

April 27, 2012

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**RE: SOUTH BOSTON INNOVATION DISTRICT
BSA POSITION PAPER**

The Urban Design Committee of the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) is one of the largest and oldest of the BSA's committees, offering professional perspectives and community engagement surrounding design and development in the public realm of the city. Over the past few decades, it has facilitated dialogues on critically important urban planning issues that have helped educate the public about excellence in urban design.

From time to time, the Urban Design Committee has established "Focus Teams" to evaluate urban plans with significance for the city's future and contributed their insights to the civic dialogue. Through public meetings, presentations and other outreach efforts, the teams have helped shape public policy on urban design. For example, in 1998 the Seaport Focus Team was actively engaged with the Boston Redevelopment Authority, advocacy groups, and local residents to help define a vision for the area and provide sustained input into individual development proposals as they evolved. This work culminated in prominent exhibits and programs at the Build Boston Exposition the following year.

In 2011 the Innovation District Focus Team was formed to support the Menino Administration's vision for the Seaport area. Kairos Shen, Matt Kiefer, Jim Doolin, David Hacin FAIA, Janne Corneil Assoc. AIA and others presented their ideas in a series of well-attended presentations from March through May. These ideas continue to inform our discussions.

Focus Team participants understand that planning and development are taking place within a challenging environment. The ongoing economic malaise means that both the public and private sectors have limited resources to provide the urban amenities that everyone desires. This is exacerbated by the absence of a strong institutional presence – the kind that propelled Kendall Square and the Longwood Medical Area forward, and provides the well-financed, mission-driven development agenda and accessible urban fabric that sustains a culture of knowledge creation and innovation.

In response to these challenges, the Innovation District Focus Team has put together a set of **design, program, and policy recommendations** that are detailed below. We believe that they will help the City fulfill the promise of the Innovation District, adding value to individual properties and helping innovation in business, science, and the arts to flourish.

A. INNOVATIVE DESIGN THAT ESTABLISHES DISTRICT CHARACTER: Designing a new innovation district is a challenge because life science and technology companies--the heart of the seaport development--require large floor-plate buildings that do not have the **finely scaled urban texture** of older parts of cities. Key to the future build-out of Boston's Innovation District will be clever planning and **well-crafted guidelines** that ameliorate the effect of large single-use buildings and provide the pedestrian-friendly environment everyone wants.

But amelioration is not enough. The character of the Innovation District is largely determined by the design of its buildings and public spaces. **Design excellence will establish an inventive spirit** that will attract tenants and residents and help the area live up to its brand. Cornell's short list of architects, landscape architects and urban planners for its innovative Roosevelt Island campus included six of the most imaginative architectural firms in the world. Spain's 22@Barcelona Innovation District includes buildings and spaces with truly inventive characters. And China's Vanke Center and Linked Hybrid research facilities create a model of what innovation can look like. We encourage the City, Innovation District property owners, developers and potential tenants to consider **design excellence one of the most effective investments** they can make in the future of Boston and their own success. A **Designer Recommendation Committee** can bring design professionals together to help them achieve the kind design innovation the district deserves.

B. ACTIVE PUBLIC SPACES THAT FOSTER INNOVATION: Inventive public spaces are critically important in helping the District assert its identity as a home for the dynamic, multivalent, ever-changing group of people, companies and institutions it seeks to attract. The BRA has a long history of successful city building efforts that reinforce a sense of **vitality, accessibility, and permeability**-- the recent Atlantic Wharf development and planned Innovation Center being just the latest examples.

Boston's Innovation District should continue this effort through the creation of a **network of active public spaces**, at the exterior and interior of buildings, and at street level and on upper floors or roofs that foster opportunities for public interaction. These spaces should connect the district to the larger system of public spaces in the city and activate interstitial and underutilized spaces in between buildings and adjacent to infrastructure. The best spaces use **thought-provoking design** to make them destinations in their own right.

The BRA should consider identifying a public space that could be a **testing ground for provocative installations, challenging events and constantly changing interventions** that engage people of all ages. This space should have a "crossroads" location that centers the Innovation District symbolically and reflects the edgy, chaotic and multifaceted nature of

Boston's version of innovation. The Hubway bike share, a test platform for MIT robotics projects and the experiments of MassChallenge entrepreneurs could all find a home here.

The public realm could be further enriched by a **public art requirement for large-scale projects**, with input provided by the ICA and the Children's Museum and in collaboration with the BRA as well as other civic agencies such as the Mayor's Office of Arts, Tourism and Special Events. Leadership by the Children's Museum and the ICA will ensure that new media will be encouraged and successfully implemented. The expansion of the institutional presence of the cultural institutions in the area can only help in defining the Innovation District brand.

