



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

IRAM FAROOQ
Assistant City Manager for
Community Development

To: Planning Board
From: CDD Staff

SANDRA CLARKE
Deputy Director
Chief of Administration

Date: June 1, 2022
Re: **PB #303– MIT SoMa Site 2 Minor Amendment and Design Review**

KHALIL MOGASSABI
Deputy Director
Chief of Planning

Update

During the last meeting on December 7, 2021, the Board provided comments to consider revisions for the proposed design of Building 2. In addition to design review approval, MIT is also seeking a Minor Amendment to increase the parcel size by 2,736 square feet, with no other dimensional changes to the approved development program, as well as seeking approval of an updated subdivision plan. The parcel will include 33,560 sq.ft. of publicly beneficial open space that accounts for 34% of publicly beneficial open space in this PUD-5 district, for which the minimum requirement is 15%. The maximum net new nonexempt commercial GFA permitted in the PUD-5 district is 980,000 sq.ft and based on the information provided by MIT, the approval of Building 2 as proposed will bring the total nonexempt commercial GFA to 831,394 sq.ft. No changes to the approved GFA or uses of this development site are proposed. Section 13.810.1 requires that 75% of the first 20' of depth of first floors of commercial buildings abutting Main Street contain Active Uses. The façade abutting Main Street is approximately 120' wide, of which approximately 90' consists of Retail/Active Use; meeting the 75% requirement.

Planning Board Action

An Amendment to an approved PUD can be found to be either a Major Amendment or a Minor Amendment. Per the general PUD provisions in Section 12.37 of the Zoning Ordinance, the Planning Board must determine whether changes to the Final Development Plan may be approved as Minor Amendments. The following guidance is provided in zoning:

[Section 12.37.2] Minor amendments are changes which do not alter the concept of the PUD in terms of density, floor area ratio, land usage, height, provision of open space, or the physical relationship of elements of the development. Minor amendments shall include, but not be limited to, small changes in the location of buildings, open space, or parking; or realignment of minor streets.

The following condition of the Special Permit Decision (PB-303) provides some additional guidance to determine what changes would constitute Major or Minor Amendments and procedures for granting them:

344 Broadway
Cambridge, MA 02139
Voice: 617 349-4600
Fax: 617 349-4669
TTY: 617 349-4621
www.cambridgema.gov

15. *Procedures for Granting Minor and Major Amendments to this Decision.*
- a. *Determination. Except where a change is explicitly authorized as a Minor Amendment in this Decision, the Planning Board shall determine whether a proposed change is considered a Major Amendment or Minor Amendment pursuant to Section 12.37.*
 - b. *Minor Amendments. A Minor Amendment to this Decision shall be approved by an affirmative vote of at least five (5) members of the Planning Board after consideration of the proposed change, as enumerated on the Agenda, at an appropriately noticed meeting of the Planning Board. In approving a Minor Amendment, the Board shall issue a written determination that:*
 - i. *The change does not violate applicable Sections of the Zoning Ordinance, or if the change requires relief pursuant to a special permit or variance, such relief has been granted.*
 - ii. *The change will not substantially alter the Findings upon which this Decision is based.*
 - c. *Major Amendments. Notwithstanding the provisions of Article 12.000, any Major Amendment shall only be granted after an affirmative vote of at least five (5) members of the Planning Board and only after the proposed change has been advertised as a new Special Permit subject to the procedural requirements of Section 10.40. The Planning Board shall consider the substance of the change as presented in the amendment application documents and shall not be reviewing this Decision in its entirety. Upon granting a Major Amendment, the Board shall issue written Findings that the amended portions of the Final Development Plan remain in conformance with all special permit criteria applicable to the PUD. However, if the Board finds that a requested Major Amendment to this Decision constitutes a substantial alteration to the intent, purpose and substance of this Decision, such Major Amendment shall be considered under the procedures established in Article 12.000 as if it were a new Planned Unit Development Special Permit after the submission of all required application materials.*
 - d. *Conditions. Upon issuing any Amendment, the Planning Board may impose additional conditions intended to ensure conformance with the intent, purpose and substance of this Decision as well as any applicable requirements, standards or criteria set forth in applicable Sections of the Zoning Ordinance.*

The proposed amendment is not anticipated to affect any sections of the Zoning Ordinance. If the Board determines that the change constitutes a Minor Amendment, then the Board may approve the amendment on the affirmative vote of five Planning Board members.

