

CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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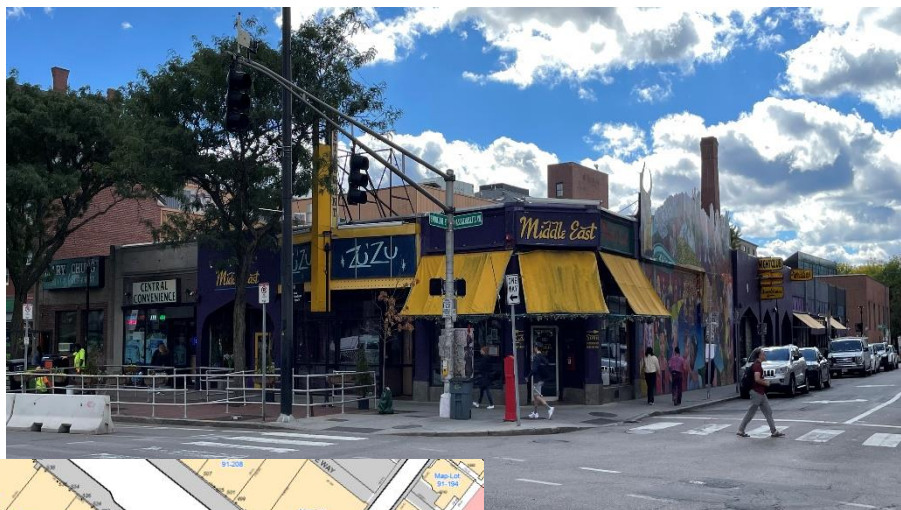
September 30, 2022

To: Members of the Historical Commission

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

Re: Case D-1631: Central Square Realty Trust Building a.k.a. The Middle East; 2-10 Brookline Street/468-480 Massachusetts Avenue (1929)

An application to demolish the commercial block at 2-10 Brookline Street/468-480 Massachusetts Avenue was received on August 8, 2022. The applicant, Patrick W. Barrett III and the owner, Sater Realty, LLC, were notified of an initial determination of significance and a public hearing was scheduled for September 2022. On August 30, the applicant requested a continuance until the October 2022 public hearing.



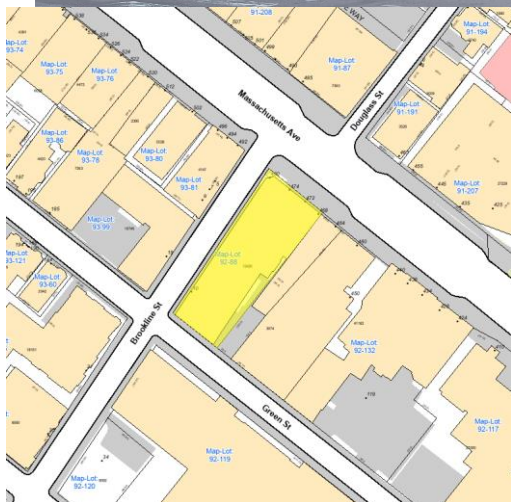
*Upper: Central Square Realty Trust building at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Brookline Street, 09/2022;
 Lower: Assessing Map of 2-10 Brookline Street/468-480 Massachusetts Avenue.*

General Description and Current Conditions

The building at 2-10 Brookline Street occupies a 13,420 square-

foot lot (92/88) on the east side of Brookline Street at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue. It is a one-story masonry building with a flat roof. The base zoning is Business BB, a neighborhood business district that also allows most types of housing. The FAR and height limits in this district are 4.0 and 55 feet. The assessed value of the land and building, according to the FY22 Assessing Database, was \$5,280,800; \$1,471,400 for the building, and \$3,809,400 for the land.

The Central Square Realty Trust Building is also located within the Central Square Overlay District, where the



maximum allowable height may be increased to 80 feet upon issuance of a Special Permit by the Planning Board, subject to design considerations, and is a contributing resource in the Central Square National Register District. These overlapping districts were adopted in 1989 and 1990, respectively, in a joint CHC and CDD effort

to channel the extreme development pressures in ways which will preserve and enhance the unique functional environment and visual character of Central Square; to mitigate the functional impacts of new development on adjacent residential neighborhoods; to maintain the present diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and ages; and to provide sufficient regulatory flexibility to advance the general purposes of this Section.

