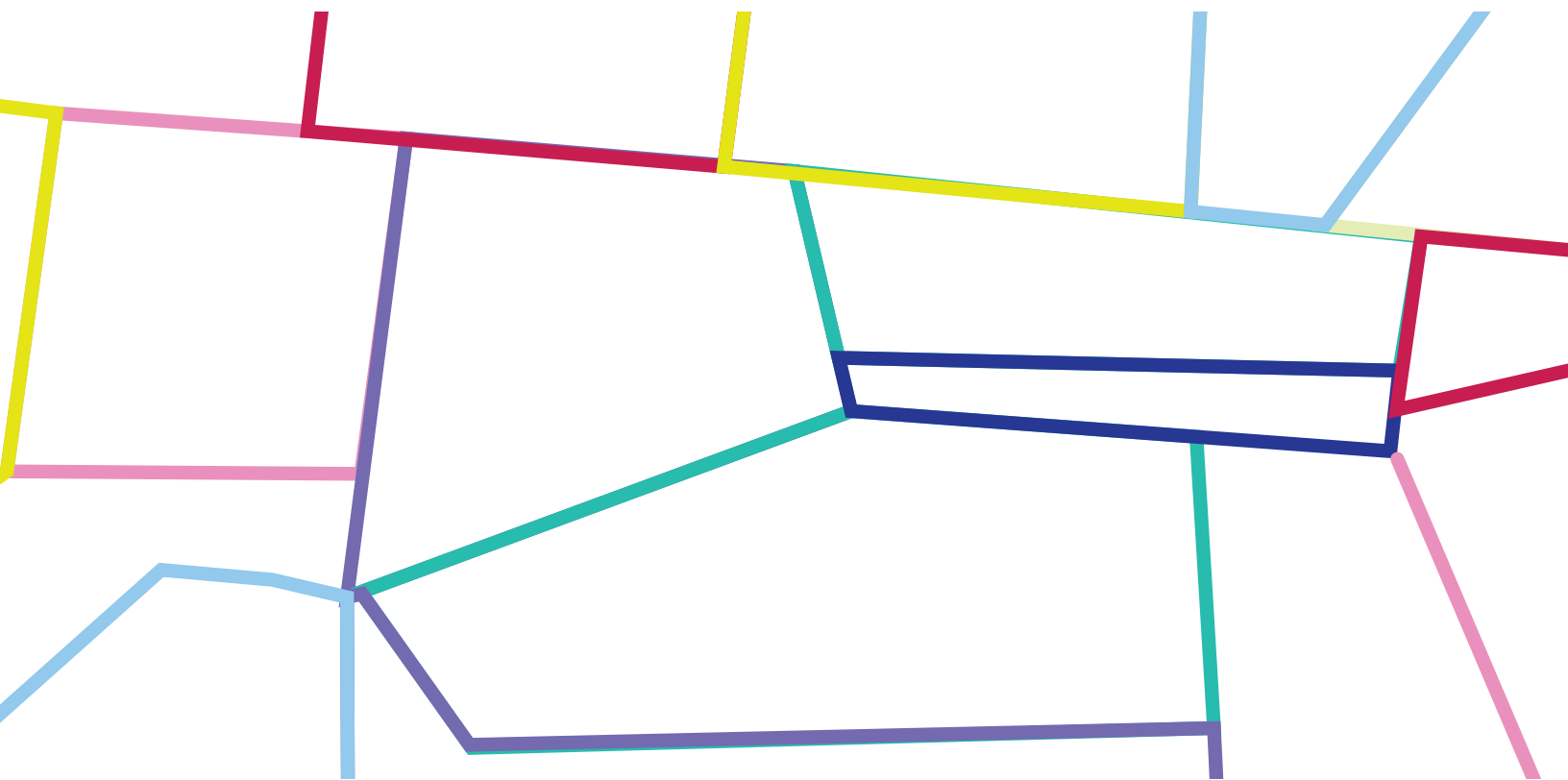


MAKING SPACE FOR ART

Securing Cultural Infrastructure in Boston, Cambridge & Somerville



MAKING SPACE FOR ART BRIEFING PAPER *ZONING FOR CULTURAL USE*

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Introduction

Creative workspaces are foundational for a thriving arts and culture ecosystem. As part of the Making Space for Art project, MAPC has explored the impact that spaces of creative cultural production and presentation have on the artistic and cultural communities that use these spaces for gathering, learning, and creating. The experience of displacement from creative workspaces is disruptive to both artists and the communities that develop within creative workspaces – creating both financial, professional, and social disruptions. The project also explored the role that zoning and land use planning play in exacerbating or mitigating displacement pressure. Regulations that explicitly allow for and encourage creative production or presentation by right can make it easier to preserve spaces for creative use. Conversely, regulations that do not explicitly allow and encourage creative production and preservation and make preservation of those uses more challenging, particularly when building owners change or seek to make improvements to their properties. The presence of regulations that explicitly encourage the inclusion of creative production or presentation space expands the ability of property owners and artists to maintain creative use over time.