The public realm of the District is also defined by its relationship to downtown and the harbor. **Maintaining view corridors** is critically important. D Street and the eastern portion of Congress Street have landmark views back to the downtown; the western portion of Congress Street has views of Summer Street beyond the Convention Center, and from Congress Street east of the Children's Museum, one can see the marquee at the BCEC and the buildings beyond. These views should be retained as new buildings are created.

C. GROUND FLOOR USES THAT CREATE VIBRANCY: Article 80 rightly encourages an activation of the public realm through non-office ground floor uses, but economics tend to favor medium and large scale retail, national brands, and out-sized building-scale lobbies. The kind of vital urban neighborhood the BRA envisions also needs **small scale, locally owned stores and services** that meet typical day-to-day needs while providing a dose of **unpredictable urban charm**.

Setting aside a certain percentage of the ground floor of new buildings for local retail tenants would attract the "creative class" companies and workers that are looking for a rich and variegated streetscape without imposing an enormous burden on the bottom line. As rents rise in the Fort Point Channel Landmark District, new development policies can insure that **small scale and innovation-oriented businesses** can continue to thrive.

D. INSTITUTIONAL ANCHORS THAT EMPHASIZE COLLABORATION: Innovation districts in Cambridge, Haifa, Austin and Barcelona – and now New York's Roosevelt Island – have grown out of **academic institutions**. They bring a diverse range of funding sources, an ability to accept risk, an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge and product creation, and an abundance of energy and enthusiasm at a relatively low cost. We understand that the BRA's support for rent subsidies for start-ups and the development of an "Innovation Center" are intended to provide some of the infrastructure and vitality that might otherwise be provided by institutions. We encourage the BRA to consider a broader range of efforts to help **build a collaborative urban environment**. These might include:

- Identifying areas where the open, activated character of **an academic, non-profit, professional or arts organization** could help activate an entire neighborhood and encourage appropriate institutions to rent or develop space.

- Continuing to encourage **regional universities to establish satellite campuses** in the Innovation District. Babson College’s commitment to the neighborhood is an excellent start. The BRA might consider orchestrating a consortium of institutional programs or cluster of disciplines that share spaces in a campus-like arrangement as a catalyst for further growth. **A roundtable of institutional partners** could be formed to consider opportunities for collocated learning and research in the District.
- Encouraging large businesses to **share their facilities** – conference spaces, auditoriums and research facilities – with non-profit organizations, academic institutions, and public and charter schools.

E. ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS THAT PROMOTE CREATIVITY: The Seaport has, over the years, been an important location for seasonal, temporary, and regionally significant public events and attractions sponsored by a broad range of local institutions. The City, private developers and local companies and institutions can facilitate relationships, provide financial incentives, and lend the outspoken support that can help the District become a **center for creative programming**. Strengthening ties with neighboring institutions such as the ICA, the Children’s Museum, and the Convention Center can promote the idea of the Innovation District through **creative public events, programs, and exhibitions**. The current digital project resulting from the partnership between Boston CyberArts, the Convention Center Authority and area design schools is a perfect example.

The Innovation District has already sponsored a series of activities that create a strong model for what can come, including the Volvo Ocean Race in 2008 and 2009, and the Red Bull Cliff Diving at the ICA and the TEDx Boston at the Seaport World Trade Center in 2011. In an appendix to this letter, we have attached **a series of possibilities** for the future that suggest the kinds of events that should be considered.

F. INCENTIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVING AND WORKING: Efficient use of resources, construction that recognizes the natural patterns of the waterfront, and planning that anticipates rising sea levels are critically important to an innovation district. The Boston area’s academic institutions, businesses, and design community are **international leaders in sustainable design**, and their expertise should be brought to bear on planning and its implementation in the District.

The Portland Oregon Eco District sets targets and outlines strategies to incrementally transform both hard and soft infrastructure in the City and is a model for what Boston could do. An **“eco-district” policy overlay** could create ambitious sustainability goals and establish the District as a testing ground for CO2 reduction targets, efficient resource management and incentives for environmentally conscious lifestyles.

Other initiatives could include: district energy supply including renewable sources; system “looping” to distribute and reuse waste heat; district storm water management that integrates water storage and reuse in the landscape; district-wide waste and recycling programs; a LEED platinum, gold or silver development requirement, DIY share programs and zoning bonuses for green roofs or solar PV. Transportation policies that offer incentives to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, put limitations on parking, set CO2 goals,

and support alternative transportation modes and technologies should inform design and development decisions.

G. POLICIES THAT MAINTAIN AFFORDABILITY: Fort Point Channel has long been a haven for artists and entrepreneurs because of its low rents and small floor plates. Planned development should increase, not decrease, the kind of affordable housing and work space that fosters innovation and allows employees to live near where they work. Today's economic conditions have allowed developers and property owners to provide **subsidized space to start-ups and artists**. We encourage the City to continue to work with the private sector to insure that space remains affordable as the economy recovers and upward pressure on property values resumes.

