



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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October 27, 2016

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Charles Sullivan

Re: **Case L-121: Harvard Square Kiosk.** City of Cambridge, owner. Consider petition of registered Cambridge voters to initiate a landmark designation study.

On September 28, 2016 Commission staff received a petition requesting, “that the Cambridge Historical Commission initiate with all possible haste the process of designating the Harvard Square Kiosk as a protected landmark of the City of Cambridge.” The fifteen signatures on the original hard copy petition were verified by the Election Commission and a public hearing scheduled for November 3 to consider the petition. Only ten signatures are needed to validate a petition. In addition to the submitted hard copy petition, an online petition was also circulated and has been signed by hundreds of persons from Cambridge and beyond. A list of the online petitioners and their comments is included in materials submitted to members of the Commission.



Cambridge GIS, 2016

This memo evaluates the significance of the kiosk in the context of Ch. 2.78, Art. III of the City Code; it is a necessarily superficial review of the history and significance of the building and is not intended to substitute for a Landmark Designation Report.

### Description

The Harvard Square Kiosk was designed for the Boston Elevated Railway in 1927 to replace the original subway station headhouse of 1912.<sup>1</sup> On completion, the solid brick structure of 1912 was initially hailed for

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<sup>1</sup> The function of a headhouse in this context is to provide weather protection for stairs leading to the station below.

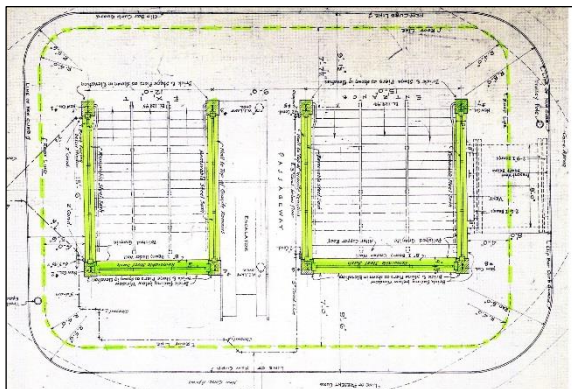
its dignified architecture, but it was soon perceived as a hazard for pedestrians and automobile traffic. The streetcar tracks on each side left little room for other traffic, drivers could not see vehicles approaching on converging streets, and there were almost no sidewalks around it. The Harvard Square Businessmen's Association began calling for its removal in 1919.



Harvard Square Kiosk, 1938

Boston Elevated Railway (BERY) Collection, CHC

The replacement followed the concept, if not the plans, of Professor Charles B. Breed of M.I.T. Designed by Blackall, Clapp & Whittemore and constructed in 1928, the new kiosk had thin piers of alternating water-struck brick and limestone in a pattern similar to that of Harvard's Class of 1877 Gate. The piers supported a thin copper roof of shallow, intersecting barrel vaults.<sup>2</sup> Between the roof and a low brick perimeter wall the entire structure was glazed so as to be transparent to converging traffic. The perimeter wall enclosed three sides of the structure; the fourth side, facing the Coop, was open to the staircases down to the station. The two staircases were separated by an escalator and a passageway.



Original plan; perimeter walls in green.



East elevation, ca. 1955

Both CHC

The current configuration of the kiosk dates from the construction of the Red Line Extension in 1978-84. Initial plans to raze the structure were thwarted when the Cambridge Historical Commission nominated it to the National Register of Historic Places, and the MBTA directed the architects of the station and the surface improvements, the Chicago office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, to preserve the building. The Massachusetts Historical Commission agreed to adaptive reuse of the kiosk as a newsstand. SOM prepared detailed plans for dismantling and reconstruction, and in 1979 the structure was removed and stored while most of the station below was demolished. In 1983 the kiosk was reconstructed a short distance from its original site using

<sup>2</sup> The construction drawings bear the signature of William J. Keefe, Chief Engineer of the Boston Elevated Railway; contemporary news accounts attributed the design to the Blackall firm.

the salvaged brick and limestone and copper roof. Sections of the interior walls were removed, and a cashier's booth and doors were inserted in the former passageway between the stairs. Magazine racks were inserted in the staircase openings, and the south wall was modified to accept two additional doors (never used) and a vent for the heating system. Period-appropriate pendant lights were added under the roof overhang. No significant structural changes have been made since 1983.



West elevation, 1977

CHC



Kiosk adapted as a newsstand, 2016

CHC

## Preservation Status

The Cambridge Historical Commission nominated the kiosk to the National Register of Historic Places in 1977, and the Department of the Interior approved the listing in January 1978. The effect of National Register listing was and continues to be that any proposed Federal- or State-funded, licensed or permitted activity affecting the kiosk must be reviewed by the Massachusetts Historical Commission to determine whether the structure would be adversely affected, and if so to negotiate appropriate mitigation. National Register status does not affect non-Federal or State activities.

The MBTA transferred ownership of the Harvard Square Kiosk to the City of Cambridge soon after completion of the surface improvements in 1983-84. Out of Town News, at that time a company owned by Sheldon Cohen, occupied the property as a newsstand as intended when the property was preserved in 1978. When Hudson News succeeded Cohen in 1994 the new lease required CHC approval of future alterations, a provision that has never been exercised.<sup>3</sup> Another successor firm now holds the lease, which is scheduled to transition to a month-to-month tenancy before it expires in January 2017.

