



# CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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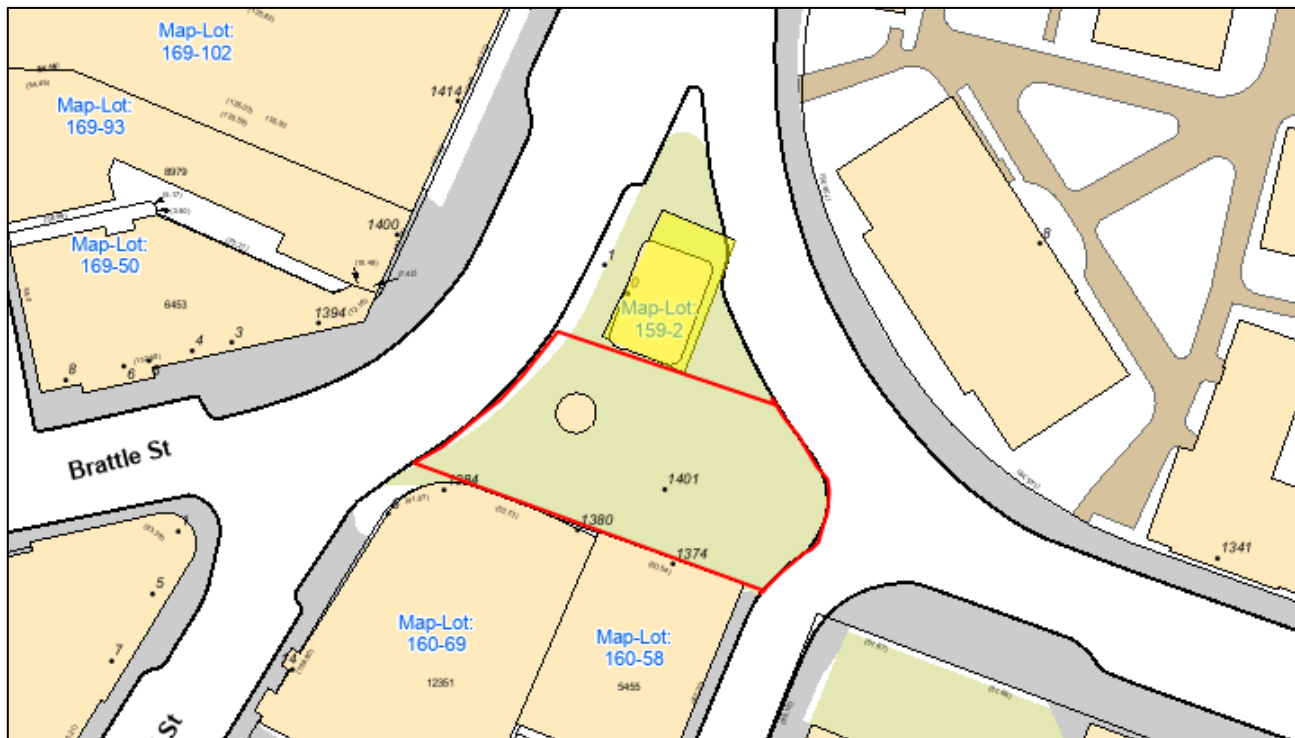
Date: August 3, 2022

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Sarah Burks, Preservation Planner

Re: **Case L-143: The Pit, Harvard Square.** City of Cambridge, owner. Consider petition of registered Cambridge voters to initiate a landmark designation study.

On June 30, 2022 Commission staff received a petition requesting that the Cambridge Historical Commission initiate a Landmark Designation Study for “the Pit” area of the Harvard Square plaza as bounded by the sidewalk along the Cambridge Savings Bank to the Harvard MBTA Station headhouse on the south, the curb of Dunster Street to Massachusetts Avenue on the east, along the curb line of the north/west bound Massachusetts Avenue across the plaza just to the south of the Kiosk on the north, and along the curb of the south-bound portion of Massachusetts Avenue on the west but not including the Kiosk, the elevator headhouse or the information booth structures. The red line overlaid on the assessor’s map below represents the CHC staff’s understanding of the area intended to be covered by the petition.



