



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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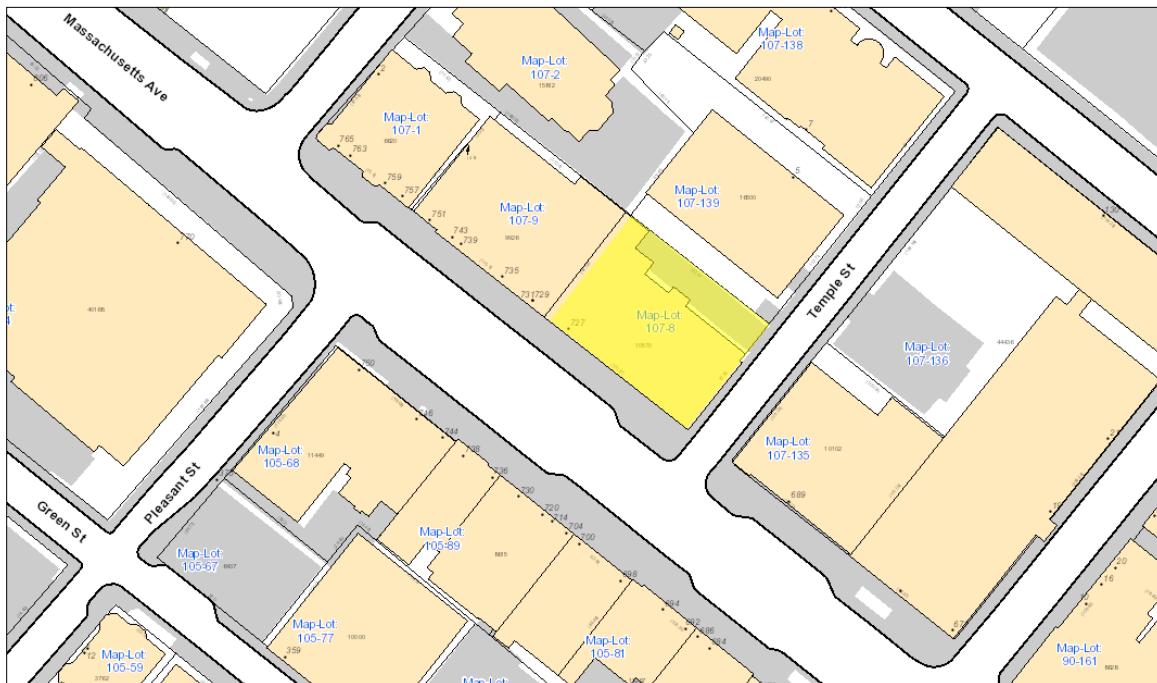
August 26, 2021

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Eric Hill, Survey Director  
Charles Sullivan, Executive Director

Re: Landmark Evaluation: Cambridge Gas-Light Company Building,  
727 Massachusetts Avenue (1912)

A citizens' petition with 100 signatures was received on July 30, 2021, requesting that the Cambridge Historical Commission initiate a landmark designation studies of the Cambridge Gas-Light Company Building at 719 Massachusetts Avenue and the Cambridgeport Savings Bank Building at 689 Massachusetts Avenue.<sup>1</sup> The Cambridge Election Commission has verified that at least ten of the signatories were registered voters. The owner, Gas Light Building LLC, was notified and a public hearing was scheduled for September 2, 2021.



727 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge Gas-Light Building. Cambridge GIS, Assessor's map

<sup>1</sup> The actual address of the Gas-Light Company building is 727 Massachusetts Avenue.

## Description

The Cambridge Gas-Light Company building at 727 Massachusetts Avenue was built in 1912 to house the company's showrooms and offices. The Cambridge Gas-Light Company was incorporated on March 15, 1852, for the purpose of manufacturing and marketing gas for lighting. Service to the first customers began on January 17, 1853. The company prospered over the subsequent decades in Harvard Square and built a new gasworks in 1871 on Third Street, just north of Kendall Square. Construction of the Gas-Light building in Central Square was important for the company, which sought a central location to better serve its patrons. The building presently houses a convenience store and bank at the street level with offices above.



