

Volpe Working Group Meeting – Notes

April 13, 2017, Cambridge Police Department

- Attending:
 - Volpe Working Group: Steve LaMaster, Kathy Born, Esther Hanig, Hugh Russell, Gerald O’Leary, Peter Crawley
 - CDD staff: Jeff Roberts, Suzannah Bigolin, Daniel Wolf, Erik Thorkildsen (consultant)
 - MIT: Steve Marsh, Hunter Kaas, Kathryn Brown, David Manfredi, Anthony Galluccio
- Introduction:
 - Steve Marsh (MIT): update
 - MIT team continues to canvass and discuss their approach with the community
 - Scheduling meetings with Cambridgeport and Wellington-Harrington
 - Jeff Roberts
 - Shifting to Wednesday meetings for May
 - Will be looking at housing, sustainability, and transportation in next meeting
- Presentation by Erik Thorkildsen (part 1):
 - Remarks on built form
 - Review of principles discussed so far
 - Five building zones
 - Reflections on nuances in design within different zones
- Discussion: pedestrian zone and street wall (lower portions)
 - How do you decide the proportions of pedestrian street wall height to street width? What's the proper ratio?
 - Tends to be between 0.5:1 and 2:1
 - Should this relate to pedestrian density too?
 - Important to distinguish between renderings and reality
 - When you have a high building you really know you're somewhere - is it about the height of the building or about design novelty?
 - The sketch that showed the less conventional buildings had more design novelty - contributes somewhat to sense of place
 - People keep coming back to the market building in Rotterdam - unique, novel design
 - Why is it so easy to walk 20 blocks in NYC without thinking about it? In New York City, the grid helps you know where you're walking, and the environment is engaging and keeps the walk interesting
 - So many streets in Boston are hard to get across, such as Binney Street
 - New and unique buildings would pull you into the Volpe site
 - Are there some rough assumptions that would help us have this conversation? Such as the footprint of some uses or anticipated density?
 - Unless you have a couple of very tall buildings accounting for the majority of the density, would transfer of development rights have any use here, to take pressure off of these 14 acres and shift to other nearby areas (perhaps within MIT areas)?
 - We have design guidelines that say: develop the street wall and pedestrian experience; we should want to do these things on 3rd Street, Broadway, Binney Street, 6th Street Connector – these want to be nice streets
 - Interesting to look at how design guidelines for the recent MIT projects are applied; these buildings are intended to be individually iconic with existing buildings on Main

Street as the street wall; seems to be a desire to make this site “special” but “special” buildings can be scary

- MIT Building 1 is a textbook example of the design guidelines approach.
- Is it too soon to talk about streets, pedestrians, traffic?
 - Is there going to be a lot of parking here?
 - Even if not drivable, there should be a path along 5th Street to invite people to enter site
 - Should consider primary points of entry
 - Activity at street level is essential; there’s nothing happening on ground level of University Park building fronting the adjacent park
 - Not having the retail activation at University Park diminished the project
- Many places in Boston feel warm and inviting, based on use mix
- More is more – a greater draw builds upon itself
- Limit street frontage for banks
- Density on the site is a real opportunity; the Volpe site is really where density should intensify – an exclamation point for the city; not just height and density, but texture too
- Not just a bunch of slick buildings that are extruded from their base
- Opportunity to shape a place to feel like it’s in the heart of the city
- What about permeability through buildings?
 - Like idea of upper-floor public permeability, e.g., observation decks
 - Connecting different levels
 - So many different ways to walk through MIT - even second and third floors of buildings are publically accessible
 - Doesn't bother me to pass through the Marriott space; As long as these spaces are created with public use in mind, public accessible space could expand
 - If there aren't enough people to populate these kind of pass through spaces inside buildings, they can become dead
 - How many people are going to live and work here?
 - Think about connectivity - Broad Canal, to MIT, etc
 - Some of these kind of passages through buildings can feel like a bland mall
 - But if it's on your way from A to B, that's different
- Thoughts on unconventional buildings that veer away from a traditional street wall?
 - Cautionary example at MIT, where main building and Student Center form a well-proportioned “outdoor room,” but it doesn’t read as a room because Mass Ave cuts through at an angle
 - If you "erode the corner," at the southeast of site - near Point Park, that could be nice - make a nice square there;
- Would be good to know that you're in the center of this dynamic district when you're at Third, Main, and Broadway; creating a space on that corner helps that
- Area in front of MIT student center is a magnet of students, traffic flow, Mass Ave activity – nexus point of student and pedestrian traffic;
- Where is the center, nexus in Kendall Square? That corner (3rd and Broadway) seems like the obvious nexus; creates the human element and dynamism of lots of people moving - could animate a space; Times Square does that - intersections of roads, creates a room, you know where you are
- It’s the first moment when you know you're in Cambridge - when you cross the Longfellow Bridge, arrive at 3rd and Broadway
- Doesn't need to be a huge space

