



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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Community Development

To: Planning Board
From: Jeff Roberts, Land Use and Zoning Planner
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Date: April 12, 2016
Re: Special Permit **PB #308, 95 and 99 Elmwood Street**

This memo contains an overview of the proposed project at 95 and 99 Elmwood Street, the special permit being requested, and related comments. Comments from the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TP&T) and Department of Public Works (DPW) are provided in separate memos.

Summary of Proposal

The applicant is proposing to demolish the two existing buildings located on two adjacent parcels, 95 and 99 Elmwood Street, to construct a new building with 34 residential units, underground parking for 34 cars, a shed for 39 long-term bicycle parking spaces, and a small retail space. The proposal also includes addition of sidewalks and street trees on Elmwood Street.

Requested Special Permit

The project is located in the Business A-2 (BA-2) District and requires a Project Review Special Permit for the construction of a new building of gross floor area greater than 20,000 square feet per Section 19.23 *Special Permit Threshold*. In this case, only urban design review is required, so no transportation impact study has been performed. The applicable special permit findings are summarized below. Applicable sections of the zoning are provided in an appendix.

Requested Special Permits	Summarized Findings <i>(see appendix for zoning text excerpts)</i>
Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the City as set forth in Section 19.30 (see appendix).
General special permit criteria (Section 10.43)	Special permits will be normally granted if the zoning requirements are met, unless it is found not to be in the public interest due to one of the criteria enumerated in Section 10.43 (see appendix).

Area Planning and Zoning

The BA-2 District allows residential and commercial development, with multifamily residential uses allowed at a moderate density and a maximum height of 45 feet (four stories). Within 50 feet of abutting residential districts, the maximum height lowers to 35 feet to match the abutting district height. BA-2 requires minimum setbacks of 5 feet in the front, 10 feet on each side yard, and 20 feet in the rear yard, rather than the formula setback requirements of some other districts.

The site is also within the Massachusetts Avenue Overlay District (MAOD) and North Massachusetts Avenue Subdistrict (NMAAS); however, the parcels are exempt from the standards applicable in the NMAAS (such as the ground floor retail requirement) as they do not have frontage on Massachusetts Avenue.

The MAOD augments the base zoning regulations for the purpose of creating harmonious and consistent development along Massachusetts Avenue and adjacent areas. MAOD requirements address building and site design factors such as the orientation of uses at the ground floor, location of pedestrian entrances, articulation and fenestration of façades, and placement of parking. The intent is to promote good building design and site development that enhances the pedestrian amenities and compatibility with the scale and character of the abutting neighborhoods. The MAOD zoning was adopted in 1986, along with an “Urban Design Guidelines Handbook” (portions of which are attached) to illustrate desired development outcomes.

The conditions abutting the site are an important consideration in the review of this project. The site abuts Linear Park near Trolley Square Park, which was created in conjunction with the adjacent housing complex in 2007. Linear Park is a very actively used bicycle and pedestrian corridor. Elmwood Street, which starts at Holland Street in Somerville, crosses into Cambridge and terminates at Linear Park. Therefore, the site is within Cambridge but can be accessed by road only via Somerville. The portion of Elmwood Street in Cambridge is an unaccepted city street, meaning that it is currently not regulated or maintained as a public way. It is not pedestrian-friendly, with no sidewalks, and edges fronted by garage entrances, loading bays and parking lots. A chain link fence separates Elmwood Street from Linear Park, but community members have created a large hole in the fence to allow pedestrian and bicycle access.

Proposed Project

As they exist, the lots are currently non-conforming with regard to all setbacks and some other dimensional requirements. The Applicant has reviewed the proposal with staff at the Cambridge Historical Commission, who did not find the existing buildings to be significant and therefore no demolition review hearing will be required.

The proposed new residential building is designed to conform to the base zoning requirements (including FAR, unit density, height, setbacks, parking and bicycle parking) as well as the additional MAOD standards (Section 20.100), which require pedestrian entrances and minimum 25% clear glass on façades facing public streets and parks. Required automobile parking is located below grade, with the exception of disabled parking and delivery/pick-up areas on the surface, and required long-term bicycle parking (which is exempt from dimensional zoning requirements) is located on-grade within a shed.

There is no minimum requirement for open space, though the MAOD zoning requires open space between building façades and public streets or parks.

The project will also be subject to the Green Building requirements per Section 22.20. The requirement is to design to a minimum “Certified” standard under the LEED rating system, and the application materials indicate that the design could potentially reach a “Platinum” level under LEED for Homes. The project will be subject to continuing Green Building review by CDD staff prior to receiving a Building Permit and Certificate of Occupancy.

