

CRA Design Review Committee
Held Virtually on Zoom
Meeting Notes
October 27, 2021

ATTENDEES

Barry Zevin (CRA Board), Kathleen Born (CRA Board), Hugh Russell (Planning Board), Louis Bacci (Planning Board) Erik Thorkildsen (CDD), Tom Evans (CRA), Alexandra Levering (CRA), Fabiola Alikpokou (CRA), Carlos Peralta (CRA), Ian Hatch (BXP) Mike Tilford (BXP), Todd Lanham (Eversource) John Zicko (Eversource), Cory Liu (Eversource), Dave Kadish (Stantec), Brian Skrovig (Pickard Chilton), Anthony Markese (Pickard Chilton)

COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS C & D EVERSOURCE MXD SUBSTATION DEVELOPMENT PRESENTATION

PRESENTATION

Anthony Markese from Pickard Chilton presented on the Commercial Buildings C & D as part of the Eversource MXD Substation Development Proposal – Parcel 2 of the Kendall Square Urban Redevelopment Plan.

COMMITTEE COMMENTS

Mr. Zevin noted that from Broadway to Binney, there is at least a two foot change in elevation, and that he has never seen how it will be addressed on the substation roof, but thinks it is an opportunity to do some good things. He also mentioned that the existing grade might need to be maintained to meet the building zones on either side of the existing service drives. Mr. Tilford added that BXP will create cross-sections to show how the grade change works in a future design review meeting. He agreed with Mr. Zevin that the grade does have to resolve itself to meet the finished floor elevations of the surrounding buildings, and that the two-foot differential helps raise the grade to the top of the roof. Mr. Markese added that they are looking at the elevation of the two entrances and lobbies of the commercial buildings, and that they have enough dimension east and west to transition to make the entrances and the cores for the commercial buildings work to the north. NBBJ and Sasaki are working on the other circulation plans on the site.

Mr. Zevin asked how the five trees on the substation roof get there? Mr. Tilford noted that the trees are an ongoing conversation, and the trees in the image shown are in planters, adding that the plan presented is focused on the commercial buildings and is not the landscape plan for the site. Mr. Markese added that they've collaborated with Christian Lemon of Lemon Brooke to develop greenery adjacent to the two lab buildings. Mr. Lanham said that planting trees on top of the substation is problematic for Eversource for a host of reasons. He continued that the most significant issue is that Eversource doesn't want the root structure penetrating the waterproof barrier and creating leaks into the station. They want to work out the waterproofing system with partners to potentially move away

from artscape and maybe agree on some planting areas or grass. Overall, the trees will be ultra-problematic to be planted in the dirt on top of the substation.

Mr. Zevin was pleased that the access hatch was moved over to the service drive and thought that splaying the buildings takes the curse off of how close the space between them seemed.

Mr. Bacci noted that the setback from Binney Street is considerably less, and if it all depends on the greenery, then the rendering should show what kind of trees will be there for the first few years after the building is constructed. Mr. Markese noted that Binney is designated as a major street in the K2 guidelines. Therefore, designers/planners look to see that the building is holding the street edge. Mr. Bacci noted that it is hard to get detailed planting information. Mr. Evans added that the landscaping shown is taking space from the Binney Street travel lane, as part of the Alta Streetscape work BXP is undertaking. This creates setbacks from the automobile corridor and will allow for bike facilities and trees to be in those spaces.

Mr. Bacci asked if the corner of the commercial building adjacent to the plaza would increase wind problems? Mr. Markese answered that after doing a preliminary wind study, the corner did not give any trouble.

Mr. Bacci raised the concern of warm air being trapped in the plaza area from the substation exhaust and said that anything to ventilate the area will help, except for the excessive wind. He also wondered how much cover there needs to be for the roof of the substation to work as insulation?

Mr. Evans wanted to be conscious that every foot that the east building moves away from the west building, it gets closer to the Sixth Street Walkway. Therefore, it is essential to be mindful of the compromises in creating a space between those buildings. Mr. Markese clarified that they are not going any further east than the existing building, and that the trees along the Walkway will be preserved.

Mr. Russell says the move to shape the buildings to create a much more generous space between them is a huge improvement. He noted that it might cause some challenges for the above ground connections they might wish to make, but maybe those connections will be over the loading docks. He further added that it is impossible to believe that a root barrier cannot be placed on top of a \$100 million electrical substation. He said they could put in a quarter-inch thick stainless steel plate covering the entire waterproofing for relatively cheap dollars. He also added that the opportunities for trees are outside of the roadways, and providing a place to put trees between them is very good.

Mr. Russell added that the space between the new GSA building is very wide and isn't constricted and that given the hundreds and millions of dollars spent on the two commercial buildings we can afford to put in big trees along the street.

Mr. Thorkildsen said the massing seems a lot better at dealing with the bulkiness of the two commercial buildings, and that the architects did a great job opening the spaces between the two buildings. He wondered that in the current drawing, the narrower funnel coming from Binney seemed better than previous schemes and that it seemed like a gateway to the interior of the block rather than a big setback between the two buildings. He noted that the issue is finding an appropriate balance between the reading of the buildings as objects and the reading of the buildings as members of a somewhat

cohesive block. He added that from the model, the buildings are doing that successfully and interestingly.

