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Central Square – An Urban Amalgam

Central Square is one of the greater Boston area's most distinct and heterogeneous quarters. Packed with restaurants of all calibers, bars, nightclubs, and every kind of retail outlet from international chains to independent record and book stores, the square is a magnet for some of Cambridge's eclectic crowd and is occupied by people throughout the day and much of the night. Specifically, Central Square is an urban district of Cambridge, Massachusetts with its heart at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue, Western Avenue, and Prospect Street. The square lacks a distinct border on either side but the core part of the district is centered on Massachusetts Avenue, beginning from the southeast around its junction with Main Street and ending shortly beyond the Cambridge Town Hall in the northwest near the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Bigelow Street (Figure 1). These limits were established on the basis that the density of congregated people and businesses drops off considerably beyond these boundaries rather than on any concrete line that distinguishes Central Square from surrounding Cambridge. However, the center of the district is undoubtedly located at the eponymous MBTA Red Line station that connects the square to the greater Boston metropolitan area.

Evaluating the positive and negative attributes of Central Square as an urban environment is a difficult task because of its nature as a melting pot of people, cultures, behaviors, and even architectural styles. The square has garnered a reputation as a gathering place for Cambridge's impoverished and homeless crowd, as practically every visit to Central Square is inevitably characterized by the sighting of a destitute beggar. By night, while the well-to-do queue up for entrance to pricey nightclubs and bars, small crowds of the less-fortunate huddle together around benches or under awnings of now-closed shops and businesses with fuming cigarettes and cheap alcohol. Yet it is precisely this juxtaposition of wealth and poverty that attributes such an interesting character to Central Square (Figure 4). In a single glance, one can observe the warm interior of the ritzy eatery Central Kitchen, serving up 27 dollar entrees of wild striped sea bass with braised baby

fennel and fingerling potatoes, and simultaneously pity the shivering elderly woman on a nearby bench wrapped up in voluminous sweatshirts and living her life out of a shopping cart just meters away. Meanwhile, cars speeding down Massachusetts Avenue and lines of parking meters with one-hour limits highlight the ephemeral nature of the square's population. With such flux in inhabitants, it is difficult to believe that some people might call the area their home because the bustling road artery, subway stop, and bus connections leading to the square effectively destroy any notion of permanence associated with it. Central Square does not seem to be a final destination for many people. Rather, it is an area for people to pass through for shopping, dinner, or perhaps a stroll from Boston proper to Harvard Square. But when business is done or the meal is finished, the majority of the square's patrons push on to other locations.

A late afternoon visit to the square yields some equally interesting insights about the manner in which Central Square attained much of its current character. Primarily, there is an astounding abundance of public seating towards the heart of the square. Wooden benches line Massachusetts Avenue and a small plaza on Western Avenue serves as a congregation area for several locals and passersby alike. But perhaps even more interesting is the layout of many of the benches. Instead of facing outwards towards a view like benches along a river would be placed, the benches are arranged in sets of two facing towards each other, effectively providing mini-squares for public gathering points. Yet the arrangement affords a curious sense of privacy for a group of four to six individuals and promotes conversation and human interaction within each set of two benches (Figures 2 & 3). Additionally, Central Square is saturated with uniformed police officers. While this could be due to the proximity of the Cambridge Police Department located nearby on Western Avenue, it contributes to the square's image as a "rough" or "troubled" area.

The square's location on a main thoroughfare strongly separates it from plazas or squares of European style, such as Madrid's Plaza Mayor or Saint Peter's Piazza in Rome. While Central Square certainly functions as a gathering-place for people, it is absurd to imagine inviting a friend for an afternoon of conversation on one of the square's numerous benches because of the transient nature of Massachusetts Avenue. Rather, much of the middle and upper class interaction takes place in Central Square's many coffee shops, cafes, and small restaurants. Furthermore, several

businesses of Central Square seem to be quite opposed to the area's acquired function as a place to gather without specific commercial intents. Many have posted prominent "No Loitering", "Private Property", and "Restroom for Customers Only" signs that imply an aversion to the lingering crowds. Lastly, a number of local bars and "indie" music clubs contribute to Central Square's vibe as an independent and free-thinking district with a high concentration of people who simply do not assimilate well into other parts of greater Boston. In this sense, it is a sort of welcoming ground for the quirky which can cause some degree of discomfort and uneasiness for its more mainstream or "normal" visitors, particularly at night. This analysis of the square is based on its character as an urban public space – particularly the way in which people interact with it – and the emotions and sentiments it invokes for the transitory visitor.