The project proposes street edge improvements to Elmwood Street, including new sidewalks, and public connections to Linear Park for pedestrians and bicyclists from Elmwood Street as well as direct connections to Linear Park from the proposed residential building. These changes have the potential to significantly improve pedestrian and bicycle connections within the neighborhood. Any improvements or connections to Elmwood Street or Linear Park will be subject to approval by the City.

The residential building will contain units of a variety of sizes, with a relatively large percentage of three-bedroom units (26%) and large percentages of two-bedroom and studio units. Though the project is not subject to requirements for ground floor retail (as it does not front Massachusetts Avenue), it proposes to include a small community-oriented retail space fronting Linear Park. The retail space has only 480 square feet of area, which is very small for a retail establishment, but it could accommodate a small shop or service that is uniquely targeted to pedestrians and bicyclists on Linear Park.

Urban Design

While the North Massachusetts Avenue Urban Design Guidelines date back to 1986, the document still provides useful information regarding the key urban design issues. These include:

- Improving the site’s relationship with Linear Park;
- Enhancing the pedestrian environment; and
- Creative massing and building setbacks with particular attention paid to scaling down to small-scaled residential areas.

The project’s contribution to Linear Park with the proposed retail use at the corner, formalization of an existing pedestrian and bicyclist connection, and removal of the chain link fence are positive urban design impacts. Such a change capitalizes on the community asset and also has the potential to act as a catalyst for other underutilized sites in the area. As part of these improvements it is important to ensure that any new fencing is as attractive and permeable as possible. To this end, further thought should be given to the design, height and siting of the close-board and aluminum fencing shown in the application materials. Examples exist nearby where a lower fence is provided, which seems to successfully balance the need for privacy and transparency, and maximize usable and visual green space.

The proposed sidewalk improvements, street trees and reduced curb cut will have a significant impact on the public realm. Likewise, placing the parking below-grade enables the housing units, lobby and retail space to front the street, activating it and creating a pleasant pedestrian experience. The building also has many outdoor spaces, in the form of balconies, patios, roof decks, and a publicly accessible

seating area, as well as significant landscaping, which softens the building base and also contributes to the landscape setting of Linear Park.

Along Elmwood Street, the zoning setback requirements result in a cantilevered three-story form above the garage entrance, which when combined with the ADA van space and access aisle does create a wide area of asphalt paving and opens up a view to the underside of the building. While some landscaping is proposed to ameliorate these concerns, further attention should be paid to the view of the building when walking south on Elmwood Street.

The building's massing is comprised of a series of additive volumes that create a linear form with height concentrated along the middle, allowing for lower, more pedestrian-scaled volumes along the street edge and Linear Park. The two entrances also capitalize on the site's assets and help to activate both these important interfaces. Opportunities to accentuate the retail corner by way of additional modulation, awnings or a canopy could help to strengthen its presence within the public realm.

While the building is not necessarily a typical multi-family housing project, the more contemporary aesthetic and loft-style design references the industrial precedents in the neighborhood. A combination of materials and colors, including fiber cement clapboard, wood panels and aluminum trim, is proposed. Careful detailing of the fiber cement and other materials will be important to achieve the proposed contemporary aesthetic and also provide enough depth across the facades. The fourth floor volume does appear visually busy and long with the variety of materials proposed. Perhaps there is a better way to introduce some modulation, roof variation and interest, while simplifying the materials palette.

Mechanical equipment is arranged on the site in a logical way that reduces its impact on abutting properties and the public realm. Rooftop mechanical equipment is located on the third-floor roof behind a small parapet and metal screening, the details of which should be provided. A transformer is shown on the north side of the site, tucked behind the ADA van space, and is relatively well landscaped.

Continuing Review

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends should be further studied by the Applicant, either in preparing revised materials if the Planning Board continues the hearing to a future date, or as conditions for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant the special permit:

- Further study of the fourth floor volume with regard to simplifying the materials palette and investigating alternative ways to articulate the facade and reduce its linear presence.
- Review of landscape details, and consideration of alternative fencing treatments and opportunities to minimize the perceived extent of asphalt paving.
- Clarification of internal access points, unit entries and stairs as there appears to be some inconsistencies shown in the application materials.
- Review of the final bicycle shed design and the location of short-term bicycle racks, to ensure conformance with City standards.
- Review of all exterior materials, colors, and details.

Project Review Special Permit – Urban Design Findings

19.25.2 Urban Design Findings. The Planning Board shall grant the special permit only if it finds that the project is consistent with the urban design objectives of the city as set forth in Section 19.30. In making that determination the Board may be guided by or make reference to urban design guidelines or planning reports that may have been developed for specific areas of the city and shall apply the standards herein contained in a reasonable manner to nonprofit religious and educational organizations in light of the special circumstances applicable to nonprofit religious and educational activities.