The Central Square National Register district contains “contributing” and “non-contributing” resources. Many of the contributing resources are prominent buildings like City Hall, but when we drafted the district nomination we listed several one-story commercial buildings of the 1920s as contributing because they retained some of the architectural character of their period. Contributing buildings are automatically significant under Cambridge’s demolition delay ordinance.

Provisions of the overlay district encourage retention and restoration of contributing buildings. Projects that involve demolition of contributing buildings are penalized unless the Commission finds them not preferably preserved, in which case the replacement project can take full advantage of the provisions of the Overlay District.

The applicant is proposing to raze the building and erect a six-story mixed-use building with a hotel on the upper floors, music venues in the basement and ground floor, retail space on the ground floor, and a bar/restaurant on the sixth floor.

Architectural Description:

The Central Square Realty Trust Building is an example of an inter-war commercial block blending eclectic elements of Tudor/English Revival styles.



468-480 Massachusetts Avenue showing parapet and storefront detail before renovations. CHC photograph taken July 1969.

In form, the building is typical of the one-story storefronts built in the 1920s, with a row of storefronts extending down Massachusetts Avenue and onto Brookline Street. The building is of brick construction with stone/concrete facing and is detailed in a simplified version of Tudor Revival. Nearly all of the original façade has been covered by later alterations. The original storefronts consisted of two-bay-wide retail spaces with a recessed center entries with prism glass transom windows above. A stepped concrete parapet once wrapped the street-facing elevations. Division of the retail spaces was expressed on at the parapet by cast-stone pinnacles. Cast-stone plaques in the shape of shields with coats of arms were located at the parapet, it is unclear if any remain.



468-480 Massachusetts Avenue showing original parapet and storefront details. CHC photograph taken July 1969. Note: 464 Massachusetts Avenue (left) is not included in the report.

Today, the 1929 design is largely altered due to the removal of the raised cast stone parapets and pinnacles, cladding of the façade with later storefronts, and altered openings and storefronts. A permit in 1972 called for the repair or removal of cast concrete decorative panels; the parapets were likely removed at this time. Only the easternmost bay at #468 Massachusetts Avenue (presently Central Convenience), retains the most of its architectural integrity of the 1929 design, with its exposed



Original Middle East Restaurant entrance on Brookline Street. Ogee arched openings and glass block windows as part of likely 1980 renovation.

cast stone façade; however, the prism glass transom is covered with an internally illuminated box sign and panel, and the central storefront entrance has been reconfigured.

A 1980 permit issued to owner Nabil Sater describes an alteration and remodel of the restaurant front on the Brookline Street façade. It is likely that this work included the altered storefronts and entrances on Brookline Street, resulting in the ogee arched openings in a Moorish Revival style.

Over time, the Central Square Realty Trust building has gained public art in the form of murals on its visible facades. The oldest mural on the building is titled “Crosswinds” and was created in 1992 by artist Daniel Galvez. Mr. Galvez is an artist based out of California who is inspired by traditional Mexican mural painting. For “Crosswinds”, Galvez relied on the community for ideas, including images from local photographer Jeff Dunn to show the “multi-cultural spirit” of Central Square (Cambridge Arts Council, 2002). Galvez returned in 2016 to restore the mural.



“Crosswinds” mural on Brookline Street façade. CHC photograph, 1997.

On the southernmost bay on the Brookline Street façade and wrapping around onto the Green Street elevation, a mural titled “Nocturnal/Diurnal” fills in the since-enclosed storefronts. The mural was painted as a Science Mural by the Art+Bio Collaborative, a public art mural initiative of local artists and scientists which collaborates with the Cambridge Science Festival. The Science Murals are installed in public spaces “with the aim to showcase and communicate the scientific research conducted inside the laboratories at institutions in the Cambridge and Boston community.” This mural depicting geckos is based on the research by Saul S. Nava, PhD and the Dr. John Dowling Lab at Harvard University.

