

Guidelines for Demolition, Construction, and Alterations  
in the Harvard Square Conservation District

(Excerpted from “Final Report of the Cambridge Historical Commission  
Regarding the Proposed Harvard Square Conservation District, Dec. 5, 2000,”  
as adopted by the City Council Dec. 18, 2000)

Chapter 2.78, Article III, Section 220 describes the factors to be considered by neighborhood conservation district commissions:

A. In passing upon matters before it, the Historical Commission or neighborhood conservation district commission shall consider, among other things, the historic and architectural value and significance of the site or structure, the general design, arrangement, texture and material of the features involved, and the relation of such features to similar features of structures in the surrounding area. In the case of new construction or additions to existing structures a commission shall consider the appropriateness of the size and shape of the structure both in relation to the land area upon which the structure is situated and to structures in the vicinity, and a Commission may in appropriate cases impose dimensional and setback requirements in addition to those required by applicable provision of the zoning ordinance. A Commission shall not consider interior arrangements or architectural features not subject to public view.

In making its determinations, the Cambridge Historical Commission will also operate under goals and guidelines designed by the Study Committee to protect historic resources while encouraging the architectural diversity that characterizes Harvard Square. Guidelines that are clear, detailed, and easy to apply will help maintain consistent interpretation of urban design and preservation priorities for Harvard Square.

All applications will be reviewed by Cambridge Historical Commission staff for compliance with the guidelines, and the staff will actively engage the applicant in discussions about the objectives and nature of the project. The staff will advise the applicant throughout the application process, and will coordinate reviews by the Cambridge Historical Commission and the Harvard Square Advisory Committee. Historical Commission and Community Development Department staff will continue to advise both boards.

The following guidelines for demolition, construction, and alterations expand upon the

language of the Ordinance to provide additional guidance for administration of the Harvard Square Conservation District.

#### A. Demolition

Although the City's demolition delay ordinance will not apply in a Harvard Square Conservation District, demolition will be similarly defined as "the act of pulling down, destroying, removing or razing a structure or commencing the work of total or substantial destruction with the intent of completing the same".<sup>1</sup> The Cambridge Inspectional Services Commissioner has interpreted "substantial destruction" as including removal of a roof or one or more sides of a building, gutting the interior to the point where exterior features are impacted, or removal of more than 25% of a structure. Work of this sort will be reviewed under the following demolition guidelines, while the removal of building components, including signs and storefronts, will be reviewed as alterations.

The purpose of reviewing demolition within the Conservation District will be to preserve significant buildings and the diversity of building ages, styles, and forms that help to define the historical character of the Square. Other benefits will include the opportunity to review the significance of individual buildings in the context of specific development proposals, to consider creative re-use possibilities, and to encourage the care and maintenance of the building stock.

The Cambridge Historical Commission will issue a Certificate of Appropriateness to an applicant seeking to demolish a structure in the Conservation District if the project, including both the demolished and the replacement buildings, is determined to be "appropriate for or compatible with the preservation or protection of the . . . district."<sup>2</sup> Approval of demolition will be dependent on a finding by the Cambridge Historical Commission that a) the demolition of the structure will not adversely impact the district, subdistrict, or abutting properties in the sense described in secondary goal #1, and b) the replacement project meets the purposes of the Conservation District with respect to secondary goals #3 through #9, where these are applicable.

The history of Harvard Square suggests some specific criteria that may be applied to demolition proposals. Buildings that are over fifty years old, that are contributing structures in

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<sup>1</sup> City Code, section 2.78.080.F. Demolition is categorized in Chapter 40C as an "alteration;" moving a building categorized as "construction."

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 40C, Section 10a. This language is incorporated by reference in the Neighborhood Conservation District and Landmark Ordinance, Ch. 2.78.170.

the Harvard Square National Register District, or that are part of the Square's dwindling inventory of wood-frame structures, are generally valued for their contribution to the character of the Square, and it may be presumed that preservation will be strongly preferred to demolition (secondary goal #4).<sup>3</sup> However, all such applications will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and the Cambridge Historical Commission will not necessarily protect all such structures from demolition.