19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives

The following urban design objectives are intended to provide guidance to property owners and the general public as to the city’s policies with regard to the form and character desirable for new development in the city. It is understood that application of these principles can vary with the context of specific building proposals in ways that, nevertheless, fully respect the policies’ intent. It is intended that proponents of projects, and city staff, the Planning Board and the general public, where public review or approval is required, should be open to creative variations from the detailed provisions presented in this Section as long as the core values expressed are being served. A project need not meet all the objectives of this Section 19.30 where this Section serves as the basis for issuance of a special permit. Rather the permit granting authority shall find that on balance the objectives of the city are being served. Nor shall a project subject to special permit review be required to conform to the Required Building and Site Plan Requirements set forth in Section 19.50.

Further indicators of conformance with these policy objectives shall be found in planning documents and plans developed for specific areas of the city or the city as a whole, to the extent that they are not inconsistent with the objectives set forth in this Section 19.30. These documents include the *Harvard Square Development Guidelines*, the *Central Square Action Plan*, the *Central Square Development Guidelines*, the *North Massachusetts Avenue Urban Design Guidelines Handbook*, the *University Park at MIT Urban Design Guidelines*, the *North Point Policy Plan and Design Guidelines*, the *Cambridge Institutional Growth Management Plan*, the *East Cambridge Riverfront Plan*, the *Eastern Cambridge Plan*, the *Eastern Cambridge Design Guidelines*, the *Alewife Revitalization, Alewife Urban Design Study Phase II* and its Draft update of 1991, and *Toward a Sustainable Future: Cambridge Growth Policy Document*.

19.30 Citywide Urban Design Objectives [SUMMARIZED]

Objective	Indicators
New projects should be responsive to the existing or anticipated pattern of development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition to lower-scale neighborhoods • Consistency with established streetscape • Compatibility with adjacent uses • Consideration of nearby historic buildings
Development should be pedestrian and bicycle-friendly, with a positive relationship to its surroundings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inhabited ground floor spaces • Discouraged ground-floor parking • Windows on ground floor • Orienting entries to pedestrian pathways • Safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access
The building and site design should mitigate adverse environmental impacts of a development upon its neighbors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location/impact of mechanical equipment • Location/impact of loading and trash handling • Stormwater management • Shadow impacts • Retaining walls, if provided • Building scale and wall treatment • Outdoor lighting • Tree protection (requires plan approved by City Arborist)
Projects should not overburden the City infrastructure services, including neighborhood roads, city water supply system, and sewer system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water-conserving plumbing, stormwater management • Capacity/condition of water and wastewater service • Efficient design (LEED standards)
New construction should reinforce and enhance the complex urban aspects of Cambridge as it has developed historically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional use focused on existing campuses • Mixed-use development (including retail) encouraged where allowed • Preservation of historic structures and environment • Provision of space for start-up companies, manufacturing activities
Expansion of the inventory of housing in the city is encouraged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing as a component of large, multi-building development • Affordable units exceeding zoning requirements, targeting units for middle-income families
Enhancement and expansion of open space amenities in the city should be incorporated into new development in the city.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicly beneficial open space provided in large-parcel commercial development • Enhance/expand existing open space, complement existing pedestrian/bicycle networks • Provide wider range of activities

General Criteria for Issuance of a Special Permit

- 10.43** *Criteria.* Special permits will normally be granted where specific provisions of this Ordinance are met, except when particulars of the location or use, not generally true of the district or of the uses permitted in it, would cause granting of such permit to be to the detriment of the public interest because:
- (a) It appears that requirements of this Ordinance cannot or will not be met, or
 - (b) traffic generated or patterns of access or egress would cause congestion, hazard, or substantial change in established neighborhood character, or
 - (c) the continued operation of or the development of adjacent uses as permitted in the Zoning Ordinance would be adversely affected by the nature of the proposed use, or
 - (d) nuisance or hazard would be created to the detriment of the health, safety and/or welfare of the occupant of the proposed use or the citizens of the City, or
 - (e) for other reasons, the proposed use would impair the integrity of the district or adjoining district, or otherwise derogate from the intent and purpose of this Ordinance, and
 - (f) the new use or building construction is inconsistent with the Urban Design Objectives set forth in Section 19.30.

**North Massachusetts Avenue
Urban Design Guidelines Handbook**

**Cambridge Community Development Department
Wallace, Floyd, Associates, Inc.**

July 1986

**North Massachusetts Avenue
Design Guidelines**

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1.0 Intent

The purpose of this report is to establish a set of design guidelines for the North Massachusetts Avenue corridor.