Assessors map, Cambridge GIS. Accessed August 2022.

The petition was signed by thirty-eight individuals of which all but four were verified by the Election Commission as registered Cambridge voters. A public hearing was scheduled for August 4 to consider the petition. Only ten signatures are needed to validate a petition.



Aerial imagery, March 23, 2022. Accessed from Nearmap.com on August 2, 2022.

### Description

The roadways and pedestrian spaces surrounding the Harvard Square subway headhouse have evolved over time. The original headhouse of 1912 was an oval building with a minimal sidewalk around it.<sup>1</sup> Road traffic including streetcars and automobiles surrounded the headhouse on all sides, creating hazardous conditions for pedestrians and vehicles alike. It was replaced in 1927 by the structure known today as the Harvard Square Kiosk. The MBTA dismantled the kiosk in 1979 and stored it off site during the Red Line Extension project, then reconstructed and repurposed for the use of the Out of Town News business. The present station headhouse (completed 1984) was built closer to the Cambridge Savings Bank on what was previously roadway where Brattle Street and Massachusetts Avenue converged. This newest headhouse and the surrounding brick pedestrian plaza were designed for the MBTA by the Chicago office of the architectural firm of Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM).

The redesign of Harvard Square by SOM enlarged the pedestrian environment by joining the kiosk island to the Cambridge Savings Bank and Read Block, creating a larger brick plaza with amenities that included seating, plantings and the news kiosk. A tourist information booth was added shortly thereafter. This design required a major re-working of the roadways, eliminating the connection of westbound travel on Massachusetts Avenue to Brattle Street and creating another green island at MacArthur Park where there had formerly been automobile parking.

The Pit is located south of the kiosk and wraps around the SOM headhouse. It consists of two curvilinear areas paved in brick, both situated below the grade of the street. The round amphitheater accessed from the eastern end of the plaza includes a 25'-long rectangular stone bench in front of the steeply sloped rear brick

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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.



wall of the headhouse and a curvilinear seat wall and steps. This area is four steps below the Mass. Ave. sidewalk level at the head of Dunster Street. There is another two-foot elevation drop to the semi-circular area that wraps around the west and north sides of the station entrance. The sunken grade was intended to provide gathering spaces. The Pit remains fully in public view but does provide a perceived sense of separation from the roadway. The configuration of the seat walls and stairs created a pinch point on the south side of the Pit, immediately adjacent to the Cambridge Savings Bank. Pedestrian passage through to Brattle Street and entering the station often becomes congested at this location.

Beginning about 2017 the City of Cambridge, which now owns the kiosk and the surface improvements installed by the MBTA in 1978-85, began a project to re-imagine the plaza for greater accessibility. Among other alterations, the new design re-grades the plaza to meet ADA standards and eliminates the Pit as a separate design feature. This project received a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Cambridge Historical Commission in 2019 and a building permit in 2021. A contract has been awarded and construction is now underway.



First Harvard Square subway headhouse. Photo c. 1912.



Harvard Square subway headhouse #2 (built 1927). Photo, 1938.