727 Massachusetts Avenue, Staff photo, 2021.

The Cambridge Gas-Light Company building is a significant Italian Renaissance Revival style building designed by the firm of Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge. George F. Shepley, Charles H. Rutan, and Charles A. Coolidge had been draftsmen in the office of the famed architect, Henry Hobson Richardson; after Richardson's death in 1886, the three entered into a partnership to continue his work. The firm became one of the most significant architectural practices in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, and still exists today.





727 Massachusetts Avenue, Photo ca.1914.

The rectangular, three-story building is steel framed of brick masonry construction with a limestone ashlar façade. The building is seven bays wide on Massachusetts Avenue, and three bays deep along Temple Street. At the ground floor, a two-story arcaded base represents traditional Italian loggia but with glazed openings that serve as storefronts. The half-round arches are supported on piers that extend to Tuscan pilasters to the sidewalk. The pilasters are flanked by engaged columns that sit atop a raised base. Wrought iron grilles cover the eastern- and westernmost bays on the Mass Ave façade. Reproductions of the two original ornate wrought iron sconces were installed into piers along the main façade in 2018. The original main entrance to the building is set in the center bay on the main façade. Ornate bas-relief work is located within the spandrels flanking the central bay and include cartouches, garlands, and scrolls, calling attention to the main entry. While the Gas-Light building and the Cambridgeport Saving Bank buildings were built ten years apart, they complement each other architecturally and represent the most significant expression of the City Beautiful movement in Cambridge.



727 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge Gas-Light building. Entry detail, photo ca.1914.

The upper story features much of the detailing and acts as a *piano nobile* set off by a string course between the first and second stories. Above the string course, the façade has a three-part organization with a paneled base, pilastered center section, and entablature above. The bays contain double-hung, one-over-one replacement window sash. Framing the windows, fluted pilasters with composite capitals are surmounted by alternating triangular and segmental pediments. Each bay is separated by a paneled pilaster with composite capitals. A tiered cornice meets the roofline with decorative, alternating diamond and circular stone medallions set into the frieze below. The two-story ground floor room, originally one continuous space, has been subdivided for two tenants.



727 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge Gas-Light building. Interior view, 1914.



727 Massachusetts Ave., staff photo 2021.

### Planning Issues

The Cambridge Gas Light Company building occupies a 10,570 square foot lot on the west corner of Temple Street. The building is zoned Business B, which allows a height of 55' as of right, with the ability to increase to 80' upon issuance of a Special Permit by the Planning Board (as modified by the provisions of the Central Square Overlay District). A total FAR of 4.0 for residential and non-residential uses combined is also permitted upon issuance of a Special Permit by the Planning Board. With a gross floor area of 26,877 square feet and 10,570 square foot lot, the current FAR of the building is 2.54.

The proposed hotel development required special permit relief from the Planning Board. The gross floor area of the proposed development is 41,781 sq. ft., which is less than the allowed 42,212. As approved, the project will increase from a FAR of 2.54 to 3.96, which falls within the allowed 4.0 FAR after issuance of a special permit. The proposed building will be 80'-0", which is the maximum allowed in the Central Square Overlay District.

Both the Cambridge Gas-Light Company (727 Massachusetts Avenue) and the Cambridgeport Savings Bank (689 Massachusetts Avenue) buildings are contributing resources in the Central Square National Register District, established in 1990. Contributing buildings are automatically considered "significant" under the demolition delay ordinance, and their preservation is encouraged by the provisions of the Central Square Overlay District.



The Cambridge Electric Light Company, which acquired the Cambridge Gas-Light Company in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, sold the building to the Rink Realty Company in 1969. When the Cambridge Historical Commission considered landmarking the building in 1990, Arnold Ginsberg, the trustee of Rink Realty, assured the Commission that he had no plans to alter the building and would consult the staff on any proposed alterations in the future.

Rink Realty sold the building in 2017 to Chevron Partners, investment group acting through a local entity, Gas Light Building LLC. Representatives of Chevron soon contacted the Commission concerning masonry restoration and architectural lighting, and CHC staff continued on the former advisory basis. In October 2018 the owners reached out again to discuss conceptual plans to convert the building to a hotel by adding three additional floors. The owners initiated the permitting process with CDD the following March, and in September 2019 presented plans to the Central Square Advisory Committee for a three-story rooftop addition to accommodate a 37-room hotel.



Proposed addition as presented in September 2019.