## B. Construction

Creative design solutions to development and renovation requirements will be encouraged to ensure that the unique resources and character of Harvard Square are protected.<sup>4</sup> Coordination with the Harvard Square Advisory Committee's large project review will be essential.

### 1. New Construction/Additions to Existing Buildings

Harvard Square is a kaleidoscopic urban environment. The Cambridge Historical Commission will recognize the continuing evolution of architectural design and the necessity of keeping the Square fresh, vibrant, and economically viable. Contemporary design expression will be encouraged in new construction (secondary goal #3).<sup>5</sup>

Proponents of projects requiring special permits on sites with little apparent impact on historic resources will be encouraged to initiate their public review process with the Harvard Square Advisory Committee. To the extent feasible, the Cambridge Historical Commission will seek to hold joint meetings with the Advisory Committee on projects that fall within both jurisdictions. The existence of parallel reviews by the Historical Commission and the Advisory Committee is seen as a productive application of both zoning and historic preservation disciplines in a complex urban environment; in the event of conflict, however, conservation district protection, which requires Cambridge Historical Commission approval of building permits, will prevail. Because the specific circumstances of every development project cannot be predicted, it is not pos-

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<sup>3</sup> "Build on and sustain the diversity of the existing building form, scale and material. Preserve and encourage flowers, green yards and courtyards and small, free-standing and wood-frame buildings where that character prevails. Encourage streetwall buildings where that character has been set."

<sup>4</sup> Secondary goals #2, #3, #6, #9.

<sup>5</sup> "Support creative, contemporary design for new construction that complements and contributes to its immediate neighbors and the character of Harvard Square. Recognize and respect creativity of design during the review process and mitigate the functional impacts of development on adjacent areas."

sible to specify an exact regulatory protocol governing the sharing of reviews between the Historical Commission and the Advisory Committee. The inherent logic of the project review process will guide the proponent.

The Cambridge Historical Commission will begin its review of a new construction project or addition with an analysis of the historic significance and architectural value of the premises and its immediate surroundings. New construction that accommodates older structures on or adjacent to the site will be encouraged. Construction that incorporates significant major portions of older structures may be acceptable; however, use of isolated historic architectural elements will be discouraged. Demolition involving retention of facades to allow replacement of historic structures with new construction (mis-named "facadectomies") will be discouraged unless the supporting historic fabric is found to be unsalvageable.

In reviewing new construction or additions to existing buildings, the Commission "shall consider the appropriateness of the size and shape of the structure both in relation to the land area upon which the structure is situated and to structures in the vicinity."<sup>6</sup> Review of new buildings will be guided by considerations such as the appropriateness of the structure's height, scale, mass, proportions, orientation, and lot coverage; the vertical and horizontal emphasis, rhythm of openings, transparency, texture, and materials of the publicly-visible facades; sunlight and shadow effects; relationship to public open space; and landscaping.

Review of new buildings and additions will be further guided by the subdistrict goals in Chapter VI regarding the relationship of a proposed building to the site and to other buildings and structures in the vicinity.

Under the City Code, the Historical Commission acting as a neighborhood conservation district commission "may in appropriate cases impose dimensional and setback requirements in addition to those required by the applicable provision of the zoning ordinance."<sup>7</sup> Implementing such a measure could result in a reduction of the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) allowed by zoning. The appropriate circumstances for imposing dimensional and set-back reductions could include a wide disparity of scale and density between the proposed project and its surroundings, or a situation in which the proposed project would destroy or diminish the historical resources of the site.

## 2. Alterations to Existing Buildings

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<sup>6</sup> Ch. 2.78.220.A.

<sup>7</sup> Ch. 2.78.220.A.

Alterations to exterior architectural features visible from a public way will be subject to binding review by the Cambridge Historical Commission, guided by secondary goals #1, #2, and #4. Storefronts will be treated more flexibly than building facades or upper stories. The goals of the district favor retention and repair, rather than replacement, of original or significant exterior fabric.