Ultimately, Central Square has provided a location for people of a variety of cultures, ages, and socioeconomic classes to mingle and interact, and the presence of retail outlets and eateries are likely a strong economic boon for the city of Cambridge. In this sense, it is a useful and positive urban environment. However, the square continues to have a negative-character associated with it due to the ubiquitous vagabonds and loitering crowds who are viewed disapprovingly by much of the public. Improvements to the square could come in the form of expanding the central intersection to increase the size of the main plaza to provide a more defined area for congregation, which might ease tensions between business owners and people who have nowhere but the square to call their home. Central Square could also benefit from the installation of some public artwork such as small statues or creative landscaping on the sidewalks to create an atmosphere of a destination, rather than a highly transient commercial area that people come to for specific purposes (shopping and eating) and then promptly depart from. Additionally, adding some kind of division between the street and sidewalk perhaps with plants, bushes, or other greenery would create a more pleasant walking and sitting area and reduce the sentiment of grime and urban disenchantment that currently characterizes the district. But in the end, the environment that is Central Square is truly defined by the diverse array of people who populate its shops and streets, conversing perhaps over a cup of four dollar coffee or equally likely, a pillaged shopping cart and still-burning cigarette butt on the cold concrete lining bustling Massachusetts Avenue.

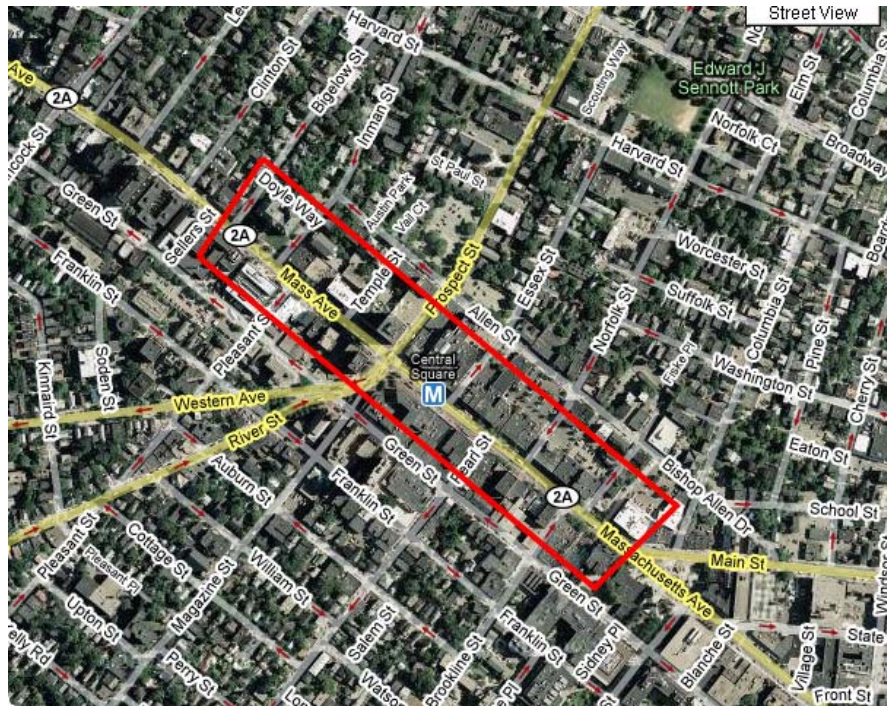
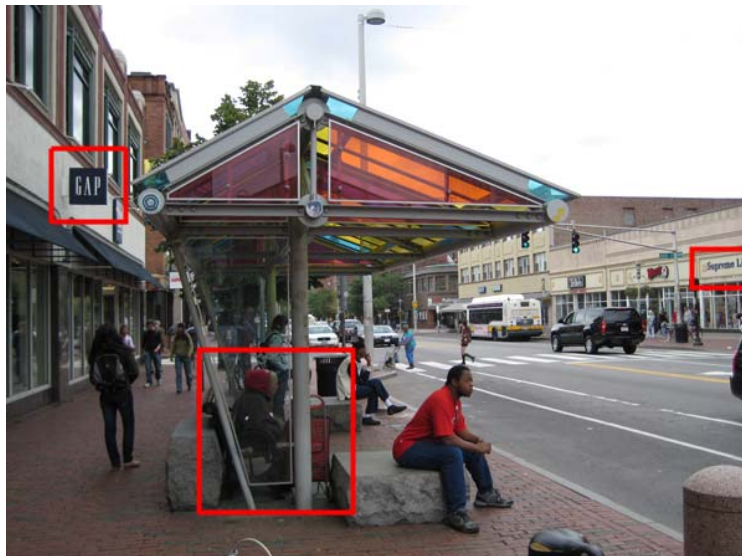


Figure 1: Approximate borders of the core area of Central Square (Source: Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com>)



Figures 2 & 3: Layout of public seating in Central Square



← Figure 4: Note the juxtaposition of a chain upper-middle class store (Gap) with an elderly lady bundled up in jackets and sweaters with a shopping cart sitting at a bus stop. On the opposite side of the street is Wendy's, a cheap fast-food eatery and a liquor store. Meanwhile the #1 Bus runs up and down Massachusetts Avenue providing an immediate transportation link to Boston proper along with the nearby "T" subway station.