



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

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To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

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Re: **PB-315 MXD Infill Development Concept Plan (IDCP) - Design Review of
Center Plaza**

The Mixed-Use Development: Kendall Center ("MXD") zoning district is an area of land in Kendall Square that is governed by Article 14 of the Zoning Ordinance. New development is permitted through a document called an Infill Development Concept Plan (IDCP), which functions similarly to a Planned Unit Development (PUD), where the approved buildings and open space areas are subject to continuing design review in accordance with a process set forth in the special permit conditions. The IDCP is also under the jurisdiction of the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority (CRA) as part of the Kendall Square Urban Redevelopment Plan.

The current IDCP was first granted a special permit ([PB-315](#)) by the Planning Board in [2017](#) and authorizes the development of approximately 5 million square feet of floor area as well as new streets and open spaces within the MXD district. The IDCP has been amended twice, in [2019](#) and [2022](#). The latest amendment included construction of a vault to accommodate a below-grade electrical transformer substation for the public utility company Eversource and a new 28,272 square-foot public open space called Center Plaza, which would be situated above the electrical transformer substation vault. bxp submitted a design proposal for Center Plaza to be approved by the Planning Board and CRA Board.

Planning Board Action

The Planning Board's review of the building and landscape design is guided by the conditions of the special permit, which references the design standards specified in the draft IDCP Design Guidelines (2021), the Kendall Square Design Guidelines (the "K2 Design Guidelines", 2013), the Volpe Working Group Planning & Design Principles dated July 20, 2017, and the "Volpe Site Design Guidelines", November 2017).

Review Process

This memo contains design review comments on Center Plaza. Over the past several months, the Applicant has met with staff regarding the project's design. The submission package to the Planning Board includes some design considerations made in direct response to the comments by staff during these meetings.

Relevant Design Objectives and Guidelines

The Kendall Square Design Guidelines (2013) are primarily focused on the design of buildings, and less so on the design of open spaces. But their goals include that design decisions should seek to balance the positive aspects of building near a transit hub with changes in the environment that result from more housing, retail, and business uses in relatively dense new structures located in close proximity to one another. They recommend that:

- New buildings and open spaces be designed to minimize negative wind impacts on streets and public spaces.
- Development should provide vegetative cover, improve stormwater infiltration, and reduce the heat island effect.
- Projects increase permeability by creating pedestrian and bicycle connections through their sites.
- Project design emphasizes universal access.

The key goals and objectives of the MXD site’s Infill Development Concept Plan (September 6, 2018) include:

- To create permeability with pedestrian and bicycle connections through the site blocks within the district, especially those routes that strengthen ground floor active use and retail.
- To provide access to outdoor and indoor public spaces that allow people to enjoy them throughout the day and evening.

While the MXD site is outside the specific area covered by the Volpe Site Design Guidelines (November 2017), their recommendations are relevant. Their goals for public open spaces include that:

- Public open spaces be visually and spatially coherent, memorable, and meaningful, framed by the masses and facades of the surrounding buildings, and their forms should be reinforced and enriched by the design of their landscapes.
- They provide a safe and welcoming pedestrian environment.
- They support a wide range of outdoor uses, and are enlivened by pedestrian-oriented functions in the ground floors of the surrounding buildings.
- They link together with each other, and with the surrounding districts to create a varied, yet continuous public realm that gives the district permeability, porosity, a strong sense of place and attractive and inviting connections to and from adjacent neighborhoods.
- Regardless of the details of ownership and responsibility of maintenance, the site's streets, squares, and parks should be public in use and character.

Urban Design Comments

The Plaza’s design has improved in each iteration over the last two years. The current scheme is not only more coherent than earlier versions, it creates a richer, more interesting, more memorable place, and achieves more of the qualities that were appreciated in the early “Urban Wild” concept for the Plaza. Notable improvements include the provision of trellises on the western side of the Lawn and in the Play Area, the multiple areas of nook seating around the edges of the Lawn, and the augmented plantings. These all help to create more intimate and occupiable places and a stronger sense of pedestrian scale, to emphasize the Lawn by giving it a more consistent frame, and to enhance the Plaza’s character as a green oasis. As the details continue to be developed, staff would like to encourage the applicant to continue to clarify and enrich the design.