It has been prepared in response to both public and private concerns about the quality of the environment along North Massachusetts Avenue and its relationship to the neighborhoods surrounding it.

The corridor has been undergoing rapid redevelopment due to increased market pressure resulting from the opening of the Porter Square Transit Station and the business climate of the Boston Metropolitan area in general. The City of Cambridge has conducted an urban design and land use study of the corridor. The results of this study are set forth in the North Massachusetts Avenue Urban Design and Land Use Study as prepared by Wallace, Floyd, Associates Inc. (WFA). Material used in this report has been taken, in part, from the North Massachusetts Avenue Urban Design and Land Use Study. The latter study was undertaken to prepare recommendations for specific changes to zoning regulations affecting the study area.

2.0 Study Area

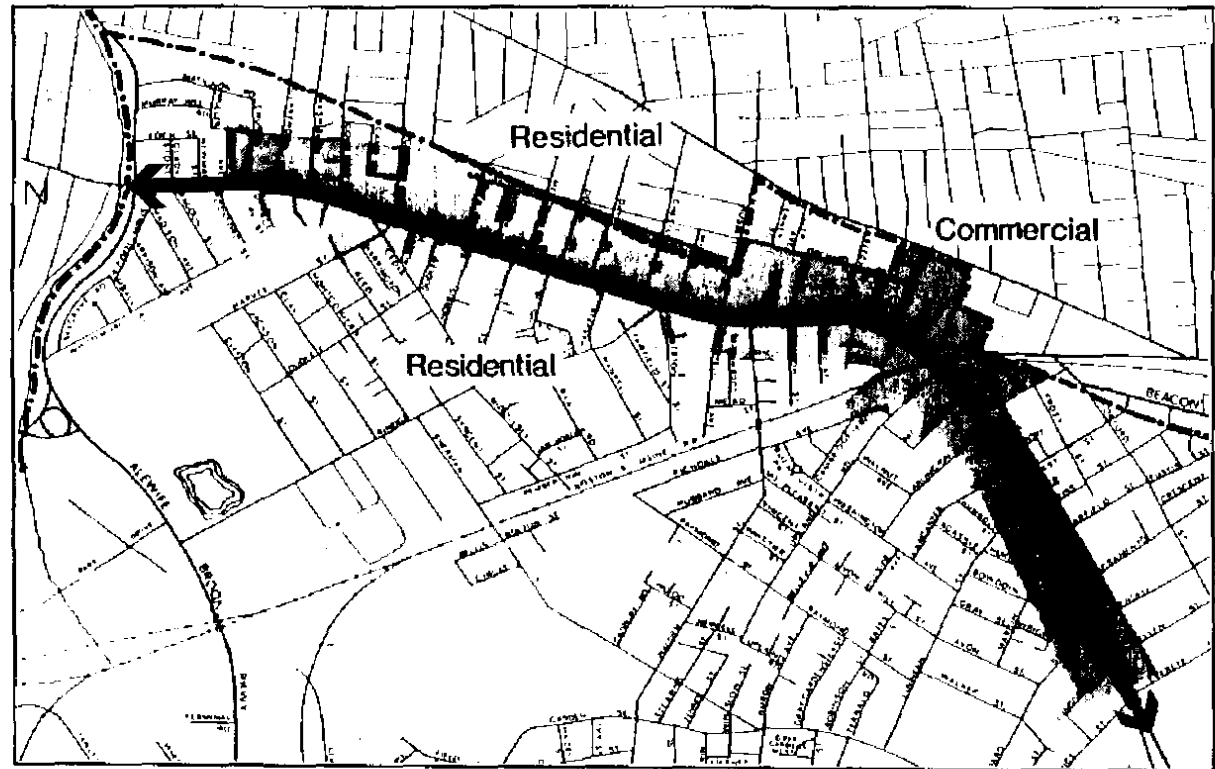
The study area for this report extends along Massachusetts Avenue from the Cambridge Common to Alewife Brook Parkway at the Arlington line. It includes all of the zoning districts through which the Avenue passes.

The study area corresponds to the study area as identified in the Urban Design and Land Use Study as prepared by WFA.

2.1 General Objectives

Massachusetts Avenue, which passes through a diverse group of Cambridge places, is more a reflection of these places than an entity in itself. At any location along the Avenue, a mix of local and city-wide uses can be found. This mix varies as the Avenue links up with other major features of Cambridge such as the MBTA Red Line, Alewife Brook Parkway, Harvard University, etc.