Regarding the chamfered corners, Mr. Thorkildsen noted that the exhaust vent structure is blocking the diagonal pedestrian desire line across the plaza. He suggested reexamining that area, but also noted that the slimness created by the facade seems like a good thing. He added that the landscape design seems spotty and that he would love to see the pedestrian path and landscape area east of both service drives be more coherent and cohesive like the Sixth Street walkway, rather than a series of individual patches of planting and different kinds of pavement. He asked if there could be a continuity of sidewalk through the loading dock on both sides, or if the whole thing could be the same kind of pavement? He also suggested something more active on the ground floor instead of something corporate.

Mr. Thorkildsen also asked if the designer has reduced the gross square footage and if it matters? Mr. Markese answered that they have not and that it does matter a great deal. Mr. Thorkildsen wondered if the above grade connectors between the two buildings would look best at the closet point and be over the driveways to the loading garage.

Ms. Born noted that she was worried about the commercial building regarding continuity of facades versus being an object building, and wondered how the view from Binney would look. Therefore, she noted she was glad to see the perspectives presented. She added that she loved the way the facades are presented because their geometry reduces size, providing space between the two buildings, making them not identical facades. Ms. Born asked if the terraces would be two or three levels? Mr. Markese answered that they would span the entire façade. Ms. Born added that she was okay with the current progression of facades: 300 Binney Street as a low curved building, the two siblings (commercial buildings), and the bland elegant Federal building sitting in the back. She also liked the horizontality of the two commercial buildings and the exposed columns on the corner.

Mr. Bacci asked if the loading blocking the sidewalk near the west building would be addressed at some point? He said that pedestrians need some safety. He also asked if the exposed column on the roadway created any safety problems? Mr. Markese clarified that the columns land on the sidewalk and not the roadway, and that there will be a separate sidewalk. He also added they were trying to create a sense of shelter. In regards to the trucks, Mr. Markese mentioned that they still need to work the truck turning (loading dock) pullback in the space from the back of the truck dock to the core a little bit more, and that more information will be provided. Mr. Markese noted that he hoped trucks can pull into the west building without blocking the path, and that there is more space on the east building. He also said they would have more information on the dock, rotation, and trucks that will be serviced there. Mr. Bacci noted that area will be a constant hassle for pedestrians.

Ms. Born asked if all the floors in the two buildings would be aligned? Mr. Markese confirmed they will be aligned. She also added that she thought locating the bridge at the closest point could make an exciting throat, and the building could be carved where the bridge intersects it.

Mr. Bacci wondered if it made sense to hold back the second-floor terrace to make room for a tree canopy? Mr. Markese answered that they would review it, but noted that the first terrace lands at 30ft in the air as it is double height.

Mr. Zevin mentioned he was less enthusiastic about the terraces spanning the entire width of the building. He suggested bringing a pair of column lines in the width of the building end to bring the interior out to the edge and keep some back as terraces. He also noted he was worried about the glass fin walls killing birds and suggested leaving these spaces empty instead. As for the roof, he asked if the entire roof needs to be corralled behind a screen, or if they could get some visual interest by varying the height of the enclosures on the roofs within each building? Mr. Zevin also added that he was amused by the two balconies that face each other across the service drive. Mr. Markese added that they would work on varying or flipping the front balconies and the glass line, and play with their dimensions and location relative to the outside. Mr. Zevin added it is a choice not to do the same thing across the façade at every level, and not every floor needs to be the same.

Mr. Markese discussed ways to differentiate the buildings, looking at the top of either structure and slicing one of the buildings to create directionality, or to cut it, or step it. He also added that the problem of killing the birds with the glass might be solved by creating more articulation on the façade via the sun shading and enclosure and frit pattern. Mr. Markese also added that he'd like to create a condition where there is a sense of shelter on the terraces, so it feels like an outdoor room more than perches.

Mr. Russell encouraged the designer to do more twisting and bending of the structure, because he felt the more sculptural the building becomes, the better they are. He noted that the curtain walls on the east and west buildings are very different. He said the east building looked like a complete glass curtain wall that has horizontal and vertical material layers on top of each other, which he doesn't like. He liked the west building's facade that looked like there was a solid side piece in which there were multiple punched openings several stories tall and no glass. He also suggested looking at the punched opening at the mechanical room at the top to get a different infill than a punched opening below. He expressed dislike for fake windows on the top few floors. Mr. Russell added that he has confidence in the designer's ability to make the building extraordinary.