While irreversible changes will be subject to review and approval of the Cambridge Historical Commission, certain other visible exterior alterations will be reviewed by the staff or exempted from review entirely. Chapter 2.78, Article III identifies seven other categories of construction and alterations that may be exempted from review.<sup>8</sup> From that list, the Study Committee recommends that the following features be categorically exempt from review and not trigger an application process:

- Storm doors and storm windows (subject to specific design guidelines).
- Signs that conform to the Cambridge sign code as amended in the Harvard Square Historic Overlay District.

The Historical Commission will adopt procedures delegating review and approval of some reversible alterations which have the potential to adversely affect historic fabric to the staff. Applications for projects that do not meet these criteria will be considered by the Commission at a public hearing. A Certificate of Nonapplicability will be issued by the staff if Conservation District guidelines are followed. These categories will include:

- Ordinary repairs or maintenance using similar materials and construction details to those existing.
- Reconstruction replicating the exterior design of a building, structure, or exterior architectural feature damaged or destroyed by fire, storm, or other disaster, provided such reconstruction is begun within one year thereafter and carried forward with due diligence.<sup>9</sup>
- Roof repairs and HVAC equipment not visible from a public way.
- Window replacement in conformity with guidelines to be adopted by the

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<sup>8</sup> Ch. 2.78.190.B. Exterior color is categorically excluded from review in neighborhood conservation districts.

<sup>9</sup> Such replacement work will still be subject to review of the staff and issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness.

Commission after public hearing.

a. Interior Work and Alterations Not Visible From a Public Way

Interior arrangements and alterations to architectural features not visible from any public way are exempt from review in a neighborhood conservation district and a Certificate of Nonapplicability for such work will be issued by Commission staff without delay.

b. Storefronts

Storefronts are a source of Harvard Square's continuing vitality, and the Cambridge Historical Commission will seek to encourage creativity in this regard (secondary goal #2).<sup>10</sup> Most storefronts will be regarded as impermanent and the Historical Commission will look favorably on creative alterations that meet the particular needs of the retailer or office tenant, as long as the original structure and finishes are maintained or recovered (where they still exist). Alterations to upper stories will be regarded as having the potential for significant and permanent adverse effects and will be reviewed accordingly. Reversible changes to storefronts will not be discouraged as long as they do not obscure or damage the structure or any original architectural features. Opaque glass will not be allowed in display windows unless specifically permitted.

The Cambridge Historical Commission will adopt procedures delegating review and approval of two categories of storefront alterations to the staff. Applications for storefront alterations that do not meet these criteria will be considered by the Commission at a public hearing. A Certificate of Nonapplicability will be issued by the staff for:

- Alterations that do not alter, enclose, or extend further than the decorative or structural framework of the building or retail space originally intended to surround a storefront. The framework consists of such elements as piers, columns, cornerboards, quoins, cornices and similar structural or decorative features.
- Storefront alterations that do not obscure, remove, relocate, or replace historic or original exterior architectural features. Exterior architectural features may include, but are not limited to, such features as brackets, window and door casings, fascia, hoods, bays, and window sash.

[commentary deleted]

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<sup>10</sup> "Help sustain the vitality of the commercial environment by supporting creative, contemporary design for storefront alterations and additions, while preserving architecturally significant or original building fabric and character."

A few storefronts in the Square retain their original design or have a subsequent design that is significant in terms of architectural or historical significance. The following storefronts and/or the buildings in which they are located will be specifically designated in the ordinance as requiring Commission rather than staff approval of alterations:

- 1304 Massachusetts Avenue (Gnomon Copy) (Fig. 42)
- 1316 Massachusetts Avenue (Leavitt & Pierce)
- 1320-22 Massachusetts Avenue (J. August)
- 30-30A Plympton Street (Bow Street Flowers)

Alterations to these storefronts, including installation or alteration of signs, will require a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Commission.<sup>11</sup> Additional significant storefronts may be identified in the future, and the Cambridge Historical Commission may recommend to the City Council that they be added to the protected list.

