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**Protected Landmark Petition: Abbot Building**

November 22, 2016

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

To: The Cambridge Historical Commission  
 Mr. William B. King, Chairman  
 Mr. Charles M. Sullivan, Executive Director  
 831 Massachusetts Avenue, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
 Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND SIGNIFICANCE

- WHEREAS: The Abbot Building is widely recognized as a key defining building in Harvard Square, conveying a distinctive visual impact to the square since it was built in 1909; and
- WHEREAS: The view shed that encompasses the Abbot Building façade is one of the most significant to Harvard Square's identity, spirit of place, heritage, and cultural landscape; and
- WHEREAS: The Abbot Building is inextricably linked to the Kiosk plaza and Harvard Yard beyond, to the heart of the square, and to Winthrop Park at the opposite end of the block--the oldest marketplace in the country; and
- WHEREAS: The Abbot Building is a vital and steady anchor in Harvard Square's environment of continual change and its triangular shape anchors the epicenter of this urban cultural landscape; and
- WHEREAS: The Abbot Building is identified with Edwin Hale Abbot (1834-1927), a prominent Cambridge attorney and railroad executive, who practiced law in Boston, serving as an attorney for the Alabama Claims, that sought damages for the U.S. Government against Great Britain for the latter's assistance to the Confederate States during the American Civil War, and who also was a prominent railway executive helping create railroads, terminals, and mines, was responsible for among other structures, Grand Central Station and terminal in Chicago, and who also helped build the Phillips Brooks House in Harvard Yard (identified as the religious center of this campus), and whose residence at 1 Follen Street, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 and now houses the Longy School of Music, Bard College; and
- WHEREAS: The Abbot Building carries important architectural significance, as a structure designed by the architectural firm of Newhall & Bevins, prominent Cambridge and Boston architects, whose work consciously drew from local "context" and honored the brick and limestone materials used in nearby Harvard University buildings; and
- WHEREAS: Newhall & Bevins designed between 1903 and 1925 at least 37 buildings and residences in Cambridge, including key city landmarks such as the nearby the Brattle Street Building (1-8 Brattle -1913) and Cambridge Savings Bank (1923), as well as the YWCA (1910), YMCA (1912), the Inman Square Fire Station (1913), and the Inman Square triangular building (Hampshire and Cambridge Streets), as well as private homes and apartment buildings, including Burton Halls ("The Castle") at 10 Dana Street, and the Hilliard Street complex where Curious George authors Margaret and H.A. Rey long lived; and
- WHEREAS: The Abbot Building's design is characteristic of Newhall & Bevins' oeuvre, which feature historical precedent in design, often drawing in their plans vital overtones of old Renaissance Revival, Colonial Revival, along with Tudor and Old English details supported by prominent contemporaries like Ralph Adams Cram and H. Landford Warren; and

WHEREAS: Newhall & Bevins in the early twentieth century established the look, style, proportion, and stateliness of Cambridge as we know it due to their consistent design and sense of place; and

WHEREAS: Blevins was an MIT graduate and Newhall was a Harvard College graduate (1898), with the latter serving as president of the Boston Architectural Club and an instrumental leader in its transition to the Boston Architectural College; and

WHEREAS: At the time of its construction, the Abbot Building was described as one of the finest strictly mercantile building's in Greater Boston, its marble and tapestry brick façade described as consistent with the "most modern store show fronts and with the interior in keeping with the exterior"; and

WHEREAS: At construction, the Abbot Building was predicted to become the center of the business life of the square based in part on its having the most commanding location in Harvard Square, directly opposite the subway station and with visibility the whole length of Massachusetts Avenue and along the approach to the stadium bridge; and

WHEREAS: The largest current occupant of the Abbot Building, the Curious George store, is closely linked to internationally important Cambridge writers, Margaret and H.A. Rey, who co-authored the widely loved and read book series by this same name, and who, after fleeing Nazi Germany, chose to make Cambridge, and specifically, historic Hilliard Street their home, in another historic Harvard Square Newhall & Bevins structure; and