Suggestions for further improvements include:

1. Continue to enhance the legibility of the Plaza as a coherent and memorable urban space: develop the Plaza’s vegetation and structural elements to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, to emphasize pedestrian scale, and to engage the adjoining buildings, paths, and Drives.
 - a. Increase the spatial and geometrical coherence of the Lawn. Possibilities include more consistent plantings; and reconfiguring its northern edge. Consideration should be given to extending the west trellis closer to the Beacon, or to extending it to overlap a portion of a reshaped Beacon, and to adjusting the Beacon’s shape to accord with the geometries of adjoining angled paths and planters.
 - b. Further emphasize and enrich the Plaza’s sense of pedestrian scale: Means could include additional low plantings, more varied topography, additional trellises, small trees planted in the ground where possible and in containers where over the vault, taller planters, benches and seating nooks that nestle against taller site walls and/or taller vegetation, and pedestrian-scaled lighting. Further emphasize the kinds of lush, interesting, intimate, and varied spaces shown in the precedents. Consider additional precedents, such as Martin’s Park in Boston, and Teardrop Park in New York City.
 - c. Develop the Plaza’s northern edge adjoining the 290 Binney Street building. How will this space interface with 290 Binney’s ground floor facade and uses? How will this area be used? How will the contrast between the scale of the building and the pedestrian scale of the Plaza be mediated?
 - d. Give the East and West Drives more coherence by the treatment of their pavement and the plantings (especially trees) alongside them. Investigate the possibility of moving the East Drive a few feet farther east to allow a row of trees (in-ground or in containers) between it and the Vault, or curbside on the sidewalk on the west side of the East Drive. Provide pedestrian pavement at the crosswalk from the connector.
 - e. Consider using related colors and materials throughout.
2. Continue to emphasize the Plaza’s character as a green oasis. Enrich it with additional vegetation, including low plantings, climbing vines, trees where possible (either in-ground or in containers), etc.
 - a. Study potential additional locations for trees in the areas that are not over the vault, including on the east side of the East Drive and the west side of the West Drive.
 - b. Investigate the possibility of providing trees in root-proof containers where in-ground trees are precluded by the vault or underground utilities.
 - c. Continue to reduce the amount of pavement. There appear to be opportunities between the Play Area and the Hatch, and adjoining the Beacon.
3. Further address concerns about environmental comfort, addressing shade and wind, especially in the Lawn and the Play Area.
 - a. Include more strategies for shading.
 - b. Consider providing additional protection from wind and downdrafts.
4. Further develop path widths and locations relative to pedestrian desire lines, and clarify the elevations of raised areas such as the deck at the hatch and the exhaust tower.
 - a. Clarify circulation routes at the Hatch, both east/west and from the Hatch to the Lawn.
 - b. Consider providing a path along the south side of the bench on the south side of the Exhaust Tower.
 - c. Consider redesigning the planted area on the south side of the Hatch so that it does not intrude into the Lawn.

- d. Consider maintaining the East and West Drives at a constant level along the Plaza (or for more of the Plaza's length), instead of locating their northern portions at sidewalk level and their southern portions at bottom of curb level. Consider using pedestrian paving for their full lengths along the Plaza.
 - e. Consider providing a raised crossing table where the "Connector" to the 6th Street Walkway behind 105 Broadway crosses the East Drive.
5. Further develop the design, use, and features of the Play Area. Consider extending "Play" more broadly throughout the Plaza, and also providing multifunctional features and equipment for all-age play and exercise.
 - a. Foster a sense of cozy intimacy in the Play Area: enrich the Play Area with more plantings, more play equipment, different types of play equipment, and by reintroducing the nooks at its edges.
 - b. More broadly distribute features and equipment for play and recreation throughout the Plaza. (The area south of the Hatch appears to be a possibility.)
 - c. Review the "[Healthy Parks and Playgrounds](#)" report, which promotes an expansive concept of "Play". Consider dispersing play and recreational opportunities and equipment throughout the Plaza. Provide movement-based equipment: swings, slides, spinning features, structures for climbing, exercise equipment etc. Consider providing loose/moveable play objects
 - d. Provide unique artistic, musical, and other sensory-stimulating features
6. Develop the strategies and locations for public art and investigate the potential of informational signage as ways to further enrich the Plaza. Consider celebrating the design and function of the Electrical Substation as a positive element of the experience.

Continuing Review

The following is a summary of issues that staff recommends should be further studied by the Applicant, either in preparing revised materials if the Planning Board continues the discussion to a future date, or as conditions for ongoing design review by staff if the Board decides to grant design approval:

1. The design of the Plaza: layout, dimensions, topography, accessibility; design and locations of elements including furniture, bollards, lighting, trellises, intake and exhaust towers, bicycle parking, detailed design of paths and of the East and West Drives, etc.
2. Landscape materials: plantings and paving, etc.
3. Design and locations of directional signage.
4. Design, location, and content of informational signage.
5. Design, location, and specifications of play and recreational equipment.
6. Review of measures to mitigate wind impacts.
7. Designation of the Plaza as a "Privately Owned Public Space" (POPS) and provision of "Open to All" signage in appropriate locations.
8. Process for the acquisition of public art.
9. Administrative process for creating public events.
10. Consider alternative names for the Plaza.