Staff Comments on Proposed Design Revisions

As a reminder, the Special Permit for the “SoMa” Planned Unit Development (PUD) was granted by the Planning Board on May 17, 2016. The Planning Board’s review of Building 2 and its associated open space is guided by the conditions of the special permit, which reference the *Kendall Square PUD-5 Design Guidelines, 2016*, the *Sustainability Strategies* described in Appendix D of the Final Development Plan, and the *Kendall Square Design Guidelines, 2013*, which were presented to the Board as a consolidated file at the prior review session.

Planning Board Comments from December 7, 2021

Generally, the Planning Board was very supportive of the building design at its December 7, 2021 meeting. Board members recognized the building’s energy performance, sophisticated curtainwall, and dramatic cantilever design as very positive features. Key issues raised by Board members included:

- The lack of program for the stair. Board members expressed a desire for the stair tower to be more than a rarely used egress stair. Suggestions included use as a season patio, and some sense of motion, whimsy, and playfulness.
- The space beneath the cantilever being intimidating for pedestrians and needing more of a human scale.
- Concerns about the landscape design being a missed opportunity for families, including the potential for the space between Building 2 and the Sloan School to be a world class space for children.
- The need for Wadsworth Street to be more interesting for pedestrians at a variety of scales.
- That the mechanical louvers should fade into the background of the building.

Building Design Changes

In response to the Board’s comments, MIT engaged lighting consultant Fisher Marantz Stone (FMS) to enhance the design of the stair tower with a dramatic, architectural lighting strategy. This change has significant visual impacts and alters the experience of the space. The lighting will undoubtedly create a bold visual effect, being incredibly captivating at dusk and during evening hours. The tower will most certainly have an iconic and unprecedented presence at the gateway into Cambridge. Using light in a meaningful way to express a sense of innovation and creativity that is so much a part of MIT is also appreciated.

The stair enclosure design has also improved with the introduction of a custom curtainwall, solid stainless steel vertical mullions and low-iron glass. The minimal mullions and low-iron glass will help to dematerialize the enclosure, providing maximum transparency to the stair itself and the cadmium yellow structure. Staff appreciate the design team’s commitment to keeping the building and its detailing authentic and minimal.

While all very positive, the design changes do not address comments about the use and activation of the stair during the day. Staff had hoped that a more creative and robust response would have been possible.

Staff also note that the “Additional Information” section of the revised materials includes some further design refinements, including artwork on the loading dock doors and changes to the stone details at the main building entrance.

Open Space Design Changes

Regarding the open space design, it is the Applicant’s contention that the larger, SoMa open space provided to the west is the primary location for children’s play. As such, relatively modest changes to the landscape design are proposed. These include additional canopy trees and depressing one of the elliptical, prairie mounds to create a large lawn area that could be used by children. Other refinements to the landscape design include additional understory plantings and benches (and backs).

The additional plantings and canopy trees, particularly those located beneath the cantilever, will help enhance the pedestrian environment and soften the presence of the cantilever. The elliptical lawn area seems like it will provide space for unstructured play and informal use by pedestrians given its location adjacent to the sidewalk. While these modifications serve to enhance the landscape design, staff feel that the spirit of the Board’s comments about the open space have not been comprehensively addressed. Opportunities to integrate playful elements, such as those described in the City’s [Play in the Public Realm](#) document, could have further enlivened the space, and made it more attractive and engaging for children and families. Strategic insertions of public art and/or interactive play elements, would also help foster a sense of playfulness, exploration, and help humanize the building.

Continuing Review:

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends should be further studied by the Applicant, either in preparing revised materials if the Planning Board continues the review to a future date, or as conditions for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant design approval:

- Stair tower details, including the enclosure, corner columns and stair stringers, landings, and railings.
- Further information on the specific transparency and reflectance of all glazing.
- Review of all building mechanicals and appurtenances, including the need to ensure that parking and retail exhaust is located away from the public realm.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, and details, including a mock-up of all materials. The mock-up should be installed on the site, and be reviewed by staff and the Planning Board, prior to any exterior materials being ordered.
- Landscape design details, including species and planting standards for trees and other vegetation, locations of trees, bicycle racks, and details of hardscape, benches, and potential play features and interactive art, etc.
- Review of expected pedestrian wind conditions, particularly at Galaxy Park, and possible mitigation measures associated with the landscape design.
- Review of all exterior lighting, including reference to the City’s Draft Outdoor Lighting Ordinance recommendations.