This report is intended to reinforce the mixed-use nature of the Avenue while encouraging a general level of quality in new and rehabilitated construction throughout the corridor.



The overall goals for this study are as follows:

1. Maintain a sense of diversity in use and physical character along the Avenue.
2. Encourage any new development to be compatible in scale and character with abutting residential neighborhoods.

3. Improve pedestrian environment. Encourage active uses at the ground level and physical improvements to the streetscape.
4. Set forth general architectural guidelines for both infill and larger scale development.
5. Encourage the retention of existing historic structures.

• **Landscaping** - as mentioned above, landscaping can be used to screen parking, loading areas, or other undesirable areas of the site from the passerby. Along much of the Avenue landscaping in the form of small front yards can be used to break up the hardness of the Avenue edge and to keep a sense of the front lawns of earlier houses. Landscaping can also be used to help make the larger buildings along the Avenue compatible with the neighborhoods beyond; in addition, plantings can help screen the light and noise of these buildings from the neighborhoods.

• **Parking** - wherever possible a parking lot should be situated so that its entrance and exit do not add traffic to the residential streets behind the Avenue. In order to improve the pedestrian space of the Avenue, parking lots should be screened from the sidewalk by landscaping, a low wall, or both. Parking lots should not be placed in front of buildings or on corner lots where they will not be screened by buildings. Front yards can be landscaped or added to the sidewalk where they might serve as a place for a cafe or some other sidewalk related activity. Buildings should not be raised up on stilts or sit on blank walls in order to accommodate parking.

The Building

The existing buildings along the Avenue contain a variety of shapes and details. Regardless of their age, the buildings which contribute to a lively streetscape have two common features. These features are the use of a variety of building surface textures and the use of small scale architectural articulation. Both of these ideas can be used to break up the mass of repetitive buildings, relate newer buildings to older ones, and to make larger buildings along the Avenue compatible with smaller ones in the neighborhoods beyond.

These two ideas are explored further below:

Architectural Articulation

- **Bay windows** - use of projecting bays on the front or side walls is encouraged.
- **Facade modulation** - portions of the building can be set back at different depths from the property line to break up the mass of longer buildings or to emphasize a special part of the building such as an entrance.
- **Building massing** - buildings along the Avenue should be designed to step down

to residential areas beyond so that they do not overwhelm the smaller structures in the neighborhoods.

- **Roof forms** - use of a variety of roof forms to add interest to the skyline of the Avenue and avoid the monotony of rows of flat buildings. These forms include turrets, detailed cornices, roof shapes, dormers etc., and are currently found in great variety along the Avenue.
- **Small scale elements** - elements such as porches, entrance ways, balconies, and awnings are encouraged as a way of relating the architecture to its inhabitants and helping to give the Avenue a more human scale. This is especially true along commercial frontage where a long uninterrupted wall could be enlivened by a number of the above elements without harming its function as a retail facade.

Building Materials

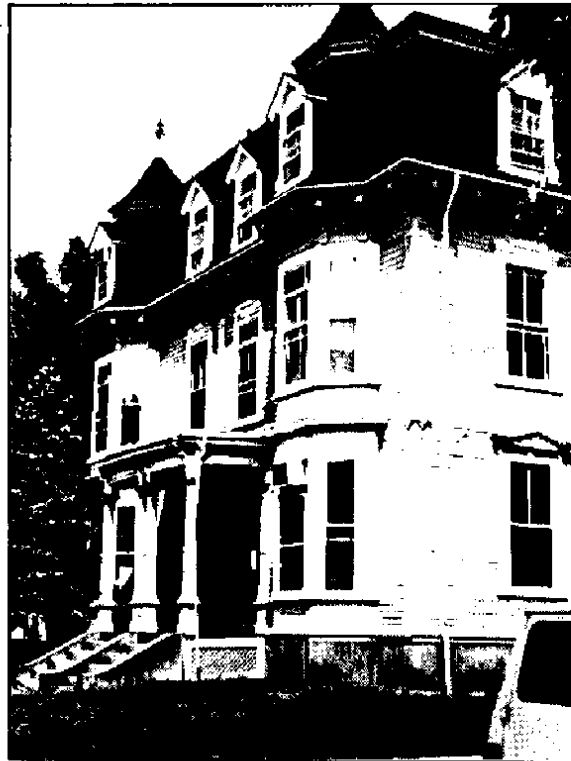
- **Traditional materials** - materials such as brick, stone or wood should be used to relate to the existing context of the Avenue. These materials should be used to highlight architectural features of the building such as bays, etc. This could be achieved by breaking up the larger surfaces of a building (as string cornices and other types of molding might do), or by dividing the

building into several pieces (as a stone base might do). Large blank walls of any materials should be avoided.