- MIT remarks on factors considered in site planning – David Manfredi:
 - Buildings define space
 - Best cities are made up of combination of background buildings and iconic buildings
 - Iconic – a symbol of something – innovation, community, or power
 - Can be small and iconic
 - Boston City Hall plaza - City Hall, like it or not, is iconic; symbol of renaissance of city of Boston and becoming a world class city
 - Piazza del Campo in Sienna – space is important, buildings are background, but define space
 - Durability - buildings that will endure a very long time, not trendy or fashionable, somehow rooted in this place
 - Defining the program (current thinking):
 - Ratio of commercial to residential of 60:40 - based on previous proposals for the site
 - Total of 1.7 M SF of commercial space and 1.1 M of residential (excluding new Volpe building)
 - 4 commercial and 4 residential buildings
 - Commercial buildings - some mix of office and lab; big range in lab types: intensely wet lab (lots of air changes, different utilities) vs. dry labs which are basically lots of computers; all use a lot of air and power
 - Basics on size of footprint: tenants usually want 40,000 SF floorplate – horizontal communication is where greatest potential for collaboration lies; cites Stanford study about creative collisions; actually 80,000 SF is ideal in this regard, but not great city making; in MIT SoMa - closer to 25 - 28,000 SF
 - Make connections with bridges for larger footprints
 - Commercial buildings designed the same whether lab or office, to maximize future flexibility
 - 15' floor-to-floor heights, yield 9'6" ceilings
 - For 4 commercial buildings with a floorplate of 28,000 SF building heights will be around 243'
 - Completely different metrics in residential: building footprints much more variable; as small as 10,000 SF on floor plate can yield very slender and beautiful buildings; could be 15,000 SF or 18,000 SF
 - 11' or 10'6" floor-to-floor heights for residential buildings
 - Could relate the height to the space - perhaps putting tallest buildings next to open spaces;
 - Lab buildings are often orthogonal in shape; residential is more malleable and provides an opportunity to play architecturally
- Presentation by Erik Thorkildsen (part 2)
- Discussion
 - Building to be as flexible as possible - high floor heights
 - Difficult to do a tall life sciences building (not more than 250-300')
 - Boston Foundation says we'll need a significant amount of new housing
 - Transportation and housing problem; if we build enough housing to account for employees in new commercial buildings, we could avoid traffic impacts
 - Important to maintain an aggressive amount of residential in Kendall
 - Majority of city is residential and only allows residential by zoning

- Question about the economic feasibility of a 250' residential tower - is this something the market can absorb?
- Marsh:
 - Proximity to collaboration is high here – opportunity
 - Open space, housing, and retail consumes funding; commercial generates most revenue
- But other uses and activities make a place attractive and desirable
- Residential could be very stylish in design
- Manfredi: Agree to the extent that residential is less fixed to hard metrics, but we shouldn't lower our expectations that lab buildings can be beautiful too
- Don't want to see formulaic residential buildings
- All buildings don't have to be equally iconic. There needs to be some sophistication in plan, inside and out
- Advantage of MIT as developer: has vested stake in placemaking; not going anywhere
- Do we think that residential open space (e.g. green roofs and balconies) at upper levels is important?
- To the extent that it enlivens ground level?
- Should it count toward Floor Area Ratio?
- Working with a 3D model mockup would be really helpful, brings home challenges around wind, sunlight, canyon effect
- Would this be a form based zoning proposal or about numbers?
 - Jeff: we're trying to create clear statement about desired outcome and principles, rather than a zoning strategy
- GSA has set of design guidelines for their buildings - could these be informative for rest of site; do they align with what else is going on site?
- Manfredi: They're very general, performance standards about quality and endurance - about representing integrity and stability of US gov, long term investment in buildings, performance standards for building
- Public comment
 - 3 M SF? Prudential Center is 1.2 M SF, so this would be bringing about 2.5 Prudential Centers onsite
 - Seems pretty dense; maybe we should transfer some of this development to other parts of the city
 - Greatest demand is in lab space; residential is making site more dense than it should be
 - Massing study didn't take into account number of trees on the site - tremendous opportunity to include the existing trees
 - Opportunity of making seating/plaza environment underneath trees
 - Development should accommodate active pedestrian use; people are drawn to openness, sunlight, and sky; all about light and air
 - Non ground floor retail - in K2C2 there was concern that retail wouldn't work outside of ground floor; underground connections might not be the right thing here for the public realm
 - Conducted a tree count - Volpe site has 104 trees onsite, 6th Street Connector has 52 additional, sidewalks additional 34; total: 190