

Cambridgeport Workshops

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Notes for Ovida Robert Simha

Often it helps to look back to see where we have come before we decide how to progress forward...

The Community Development Department and the Historical Commission has done wonderful work in recording the history of Cambridgeport and the several planning studies provide a wealth of information and a catalogue of needs and actions that have been the subject of past planning efforts.

Some of the proposals have been successfully implemented and others have not. But hope springs eternal...

Having served as MIT 's planner for many years and having been deeply involved in MIT's efforts both for academic and community purposes, I have some observations about how there has evolved over the last half century.

Let me share some these observations in the hope that they will help us see how good things can happen when residents, the city and the institutions work together. There are also examples where a lack of a commitment to a larger good can rest in disappointment.

Let's start in the 1950's

Cambridgeport was a thriving residential community of 120,740 residents as reported by the US Census. WW II factories in the City had provided full employment during the war. But jobs began to decline in the old factories as old companies died or moved away to the suburbs.

Many children of Cambridgeport families coming back from the war married and moved away to single family houses in the more spacious suburbs.

Still, Central Square was the City's main shopping center and the transportation hub of the city. The red line terminated in Harvard Square and would not be extended for more than three decades. But by the late 50's things began to change: the universities were growing and many students looked for inexpensive housing in the neighborhood.

The neighborhood was one of the areas designated as a potential urban rental area, along with Riverside, in the hope of attracting federal funds to the area.

The old schools were tired and lacking any adequate site on City owned property, a new Morse school was built on park land on Memorial drive,

The MDC, the predecessor of the DCR, opened curb cuts in the parkway to allow commercial development along the roadway. There may be some who remember the California-style drive in where you could get burgers and shakes delivered to your car in a window tray stand.

But it was also a time in the mid fifties that the proposed Inner Belt highway hung heavily over the neighborhood's future.

By the early 60's life was being sapped out of Central Square. A Stop and Shop was built on Memorial Drive where the Micro Center sits today. Industries were leaving, with their jobs, in droves. The Reardon rendering plant and soap factory next to Fort Washington closed. 640 Memorial Drive was becoming a development laboratory for the new Polaroid company. And here and there new startups were popping up in the electronics industry. The KLH company, California Paint and other young companies that rented cheap space in the old buildings....

In 1962 a new revision of the zoning ordinance tried to breath some new life into the City's development efforts, increasing densities and height limits in Cambridgeport and other neighborhoods. Some of these proposals stimulated a spate of projects called Arlington Pill boxes. A developer would come in and buy two or three three deckers, tear them down and build a brick apartment building with small units. This created unintended problems, including the growing parking problems of the neighborhood.

Freight rail service was declining but the truck terminals were doing fine... Saint Johnsbury on Waverly Street kept bringing 18 wheelers through the neighborhood much to the consternation of young families. Lots of warehouse operations attracted heavy truck traffic that rolled through the neighborhood.

By the late 60's during the Vietnam War, Cambridge became a haven for counter culture people who put more pressure on the inventory of low cost housing. While the universities began to build more housing for graduate students it was not sufficient to meet the 50% housing goal that MIT had set for itself. The need for affordable housing for both students and citizens continued to grow.

In 1969 the largest land user in the neighborhood, the Simplex Wire and Cable Company, departed for Maine where they would enjoy new tax advantages. Many of you will remember the large open areas where the company parked great wheels of communication cable manufactured on a single story building that spread over several blocks.

MIT acquired the property promising to build the first mixed-use project that included affordable as well as market rate housing, along with other commercial buildings, that would include shopping, a hotel, and other retail services. But it took more than ten years to see the project get started.

When MIT announced the project, President Howard Johnson publicly stated that the land would be used for tax paying purposes and that MIT would seek to build more housing in the areas it controlled in Cambridgeport.

In that same year 1969, the Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee held a housing Convention that demanded more housing for the elderly.

MIT stepped forward to build 700 units of affordable housing in three elderly housing projects, one of which is the LBJ, where we meet tonight...

In 1970 Governor Frank Sargeant killed the Inner Belt highway plan after many people from the neighborhood led protests. Others including MIT and the City of Cambridge worked in concert to help the governor reach the conclusion that interstate highways in the City was not the way to go.

By the mid 80's MIT had chosen a developer Forest City to develop The University Park development. With all of its imperfections, it demonstrated that it was possible to have an unusual example of the City, the neighborhood and the developer working together to hammer out a plan that tried to balance everyone's interest. The neighborhood was well served by a variety of leaders like Geneva Malenfant and Bill August who helped to insure that balance.

This effort stimulated the City to create a blue ribbon committee that included representatives from the neighborhood and headed by Professor Van Molke, from the Harvard School of Design, that addressed the land use and zoning needs for the rest of the neighborhood. Those zoning controls are still in place.

During this time many young families and professionals found the neighborhood very attractive and began to buy homes here. The passage of a condominium law, stimulated by the Boston Real Estate Board, suddenly provided a new option for developers and Cambridgeport began to see many new conversions of rental housing to ownership housing.

The rent control law that was in place also stimulated these conversions, adding more owners but of a different sort of population with different needs.

By 2000 University park was almost completed.

A Star Market had taken up a lease, a new hotel was built and both affordable and market rate housing had been built.

During this time MIT was building housing for graduate students along Albany Street and Sidney Street. Approximately 2,000 graduate students and families live in or adjacent to Cambridgeport

By 2010 other changes in the neighborhood were happening quickly. Churches were being turned into condominiums, new housing was being built, more traffic was using the roadways, and the changes in the neighborhood were accelerating. Planning studies were initiated to try to deal with many of these problems....

By 2013, the population of the neighborhood had grown to 18,000 according to City data.

With the new annual census report that will be available later this year it will be possible to measure what the new population will look like and what its needs may be. As we gather more information about our population we will be in a better position to measure the impact of future development proposals and the needs of both the existing and emerging community here in Cambridgeport.

The success or failure of fulfilling the neighborhood's needs and desires are still ahead. In the past, when the neighborhood worked in concert much was accomplished, where it remained passive or where it was divided opportunities were lost. The future is in your hands ...