Mr. Thorkildsen suggested introducing some vertical elements to the terraces and also wondered about adding a line of columns to the facade to bring some of the building curtain walls out. He noted he liked the idea of creating different heights by adjusting the mechanical enclosures. He said it is an interesting idea for the penthouse to remain in the same plane but somehow be differentiated. He shared that the 325 Binney Street building did that in an interesting way, by carrying the zone of the fenestration up but changing it when it gets to the top. He added that the hexagonal patterns seemed spindly and that if there are going to do it, shouldn't there be more of it? He also added that altering the shape at the top of the building reminded him of the Gary Handel building in Boston and that they should think about how to be different. He also noted that twisting the building's form should be done to respond to what is around it. He also added that he'd like to avoid the building leaning over the plaza, which creates a sense of looming. He continued to add that since the GSA building has a big setback and is bland, it could be helpful for the designers to think about how the two commercial buildings could make a structure that's defined by its deep front yard setback. He noted that he liked the way the small balconies were pulled closer to Binney to look in line with its north façade and make it look like there is a relationship between them. He noted this was an example of twisting and angling the building with purpose, which is to establish a relationship between the two structures and the space. Mr. Markese added that they are not concerned about the building looming over the plaza because the idea of the

terraces is to cascade eyes on the plaza. He also added that the tilted glass will reflect the activity below, and the activity on the plaza will reflect on the façade. He also said the tilt is minimal and subtle.

Ms. Born noted appreciation for the visuals and the way the modeling was presented.

Ms. Born asked if the vent shaft shown against the west building was the same shaft shown as a sculptural element in the past? Mr. Markese answered no, and that it was the other shaft, the one against the residential building that was shown as sculptural.

Ms. Born clarified that the vent shaft is the exhaust and not the intake, and that it has warm air coming out? Mr. Markese answered yes to both questions. Ms. Born also asked if the element had mechanical equipment in it? Mr. Markese answered no, and added that all the fans are below grade, and the exhaust air is blown through it. Ms. Born asked if the volume shown has to be the volume it has to have? Mr. Markese answered yes and that the cross-section drives the volume.

Mr. Thorkildsen wondered about extending the ground floor of the building out to wrap the exhaust vent with active-use spaces of some sort. When thinking about the big exhaust, he suggested that a boxy shape is not best; and suggested instead something rounded and curvilinear. He also wondered if the corner is the right location for the vents when thinking about pedestrian flow? Mr. Tilford noted that the machinery below is not flexible and has to intersect with equipment below, and that the vent can't be easily relocated. Mr. Lanham emphasized Mr. Tilford's point by adding that the placement of the intake and exhaust vents is rigid and tweaking it would create a domino effect impacting the whole substation design, and the work that would create would be monumental. Mr. Markese also added that the current place is best given the already compressed space between the Akamai building and the residential building.

Mr. Bacci noted that the structures are vast for the plaza. He asked for dimension and height of the structures and also if the exhaust is coming out on the side or the top of the structure? Mr. Markese added that by creating an enclosure around it, it brings the ventilation closer to the ground, so the element is getting smaller and not bigger. Mr. Zevin added that the vent is a small object compared to the buildings around it, and that what is important is the view of the open space even if it has something in it. Mr. Bacci added that it is an element to consider and to continue to discuss because it generates 100 or more degrees of exhaust temperature. Mr. Bacci continued to express his concern about the large volume of air coming out of the vent. Specifically, he noted he's concerned about what the intake is pulling in, what is being exhausted, and their proximity to each other, and the temperature of the plaza deck.

Mr. Russell said that embedding it in the building is a very bad idea. He mentioned that the more sculptural the objects are, the better, and it is feasible to make them more diagonal. Mr. Thorkildsen agreed with Mr. Bacci by expressing his concern and curiosity about the impact of the vent on the microclimate. He asked how much heat is it going to produce, how's that going to affect the heat of the space itself, and how much noise the vents will make? He noted that if it's enough, it'll make the plaza uninhabitable. He noted that he wants to see more data regarding these questions. Mr. Tilford stated that they have documents to address the noise question, which they will send. Mr. Hatch added that all of the questions would be addressed in a separate design review conversation, but that the noise does comply with Cambridge's standards and will be below ambient.

Mr. Zevin disagreed that this will create a visual problem, but did agree with Mr. Bacci about the noise concern and how the space will be uninhabitable if the issues are not addressed. He noted all the questions asked need to be answered.

Mr. Evans added that a plaza and infrastructure logistics session would happen with all the right people present. He also noted that the purpose of the current session was to focus on the commercial building and that Mr. Markese was showing that it works best for the building for the vent shaft not to be integrated. Any discussion beyond that needs to happen when the Eversource team is present.

Ms. Born mentioned that the project is a complicated one that solves what had seemed to be a challenging problem of where to put a substation in this part of Cambridge without a devastating impact on neighborhoods, open spaces, and public buildings in the city like a school. She also noted that the project isn't worth building if it is going to make a space bad, unlivable, or be an environment that won't be good for people. There are compromises, and she wants to keep the talk positive and think of ways to be creative with the space instead of rejecting ideas.

Mr. Zevin asked if the fan in the space will be relatively low velocity and high volume, and nothing like the exhausts on the top of lab buildings? Mr. Tilford agreed and added that they would have more information on the velocity, volume, and acoustics at the next design review meeting. Ms. Born asked if there was a way to capture the heat and do something positive with it? Mr. Tilford said he did not have that answer but would provide it during a future conversation.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None