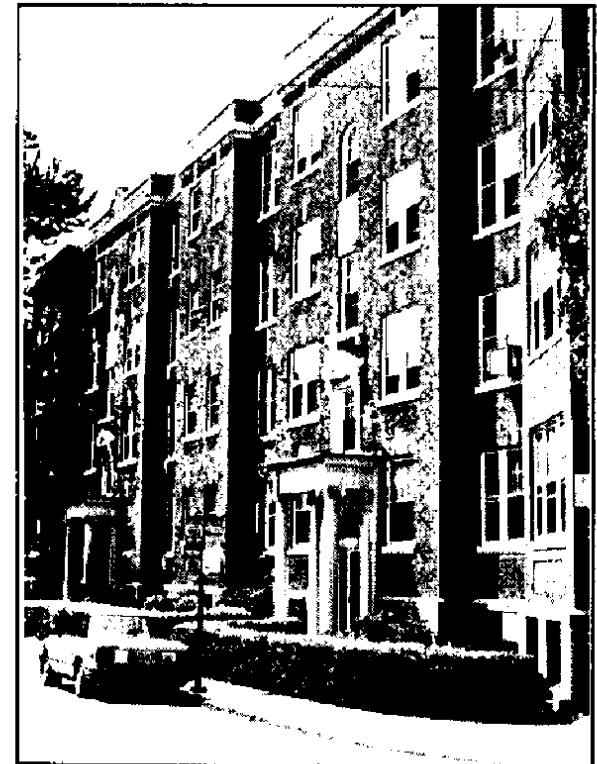
- **Glass area** - glass openings should be kept similar to the traditional types which can be seen along the Avenue. These include a variety of proportions, but in any case the windows should be seen as distinct elements within a wall and should not blend together into a "window wall." The only exception to this might be the ground floor of a commercial building. Reflecting glass should not be used regardless of the window size or shape.

North Massachusetts Avenue Context

The design elements above have been taken in part from the existing context of the Avenue. Below are several examples of these elements as they are found along the Avenue.



A Victorian building with large bay windows, a porch, and an abundance of details along the roof.



Apartment building in traditional materials broken into several smaller pieces by the use of setbacks of various depths and entrance porches. Small lawns help relate this building to adjacent smaller houses.

Multi-use buildings with a variety of traditional window openings, small signs, and a horizontal cornice.

2.2

Design Elements

The character of Massachusetts Avenue varies greatly as one moves along the Avenue. In places, it is a pleasant tree-lined boulevard; however, at other places, it is dominated by strip development and parking lots.

The whole of North Massachusetts Avenue could become a tree-lined boulevard with a lively pedestrian streetscape. This boulevard, anchored at Porter Square with the MBTA Station, could be supported by a variety of local uses along its length. A strong residential presence along the Avenue would be important in order to encourage pedestrian traffic and to insure compatibility between the activities of the Avenue and those of the neighborhood beyond. The newer buildings along the Avenue should take account of the rich architectural language and the attention to detail which characterize many of the older structures along the Avenue.

This vision of North Massachusetts Avenue would be realized as a product of many individual decisions rather than as the product of an overall design plan for the Avenue. This section is intended to serve as a reference catalog of most of the design elements along North Massachusetts Avenue. It can be used for a guide-

line for making design decisions concerning various aspects of the Avenue. These elements make up the context of North Massachusetts Avenue and are described in the three categories below. Several examples of this context follow to illustrate these elements as they can be found along the Avenue.

The Streetscape

The streetscape of North Massachusetts Avenue should be an inviting place for pedestrians as well as an efficient route for autos. Its present character varies greatly as one moves from the Cambridge Common to the Arlington line. Several aspects of the streetscape could contribute to make all of the Avenue feel like an inviting boulevard. These are listed below.

- **Street trees** — used wherever possible to provide shade, as a relief to large areas of pavement, and as a way to provide a continuous rhythm as one moves along the Avenue.
- **Street lighting** - can do more than provide illumination. Smaller scale light fixtures can be used along with street lights to relate to the pedestrian and tie the architecture along the Avenue to the public space of the sidewalk and street. Architec-

tural features can also be lit as landmarks, contributing both to their own image and that of the overall streetscape.

- **Signage** - signs which are in character and scale with their surroundings can be used to enliven the streetscape as they convey information. Examples of signs which are worked into the architecture of the Avenue abound. Larger signs, billboard types, and freestanding signs should be avoided.

- **Paving** - uses of small scale materials for paving all non-traffic areas such as parking spaces, median strips, and crosswalks could further enhance the pedestrian environment of the Avenue. These materials include brick, stone, and small concrete pavers.