Finegold Alexander Architects

CHC staff objected to the proposed design on the grounds that the addition seemed to dominate the historic facades and that the “picture frame styling” of the fenestration inappropriately called attention to the new upper floors. CHC and CDD staff worked closely on a July 14, 2020 recommendation to the Planning Board which contained the following analysis:

The “Central Square Development Guidelines” (1987) recommend that new construction be compatible with and sensitive to existing historic structures. “The Central Square Design Guidelines” (2013) recommend that, consistent with the Department of Interior’s “Guidelines for the Rehabilitating Historic Buildings,” additions to existing historic

buildings be architecturally distinguished from them. Cambridge Historical Commission staff have advised CDD that, as a matter of principle, additions to historic buildings should be recessive, and especially so when the historic building is as significant as the Cambridge Gas and Light building. Staff appreciates the Applicant's willingness to work collaboratively on the design but remains concerned that the appearance of the proposed addition seems to dominate the existing building. ...

CHC and CDD staff offer the following suggestions to avoid visually overwhelming the existing building:

- In accord with the "Central Square Development Guidelines" recommendation that color be appropriate to the historic character of the Square, consider "lightening up the box" by using a color and finish for the large angled panels at the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floors that are more in keeping with the existing building.
- Reducing the potential for visual competition between the new 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floor element and the existing building, both of which currently read as unified rectilinear masses. Consider deemphasizing the color of the sunshades to reduce the strong horizontal banding on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floor facades.
- Create a sense of delineation between the new 6 floor vertical element at the rear of the building and both the existing building and the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floor addition above it. This would help distinguish the new addition from the historic building and strengthen the sense that the new 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> floor element "floats" independently above the existing building. <sup>2</sup>

The Planning Board reviewed the proposal in July 2020 and raised these and additional issues that the owner addressed in a revised Special Permit application in October. The revised design reduced the dimensions of the framing panels around the windows, muted the colors, reduced rooftop mechanicals, and made other changes to meet zoning requirements not relevant to historic preservation review. CHC and CDD staff were present in all relevant discussions with the applicants.

In October 2020 the Board requested the applicants to restudy the massing of the addition in response to residents of 5 Temple Place who requested that the addition be placed closer to Massachusetts Avenue. The applicants responded that repositioning the massing would require abandoning the proposed cantilever design that preserved the historic interior structure in favor of internal structural supports within existing spaces, and that a repositioned addition would inappropriately overwhelm the historic facades. CHC and CDD staff concurred in this analysis.

The Board discussed the design again on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The applicants presented a further revision that reduced the massing on the north elevation by introducing setbacks on the fifth and sixth floors. With these amendments, the Planning Board approved a Special Permit on June 15, 2021. Among other conditions, the Board required that CHC staff be consulted on "exterior materials, colors, façade alterations and restoration details".<sup>3</sup> The owners are currently preparing an application for a building permit.

