

Harvard Square Kiosk and Plaza Working Group Meeting – Notes

Thursday, May 31st, 2018

- Attendees
 - Working Group: Mary Flynn, John DiGiovanni, Janet Si-Ming Lee, Robyn Culbertson, Bertil Jean-Chronberg, Abra Berkowitz, Frank Kramer, Peter Kroon, Ken Taylor, Timothy Hyde, Daniel Andrew Schofield-Bodt
 - Staff: Iram Farooq, Daniel Wolf
 - Project for Public Spaces (consultant): Meg Walker
- Intro (Daniel Wolf)
 - We're close to the end of the Working Group process – we may schedule one additional meeting, to be determined
- Presentation: Summary of feedback from April 25th Public Meeting (Meg Walker)
- Discussion:
 - "History" is about future users of the space engaging with our present and past – how would they engage with it?
 - How many people at the public meeting commented about signage? Important to consider the sample size
 - We should think about how to cater to a wide variety of future users
 - Ideally wouldn't want to see advertising, but if that helps with revenue to support other activities that would bring value to the community, maybe it's okay; we should think about how to prioritize one use over another
 - The Kiosk and Plaza should be adaptable platforms
 - We should be cautious about taking on history in a certain way – there's a temptation to use permanent displays and statues – that only serves people visiting once; even digital displays are just a "recitation" and can be stale; we should seek more performative approaches, maybe keyed around certain dates
 - Lots of historical reenactments around Cambridge – happen on a particular day of the year
 - Should use a very elastic definition of historical uses
 - There can be evergreen historical approaches/content; emphasize living history and personal histories – we could enable users to document and display what used to live here from personal recollections
 - The site needs some permanent recognition of the Kiosk's two major historical uses over time – transit and news; could integrate photos showing past use
 - Not fond of large historical statues, but a small sculpture or vignette could be appropriate
 - Agree that historical activity should be performative/flexible; a sign can do all those things: a photo of local life, etc.; it's a theater – about the Plaza and also just the seating; changing with seasons; could have a sign that just a quarter of the time displays advertising but focuses on other things
 - The most obvious manifestations of history here is the buildings; self-guided audio tour of buildings in the area; Smith Center will have light; digital billboards are inappropriate in Harvard Square

- Cambridge had a significant role in the Revolution; reenactments are a great idea; Freedom Trail is a good precedent; something that's fixed and doesn't change isn't great for locals or repeat visitors – make it come to life
- Something physical that you can touch goes a long way – a whale exhibit on Cape Cod displayed tools whalers used; some advantages of physical over digital
- Presentation: Management, operations, governance, and oversight (Daniel Wolf)
- Discussion:
 - City owns the Plaza and is looking for a business operator – shouldn't put too many constraints on a business to make this work; obtained an estimate for revenues from promotions onsite at \$250,000 to \$350,000 per year; should decide whether to seek a nonprofit or for-profit; Harvard Square Business Association would be a good fit
 - Iram Farooq: City would provide the space at free rent; Foundry is a similar model; found interest from multiple operators; Advisory Committee would look at whether something is really out of whack
 - Examples of places where it's working?
 - Meg Walker: these kinds of operations are done by nonprofits and for-profits alike – New York City is full of them; many in San Francisco and elsewhere; often using revenue sources similar to the range captured in the presentation; businesses and nonprofits can also partner together
 - The revenue estimates shown span a wide range; business owners don't have the luxury of moving slowly; this timeline is long
 - We should coordinate between language of vision and revenue sources – words like performance, civic/urban theater, performative; should unify the vision and commercial activity and convey in the RFI and RFP; display/billboard doesn't fit as well with those ideas as promotional activities might
 - Advertising is objectionable – very sensitive issue; it doesn't take a large screen to dominate the space; it's a historic place; dislike the roof signs
 - How many more Working Group meetings? Please send around Foundry materials; composition of Advisory Committee – should include resident, employee, tourism – broad representation
 - Daniel Wolf: up to one additional Working Group meeting
 - There may be a way to use advertising in a more appropriate way to generate revenue – not a fan of advertising on the exterior; saw interior screens at Boston Common Visitor Information Center – good option to consider; would there be one operator for the who thing? Concerned about having no tourism piece during construction – could identify place in Plaza for temporary tourism presence
 - Daniel Wolf: RFI could help connect potential partners for a joint RFP proposal; operator doesn't just have to be one preexisting entity
 - Iram Farooq: tourism piece may have a carve-out
 - Could retain brand of Out of Town News in some way – represents past and international aspect, landmark; Advisory Committee could be an opportunity for Working Group members to influence the program approach and generate ideas; MBTA mezzanine level could be place for temporary tourism area
 - Iram Farooq: that area is not accessible

- We should be thinking about how these spaces could make the experience in Harvard Square more memorable; relatively indifferent on signs; could be advertising a quarter of the time; Taza chocolate promotion example: valuable for the business to take the photo of an onsite activity and share online – more value than just directly promoting to passersby; goal is to be more inviting to more folks; shouldn't have anything for sale there; having a human being there (2-4 during peak periods) offering visitor information
- Hours of operation can be flexible; 7am seems early for Kiosk opening – tourists not there, people getting to work; 9am/10am opening time is better; just one person staffing the Kiosk seems difficult – better to shorten hours and have two people there; would be useful to look at precedents to inform the model
- Kiosk staffing could be an internship or job training opportunity
- Teens and seniors could be a good fit
- Out of Town News has 4-6 staff at a time; Trademark Tours has 2-4 tour guides at a time; sees OoTN employees out at 4am, 5am, 6am...; concerned about understaffing the Kiosk; could try introducing programming in areas of the Plaza while other areas are still under construction
- Public comment
 - Cambridge is not just Harvard Square; George Washington formed the defense force here; use creativity – keep rebuilding; don't destroy the EMF building
 - RFP for programming and use consultant (awarded to PPS) lists deliverables including a budgeting plan, proposed programming plan, and a budget – please provide
 - There are people in need in Harvard Square – the Kiosk should serve the homeless
 - The Kiosk and Plaza should serve a greater range of people than are there now; consider refugees and immigrants; public money should be spent on this project; plan for current and future users
 - What about showers for the homeless? Address the needs of all coming to Harvard Square
 - Sales should be included; history and exhibits don't ossify – good precedent is History of New York City museum; think seasonally about this
 - There are ways of using displays in a more “performative” way that's engaging; however, a large roof display can impact the aesthetics – keep it inviting; role of light in the space – light celebrating architecture can tell a story but don't over-illuminate
 - An information center is needed for visitors to Cambridge; history of Harvard is intertwined with history of Cambridge; more people are looking for information on their ancestry; Kiosk could provide an interactive terminal for finding one's roots; could provide literature which wouldn't need to compete with bookstores, such as little paperback souvenirs for kids; Sheldon Cohen sold thousands of little Kiosk models; quality is important; don't underestimate power of tourist's purse
 - Harvard Square is a public space – should belong to all of us and public should control it, not the profit motive; why do we need any advertising there? Should it be controlled by the Harvard Square Business Association? Consider our priorities
 - How much of the Plaza would the operator have access to? How does that work?

- Iram Farooq: there's a goal of having an inside/outside quality of the Kiosk so we don't want to constrain the operator completely to the Kiosk; still thinking through the model
- Handout: Draft Working Group Recommendations – to be circulated digitally as well; looking for feedback via email to dwolf@cambridgema.gov.