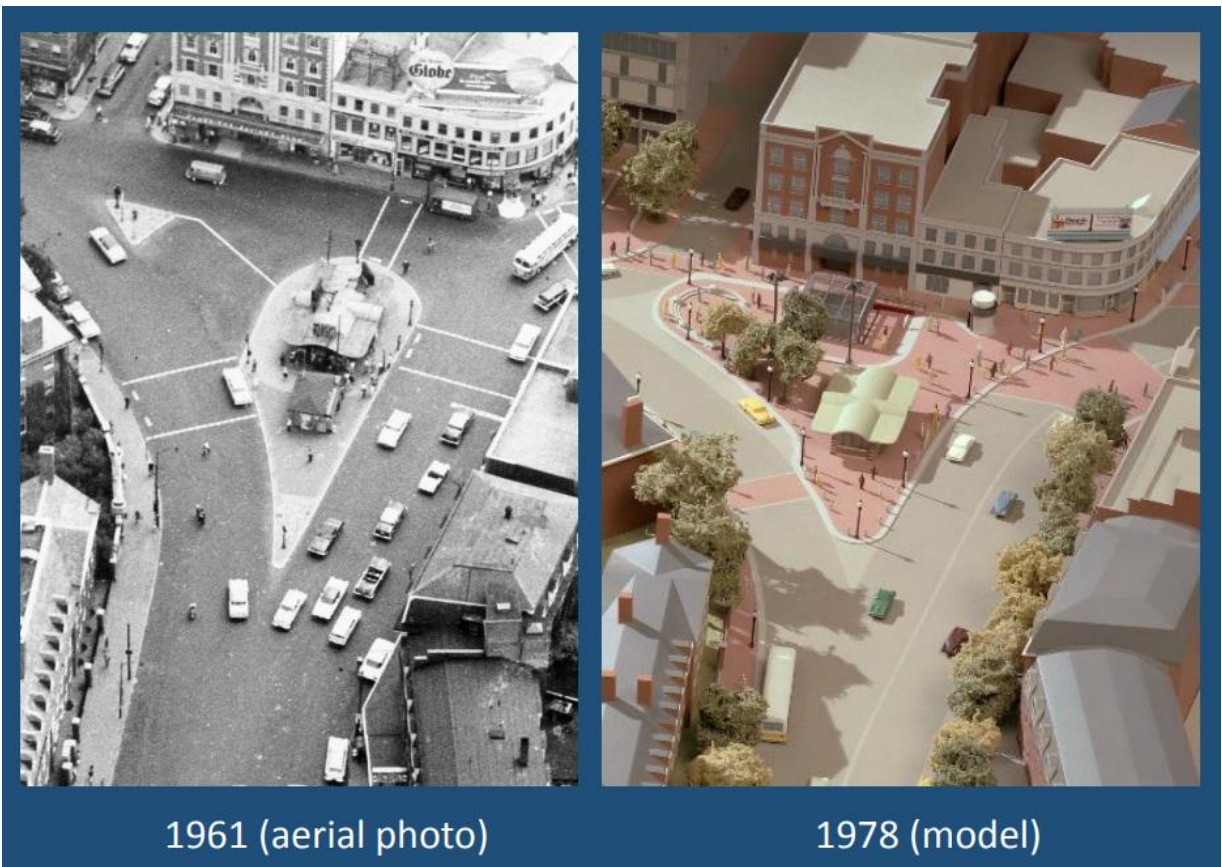
BERY Collection, CHC





Kiosk adapted as a newsstand.

CHC, 2016



1961 (aerial photo)

1978 (model)