#### c. Windows

Windows are critical to maintaining the characteristic appearance of significant buildings. Replacement of wood windows with inappropriate modern units can destroy the traditional appearance of a building. The Commission will establish design guidelines for window alterations governing materials, muntin patterns, panning, and reflectivity.

In almost all cases, modern replacement windows are available that match the originals in appearance while offering significant energy efficiency. The Commission will, in most cases, allow window replacement routinely as long as design guidelines are met. Applications to replace windows that are ornamental in design or that contain significant original sash will require review by the Commission.

Review and approval of certain window alterations may be delegated to the staff. For example, applications for window alterations that do not change the size of the opening, configuration of the muntins, material, or transparency will receive a Certificate of Nonapplicability in the same manner as the exempted storefront alterations.

#### d. Masonry

Harvard Square contains many outstanding examples of brick masonry construction. Because the appearance of masonry can be irreversibly altered by improper pointing or cleaning,

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix for a description and additional photographs of these storefronts.

Cambridge Historical Commission approval will be necessary for these operations (Fig. 40). Review will include approval of specifications for cleaning, cutting joints, mortar composition, and joint profiles. Replacement masonry units will be reviewed for color, size, and finish. Painting of masonry surfaces without a Certificate of Appropriateness will be prohibited.

e. Signs

Signs in Harvard Square should contribute to the commercial vitality of the area. Uniformity of signs and conformance to conjectural "historic" designs will not be encouraged. However, signs should not obscure any original architectural features of the structure on which they are located. Signs should be fastened to structures in the least destructive way possible.<sup>12</sup>

The Study Committee recommends that the Harvard Square Overlay District should be amended to transfer jurisdiction over signs which do not conform to the sign code applicable elsewhere in the City to the Cambridge Historical Commission (see discussion of Zoning Amendments). Limitations on the number of projecting or free-standing signs on a lot; limitations on the size of individual wall, freestanding, or projecting signs; and limitations on the height of signs above the sidewalk, and placement of signs, would be deleted from the zoning ordinance with respect to the Harvard Square Overlay District and made subject to Cambridge Historical Commission review.

Under Chapter 2.78, Article III, the Cambridge Historical Commission will have binding jurisdiction over size, materials, dimensions, illumination, and appearance of new or altered signs.<sup>13</sup> However, signs that conform to the provisions of the zoning code regarding the total area of signs on each building and the height at which signs can be placed will be exempted from review. Decorative banners and temporary signs will be prohibited unless specifically approved "subject to such conditions as to duration of use, dimension, location, lighting, removal and similar matters as the commission may reasonably specify."<sup>14</sup>

C. Public Spaces

Municipal and utility company modifications to sidewalks, streets, and street furniture

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<sup>12</sup> Sandwich board signs are subject to permitting by the Department of Public Works when placed on a sidewalk and will not be subject to Historic District review.

<sup>13</sup> Content, color, and graphics used on signs - the commercial message - will be exempt from review in the Historic District.

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 2.78.190.A.7.



will be subject to the jurisdiction of the Cambridge Historical Commission. Review will be undertaken with consideration to the appropriateness of such materials and structures as paving and curbing, light standards, traffic and parking structures and signs, and utility structures visible at or above grade from any public way.

The Cambridge Historical Commission may adopt a master plan for the treatment of publicly-accessible private open spaces in Harvard Square and suggest public improvements of sidewalks, crosswalks, and lighting. The Commission will encourage privately-initiated efforts to improve the public spaces of the Square and will serve as a public forum for discussion of alterations and coordination of privately- and publicly-funded improvements.

Proposals for public art installations, whether private donations or public projects, will be referred to the Cambridge Public Art Commission for a recommendation in accordance with established city policies.<sup>15</sup> For the purposes of conservation district review, three-dimensional artworks will be considered to be structures, and murals will be considered to be signs if they contain an explicit message. In general, such installations must also be found to be appropriate for their setting and for the district as a whole.

Cambridge Historical Commission  
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<sup>15</sup> See "City of Cambridge Art Gifts and Donations Policy", adopted May 17, 1999, and Chapter 2.114 of the City Code, "Public Development Arts Projects."