

CNA

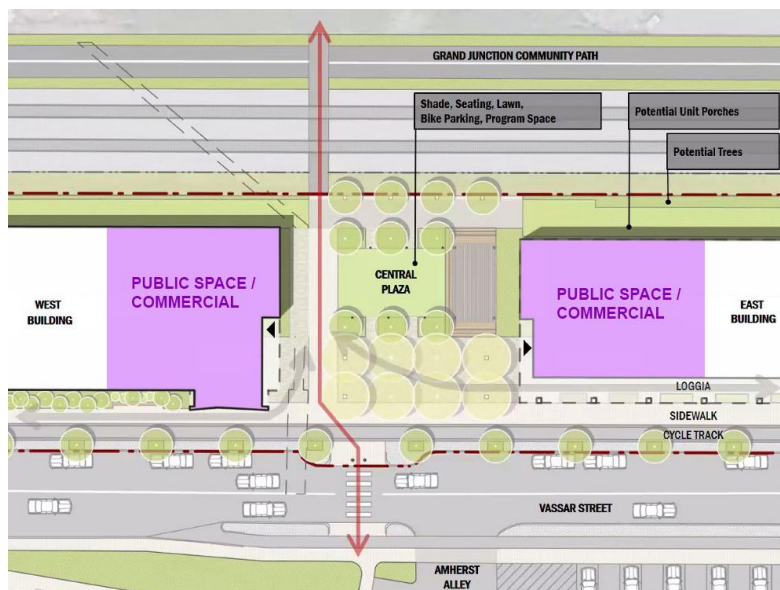
Cambridgeport
Neighborhood
Association

Dear President Reif, and members of the MIT Campus Planning team,

We are writing to you about MIT's proposed Vassar Street dormitory, slated for construction directly across the railway from Fort Washington Park in our Cambridgeport neighborhood. We are grateful that MIT is living up to its commitment to build more graduate student housing.

However, we are expressing a concerted request on behalf of our neighborhood for the incorporation of ground-floor public space in the design.

Specifically, we request 25,000 RSF of ground-floor public and commercial space in the areas of the East and West buildings that directly abut the Central Plaza, as labeled on the schematic design plans, and indicated on the plan below in purple.



The site under consideration falls partially in Zone SD-6 and partially in Zone SD-11. Both of these Special Districts, along with nearby SD-5, SD-7, SD-8, SD-9, SD-10(F), and SD-10(H), were created in 1992 as the result of a resident-driven zoning petition and ensuing negotiations with MIT.¹ The purpose of these actions was to create opportunities for more mixed-use and active-use development for this area. Following this, the 1995 *Cambridgeport Neighborhood*

¹ See *Cambridgeport Neighborhood Study*, 1995, Page 31.
https://www.cambridgema.gov/~media/Files/CDD/Planning/Neighborhoods/5/cport_ns_1995.pdf

Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association, Inc.

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Luke Mitchell (Recording Clerk), Brittany Butler, Gabe Cira, Julia Halprin



February 8, 2021

Melissa S. Stopa, Sr. Planner
Office of Campus Planning
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02319

**Re: Retail Study & Recommendation Letter
MIT West Campus Graduate Dormitory**

I. Summary:

Graffito SP (“GSP”) has been engaged by MIT (the “Client”) to evaluate the viability of ground floor retail at the MIT West Campus Graduate Student Dormitory (the “Project”) at 269-301 Vassar Street on the west end of MIT’s Campus.

Graffito’s perspective and the conclusions shared herein are influenced by (i) the current context of the neighborhood surrounding the Project, (ii) market studies for the trade area that detail traditional retail metrics, specifically including leakage and surplus data, (iii) the current state of Cambridge, MA retail as detailed in various City documents, including the “*Retail Strategy for the City of Cambridge Market Analysis and Recommendations Report*” (2017) and the Central Square BID’s recent “*District Impact Study*”(2020), and (iv) Graffito’s fifteen year track record of developing and leasing retail space in Cambridge, particular in and around Kendall and Central Squares.

With all of the above in mind, and for the reasons as set forth in the following sections, Graffito does not believe retail is *currently* a viable use at the Project.

II. Context & Locational Challenges

Graffito is generally and increasingly skeptical of planning and development exercises that put ground floor retail in all new projects regardless of the context. Such efforts – requiring ground floor retail in new urban projects in spite of challenging retail locations – over the past ten years in Greater Boston (Cambridge included) have contributed to growing retail vacancy rates, which have been wildly amplified by the pandemic. Further, as has been widely documented, retail is going through a massive shift spurred by technology and changing consumer preferences, which is putting unprecedented pressure on brick-and-mortar operations. Despite this reality though, well located retail in Cambridge will survive. But the Project (and any retail put therein) does not fall into the “well located” category.