Also on the Green Street elevation, a mural painted on the previously unpainted brick wall was added by artist Jaime "Vyal" Reyes (Vyal One). The piece is more abstract, and no title or description could be located at the time of this writing.



2-10 Brookline Street/468-480 Mass. Ave., Brookline Street (left) and Green Street façades.



2-10 Brookline Street/468-480 Mass. Ave., Green Street (left) and rear façade (right).

History and Context:

From the founding of Cambridge in 1630 until 1793, present-day Cambridgeport comprised a vast tract of unpopulated salt marshes and woodland. The nearest village centered around Harvard Square, whose residents owned tracts of marsh where they gathered the nutrient-rich hay.

The opening of the West Boston Bridge in 1793 spurred the development of Cambridgeport. Prior to that time, there were only three houses east of Quincy Street and none south of Massachusetts Avenue. Most of the area was controlled by a handful of landowners, including William Jarvis, Francis Dana, and William Watson. Jarvis and Dana worked with the bridge company to lay out Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street, and in 1800 and 1801 Dana and Watson laid out Pearl, Brookline, and Franklin streets. Merchants and tradesmen quickly began to establish businesses

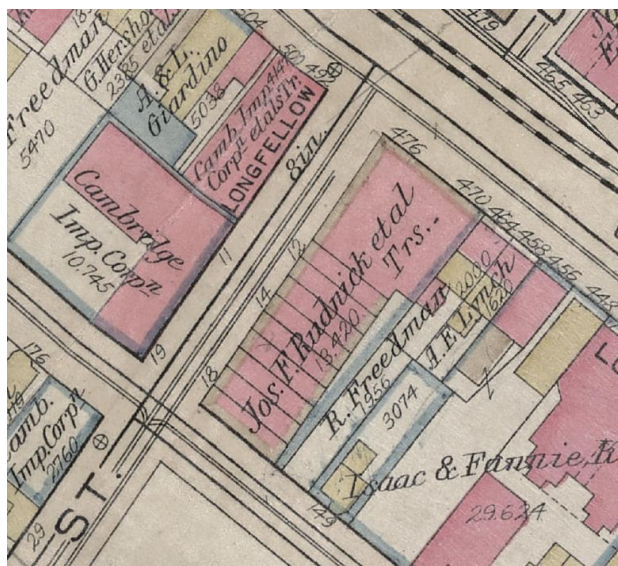
Brookline Street ran along the edge of the relatively well-drained upland pastures, separating them from the tidal marshes of the Charles River. The area was somewhat desolate, subject to flooding in storms until the construction of a railroad embankment in 1853. The upper,

residential portion of the street was fully developed by the end of the 1840s, as seen on Walling's 1854 map. Below Auburn Street, Brookline developed as an industrial corridor.

Brookline Street and Central Square saw redevelopment into the early 20th century coinciding with the subway service connecting the area to Downtown Boston and the growth of automobile transportation. Development pressure leveled off by the 1920s when the newly rebuilt Brookline Street/Cottage Farm Bridge (now the Boston University Bridge) was seen to be a tool to bring shoppers from Boston and Brookline into Central Square, potentially revitalizing the area.

The business community advocated for widening Brookline Street from the bridge all the way to Central Square and across Massachusetts Avenue along Douglass Street, but this plan was stymied by the construction of the Moller Furniture Company building at 485 Massachusetts Avenue in 1927 and improvements made by real estate developer J. F. Rudnick of the Central Square Realty Trust at the eastern corner of Brookline Street and Massachusetts Avenue that made a taking too costly.

Joseph Rudnick was an Eastern European immigrant based in Brookline who engaged in real estate development in the inter-war period. An article in the *Cambridge Chronicle* on January 4, 1929, noted that Rudnick and his family, under the Central Square Realty Trust, would be erecting two contiguous buildings at the corner of Brookline Street and Massachusetts Avenue. The article explained that "the building fronting the avenue will have stores on the first floor and offices above, while the Brookline St. building will also have stores on the first floor but will use the floors above for light manufacturing." It is unclear why only the ground floor was constructed, but it can be assumed that construction was rushed with a promise for taller buildings to increase the perceived value of the property in case of a taking by the City of Cambridge for the widening of Brookline Street.