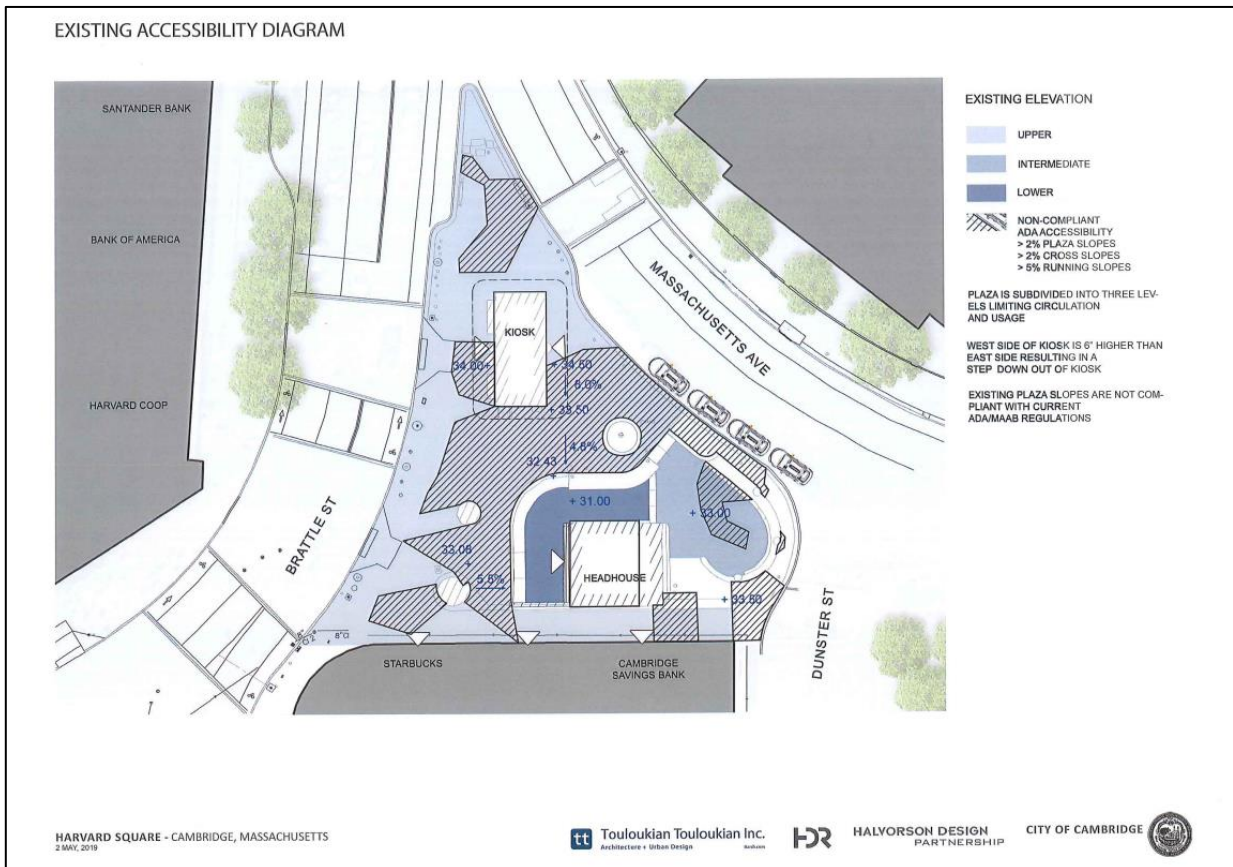
L: Subway headhouse and surrounding roadways in 1961.

R: 1978 architectural model for new headhouse, news kiosk and plaza as part of the Red Line Extension project.





Harvard Square plaza under construction in Summer 1985. The Pit is in the foreground. Photo by Jane Erwin. Community Development Department Collection, CHC Archives.



Existing accessibility diagram of grade levels and non-compliant slopes in the plaza, May 2019 application materials.

### Background of the Pit

Soon after the Red Line Extension construction was completed and the new Harvard Square plaza opened in the mid-1980s, the Pit became a popular gathering spot for people of all ages, but especially for teenagers and young adults from Cambridge, Boston, and surrounding communities. The site was easily accessed by bus and subway. Those who frequented the Pit formed a community and later became known as the “Pit Kids,” or less frequently as “Pit Rats.”

The [landmark petition](#) describes how the physical characteristics of the Pit are “well-suited to large informal gatherings,” and that the historical and cultural significance of the Pit are based on it being a place,

“where people from very diverse socio-economic [sic] backgrounds congregated and mingled. In its heyday you could find unhoused people, poor and working-class youths, youths from wealthy families, as well as working-class adults all hanging out together for hours on end. The popular subcultures represented by those who frequented the Pit likewise were various: punks, metalheads, hippies, hip-hop heads, and others.”



Group of people sharing space in the Pit, ca. late 1980s.

