

Petition to Amend the Harvard Square Conservation District Guidelines

January 31, 2017

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

RECEIVED

FEB 06 2017

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

- Whereas: The Harvard Square Conservation District is facing unprecedented pressure on its historic building fabric from recent inflationary prices accompanied by applications for sizable changes as well as demolitions, all of which have potential to seriously erode the historic, socio-cultural, and architectural integrity of the district; and
- Whereas: The variability in significance of the Harvard Square Conservation District buildings are not sufficiently addressed in the current guidelines for the district since each structure is evaluated using similar procedures and assessment criteria; and
- Whereas: Many Cambridge citizens have voiced a need to revisit, re-evaluate, and revamp the Harvard Square Conservation District guidelines and language; and

PROCEDURAL

- Whereas: The City of Cambridge Municipal Code states that "Any ten registered voters of the City may petition that the Historical Commission initiate ... the process of designating a landmark or neighborhood conservation district or amending or rescinding any such designation theretofore made;"¹ and
- Whereas: Each conservation district in the City of Cambridge is allowed and indeed encouraged to create its own assessment criteria to best meet the needs and character of its neighborhood building fabric; and
- Whereas: Section 2.78.180 of the Ordinance on "Designation procedures" stipulates that "Prior to the recommendation of designation or amendment of designation of any landmark or neighborhood conservation district an investigation and report on the historical, architectural and other relevant significance thereof shall be made" and that "In the case of a neighborhood conservation district, the report shall be prepared by a study committee consisting of three members or alternates of the Historical Commission and four persons appointed by the City Manager, including at least one person who resides in the district under consideration, at least one person who owns property in the district under consideration, and one person who owns property or resides elsewhere in the City and has demonstrated knowledge and concern for conservation and enhancement of those exterior features of the City which are important to its distinctive character;" and

ISSUES

- Whereas: "Standards of review in conservation districts [generally] are far less restrictive than those for historic districts" and within such conservation districts, "alterations to existing structures tend to be subject to more lenient standards of review" than in local historic districts;² and
- Whereas: The historical and socio-cultural significance of buildings within the Harvard Square Conservation District vary considerably in terms of architectural, historical and cultural merit, with some meriting more protection than a conservation district provides; and

- Whereas: The conservation district's approach emphasizing general or overall neighborhood characteristics or "one size fits all" necessarily leaves critical historic structures open to alterations that threaten to diminish individual building integrity and that of the district as a whole; and
- Whereas: The trend in the Harvard Square Conservation District has been increasingly for buildings to take on a homogenized look and scale more characteristic of a suburban mall or anonymous urban center, thereby eroding Harvard Square's uniqueness, sense of identity, and human scale; and
- Whereas: There have been cases in the Harvard Square Conservation District whereby it would have been appropriate for the Historical Commission to impose dimensional and setback requirements in addition to those required by applicable provision of the zoning ordinance, although the Commission has chosen not to exercise this power; and
- Whereas: The Harvard Square Conservation District's criteria of evaluation and procedures are in some areas vague and contradictory, lending themselves to selective adherence to certain guidelines or elements and the use of different criteria and conclusions at different times; and
- Whereas: The subjective nature of the Harvard Square Conservation District guidelines lend themselves to compromises and negotiated settlements that leave historic structures at risk and at times have failed to protect such structures; and
- Whereas: Some recent buildings or additions in the Harvard Square Conservation District that were contextually incompatible in scale or building fabric at the time of approval and construction have increasingly become the standard bearers in appropriateness for newer designs; and
- Whereas: Cambridge Historical Commission decisions for Harvard Square are often made at the staff level without a public hearing; and other decisions, sometimes are swayed, by which commission members or alternates vote on a given case, leaving the preservation of key historic buildings vulnerable to the vicissitudes of individual commissioner attendance, perspectives, and circumstances; and
- Whereas: Concerns with respect to redundancy and/or duplication of preservation safeguards that are sometimes expressed by the Cambridge Historical Commission *per se* must be subordinated to the primary goals of safeguarding the architectural and cultural heritage of Cambridge³; and
- Whereas: The act of granting one building special merit and protection in a conservation district is no more harmful to the other buildings in that district than it would be to designate certain districts as historic districts, or to designate certain buildings as Landmarks or National Register of Historic Places exemplars; and

SIGNIFICANCE DETERMINATIONS AND OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