H. REGULATORY CHANGES THAT SUPPORT DISTRICT GOALS: The overall goals of the Innovation District can be reinforced by identifying the design and development principles that make the district uniquely appealing, and by providing funding mechanisms to achieve them through a combination of developer exactions and public incentives.

The BRA can start by **updating the 1999 Seaport Public Realm Plan** to incorporate Innovation District goals by identifying major infrastructure and open space improvements, land uses, public realm design standards and urban design principles. This would form the basis for a **new zoning article** to replace the existing South Boston Interim Planning Overlay District, adopted in 1999 (stretching the meaning of the word "interim".) The new article could codify planning goals, provide a density bonus in exchange for innovation-oriented public benefits and could make conforming projects eligible for Planned Development Area Approval and expedited development and design review.

The City can also create a **special development district**, as the Mayor has recently announced for the East Boston waterfront. Within this district, a package of state and city public incentives and funding sources such as DIFs, I-Cubed, and Chapter 121A would be available for major infrastructure improvements which can't realistically be funded exclusively through developer exactions.

The City can't exert zoning control over the Convention Center expansion, but it can negotiate a compact in which the **MCCA provides programming, promotion and other assistance** to further the goals of the district as a component of and rationale for funding the expansion. MassPort can also be enlisted in a more formal way in the effort to advance Innovation District goals. The City could, for example, ask Mass Port to include these goals in property dispositions in Commonwealth Flats.

I. IMPROVE TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE As a legacy of its early development for the railroads, the Innovation District peninsula has two principal grade levels; the lower waterfront/harbor level (Northern Avenue and Congress

Street) and the raised Summer Street level, extending a half mile from The Channel to D Street. New streets and roadways, a transit system, and series of large scale developments have been added over the past 25 years. The current complexity and continuing growth will require **significantly increasing the capacity of the transportation infrastructure** to accommodate the growing numbers of people going to and living in the District.

Public transportation will be of critical importance. The **long term capacity of the Silverline** will be limited by the traffic condition where it intersects D Street. This is recognized in the FEIR for the Seaport Square Development which revealed multiple Intersection failures for the “Long Term Build Condition.” It is important that the city respond to this concern.

Vehicular traffic must also be considered. Harbor Street is a proposed new street within the Seaport Square Development that will connect elevated Summer Street to the lower grade. This street should be **designed to distribute traffic** within the District, and to and from the Highway system, mitigating some intersections and improving overall capacity. The city should require the **integrated performance** of any new piece of the infrastructure.

The Boston Society of Architects and the Urban Design Committee look forward to working with the BRA, the Commonwealth, and Boston developers and land owners on the success of the Innovation District and the promotion of design excellence. Please let us know what we can continue to do to achieve the best outcomes possible for the City, its citizens and its business community.

Sincerely,

The BOSTON SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTS Urban Design Committee



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On behalf of the Boston Society of Architects

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Examples of Activities and Programs Appropriate for the Innovation District.

- *TEDx* - Expand to attract a larger tech audience for a weekend or full week of showcased innovation.
- *PAX East* - This video game convention draws upwards of 80,000 gamers and techies and could expand from Boston Convention Center to occupy parts of Innovation District.
- *WGBH's Innovation Hub* - Kara Miller's talks with Boston's most innovative thinkers could sponsor conferences or presentations in the Innovation District.
- *Muzzy Lane Software* – 3D interactive game designed to be part of the master planning process allows idea generation for the Innovation District.
- *MIT The Education Arcade and STEM Program* – Business-supported enrichment programs for middle school students who want to get ahead in math and science.
- *Harvard Innovation Lab* – Establishing a base in the Innovation District would allow them to share resources and support innovation at the start-up level.
- *Boston Fashion Week* - Capitalize on the move of Louis Boston to the area; sponsor competition for temporary pavilions and exhibition spaces in Innovation District.
- *Innovation District "Open Studios"* – Tech labs host art-walk-style events to showcase their latest work and promote open dialogue and collaboration
- *Innovation District as Host to Conferences, Competitions and Awards* –
 - *DIGMA* - Design Industry Group of Massachusetts
 - *MITX* – Massachusetts Innovation and Technology Exchange
 - *Shift Boston* - Annual international interdisciplinary design competitions.
 - *BNYMellon CityACCESS* - Provides out-of-school opportunity partnerships
 - *Food Truck Challenge* and *Boston Harbor Seafood Festival*
 - *JP Morgan Corporate Challenge* - Harbor Tour

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4/27/12