WHEREAS: The Abbot building, long home to Peabody Award winning NPR radio program, Car Talk, heard each week by some 4.4 million listeners on 588 stations, and the name of Tom and Ray Magliozzi's related business corporation, Dewey, Cheetham, and Howe, founded in 1989, is emblazoned on the office window, visible to adjacent areas of the square, and

WHEREAS: For decades the Dow Family Foundation, known for its philanthropy, encouraged a community of local small business tenants in their historic buildings, by keeping rents low enough so that such businesses could thrive within this edifice; and

WHEREAS: The Dow Family Foundation was well known for maintaining historically appropriate buildings in Harvard Square, including the Abbot Building, and the nearby Newhall & Bevins structure (the Brattle Building - currently housing Tory Row), thus contributing to the survival of the square's unique historic and architectural character that harmonizes with the buildings of Harvard University that surround and intermingle with the commercial buildings of the square; and

#### DESIGNATIONS

WHEREAS: The Abbot Building was listed as contributing to the Harvard Square National Register District/Multiple Resources Area listing in 1982 and boundary increase listing in 1988; and

WHEREAS: The Cambridge City Council in 1983 enacted legislation designed to preserve and conserve buildings and sites of significance in Cambridge's history; and

WHEREAS: On December 18, 2000, following a period of intense public concern about the redevelopment of the Read Block in Harvard Square and the displacement of longtime retail and commercial tenants like The Tasty, the City Council unanimously approved the creation of the Harvard Square Neighborhood Conservation District; and

WHEREAS: The Abbot Building is situated within the boundaries of the Harvard Square Conservation District, specifically identified as located in both Subdistrict A and Subdistrict D; and

WHEREAS: An order from the Council dated September 12, 2016 has required the Cambridge Historical Commission to submit a status report and hold a public hearing on the effectiveness of the District in meeting its overarching goal of balancing the rights of property owners, inviting appropriate development interest from investors, retailers' needs for flexibility, and the community's interest in preserving the character and livability of Harvard Square; and

#### CURRENT THREATS

WHEREAS: Public concern was ignited upon the last minute bid of Equity One to redevelop the Abbot Building and other buildings meant to be protected by the Harvard Square Conservation District, resulting in a Change.org petition signed by close to 6,000 individuals seeking to save this and more than twenty other local businesses in the Abbot Building; and

WHEREAS: The Abbot Building is under threat even further through a takeover of Equity One by Regency Centers, an REIT company and reported to be one of the largest shopping center investors in the country; and

WHEREAS: At the November 3 hearing of the Cambridge Historical Commission the proposed plans submitted by Equity One would remove one floor of the Abbot Building and transform its ground floor level into what is in essence a lobby and elevator shaft; and

WHEREAS: Equity One's plans would unite the Abbot Building with two other adjacent buildings, which would be out-of-character with the traditional building pattern of the district—a pattern defined by distinct buildings, each expressing their own character, while contributing to the whole; and

WHEREAS: Cambridge citizens have complained publicly about the potential demise of the Curious George store and this becoming an "excuse for rampant commercialism," homogenization of architecture, and inappropriate lighting and use; and

WHEREAS: Incongruous design and program of the Abbot Building and its abutting structures threaten its heritage, cultural and socio-economic traditions and spirit of place; and

WHEREAS: The public was not included in the early negotiations with Equity One and thus broad public input was not considered in the early designs presented to the Cambridge Historical Commission; and

WHEREAS: The City of Cambridge is considering a major remodeling of the Harvard Square plaza directly in front of the Abbot Building, adding to the latter's architectural and historical importance; and

#### LANDMARK DESIGNATIONS

WHEREAS: The Abbot Building's design, architects, history, and setting make it worthy of preservation as a Cambridge Landmark;

WHEREAS: The Abbot Building is one of a select number of properties that is important to Cambridge as a whole; and

WHEREAS: Protecting the Abbot Building with local landmark status will enable its unique qualities to be maintained for the benefit of all Cambridge; and

WHEREAS: Official landmark designation would "foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge" of its distinctive characteristics and significance; and



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