- Whereas: Certain historic buildings ARE indeed more important to the history of the district, city, and region than others, and deserve and require special (and separate) preservation attention and care; and
- Whereas: The enabling ordinance stipulates specifically that "any property" in Cambridge can be designated a landmark if it meets the correct criteria,⁴ thus affirming that distinctions do exist between specific building forms whether in a conservation district or elsewhere in the city, and further, neither Massachusetts nor Cambridge city ordinance specifically precludes differentially designating buildings in the manner suggested here within its conservation districts; and

- Whereas: Other cities, notably San Francisco, are dealing with similar problems and have developed solutions that offer thoughtful pro-active protection within their commercial conservation districts by specifying certain structures as *Significant Buildings* for which historic preservation is *required*, while designating others as *Contributing Buildings* where preservation is *encouraged*, these criteria being the result of careful study and deliberation prior to a specific request for modification; and
- Whereas: In the above San Francisco model, it has proven beneficial for conservation districts to add a designation of *Significant Buildings* to notably important works. These *Significant Buildings* are seen to comprise those structures “of the highest architectural and environmental importance— buildings whose demolition would constitute an irreplaceable loss of the quality and character of downtown.” They “...include all buildings classified as *Buildings of Individual Importance* and rated as ‘excellent’ in architectural design, or very good in both architectural design and relationship to the environment.” These buildings are individually important;”⁵ and
- Whereas: *Significant Buildings* in this context carry more stringent guidelines and additional protections necessitating special treatment that, in essence, accords them status “as if” they are located within a designated historic district; and
- Whereas: The Harvard Square Conservation District currently has no such differentiating categories and guidelines, although within its boundaries are structures that exemplify individually and as a group the category of *Significant Buildings*, such as the cluster of historic buildings at the very heart of Harvard Square: the Read Building, the Harvard Square Kiosk, the Abbot Building, 1-8 Brattle (The Brattle Building/ Dow Stearns), and the Coop; and
- Whereas: Cases coming before the Commission: 1) shall require the aforementioned significance evaluation and designation (and related guidelines) before Commission discussions and deliberations shall take place; 2) proposed roof changes, including roof terraces, shall come under these guidelines if seen from a public way, as shall increases in building height and density which in turn shall necessitate the submission of accompanying night light studies and informative graphics that illustrate the proposed alterations in the broader context of the district and along all view sheds; 3) before any building can be approved for demolition, the CHC shall be required to conduct at least two public hearings on the specific matter of demolition before any decision, even preliminary, may be reached; 4) all such documents and proposals shall be published on the CHC website within three days of receipt, along with all related submissions, proposals, or revised proposals of structures that the staff is asked to review; 5) any related public hearings shall include a court reporter who will take minutes (consistent with the BZA and Planning Board practices) and such minutes to be posted on the CHC website within two weeks of the hearing; 6) amendments to the Harvard Square Conservation District’s ordinance shall not be limited to those listed herein, but shall address other concerns as recommended by an appointed study committee; and 7) a review of the boundaries of the Harvard Square Conservation District shall be a component of the study; now

THEREFORE do we, the undersigned registered voters of the City of Cambridge, pursuant to Ordinance 1002, Article III, Section 180(D) of Chapter 2.78 of the Cambridge Municipal Code, hereby respectfully pray that the Cambridge Historical Commission initiate with all possible haste the process of amending the Harvard Square Conservation District

Endorsees

Printed Name	Address	Zip	Signature
1 Suzanne Blier	5 Fuller Pl.	02138	Suzanne Blier
2 LAURENCE HAMMEL		02139	Laurence Hammel
3 MARISE MEYER	10 DANAST	02138	Mandise Meyer
4 Quinton Zondervon	235 Cardinal Melvinos Ave.	02141	
5 Susan Labandibar	8 Brewer St #6,	02138	Susan Labandibar
6 Priscilla McMillan	12 Hilliard St	02138	Priscilla McMillan
7 James W. Williamson	1000 Jackson Place, Apt. 45	02140	James W. Williamson
8 Gladys P. Gifford	15 Hilliard St	Camb. MA 02138	Gladys P. Gifford
9 Abra S Berkowitz	253 1/2 Broadway	Camb MA 02139	Abra S Berkowitz
10 CAROL L. PERRALLT	9 DANA ST, #41 Cambridge, MA	02138	Carole L. Perrault

Printed Name

Address

Zip

Signature

11 Linda C. Slack 5 Hilliard Place 02138 Linda C Slack

12 Laura Deford 3 Fuller Place 02138 Laura Deford

13 GILL DEFORD 3 FULLER PL. 02138 Gill Deford

14 Rudolph Blier 5 Fuller Place 02138 Rudolph Blier

15 _____

16 _____

17 _____

18 _____

19 _____

20 _____