

To the City Council Members and my fellow neighbors,

When I left Forli (Italy) in 2010, I brought a suitcase full of curiosity, a great desire to become a fluent English speaker, and a Master's Degree in Architecture and Urban Planning from the oldest university in the world. Little did I know about Cambridge, but I was welcomed by a much more vibrant atmosphere than I could've anticipated. I had the chance to expand my knowledge for vernacular residential architecture types, and also the luxury of having such a significant collection of 19th and early 20th century architecture at my disposal, much like an open-air museum of architecture. Living in Cambridge meant I could finally experience many of the buildings described by Kenneth Frampton and the other college bibles I studied for years. The location in which they're situated, a marvelous blend of historical and traditional shingle homes from various eras, makes them stand out even more. It's as if the MFA placed Picasso's art in the middle of a Renaissance collection. After all, the destruction of two World Wars, and a loss of identity, shifted the center of architecture from Europe to the United States.

Unfortunately, the recovery from "The Great Recession" is marked by increased economic disparity and a large amount of reckless development that is reminiscent of the worst aspects of brutalist constructivism mixed with the Soviet "avant garde" of Melnikov and Malevich. The pleasant urban background that managed to engage and be respectful of the human scale, even in the midst of industry, took new developments that seem to have forgotten they are to be looked at and used by people. Facades look so much alike to one another that none of them are particularly interesting. The cladding choices look outdated ten years after construction; twenty at best. One wonders how the cladding manufacturers remain in business and keep selling these products when the only "green" thing they have is a big label on the door. The stones of St. Peter's are green and have held up pretty well for a slightly longer span...

I don't get excited about contemporary architecture because it sells its soul to the greatest developer. Quality and permanence don't seem to matter any longer, and the results are spaces that suffer a terrible lack of beauty. In addition, they only exacerbate climate problems.

The economic disparity became most evident in the rental market where prices started quickly soaring; a dynamic that conveniently worsens every September in perfect accordance with the new academic year. Cambridge clearly chose to stop being inclusive back then. Back in 2015, after my landlord sold his property to retire in the suburbs after a lifetime in facility maintenance at MIT, I was left without a home. The rental market is so fast, and I was never quick enough to write a check for a place, and the days kept going by. A dear friend (and now neighbor) offered me a temporary roof till I could finally find a good accommodation. Being homeless wasn't fun. Affordable housing for me, an immigrant, was not an easily available option - especially since I wanted to apply for permanent resident status. You may not be aware of the crude reality (not the utopia often pushed by the press) but immigrants like myself promise to not become a burden on the social aid system. I even had to swear to this at my green card interview. To this day, I am not allowed to benefit from any financial aid of any form, even if the circumstances call for it.

Wellington-Harrington had become unaffordable and East Cambridge became the new home.

All the small shops made it so walkable it almost felt like walking along the "corso" (boulevard) of Forli, window shopping - except for the loggias. The combination of historic,

local businesses, churches, homes, etc made it truly a city within the city, reminding me of the "rioni" I grew up in. No other neighborhood in Cambridge can say the same, and even during a time as hard as the one of the pandemic, this structure proved to be a blessing for it avoided trips to the corporate supermarkets. Isn't the motto "shop local"? Sadly, this past year we lost one of the biggest pillars of this community: the Live Poultry, Fresh Killed store. Now, I would like you to ponder, just for a moment about all the new large developments that occurred around here. Have any of them provided any affordable space for small businesses and sole proprietors to provide some new alternatives? Maybe offer a new home to the aforementioned case? I'm not talking about the Sweetgreens, Starbucks or Cava, but about those charming places where the owner knows your name, and even a quick exchange of words makes the day brighter, more interesting. Those warm interactions are too few and far between in corporate franchisees.

In this scenario, the lack of proper planning has led to the creation of a plethora of "mixed use" buildings, like they were the antibiotics for every urban disease. The pretty renderings in presentations makes these buildings irresistibly appealing in the eyes of commission reviewers. Yet the real users and residents' dissatisfaction grow exponentially dissatisfied. Do you think that illegal immigrants would apply to the system? Aren't we supposed to be a "sanctuary city"? What's affordable if the rental costs still force one to struggle to make ends meet? These are just a few of the questions that would be worth finding answers. [The percentage for affordable or subsidized housing is quite debatable and would deserve a separate dissertation.]

What has maintained East Cambridge's affordability when speaking of the rental market? Old, grandfathered homeownership! Did you know that this neighborhood still offers solutions similar to the old boarding rooms that are indeed more affordable than the ones offered by any subsidized program? Do you know how useful that is for the community? I can assure you that if it weren't for it, I would've moved to the suburbs many years ago. Allowing landlords and owners to do any required maintenance is indeed necessary and needn't be burdensome, hence the idea of establishing a conservation district as opposed to a historic one.

I would like you to focus your attention on a greater issue. Soil management and planning. I may sound like a broken record but the LEEDs certifications are truly meaningless if we keep spoiling the soil the way we have been over the past ten years.

Among the newer projects being presented at the edge of our neighborhood is one which will have eight underground levels. You'd think that would be an exception, but sadly, that is the new trend for all new high rise construction, whether the different levels of basements get used or not. Think of the recent developments in Kendall; all these buildings require really deep foundations, and most have at least two underground levels. However, all these sites pretty much sit on water (there used to be a canal through the area) and the soil requires them to work with slurry walls, not piles [funny enough the largest and best subcontractor for this type of work is a company that was founded in my hometown and uses proprietary high tech equipment]. Now, I think we could think of that area as an underground pond or simply a reservoir connected to the river. The more we fill this reservoir, the more we force water to find new paths which, I am afraid, is going to put a massive amount of pressure on existing foundations. Specifically, what about the entire residential area in the lower part of East Cambridge? Many of those homes already faced major settlements because of the nature of the soil underneath. We can't afford to be nearsighted and forget about these dynamics because they are destined to affect our own neighborhood.

We keep filling that underground basin. What happens when the Charles is full and its level rises? Are we going to see a disaster much like the one that happened in London a few years ago? All those double basements have caused major issues. Also of consideration is the capacity of the sewage system. Is it sized to sustain such pressure? Not to mention, how many electrical substations will all this exponential "cementification" require?

Based on studies coming from some of the major architectural faculties, the future that is envisioned to curb the soaring costs is quite a scary nightmare: Home ownership has become too costly, so the new brains plan for land to only be leased. Fast forward 10 years and all the land will be owned by big corporations/investors? Only few "lucky" ones will own simply the walls of a house or a condo, but no longer have a say nor a deed of the land and decisional power over its zoning. Scary, isn't it? The underpinning concept of private property is at stake. What part does the City want to play? Surely not the one that cares about the human scale or residents.

Clearly this demonstrates, once more, how the final user is completely disregarded and how much the shouted "high density" is incapable of resolving any issue: not at the human level, nor at the urban level and would only perpetrate urban nihilism, of the kind that already destroyed 66/68 Otis Street and many other examples.

To counteract this incessant destruction, I strongly believe a conservation district can be a step forward in the right direction, for homeowners, renters, and business owners, too.

*Francesca G.*