The impediments for successful retail at the Project are numerous, specifically including: (i) the relative lack of residential and commercial density to the east, west, and south; (ii) the lack of adjacent retail or commercial destinations; and (iii) the distance from public transit, namely the MBTA Red Line (10+ minute walk for able-bodied adult). Often great retailers and restaurateurs can overcome one or two of the foregoing challenges, especially in Cambridge, but rarely all three of them.



III. Viability, Generally

For reasons as noted in the above section, the Project is not in an area currently well suited for retail development. Furthermore, Graffito does not believe any of the comparable projects identified in the CNA letter of 2020 would be viable at this specific location. Regardless of Graffito's instincts though, empirical data supports the same.

A study of the trade area within a .5 and 1 mile radius details an abundance of retail offerings relative to residential density, particularly as related to food and beverage uses. Furthermore, the 2020 Central Square *District Impact Study* details a retail community in the trade area that is in crisis, which while largely due to the pandemic, will not resolve itself quickly or wholly.

Instead of investing resources into retail at the Project, Graffito recommends MIT continue to strengthen and bolster local businesses in Central and Kendall Squares, districts that are better suited for retail from a density, pedestrian flow, and public transit perspective; and also districts that need more diverse retail entrepreneurs, particular BIPOC owned.

Simply put, more so than ever, MIT should be striving to put retail and other active ground level uses into locations – on campus and in surrounding areas – that can support it most as opposed to spreading it out into disjointed nodes across campus simply because there is new real estate available.

IV. Viability, Food & Beverage

Despite viability challenges in areas immediate proximate to the Project, it is worth noting that the Flour Bakery & Café located a three-minute walk from the Project site, which is heavily subsidized by its landowner, serves as a valuable retail outpost for the neighborhood. While Flour's sales on Erie Street are certainly less than at its other better located outposts in Boston and Cambridge, its existence begs the question if other cafes could be equally successful. The matter was specifically addressed in the CNA letter of 2020, wherein "light food/beverage service such as a café and associated seating" was suggested. Despite this suggestion, Graffito believes additional cafes in the trade area will not be successful, both based on empirical and theoretical data.

ESRI Retail MarketPlace data (which was also one of the core market data sources for the City's 2017 retail study) shows that there is an oversupply of food and beverage uses across all indexed categories in the trade area surrounding and including the Project. Additionally, recent data collected by the Central Square BID paints a dire picture for Central Square's restaurant community.

As noted in the 2017 Cambridge Retail Study:

Consumer habits and tastes change rapidly and in the last few years this has had three main impacts on retail including the growth of omni-channel retailing, the growth of food establishments, and the expansion of experiential and service-based retail. These retail trends are a response to consumers seeking convenient, unique, and memorable shopping experiences.

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More recently and for the foreseeable future, it's the pandemic that has been and will be the main variable impacting retail. And its impact on the restaurant industry has been devastating. Graffito expects vacancy rates in Cambridge to climb significantly over the coming years and retail outside of main commercial districts will struggle most acutely. Adding food and beverage uses into projects like the West Campus Dorm at issue here, even with heavy subsidy, is ill-advised and will serve to further weaken struggling restaurants elsewhere in the trade area, particularly on Mass Ave, Sidney, Brookline and River Streets.

V. Retail Alternatives, Public Art & Programming

While retail is unlikely to be viable or successful at the Project in the near term, MIT can lean into immediate-term edge beautification and activation tactics, which will create significant community benefit and perhaps even lay the groundwork for future commercial uses.

As noted in the CNA letter of 2020, one of the community's suggested uses is "art/gallery space." An exterior arts use at the Project would serve two purposes, it will activate and beautify the edge of the building in a way that enhances the pedestrian experience and *could* simultaneously lay the foundation for future commercial uses. Accordingly, upon the opening of the Project, public art should be considered for both the Central Plaza and the building edges facing said plaza. Wayfinding to the Cambridgeport neighborhood, Fort Washington Park, and the Charles River can be thought of as part of this arts-based initiative, as can public realm lighting and seating.

In addition to public realm beautification through arts, lighting and landscape architecture, MIT could consider working with its Open Space Programming team to plan for and implement programming for the Central Plaza. Further, despite past challenges and limited interest from food truck operators for locations in this portion of Campus, MIT could consider weaving in temporary and mobile food options to test the market in parallel with public realm programming. Starting with flexible and temporary initiatives in and around the Project is the best path to success for public realm activation and also towards creating the case (and demand from tenants) for future retail uses.

VI. Recommendations & Long-Term Retail Planning

Graffito understands that the life of the Project will encompass many real estate cycles and numerous market shifts, particularly as related to retail. Accordingly, while retail and other active uses may not make sense right now at the Project, MIT can design ground floor spaces that could lend themselves to conversion to commercial uses when and if future conditions exist to support such.