In this project, creative spaces are categorized as spaces of production or presentation. Spaces of production are defined as spaces where arts and cultural products are made (such as visual and performing artist studios, rehearsal studios, fabrication sites, gathering space, etc.). Spaces of presentation are defined as spaces where arts and cultural products and experiences are shared with the public (galleries, theatres, music venues, community spaces, etc.). Arts education facilities often include spaces of both production and presentation. Across the three project communities of Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville, approximately 60% of spaces identified were categorized as spaces of production and 40% as spaces of presentation. A review of past plans and zoning regulations in the three cities generated two key findings. The first is that when cultural plans are completed, they are usually not coordinated with land use planning and zoning efforts. This means that the priorities identified in cultural planning efforts are rarely translated into land use regulations. The second key finding is that definitions of arts and culture uses are not consistent across municipalities and sometimes vary within municipalities. Cambridge and Boston both have incredibly complex zoning regulations that include many districts with separate zoning frameworks. This means that zoning definitions for arts and cultural uses may vary based on the district they are in and their associated location. Eliminating duplicative or inconsistent definitions could be helpful for streamlining the development of spaces for creative production and presentation. Without a clear definition of what arts and cultural use or creative space means, local policy makers are left without tools to determine what activities and spaces need protection, and what kinds of arts and cultural activities are allowed within current zoning.

The lack of coordination between cultural planning and land use planning activities also means that arts and culture spaces and activities are not considered during development review processes and lack mechanisms to protect them from displacement. This paper offers an exploratory analysis of Somerville's efforts to define arts and culture uses in zoning for the purpose of preserving and expanding creative space in the city. It examines the importance of defining cultural uses in zoning and planning processes in the study area, while offering relevant insights to other communities in the Metro Boston region.

Zoning as a Planning Tool

Zoning is a regulatory tool intended to implement land use planning priorities consistent with a community plan, which codifies a community's vision for its future. Zoning encourages uses consistent with the plan and discourages uses that run contrary to the plan. Zoning divides communities into geographic districts or "zones." These zones are designed to separate uses that are different from and incompatible with each other and to group uses that are similar or compatible. Typical use categories include residential, commercial, industrial, institutional, and mixed-use. For each zoning district, zoning regulations identify the characteristics of new parcel development that advance the goals of community-wide and neighborhood plans, including guidelines related to new developments' physical characteristics and allowed uses. Physical characteristics addressed in zoning typically include the height and scale of buildings, their placement relative to parcel boundaries, the density of development on a parcel, and open space requirements. Use-tables document which uses are allowed by-right (without further review), which uses require additional review, such as special permit review or design review, and which are not allowed in each zoning district. When planning processes

determine that the vision and priorities for development in a community have changed, zoning is typically revised to reflect and reinforce the new vision as adopted in a plan. These uses may also be determined as unallowable uses in new development. These existing uses would then be considered to be non-conforming uses. Buildings can also become non-conforming because they exceed the height or dimensional restrictions imposed by revised zoning regulations. Non-conformity with zoning regulations can trigger additional review by a planning or zoning board when property owners seek to make improvements to their properties. This review process can generate displacement risk for non-conforming uses.

Because underlying or "base" zoning applies to the entire municipality, it can be very time-consuming and difficult to change, especially in larger cities. The cities of Boston and Cambridge engage in neighborhood planning efforts that form the basis of new zoning that is specific to particular sub-areas of the cities. Overlay Zoning Districts are used to layer new neighborhood-specific zoning on top of this base zoning to allow for more detailed, specialized use and dimensional requirements. Each overlay district may have its own set of use definitions, which may or may not exist as definitions in the base zoning. This practice increases the complexity of zoning regulations and can lead to a lack of consistent definitions for creative uses across a city, as has been seen for arts and culture uses in Boston.