1930 Bromley Atlas Map showing newly built Central Square Realty Trust building, owned by Joseph F. Rudnick et al.

The architect, Frederick A. Norcross (1871-1929), enjoyed a prominent career designing multi-family and commercial developments in Boston, Brookline, and Cambridge. He worked as a draftsman in Boston from about 1889 until 1894. He began his own practice as an architect in 1895 and remained a sole practitioner until his death in 1929. He designed hundreds of apartment buildings in the North End, Roxbury, the Fenway, Brookline and Brighton, all of brick or stone. He designed only two other buildings which were not apartments, both houses of worship: Temple Adath Jeshurun (397 Blue Hill Avenue, Roxbury) and the First Church of Christ Scientist at 870 Great Plain



Cambridge Sentinel, October 5, 1929.

Avenue in Needham (1919, completed in 1927). His last commission was a block of storefronts at 468 to 480 Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square, which he designed just before his death in 1929.

Early tenants included the Riverside Hardware Co., a loan company and jeweler, Central Distributing Company Liquors, and an early storefront for EMF Electrical Supply Company, which later relocated to 120 Brookline Street. In the Brookline Street building, a bowling alley with ten lanes was built underneath the stores at the ground level.

Joseph and Nabil Sater first moved into a storefront on Brookline Street, purchasing The Middle East, a Lebanese Restaurant, by 1975. The Middle East had Arabic-language bands, music and belly dancers as live performances. This part of the building is now known as The Middle East Upstairs.

In 1987 Billy Ruane (1957-2010), a music aficionado and promoter, threw himself a 30th birthday party at T.T. The Bear's, a live music venue on Brookline Street in the Central Realty Building. When the event outgrew the small club, Ruane asked the Saters, owners of The Middle East restaurant next door, to take in the overflow and let a band play. With this event, Ruane was instrumental in transforming the Middle East into the nationally known rock and live music club it is today. Ruane continued to be an enthusiastic promoter of the Boston rock scene, often booking

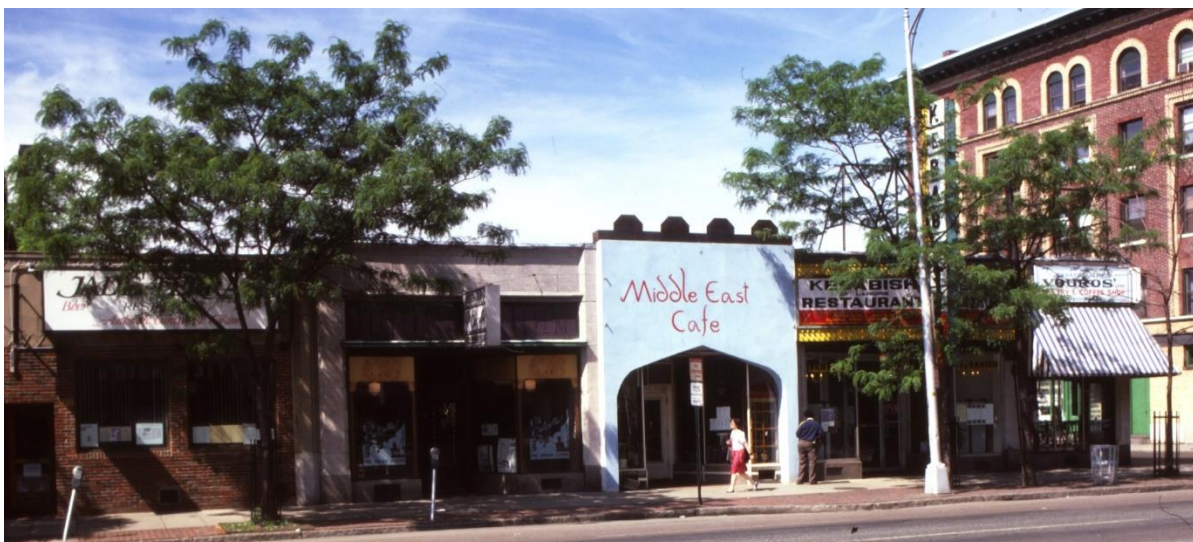


Billy Ruane (center) with singer and guitarist Tommy White of the Mighty Ions, (left) and Mark Davis, drummer in the Real Kids (right). Photograph by David P. Henry, August 1988.

shows at venues all over the Boston area. In 2018 the City Council dedicated “Billy Ruane Square” at the corner of Brookline and Green streets.