The Site

The land along the Avenue which is not covered with a building is generally used for either landscaping or parking. Traditionally, buildings along the Avenue were either built up to their property lines or surrounded by landscaped yards. This historic sense of place can be maintained with sensitive site planning while still accommodating today's need for parking. Below are several suggestions for ways to approach this situation.

2.3 Historic Preservation

The structures along North Massachusetts Avenue represent a broad span of Cambridge history. Although some have been maintained in their original condition, many have been razed or altered substantially.

A study is currently underway to identify those structures which may qualify for historic designation.

Although relatively few structures may be designated as historic properties, the historic character of the Avenue is drawn from all of the structures along it. Any changes made to existing properties should demonstrate sensitivity toward the historic quality of the property and its surroundings regardless of its status as an historic property.

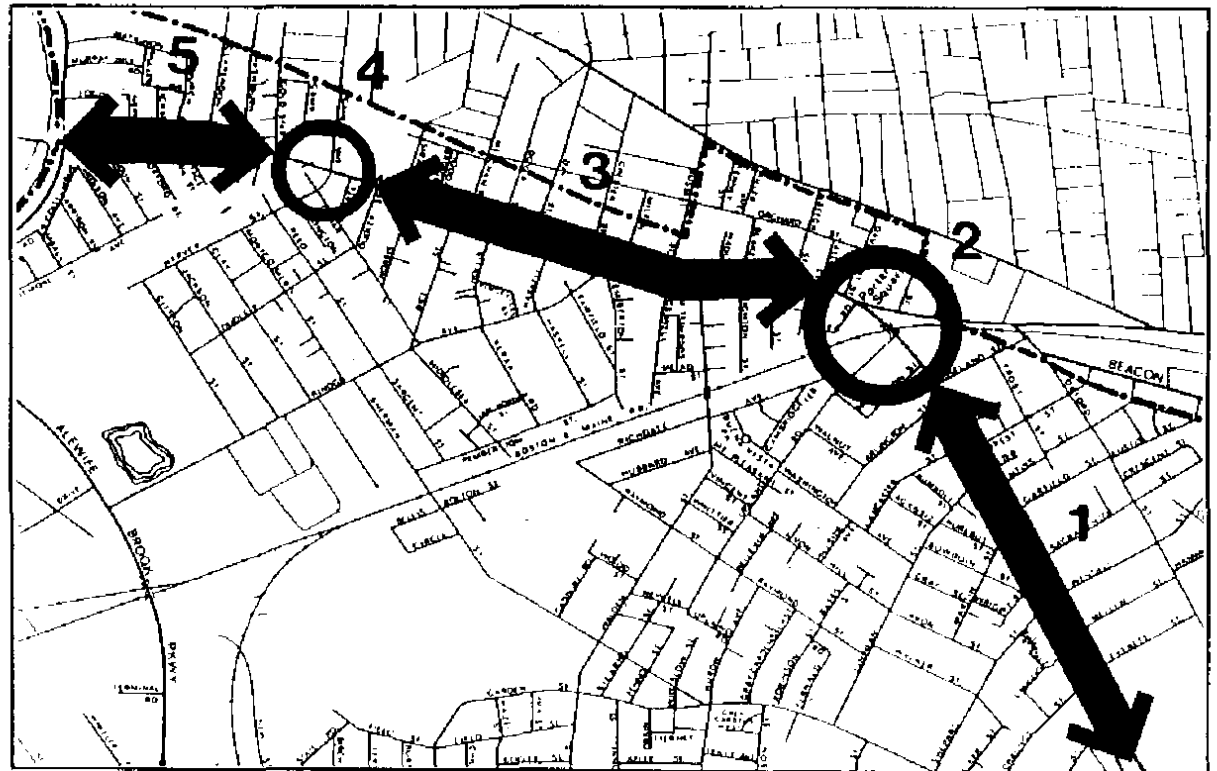
3.0 Sub Areas and Design Guidelines

The corridor can be broken down into several sub areas. In each case the divisions have been determined by the general character of the Avenue and therefore do not necessarily correspond to the present zoning boundaries along the Avenue. They are consistent with, but somewhat different from, the areas defined in the Urban Design/Land Use Study, to relate to existing zoning.

The sub areas are as follows:

1. Cambridge Common to Porter Square
2. Porter Square
3. Porter Square - Trolley Square
4. Trolley Square
5. Trolley Square - Alewife Brook Parkway

These sub areas delineate two nodes, Porter Square and Trolley Square, which include larger parcels along the corridor otherwise characterized by small parcels.