The last category of district is Planned Unit Development (PUD) Districts. PUD districts typically comprise a cluster of parcels on larger properties with multiple existing buildings, and they establish a new sub-neighborhood district geography. Like zoning overlay districts, PUD districts include separate definitions as well as use and dimensional regulations. The City of Cambridge has included specific definitions and requirements for cultural and creative space in particular areas of the city through PUD district zoning regulations. Boston and Cambridge use overlay districts and PUDs to allow more cultural uses, such as artist live/work housing, studios, performance venues, etc., by right, for development within specific geographies, and they incentivize future creative space development within these districts.

Applying Planning and Zoning to Creative Space

Cities can leverage planning and zoning tools to support cultural uses and creative spaces of production and presentation. The first step in this process is to use planning processes to document the presence of arts and culture activity and the location of creative spaces, as well as their importance to communities. The second step is to adapt existing zoning regulations as they relate to creative space to better align with and support the community's goals for its arts and culture ecosystem. If a planning process does not incorporate the creative economy or the arts and culture ecosystem into its land use priorities, these uses may remain undefined in zoning or may be defined in zoning primarily to impose regulations that mitigate perceived negative impacts such as noise, traffic, or parking.

Municipalities that define cultural uses as part of their zoning code can take a proactive approach to create more spaces that serve arts and cultural uses. A key finding of the Making Space for Art policy research is to elevate learnings from the 2022 Somerville Arts Space Risk Assessment. “The Somerville Zoning Ordinance (SZO) enacted in 2019 establishes Fabrication (FAB) Districts with the intent to “create, maintain, and enhance areas appropriate for small- and moderate-scale, single- and multi-use buildings; activities common to the arts & creative economy and supporting commercial activities; and a variety of employment opportunities in the arts & creative enterprises.” In addition, the ordinance requires that five to ten percent of commercial floor area be set aside for Arts and Creative Enterprise (ACE) uses in new developments in mixed-use and commercial districts.”¹ These two innovations have demonstrated the potential for defining arts and culture uses in zoning for the purpose of preserving and expanding cultural and creative space in the region.

Zoning is useful for protecting existing spaces and developing new creative spaces in communities, but it's also an imperfect tool. Defining cultural uses too narrowly in policy and zoning can limit the ability of creative spaces to offer the range of activities needed to realize their full impact to communities and to generate the revenue needed to maintain these spaces. Defining cultural uses too broadly can put them in direct competition for space with uses that have the ability to pay higher rents, such as technology companies and innovation spaces. Shifting the culture of planning and zoning in communities is important to ensure that decision-makers interpret zoning codes with the intent of advancing arts and culture as a foundation of thriving communities.

Case Study: Lessons Learned from Somerville

Somerville exemplifies a city-wide approach to defining arts and cultural uses in zoning. The City has established the Fabrication (FAB) Commercial District as a form-based zoning district where arts and culture is prioritized and has defined arts and culture uses within the Arts and Creative Enterprise (ACE) Use Categories approved in 2019² and updated in 2025.

¹ Metropolitan Area Planning Council. *Somerville Arts Space Risk Assessment*. Prepared for the City of Somerville, 2022. <https://www.mapc.org/resource-library/somerville-art-space-risk-assessment-study/> Accessed December 5, 2025.

² *Somerville Zoning Ordinance*. Effective December 12, 2019. Accessed December 1, 2025. <https://online.encodeplus.com/regs/somerville-ma-coo/doc-viewer.aspx#secid--1>

In addition, Artist Housing is defined in both the 2019 Zoning Ordinance and 2025 update and is designated as an allowable use by-right in Neighborhood Residential Districts and allowable by special permit in Mid-Rise and High-Rise districts.

Use Category Specific Use	NR	UR	MR3	MR4	MR5	MR6	HR	FAB	R&D	CC	CI	CB	CIV
Arts & Creative Enterprise Categories													
Artisanal Production	N	N	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N
Artist Studios & Creative Incubators	N	N	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N
Arts Education	N	N	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N
Arts Exhibition	N	N	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N
Arts Sales or Services	N	N	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N
Design Services	N	N	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N
Residential Categories													
Residential Housing	P	P	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	N	N	N	N	N	N
Artist Housing	P	P	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	N	N	N	N	N	N
Institutional Housing (except as follows)	N	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	N	N	N	N	N	N
Community or Group Residence	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N	N	N	N	N	N

Figure 1. Somerville Zoning Ordinance, Article 9

The 2022 Somerville Arts Space Risk Assessment recommended changes to the 2019 version of the ACE use definitions. The study found that the sub-categories included within the ACE use lacked an explicit definition of artist workspace and lacked a way to distinguish between artistic uses and uses that are more closely related to small-scale manufacturing, retail, innovation, and professional services.³ This ambiguity allowed a wide range of uses to fulfill the ACE-use requirement, including tech-makerspaces, architectural design firms, and general coworking spaces.

