enhance the street network to make walking and biking more convenient, safe and fun
• Maintain and improve a variety of good transportation choices
• Update parking requirements to reflect increased preferences for alternatives to driving
• Add plantings and green infrastructure to encourage a healthier environment
Enhance side street walkability

Proposed concepts

- Scale and use transition from Central Square to neighborhoods
- Potential transformation of parking lots into housing and public spaces
- Locally produced art in public spaces
- Rain gardens serving aesthetic and stormwater functions
- Green plantings on blank walls
Improved wayfinding and connections

- New connections
- New wayfinding signage
  - Identity
  - Orientation
  - Events/information

Potential Mass Ave-State-Main connection
Goals

LEVERAGE FUTURE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC INVESTMENTS, as appropriate

Mitigate neighborhood impacts.

OBJECTIVES

• Apply criteria to achieve community benefits if city parking lots are redeveloped

• Continue to promote sustainability in planning, design, and development
Leverage city parking lots as a unique benefit opportunity

- Consider opportunities for affordable housing, retail, public open space
- Ensure sensitive transition to neighborhoods
- Address ongoing public parking needs
Foster a sustainable future for central square

- **Encourage smart growth**
  - Mix of uses
  - Emphasize housing within $\frac{1}{2}$ mile of Central Square station

- **Encourage walking, biking, transit use, car-sharing**

- **Regularly update sustainable development standards** to the state of the art. Selected new thresholds include:
  - LEED Gold for commercial development
  - Energy use tracking
  - District steam feasibility analysis (Osborn Triangle)
  - Cool (green or white) roofs
  - On-site low-impact stormwater management
Update building form policy to enhance quality of place while adding residents and businesses

- Ensure **mix of lower and taller buildings** along Mass Ave with guidelines and floor size limits
- Continue policy of **stepping building volumes down** toward neighborhoods along side streets
- Consider raising height limits from 80’ to 140’-160’ to encourage **housing and other community benefits**
- Enable **transfer of development rights** to encourage housing along Mass Ave and in Osborn Triangle while keeping **densities lower near neighborhoods**
- Update **design guidelines**
Opportunity: current height and density limits

Today: 55-60’ façade height limit at Mass Ave. 45 degree height limit plane tapers back above.
Opportunity: moderate density and height increase

Retain 55-60’ façade height limit at Mass Ave.; additional height set back and spaced out
Opportunity: greater density and height increase

Retain 55-60’ façade height limit at Mass Ave.; additional height set back and spaced out.
Neighborhood view: Norfolk St. at Bishop Allen
Opportunity: current height and density limits

Existing Street View
Opportunity: current height and density limits
Redevelopment at Naggar Property only

45’ façade height limit at Bishop Allen. 45 degree height limit plane tapers back above.
Opportunity: current height and density limits

New Development at City Parking Lot 5

45’ façade height limit at Bishop Allen. 45 degree height limit plane tapers back above.
Opportunity: current density, increased height
New Development at City Parking Lot 5 + Naggar site

45' façade height limit at Bishop Allen. 45 degree height limit plane tapers back above.
Opportunity: bonus density, increased height

New Development at City Parking Lot 5 + Naggar site

45' façade height limit at Bishop Allen. 45 degree height limit plane tapers back above.
Bishop Allen at Norfolk St.
Bishop Allen at Norfolk St.
City parking lot 5 today

45’ façade height limit at Bishop Allen. 45 degree height limit plane tapers back above.
City parking lot 5 with housing over storefronts

45' façade height limit at Bishop Allen. 45 degree height limit plane tapers back above.
City parking lot 5 with housing and public park

45' façade height limit at Bishop Allen. 45 degree height limit plane tapers back above.
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DISCUSSION

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