The Middle East grew organically as other tenants left the building, with interior spaces converted from retail and offices to stages and bars. In 1988, the Sater family converted the former Vouros Bakery storefront at the corner of Massachusetts Avenue into a bar/restaurant. This section became known as The Corner or The Bakery and featured a small stage in the window on Massachusetts Ave-

nue, where local small bands and DJs would play. In 1993, due to increased demand for larger venues for popular musical acts, the former a bowling alley was converted into a music venue. This section is presently known as The Middle East Downstairs.



Middle East Café in 1985, before expansion to other storefronts along Massachusetts Avenue. Cambridge Historical Commission collections.

In 2001, the Saters took over the lease of the last remaining portion of the current Middle East complex, which was an Indian restaurant at the time. It became ZuZu, after the childhood nickname of one of the Sater brothers. ZuZu today is a separate restaurant featuring live music and DJs several times a week. In March 2017, the Sater brothers opened a fifth Middle East venue called Sonia, a nightclub in the former location of T.T. the Bear's Place.

The Middle East has long been a cultural institution in Central Square where national headlining acts could fill the downstairs venue one night and an up-and-coming local band could play there the next. Performers of varied genres and fanbases have performed in the Middle East, from the hard rocking Flaming Lips to the indie-hipster band Modest Mouse, and even the pop boy band The Jonas Brothers. One of the biggest appeals of the Middle East as a performance venue was that it welcomed people of all backgrounds and musical tastes, acting as a melting pot for the eclectic Central Square neighborhood. Other acts who performed at the Middle East include Joe Strummer (of The Clash), The Dropkick Murphys, The Mighty Bosstones, Peter Wolf, Rancid, Public Enemy, TV on the Radio, The Hives, The Misfits, Elliot Smith, and up-and-coming groups like No Age, Sunset Rubdown, RJD2 and Matt & Kim.

While the Middle East has been best-known as a rock venue, it has also been one of the best venues in the Boston-area for indie hip-hop. The Middle East has played host to Mr. Lif, 7L & Esoteric, Los Nativos, Jedi Mind Tricks, Killah Priest, OuterSpace, Irepress, Masta Killah, and Jake the Snake, among others. The Middle East is also a venue for artists in other genres including jazz, blues, funk, reggae, ska, pop, punk, and more. The Middle East has been a cultural institution in Central Square since it began as a Lebanese restaurant and has evolved to meet the changing dynamic of the neighborhood ever since.



Unknown band performing in The Middle East Upstairs, c.1990. Photo courtesy of JJ Gonson.

Lesser-known rock and metal bands have long had a place to play in the Boston area, often booking gigs at the Middle East and the former T.T. The Bear's space, a legendary concert venue in its own right. These music venues provided a space where Cambridge's underground, punk culture thrived. That artistic and hard-edged culture has dimmed, largely due to rising rents and gentrification, which has increased in recent years.

Significance and Staff Recommendation

The Central Square Realty Trust Building a.k.a. The Middle East at 2-10 Brookline Street/468-480 Massachusetts Avenue is automatically significant under the demolition delay ordinance as a contributing resource in the Central Square National Register District. It can also be considered to meet criterion (1) of the Demolition Delay Ordinance for its associations with the architectural and economic history of Cambridge and criterion (2) as historically significant for its associations with the broad economic and cultural history of the city.

The Central Square Realty Trust Building a.k.a. The Middle East at 2-10 Brookline Street/468-480 Massachusetts Avenue is automatically significant because of its listing on the National Register of Historic Places. CHC staff recommends that the Commission should hear testimony from the applicants and the public before making a determination whether it should be found preferably preserved in the context of the proposed replacement structure.

cc: Patrick W. Barrett III;
Sater Realty, LLC
Yi-An Huang, Cambridge City Manager
Ranjit Singanayagam, Commissioner of Inspectional Services Department

Sources:

Bromley Atlas Maps 1916 & 1930

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