

Minutes of the Harvard Square Conservation District Study Committee

January 17, 2018 – 1414 Massachusetts Ave., Bank of America conference room - 9:15 A.M.

Appointed Members present: William Barry, Christopher Mackin, Jerry Murphy, Jessica Sculley, Kyle Sheffield

Appointed Members absent: Christopher Angelakis, Joseph Ferrara

Additional committee participants: Jen Deaderick, John DiGiovanni, Gary Hammer, Frank Kramer

City staff present: Charles Sullivan, CHC; Sarah Burks, CHC; Stuart Dash, CDD

Public present: Liana Ascolese, Denise Jillson, Peter Kroon, Marilee Meyer, Ken Taylor

Charles Sullivan, Executive Director of the Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC), called the meeting to order at 9:25 A.M. Introductions were made around the room of all the committee, staff, and additional interested members of the public.

Mr. Sullivan summarized the purpose for the summary and topics covered at previous meetings. He noted that he had received an objection about the 9:15 AM meeting time, so if the committee wanted to reconsider the meeting time this could be discussed at the end of the meeting. He distributed handouts with information about other commercial historic districts in Beacon Hill and Back Bay. He described other town's commercial historic districts including Lexington, one of the first, which included the surroundings of Lexington Common in order to protect the character of the historic site. Beacon Hill and Nantucket followed. Cambridge established four small historic districts, one of which included some commercial buildings on the north side of Church Street—not based on the merits of the buildings themselves, but as a way of protecting the environs around the Old Burying Ground. Historic preservation legislation that was passed by the Legislature in the 1950s and 1960s was aimed at Revolutionary era sites. By the early 1980s, Cambridge had developed the concept of the Neighborhood Conservation District that could provide flexible regulations for neighborhoods of local significance and architectural character. He described the Harvard Square Kennedy Library controversy, subsequent development of the Charles Hotel and School of Government, the Overlay District, Defense Fund, and finally the establishment of the Conservation District.

Mr. Sullivan noted that every district had an enabling law and goals. He described the goals and guidelines of the Beacon Hill and Back Bay districts. The Charles Street commercial area was initially incidental to the residential area that the district was intended to preserve. The effect of regulations there were very tasteful with restored upper floors and antique style signs. Every alteration to storefronts were subject to review in Beacon Hill.

Ken Taylor, of Berkeley Street and also the chair of the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission, explained that signs in both Beacon Hill and Back Bay had to meet zoning regulations. Because Beacon Hill was all zoned residential, signs there were more limited than in Back Bay. Signs were encouraged to visually represent the business (such as a hammer shaped sign for a hardware store).

Mr. Sullivan said the Harvard Square Conservation District had intentionally been organized to be less restrictive than Charles Street. The Harvard Square ordinance allowed for more change and more modern storefront designs. He described the early 20th century character of the commercial environment in Back Bay. Many of the buildings were converted townhouses. The guidelines were strict, included review of paint colors, umbrellas and enclosures for outdoor dining.

Frank Kramer noted that he had owned and operated a bookstore and restaurant in Back Bay. He agreed it was strictly regulated, including what could be seen through the windows. He did not, however, recall that the regulations included the outdoor patio umbrellas.

Jen Deaderick observed that the south side of Boylston Street was outside of the Back Bay district. How did the district impact store owners' decisions about whether to choose to be located inside the district?

Kyle Sheffield stated that owners on the south side of the street were not interested in renovating their buildings to the same standards as required inside the district.

Mr. Sullivan asked the committee to review the goals of the Conservation District and reflect on whether they still reflect the character that people want for Harvard Square today.

Mr. DiGiovanni noted that some of the subdistricts had different character from others. There was not a single period of development for the Square, but rather a long arc.

Mr. Kramer noted that the first study committee had recommended that the City Council establish a Ch. 40C historic district for Harvard Square. That idea did not come to pass because of property owner concern about the appeal risk in a Ch. 40C district. That's when the recommendation changed to a Neighborhood Conservation District.

Ms. Deaderick noted that Charles Street was not centered around a college campus like Harvard Square. Harvard Square could not be a super stuffy environment because young people have young tastes.

Mr. DiGiovanni noted that the demographics of Harvard Square were diverse.

Jessica Sculley asked for discussion about the San Francisco model, since that was a model pointed to by the petitioners for this study.

Mr. Sullivan described the downtown San Francisco model. There were four commercial districts. All the buildings in those districts were inventoried in 1970 and rated according to significance on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the most significant. Category 1 buildings were of landmark quality. There were different guidelines for different categories. The ratings could not be changed easily but city staff recognized that a lot of things had changed since 1970. Category 5 buildings in 1970 would now be more than 50 years old and might deserve a higher ranking if the survey were to be updated. Opinions and knowledge about history and architectural styles/designers change over time. He said there was a danger to categorizing buildings, because developers would see lower ranked buildings as dispensable.

Ms. Sculley asked if the staff felt constrained by the current district regulations.

Sarah Burks answered that she considered the current regulations to be working well. Consultations with staff prior to application were encouraged. The Historical Commission isn't the only board that gets a crack at a major project, making sure that multiple areas of concern can be considered during the public process. She asked the committee if they disagreed and saw something that they did not think was working well.

Mr. Sheffield said the review of an applicant's first proposal is often the hardest. For example, the first proposal for the Abbot building met a lot of pushback.

Christopher Mackin said the study arose out of the controversy over the Abbot project. This is a new era of property values with new owners. He asked if the community was adequately prepared to react to those forces. How could a message be conveyed to the newcomers about what was acceptable?

Mr. DiGiovanni cautioned against measures so prescriptive that it essentially said to the newcomers that their investment in Harvard Square was not welcome.

Mr. Kramer said formula businesses was a topic that needed to be discussed.

Mr. Sullivan invited public comment.

Denise Jillson, Director of the Harvard Square Business Association, noted that the Business Association had met with Equity One and asked them to make arrangements to keep the Curious George store open, look out for long-term tenants, and to provide construction mitigation for the benefit of the surrounding businesses. She said Equity One ignored the requests, but when Regency representatives heard the same requests they listened and reacted positively. She noted that the push back that happens privately is different from what happens in public meetings. She said that Harvard had also responded positively to concerns raised by members of the public when they met separately, outside of a public meeting. She said the planks of the Kroon rezoning petition should be discussed by this Study Committee.

Ken Taylor noted that if the zoning were to be amended, the Historical Commission would act within that amended zoning context.

Marilee Meyer of Dana Street asked why the zoning petition and Study Committee could not proceed at the same time. She said she likes good design, but she did not see much demand for good design from city boards including the Historical Commission. Landmarked properties had the benefit of more specific guidelines catered to the individual building. The Abbot building was being sterilized. The storefront guidelines in the Conservation District were too relaxed and should be tightened up.

It was noted that the next meeting would be on February 14, 2018 at 9:15 A.M. at 1414 Mass. Ave. The meeting adjourned at 10:53 A.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah L. Burks
Preservation Planner