

Minutes of the Harvard Square Conservation District Study Committee

April 25, 2018 – 1414 Massachusetts Ave., Bank of America conference room - 9:15 A.M.

Appointed Members present: Christopher Angelakis, Joseph Ferrara, Christopher Mackin, Jerry Murphy,
Jessica Sculley, Kyle Sheffield

Appointed Members absent: William Barry

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

City staff present: Charles Sullivan, CHC, Sarah Burks, CHC, Susannah Bigolin, CDD

Public present: Liana Ascolese, Councilor Dennis Carlone, John Hawkinson, Denise Jillson, Elizabeth Klein, Marilee Meyer

Charles Sullivan, Executive Director of the Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC), called the meeting to order at 9:15 A.M. Introductions were made around the room of all the committee, staff, and additional interested members of the public. Mr. Sullivan distributed handouts including revisions to the six Subdistrict Descriptions and a clean copy of the District Goal & Secondary Goals.

Mr. Kramer asked what was meant by “local” business. Was there an agreed upon definition?

Mr. Sullivan said the topic had been discussed. There were many possible meanings but it was put into the goals without a definition for constructive ambiguity.

Mr. Kramer asked the group if they thought it meant locally-owned?

Christopher Mackin said that was the spirit of the meaning and how he interpreted it at the March meeting’s discussion.

John Hawkinson said there could be a legal challenge to a definition and agreed it was better to leave it undefined.

Mr. Kramer respectfully disagreed.

Mr. Sullivan asked for written, red-lined comments if anyone had additional edits to suggest.

Mr. Sullivan noted that the Final Report of the original Harvard Square Conservation District Study Committee was incorporated by reference into the City Council order establishing the district. There had been a suggestion made by the petitioners to rank buildings by level of importance as done in San Francisco’s downtown district. He remarked that the San Francisco model was different from most historic preservation districts in the country in its ranking of buildings. He said the flaw, as he saw it, was that the rankings get outdated as our understanding of history and architectural history changes. The rankings cannot be easily changed in San Francisco, causing a lack of flexibility to adjust the designations based on new understandings.

Mr. Sullivan proceeded to lead a discussion about the updates made to the subdistrict descriptions. The layered nature of the history of the Square meant that one size did not fit all.

Subdistrict A: Harvard Square and Mass. Ave.

Christopher Angelakis noted that the bank building at 1414 Massachusetts Avenue, altered with an aluminum façade in the 1950s, was an example of how the design of buildings change over time because of changes to the performance standards. Alterations were not always made for stylistic reasons

but because of other criteria like the cost of materials, safety codes, and engineering requirements. These are the reasons why buildings constructed today look so different from those built in the nineteenth century. You can't build load bearing buildings today for many reasons. At 1414 Mass. Ave., the architects in the 1950s were probably studying sun shading and energy issues that lead to their addition of the aluminum screen on the façade of the building.

Mr. Mackin asked if older buildings could be given priority in the district. Mr. Sullivan said they could. Secondary Goal #4 contained language encouraging the preservation of small scale, freestanding wood buildings.

John DiGiovanni noted that the redevelopment proposal of the Read Block in the 1990s caused a great uproar. He said that some people like himself would have preferred to see a taller building at that location for urban design reasons. There needed to be a balance between the physical character of existing historic buildings and good urban design.

Mr. Sullivan agreed, adding that the purpose of a Conservation District was to guide change, not to keep everything exactly the same, as is done along Tory Row (Brattle Street, Old Cambridge Historic District). He said that Holyoke Center (Smith Campus Center) had reached the 50 year-old mark and should be valued for the period in time and architecture it represented. He noted that another superblock development of its kind was inconceivable today, but it was an urban design and architectural approach of the time (1960s). He noted new commercial designs like Clover and the four historic storefronts including J. August.

Jessica Sculley noted that the mechanism protecting the four historic storefronts was similar to the San Francisco model of calling out buildings of high importance.

Mr. Sullivan said those four were the only storefronts identified as original to the building's construction or a highly significant alteration (like the Art Nouveau example).

Mr. Angelakis noted that the retail space at the A. D. Club building (now occupied by TD Bank) was a difficult design to adapt to retail use because the glazed openings were very small.

Mr. DiGiovanni said the storefront guideline requiring that no changes be made to the structural supports was stifling to designers and tenants. The Art Nouveau storefront would not meet that guideline today.

Mr. Sheffield said the Historical Commission encouraged multiple small storefronts in a building to support small local businesses, but it was a difficult thing to regulate because the Commission's jurisdiction does not extend to tenancy or the interior of buildings.

Mr. Kramer noted that Briggs & Briggs sheet music store had occupied the AD Club space for over 100 years. But as the market for sheet music waned the store closed and that space had to change. Adidas was there, moved out, then came back. Then TD Bank went in. Respecting history was very

important. Keeping historic storefronts can work with the right tenants. The goals ought to encourage preservation of historic storefronts.

Subdistrict B: Bow & Arrow Streets and Putnam Square

Mr. Sullivan described this subdistrict's mixture of private dormitories, low scale houses, and one enormous apartment building. He noted that the continuous retail frontage stops at Putnam Square and becomes more staggered. He described the Veritas Hotel project and its design evolution.

Jen Deaderick commented that the replica design had worried her at first because she didn't want it to read as a Disneyesque environment. But the construction was done well and it did not have a fake quality to it.

Ms. Sculley asked why a contemporary design for the location had been rejected. Mr. Sullivan said he would look it up. He noted the through-block passageways at St. Paul's property and the ART.

[Jerry Murphy left].

Subdistrict C: Gold Coast

Mr. Sullivan showed slides east to west in the subdistrict. He noted that many of the final clubs had donated preservation restrictions to the Historical Commission restricting the development potential of their properties and thereby getting abatements on their property assessments. Those restrictions predated the Conservation District. He noted that accessibility issues were common to the club buildings.

[Elizabeth Klein left].

Mr. Sullivan stopped at Subdistrict C. Was this approach useful?

Mr. Hawkinson said it was fun to understand each district, but how did it help to update the language. Mr. Sullivan said he would distribute the document and asked the participants to return their written markups.

Marilee Meyer asked about open space at the back of properties.

Mr. DiGiovanni asked by the addition of bike lanes on Brattle Street had not gotten reviewed by the Historical Commission. Mr. Sullivan answered that the bike lanes were constructed only of paint and plastic stanchions.

City Councilor Dennis Carlone said the City Council had not seen the plans for the bike lanes either. He commented that the Clover storefront design was not good architecture. The all-glass façade left the three upper stories hanging in mid-air. The building needed visual vertical elements to meet the ground. All glass should not be the new retail culture. A building needs to meet the ground. Mr. Sullivan noted that the only remaining structural element uncovered at Clover was an iron column. It was preserved but behind the glass. He said the design was an outlier rather than a new standard. Councilor Carlone said the Historical Commission's responsibility was to protect the integrity of buildings. Removing fabric at the first floor was as bad as removing it at the third floor.

It was noted that the next meeting would be on May 23 at 9:15 at the same location.

The meeting adjourned at 10:50 A.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah L. Burks
Preservation Planner