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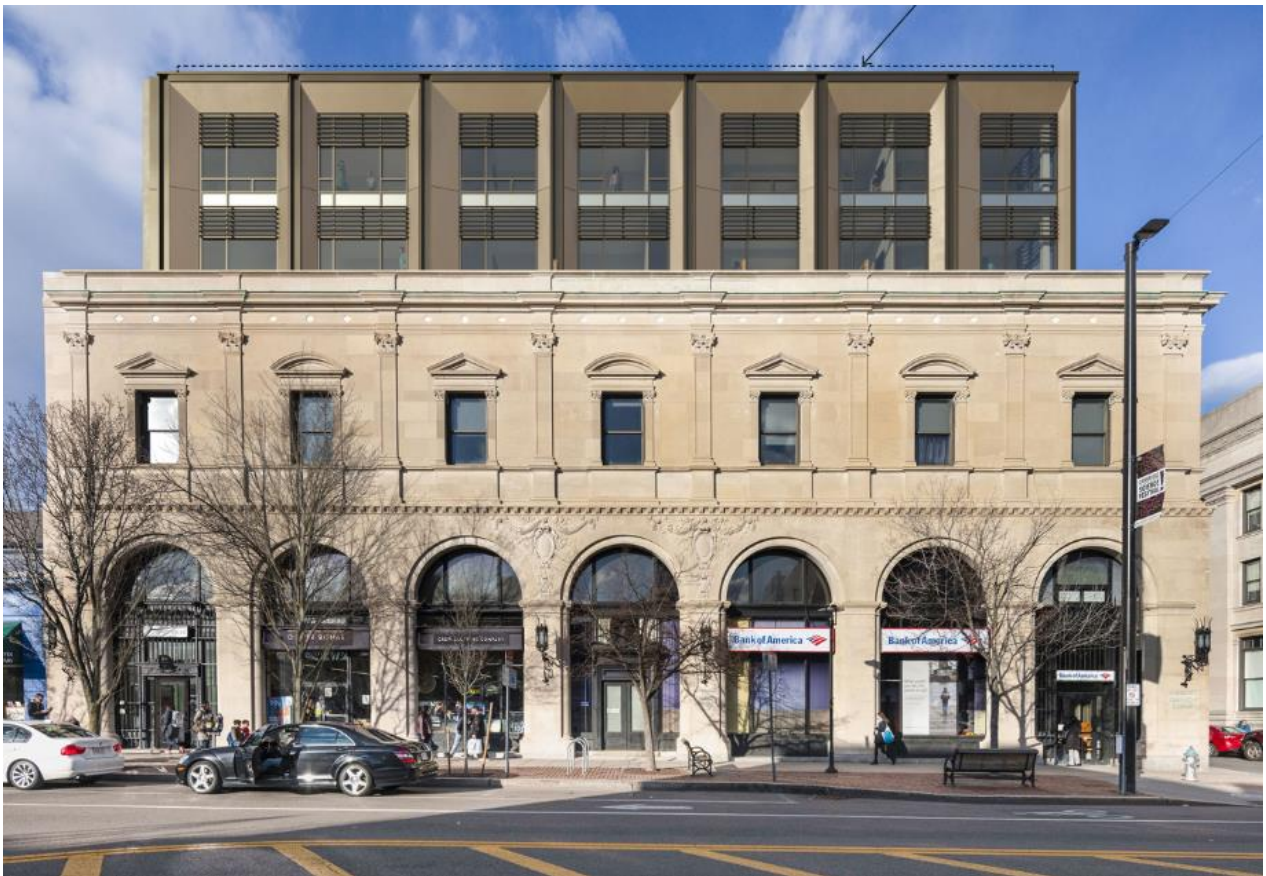
<sup>2</sup> See attached CDD memo to the Cambridge Planning Board, July 14, 2020

<sup>3</sup> Cambridge Planning Board Decision, PB-361, July 27, 2021



Potential relocated massing (left) and massing as approved.