Photo by J.J. Gonson.

Some people in Cambridge considered the Pit Kids with their dyed hair or shaved heads, tattoos and piercings, rock music and energetic dancing to be intimidating to tourists and older adults traversing the Square. Others celebrated the welcoming and nonjudgmental spirit of the place and people.

Though many young suburban residents came to Harvard Square for the fun of experiencing a counter-culture scene, a significant portion of those who gathered at the Pit were experiencing homelessness or were underhoused. Social and medical services were provided by pioneering organizations such as Youth on Fire (a drop-in day center) and Bridge Over Troubled Waters (a mobile medical van).

The Cambridge Public Health Department led a study of the social and public-safety needs of the Pit Kids and published its report, “The Harvard Square Pit,” in January 2003. The design of the Pit was not considered a contributing factor to violent crime, but the young people that gathered there were recognized as a vulnerable segment of the population who were more likely to become victims of violent crime than to be the perpetrators.



Many people remember spending time at the Pit in its glory days with great fondness. City Councillor Marc McGovern, local author Jen Deaderick and the Harvard Square Business Association hosted [Pit-A-Palooza](#) in June 2022 to celebrate the Pit and share memories, music and dancing.

### Regulatory Status

In 2000, the City Council designated Harvard Square as a neighborhood 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 reviewed the City's application for renovations to the Kiosk and Plaza, including the area that is known as The Pit, in May 2019 and issued a Certificate of Appropriateness on October 19, 2019. The City applied for an amendment in December 2019 to alter curbs and shorten crosswalks and to make safety enhancements to the arrangement of the bike and vehicular traffic lanes. This amendment to the certificate was approved by the Commission on January 2, 2020.

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).



Perspective view of redesigned plaza viewed from Dunster Street. May 2019 application to CHC.

### Kiosk and Plaza Public Planning Process

The community process for the project to renovate and repurpose the kiosk and to redesign the plaza began in 2017 when the City hired a consultant, Project for Public Spaces, and established a community working group. The [Final Report](#) of the Harvard Square Kiosk and Plaza Working Group was published in October 2018. The vision of the Working Group as detailed in the report was for the Kiosk and Plaza to be “flexible, dynamic, and welcoming community assets that enhance the everyday life of Harvard Square, act as platforms for community gatherings, including civic, artistic, and social activities, and attract and serve a broad range of people, including residents, students, visitors, etc.”

The City retained the Halvorson Group to design the new plaza. In the area of the Pit the design is not altogether different from the original. It includes tiered seating on the back wall of the headhouse and a gathering space defined by a masonry seat wall on the northeast corner. The grading of the brick pavement is adjusted to allow for ADA compliant slopes and many fewer steps.

The public bidding process for the construction project was split into two parts. The first part was to renovate the kiosk. The project was awarded to WES Construction Corp. in April 2021. A building permit was issued in June 2021 and work has been underway for the past year. It is anticipated that the kiosk will be completed in Fall 2022. Construction of the surface improvements including the plaza, sidewalks, and portions of the roadway was put out to bid in February 2022 and was awarded to Newport Construction Corp. in March. The contractor is currently mobilizing for construction.

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

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).

Though the Pit has associations with the broad cultural and social history of the City, specifically with an anti-establishment subculture of the late 1980s and 1990s, and associations with the architectural firm of Skidmore Owings and Merrill, it is the staff opinion that these associations do not rise to the level of importance required for landmark designation. Additionally, the landmark study petition was filed after the conclusion of the public visioning process for the plaza and kiosk, after the Historical Commission’s hearings to consider the appropriateness of the new design, after the public bidding and permitting process concluded, and work is already underway on the project. Beginning a landmark study process at this point would not have the desired effect of preserving the existing structures that form the Pit because the plaza redesign has already been considered and approved by the Historical Commission. For these reasons, the staff recommend that the Historical Commission decline to initiate a landmark designation study for the Pit as requested in the citizen petition.