Area 4 Strategy

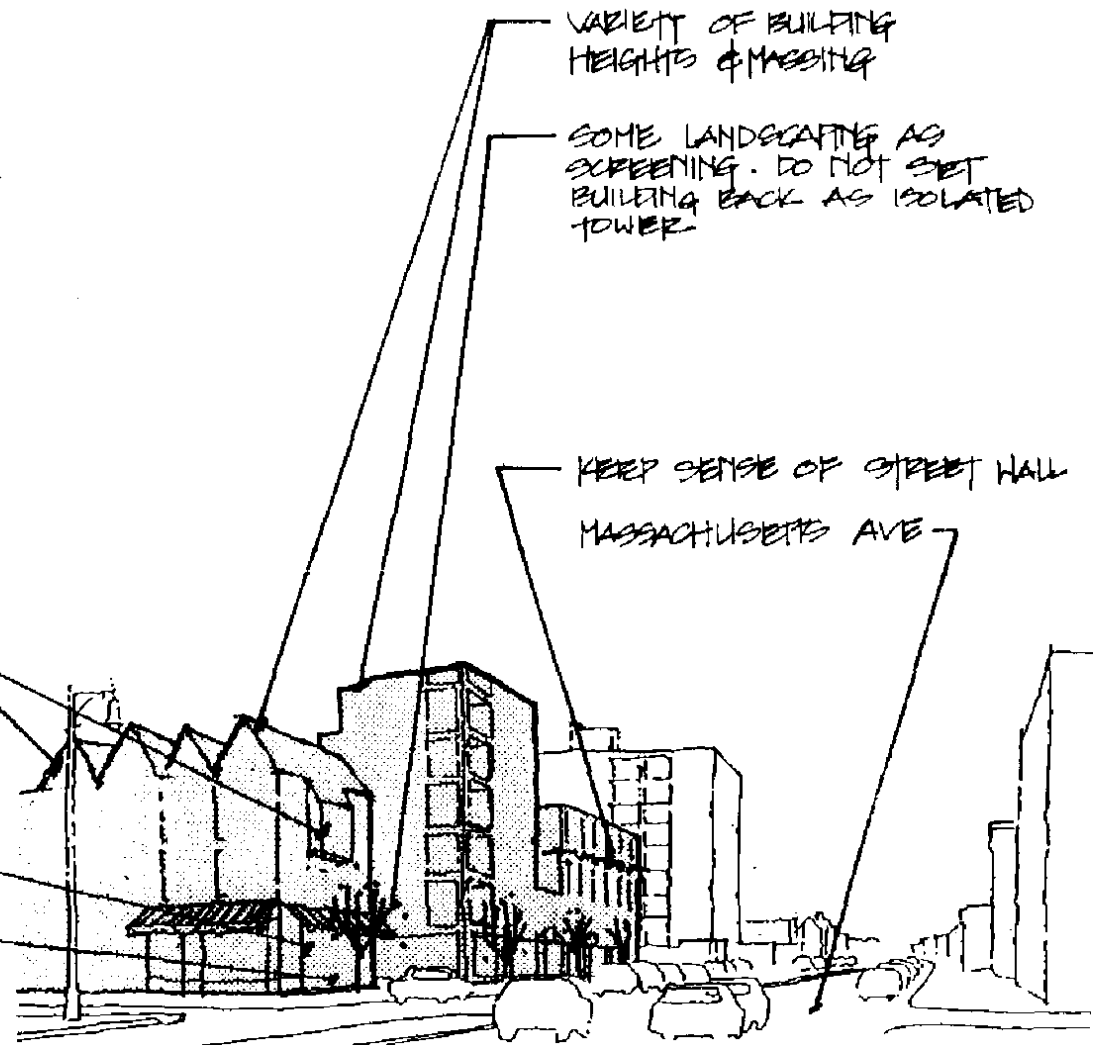
Allow Trolley Square to develop a strong neighborhood identity with residential infill along this part of the Avenue. This would include:

- development of links from the new residential fabric to the Linear Park.
- the use of creative massing studies to allow for higher densities and compatibility with the surrounding neighborhoods.
- development of a diversity of building forms along the Avenue which have small scale elements to relate to the pedestrian environment.
- some commercial uses at the ground floor of larger developments.

EXPRESS INDIVIDUAL DWELLING UNITS WITH MASSING & FACADE ARTICULATION

ALLOW SOME GROUND FLOOR COMMERCIAL USES

NO PARKING ALONG BUILDING FRONT



Small scale residential neighborhoods exist behind each sub area and at the north end of Sub Area 5 (pictured below). Careful massing and setback configurations should be used in all areas to minimize the impact of new construction along the edges of these neighborhoods as illustrated.

