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)

- 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 Marriott 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