

MEMO

Title: Civic Space Design Narrative
Project: 50 Webster Ave, Somerville, MA (Parcel D3.1)
Date: 10/19/21

To: Urban Design Commission

Summary

The Civic Space at 50 Webster is proposed to adhere to the design requirements of a “plaza.” The study of this site resulted in a desire to provide space for ample circulation due to its immediate proximity to the new T Station to the north and the planned future development of 50 Webster, 600 Windsor, Boynton Yards, and other commercial and residential developments in the vicinity of the project site. However, at nearly 16,000 SF, the open space at 50 Webster will also serve to connect people to an environment that is passive, provides ample and variable seating options, and is densely planted with trees and plants that offer comfort and welcome in an urban environment for the neighborhood, building tenants, and others who wish to enjoy the space. The plaza primarily receives southern and western solar exposure allowing a full sun and part sun planting palette which will further attract pedestrians midday, afternoons, evenings, and weekends.

Enhancing open space network

The plaza at 50 Webster will serve as a benefit to the local community and enhance the existing City open space network in multiple ways. The design of the 16,000 SF plaza will acknowledge its location adjacent to the Prospect Street corridor as it undergoes a transformational development to further enliven the area with an expansion of retail, commercial, and residential spaces. 50 Webster is located at a 5-point intersection and will also receive additional passerby traffic from points east in the Boynton Yards development. With the additional pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular traffic expected where Webster meets Prospect, the plaza at 50 Webster will be critical to safe passage and to serve as a point of refuge from a busy urban environment.

The plaza will support existing open spaces by creating spaces for linger and comfort off the existing narrow sidewalks characteristic of Webster Avenue south of the site. As 50 Webster functions as a hinge site adjacent to the Union Square T Station, it will encourage pedestrians to pause within its “green rooms,” and support the ground floor retail spaces with gathering spaces located strategically out of the path of greatest circulation.

Neighborhood Open Space Needs

The surrounding neighborhood has a multitude of small pocket parks and wedge plaza spaces that are successful and promoted for public events and gathering. The plaza at 50 Webster is an extension of the successful and programmable public spaces in Somerville and Union Square. A small amphitheater with seat steps will be provided and a series of “alcoves” function as open space nodes throughout the plaza that accommodate small public events and small gatherings in intimate settings that are not perceived as owned by the building. The plaza is primarily open to midday to afternoon sun and can be planted densely with an array of diverse and primarily native species to encourage visitors to connect with their local flora.

Community Use

The plaza is intended to be used in myriad ways. On weekends the plaza will be free of heavy rush-hour pedestrian traffic and will therefore be used by residents and patrons of the retail establishments within the ground floor of 50 Webster. The space is meant to be playful, with a fully accessible interior pathway, with multiple loops, that can double as a playscape for toddlers and small children. Bolstered by the verdant plantings and warm seating materials, the plaza is meant to be used at all hours for all people. During the work week, steady flows of pedestrians, cyclists, and speed-controlled vehicles will circulate through the site and the plaza will be animated primarily through swift movement and short-term gatherings. The existing sidewalk will be expanded into the plaza at most locations to encourage a more relaxed walking experience where pedestrians traveling at varying speeds do not feel overwhelmed by a lack of public space width in the public right of way. With widened sidewalks and an interior path, multiple options for circulation are provided making for a better open space and commuter experience. The elevation gain from the southern edge of the plaza to the north is nearly 12 feet which terminates at an overlook to the new T Station. At the overlook, a canopied seating space is proposed to provide a visual dialogue with the new development to the north and a gathering area dappled in shade. This uppermost location in the plaza will be frequented as an outdoor destination for meeting up, eating, working outside, and socializing with the rare experience of taking in the commuter line and the western terminus of the T.

Features and Benefits

The civic space will be a highly traversed space for building tenants and residents alike. It is also a space with a near consistent elevation grade change of 3-5% along its public sidewalk frontage. Therefore, the proposed civic space creates multiple “alcove” spaces where people can be within the plaza and yet out of the flow of pedestrians that will course through it during peak moments of the day. As the alcoves serve to create safe harbor for seating, they are also the locations most heavily wrapped in verdant plant life and canopy trees. The urban forest created at 50 Webster will offer shade over the largest areas of hardscape at the building’s multiple

entry points and flank most of the circulatory paths throughout the plaza further enhancing the experience of meandering through or relaxing in the civic space. The provision of large canopy trees to cast midday shade over the public spaces will help reduce urban heat island effects and catch and collect stormwater on site.

History

There is no specific design element that aims to preserve historic conditions of the site. However, as the site is the former home of the Union Glass Company, elements of glass are proposed for the plaza to be imbedded in paving, seating, and to conceptually steer the layout of the plaza spaces. The proposed design also suggests a central location for public art to be displayed that pays homage to the artfully cut glass of previous generations on the site.