

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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To: City of Cambridge Planning Board
City of Cambridge Board of Zoning Appeals
From: Central Square Advisory Committee
Date: 5/3/2021
Re:

The Central Square Advisory Committee (the "Committee") met on Tuesday, January 26, 2020 to discuss recent studies by the Community Planning Division of CDD on public space analysis and use in Central Square among other squares. Following this there was a committee discussion on the potential uses of surface parking lots in Central Square for alternative short-term uses.

This meeting was conducted pursuant to the provisions of Section 20.300 of the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance. The Committee is appointed by the City Manager to undertake all large project reviews of variances and special permits for activities within the Central Square Overlay District (the "District"), and to monitor the progress of the Central Square Non-Zoning Recommendations of the 2013 K2C2 Study (the "Study").

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The meeting minutes from the Committee meeting are summarized below. Public comment was taken after each topic was discussed by committee members.

Meeting Topic: Community Planning Division (CDD) - Public Space Lab in Central Square

The Community Planning Division is in the process of creating the Public Space Lab, an initiative to cultivate inclusive and participatory public spaces that support authentic community life, using a spirit of partnership and experimentation. With community support, The Lab will develop temporary spatial interventions in the City's commercial squares and corridors for gathering, performing, playing, and relaxing, among other uses. This meeting reviewed the intent of the initiative, discussed ideas and went over next steps in the Public Space Lab pilot project.

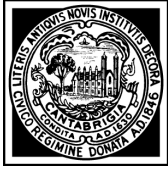
There was general enthusiasm and support for public space interventions in Central Square and the Advisory Committee encourages the Community Development Department to move forward with the initiatives.

[Summary of findings \(presentation can be found on CSAC webpage for April 2021 meeting\)](#)

General Comments:

- Esther Hanig (EH)
 - Eden St next to Margaret Fuller house is a perfect street for outdoor play-street activities
 - Math talk is a program that is already occupying some of the public realm to do interactive events with kids.
 - Information and wayfinding is another form of public realm intervention that could also be really useful. Could you partner with MIT for something technologically advanced?

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- Robert Winters (RW):
 - Likes the idea of reviving wayfinding and identity in Central Sq
 - Need iconographic sign that lets you know that you're entering Central Square
 - What about street food in Central Square? Why are there limitations.
 - People would be warm to the idea of street food. It is non-competition. Would be a community builder.
 - Food vending would be key to enlivening Central Square
 - Likes the Salvation Army space. A lot of real estate to work with
 - Also, entryway to university park is a wasted space
 - Blanche Street is a real opportunity to do something, too. Was designed to accommodate programming.

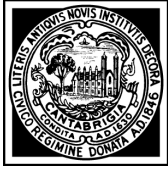
- Joel Altstein (JA):
 - Bob Simha - looking at open space opportunities in neighborhoods.
 - Neighborhood 10. Would like to tie in open space with smaller public spaces
 - Cambridge Garden Club - could be a partner in pocket park

- Melissa Greene (MG):
 - Diesel Café and Mr Crepe have been using plants as a draw. Landscape or introducing greener conditions
 - Supports the idea of putting Life Alive adjacent public space
 - Likes the idea of play and incorporating kids into Central Square
 - Can there be multi-purpose spaces for different audiences? Kids, play and places for adults that can transition over the course of the day

- RW:
 - Corner of Prospect and Bishop Allen is an incredible opportunity.
 - What about a circus there? Or fairgrounds? Or a Ferris Wheel? Such an opportunity to think big.
 - Used to be an asset before new property owner. Either one of the lots on Prospect could be a great place for something bigger.
 - If you had to start small what would you do? Street food would be a good first start.

- Chris Sol Gully (CSG):
 - Now would be easier than ever to stake out spaces for public use.
 - Good time to create subspaces at a pedestrian scale
 - Give up parking spaces along Mass Ave for addition open spaces. Low hanging fruit.
 - What about pavilions or areas for lights. Temporary interventions. Almost public art installations. Can you tap into companies that have grown up/out of Cambridge. This could be a gesture back to Cambridge.
 - What about partnering with the Media Lab?
 - Is there a benefactor for the arts in Cambridge?
 - Where does public art exist in Central Square aside from murals?

- RW:
 - Just need to give the space to some of these organizations to come up with something creative.



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- Bring music into the square
- The city should step aside and allow people's creative juices to flow
- JA:
 - Could provide connections to the Media Lab and MIT
- EH:
 - When the MIT Museum moves to Central Square, MIT plans on using it as storage.
- RW:
 - Mass and Main/Market Central has screeched to a halt because of the pandemic. What might happen in the future when those storefronts can be activated?
 - The Columbia St/Sidney St and Mass Ave intersection with Lafayette Square.
 - Central Square could have very different identities. Doesn't all have to be one unified district. Many spots of character
- CSG:
 - What about a bandstand for musicians?
 - What about the taxi stand area? Is that still needed or could it shrink?
 - Could there be designated spaces for Uber/Lyft and other rideshare?

Public comments

- Michelle Fahey:
 - Defensive architecture is an issue in Central Square and excludes certain groups, such as homeless populations.
 - The Community Planning Division will be looking into issue of Defensive Design when it begins working on new public realm design guidelines.

Committee Consensus

The Committee agrees that Central Square presents several opportunities for activating public spaces that might be different scales, programs and degrees of investment with the intention of amplifying public life in the square. The Committee feels that there are many underutilized spaces in the square and that even small temporary interventions like additional public seating, food vendors and street activities could provide critical public space for residents and visitors alike. Options for activating public space were discussed after the Community Planning Division's presentation. The Out There campaign was well received and the Committee agrees that small scale interventions and programming could be a great first start. More ambitious plans would require partnering with institutions or companies to sponsor public space or public art installations in the square. Ultimately, whether it is a small social space that is sponsored by a garden club or a large public art installation, the Committee finds great benefit to the community in creating new and engaging public spaces and activities as a well to create social ties and bring public life to the square.

The Community Planning staff will provide an update to the CSAC in the May meeting on progress with the Public Space Lab and the Out There campaign, especially as it relates to Central Square.