Finegold Alexander Architects, Jan. 13, 2021



727 Massachusetts Avenue. Front elevation as approved



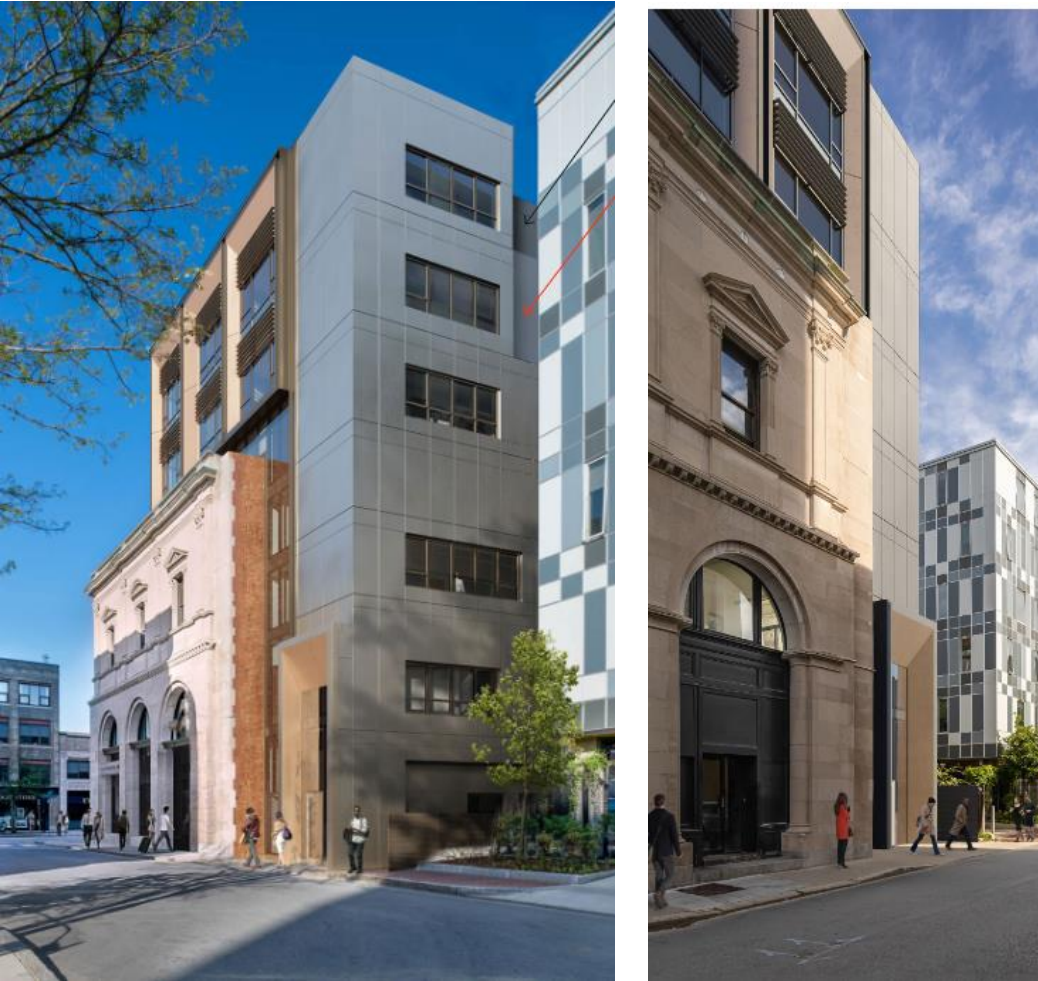
Removed Massing      Roof Layout Update



727 Massachusetts Avenue. West elevation as approved



727 Massachusetts Avenue. South and east elevations as approved



727 Massachusetts Avenue. East and north elevations as approved.

### Significance

The Cambridge Gas-Light Company building is architecturally significant as a high-style example of the Italian Renaissance Revival designed by the prominent Boston firm of Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge. The importance of the Cambridge Gas-Light Company as a public utility adds to the historical significance of the building, which represented the aspirations of a major employer and infrastructure-based company headquartered in the city.

### Landmark Criteria and Goals

Landmarks are enacted by the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission commences a landmark designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of ten registered voters.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible properties as:

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 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... (2.78.180.A)

The purpose of landmark designation is described in the ordinance, which was enacted to,

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas, or structures; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the city a more desirable place in which to live and work. (2.78.140)

### Relationship to Criteria

The Cambridge Gas-Light Company building meets criterion (1) for its associations with the architectural and economic history of Cambridge, and criterion (2) as “architecturally significant (in terms of 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.”

### Staff Recommendations

The Commission should entertain public testimony and ascertain the objectives of the petitioners seeking designation.

While the Cambridge Gas-Light Company building clearly conforms to the criteria for landmark designation and has been recognized as a potential landmark since at least 1990, CHC staff chose at that time to rely on voluntary compliance with historic preservation goals. The Executive Director informed the Commission when the building changed hands in 2017 and of subsequent proposals for an addition. Given competing demands on staff time, the Director decided to continue relying on voluntary compliance. After the proposal entered the permitting process in 2018 the Director engaged fully with Community Development Department staff and the Planning Board in a rigorous design review that successfully balanced historic preservation with other community goals and interests.

The petitioners seek to initiate a landmark designation study that would have the effect of placing the building under the jurisdiction of the Commission for up to one year while staff prepares a recommendation for designation. During the study period the owners would be free to apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness for the project as currently proposed; the Commission could approve or deny the application before any designation recommendation is submitted to the City Council. Initiation of a landmark designation study and subsequent review of the proposed addition would essentially duplicate the three-year design review process that resulted in the issuance of a Special Permit and could well lead to the same result.



Staff recommends that the Commission decline to accept the petition on the grounds that historic preservation goals have been met by the current Planning Board review, and that initiation of a landmark designation study would place inappropriate demands on Commission resources.

cc: Gas Light Building LLC