In 2000, the City Council designated Harvard Square as a conservation district under Ch. 2.78, Article III of the City Code. The effect of such designation means that no activity can be undertaken, and no building permit can be issued, that would affect the publicly visible exterior features of any structure in the district without prior review and approval by the Cambridge Historical Commission. The Commission's jurisdiction is subject to several exemptions, such as for storefronts, conforming signs, exterior colors, and normal maintenance activities, but in general extends to every visible aspect of a building's fabric, including walls, doors, windows, roofs, and non-conforming signs.

The CHC grants Certificates of Appropriateness for projects in the Harvard Square Conservation District that it finds to be appropriate or not incongruous. The Commission considers, "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 [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 ..." (2.78.220). Decisions are made in the context of the "Statement of Goals and Guidelines and Standards for Review" contained in the Order establishing the District, as well as the standards and guidelines in the "Final Report of the Harvard Square Neighborhood Conservation District Study Committee" dated November 29, 2000. Since 2000, the Commission has granted one certificate for the kiosk, for restoring masonry damaged in an automobile accident in 2013.

In 2015 the City Council adopted an Order in response to concerns about the status of the kiosk and the condition of the surrounding plaza. City staff (including representatives of DPW, CDD, and CHC) began meeting to plan capital improvements for the kiosk and the surrounding plaza, reflecting a City Council appropriation of \$2.6 million in FY17 (the current year) and an additional \$2 million planned for FY18. Architect Ted Galante presented several conceptual designs that showed how the kiosk could be adapted as a general-purpose public space.

During this process CHC staff successfully insisted on two fundamental principles: that all original material that remained after the conversion to a newsstand in 1983 should be preserved, and that there should be no additional enclosure of the structure. These are reflected in the unofficial rendering that Galante released in the summer of 2016. This concept represents a pure preservation approach in which all original building fabric would remain; it shows glass where it was historically used or where it would be needed to enclose the staircase entrances that are now occupied by magazine racks. Lighting is shown for illustrative purposes only.

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<sup>3</sup> In 1994 the Commission decided not to act on a citizen petition to consider landmark designation because the new lease was considered to have the same effect.



Galante Architecture Studio, 2016

City staff suspended design activities for the kiosk in late spring 2016; no further decisions can be made until the ultimate use of the kiosk has been determined. The City Manager intends to appoint a Harvard Square Kiosk Working Group to discuss these issues. Once the city decides on the future use some other infill might be found appropriate, but the final decision will be made by the Cambridge Historical Commission.

#### Relationship of the Property to Criteria for Landmark Designation

The enabling ordinance for landmark designation states:

The Historical Commission by majority vote may recommend for designation as a landmark any property within the City being or containing a place, structure, feature or object which it determines to be either (1) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City or the Commonwealth or (2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of its period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures ... (Chapter 2.78.180.A).

The Harvard Square Kiosk meets criterion (1) of the enabling ordinance for its important associations with the evolution of Harvard Square from an isolated post-Colonial village to a prominent commercial district integrated with metropolitan Boston by the 1912 Cambridge Subway, and criterion (2) as a unique structure designed to meet the traffic safety demands of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Cambridge by the prominent firm of Blackall, Clapp & Whittemore.

#### Rationale for Designation as a Landmark

Petitioners have presented multiple reasons for designating the kiosk as a landmark; to generalize, the petitioners claim a) that it is threatened by the proposed infrastructure improvements to the plaza; b) that existing protective measures are insufficient; and c) that the review process would benefit from further public participation and d) that landmark designation would ensure that the essential architectural features of the Kiosk are preserved.

Petitioners were correct to assume that some of the ideas floated for adaptive reuse of the kiosk were potentially destructive of its original fabric. However, none of these – including the Galante concept released last summer - were accepted by city staff. There are currently no plans to alter the kiosk, and no plans will be made until its future use has been determined.

The Harvard Square kiosk is already protected by its inclusion in the Harvard Square Conservation District, which was adopted by the City Council in 2000. The effect of this designation is that any publicly-visible exterior alteration, construction, or demolition must be approved by the Cambridge Historical Commission at a public hearing before work can begin. Approval of such construction activity would be governed by the

Harvard Square Conservation District guidelines. Designation of individual buildings as landmarks takes place under the identical section of the City Code as conservation district designation (Ch. 2.78, Article III) and would offer no greater level of protection to the already-designated kiosk.

Decisions about alterations to the kiosk will be made in a public forum. First, however, the city has to undertake a public process – which has been lacking thus far - to determine the eventual *use* of the building. City staff will engage with the Kiosk Working Group to develop a program for the building, and designers will translate the program into a *design* that will be presented to the Commission for review and approval.

A landmark study and subsequent designation could codify the stipulations already adopted by the staff, but such guidelines are fundamentally advisory; the Commission's determinations will be based on its consideration of the appropriateness of the specific design when it is actually proposed.