Upon the completion of the Project and with additional development and pedestrian activity in the trade area, specifically along the Grand Junction Multi-Use Path, retail has the potential to be successfully executed at the Project within ten years of the Project opening. The use of public art, as noted in Section V above, combined with a very strong connection to the pedestrian network surrounding the Project, is critical for both near and long-term community (and retail) aspirations.

In conclusion, Graffito recommends the following:

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- The Project, upon delivery, should not contain retail space but MIT should revisit the matter of retail viability within 10 years of the opening of the building, particularly as more development occurs in the trade area and the Grand Junction Multi-Use Path is realized;
- MIT should deploy resources towards edge activation, wayfinding, and public realm programming, including after the opening of the building to support said initiatives; and
- MIT should continue to focus its retail development efforts on Central and Kendall Squares, areas that are well situated to support robust commercial activity and that present the best opportunities for local retail entrepreneurs, particularly BIPOC owned businesses.

Respectfully submitted,



Jesse Baerkahn
President & Founder
Graffito SP

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Study Design Recommendations sought to “Encourage nodes of small commercial use in significant new developments. Developments in these nodes are encouraged to be of a character similar to street corner storefronts in the rest of the neighborhood.”²

A subsequent student masterplanning study of this immediate area, *CPORT + MIT: Envisioning the Future of MIT’s Northwest Campus in Cambridgeport* (2016) also suggested that the region between the intersection of Erie St and Waverly St, and Fort Washington Park—dubbed “The Hub”—be a node for public space, arts, and small commercial uses.³

Crucially, Zone SD-11 specifically notes the additional permitted use of “Retail, Business and Consumer Service Establishment” as 10% of gross floor area or 25,000 square feet, whichever is lower.⁴ Situated at a rail crossing, this site will soon be sandwiched between two active community paths: the separated facility on Vassar St and the Grand Junction Multi-Use Path. With a multitude of pedestrian and mobility routes, direct adjacency to a City-owned historic park, and hundreds of new residents, this is clearly the ideal and correct place to locate ground-level public and commercial space.

We suggest the following possibilities: student and community co-working area, art/gallery space, and light food/beverage service such as a café and associated seating.

We acknowledge the arduous nature of the zoning variance and special permit process, and we are willing to commit our support in that process if this request is met. Let’s work together to foster the growth of this part of our shared neighborhood as an active node, where residential uses, business uses, and public ground-floor uses converge.

With sincere regards,

The CNA

² *ibid.*, Executive Summary

³ *CPORT + MIT: Envisioning the Future of MIT’s Northwest Campus in Cambridgeport*, 2016, Page 51.

⁴ Cambridge, Massachusetts *Zoning Ordinance*, §17.202 a.(2)

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We express the above request as a unified voice of our neighborhood. We have also heard many other concerns from our neighbors, and in the spirit of representation we are including the most common here:

- People with mobility impairments and others in our community use the rail crossing at Fort Washington Park to access the CT2 bus stop. They are concerned with the closure during construction, and would like a temporary rail crossing alternative during construction.

- Neighbors are concerned with additional reflected rail noise after the dormitories are built. Adding a linear buffer of trees along the Cambridgeport side of the tracks, on MIT property (across from the site), would help reduce railway sounds. Planting the trees now would give them time to grow as new transit options for the rail corridor are developed.

- Many have expressed concerns that the current project does not add open park space or recreation space, yet it adds 700 new residents. The constraints of the site and the proposed dormitory building are tight, so we ask that the issue of adding open park/play space be prioritized in future development in Cambridgeport, particularly the two MIT parcels at right and at left of Fort Washington Park. A public masterplanning effort for this area would allow us to envision together where these spaces might be located.

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Examples - Here is a list of residence halls built via public private partnership with ground-floor dining. Other than the first two projects, they are all developed by American Campus Communities, the same group developing MIT's new dorm. This list is far from complete, but shows precedent for projects of this type.

- UMass Boston residence halls (developer: Capstone)
 - o 23,000 sf dining hall

- Wayne State University Anthony Wayne Drive residence halls (developer: Corvias)
 - o Tubby's Sub Shop, 1000 Degree Pizzeria, and Leo's Coney Island

- University of Minnesota – GrandMarc Seven Corners (ACC)
 - o Quiznos Sub shop on ground floor

- Drexel University – The Summit at University City (ACC)
 - o Urban Eatery on ground floor

- Temple University – University Village (ACC)
 - o Shop 24 Convenience Store

- Florida State University - Stadium Centre (ACC)
 - o Pizzeria on ground floor

- Arizona State University – 922 Place (ACC)
 - o Retail on ground floor

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Examples - Here are some sample photos of what we hope you'll consider for the space:

TOP: Harvard University Smith Center, food court and informal seating

BOTTOM: Drexel University Urban Eatery



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Berg'n: Food court and community event space in Brooklyn, NY with four small vendor spaces



SpaceUs: Artist and community co-working, gallery, and small event space.



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