The Planning, Preservation and Zoning Division of Somerville’s Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development (OSPCD) implemented revisions to the ACE use categories in 2025 based on the recommendations of the Arts Space Risk Assessment. The 2025 definition eliminates the Co-working and Design Services use categories and aligns the category language more closely with the goals of the Ordinance.

Updated categories are:

- Artisanal Production
- Artist Studios & Creative Incubators
- Arts Education
- Arts Exhibition
- Arts Sales or Services

³ Metropolitan Area Planning Council. *Somerville Arts Space Risk Assessment*. Prepared for the City of Somerville, 2022, p.16. <https://www.mapc.org/resource-library/somerville-art-space-risk-assessment-study/>

- Design Services

Fabrication (FAB) Commercial District

Somerville’s zoning is governed by a hybrid of use-based and form-based code.⁴ This zoning approach ties together the building form, including its scale and architectural features, and its land use, which is different from standard use and dimensional zoning regulations. Within the FAB districts, the zoning regulations provide a descriptive narrative of the desired urban form and use for the district:

“[The district] is characterized by moderate to large floor plate buildings up to four (4) stories in height. Buildings are set close to the sidewalk to create a defined street wall that supports pedestrian activity and a sense of place. The district is entirely commercial with buildings typically designed or retrofitted to support multiple tenants.”⁵

The FAB district’s use table allows all Arts and Creative Enterprise (ACE) uses and most Civic and Institutional uses by right with a limited set of additional uses allowed from categories including Cannabis Establishments, Commercial Services, Food and Beverage Services, and Urban Agriculture.

Arts and Creative Enterprise (ACE) Set-Aside Provision

The ACE Set-Aside is a use provision that is associated with by-right development in particular zoning districts in Somerville. It requires that a percentage of the developed space will be reserved for Arts and Creative Enterprise uses (as defined in the zoning code). This provision requires that space for Arts & Creative Enterprise (ACE) uses be included in the building program of development projects in the Mid-Rise, High-Rise, and Commercial zoning districts (including Fabrication).

Specific provisions for ACE Set-Aside by district include:

- 5-6 % of gross commercial leasable floor space in Mid-Rise districts
- 5% of gross floor area in FAB and Commercial Business districts
- 10 % of total commercial floor area in the Boynton Yards Sub Area
- 5% of gross floor area in Union Square with the principal use being art.

Since the adoption of the 2019 zoning, Somerville has opened three new artist production spaces. In addition, the integration of arts and culture space priorities into Somerville’s planning and zoning has improved artists’ ability to advocate for their needs and priorities in public processes required for the approval of new development projects.

Somerville’s experience demonstrates that integrating clear language into zoning to advance the policy goal of preserving and expanding creative space can work. The policy has generated important questions about its long-term implementation. The City is exploring the option of a payment-in-lieu process, particularly for developments where the location, geometry, or size of the ACE space would make it less appropriate for creative uses. In addition, there may be a need for documentation of design guidelines

⁴ Somerville is the first and largest municipality in the Boston metropolitan region to adopt a citywide form-based code (FBC) that also incorporates best practices from performance-based and use-based zoning to achieve more than 180 objectives of SomerVision 2030, the City’s comprehensive Master Plan first adopted in 2012.

⁵ *Somerville Zoning Ordinance*, Chapter 6, “Commercial Districts,” §6.1 “Fabrication District,” §6.1.1 “Description.” Accessed December 1, 2025. <https://online.encodeplus.com/regs/somerville-ma/doc-viewer.aspx?secid=372#secid-372>

for different creative space types so the policy generates more useable space. Expanding the number of districts and Planned Unit Developments that allow ACE uses offers another opportunity to expand arts and creative workspace, particularly artist live-work space in the city. Somerville's development of ACE definitions, the FAB district, and ACE set-asides provide a prototype for how planning and zoning can be used to proactively protect the urban fabric that is home to many existing creative spaces while incentivizing the future development of creative space across a municipality.

A Regional Framework for Cultural Use Definitions

Increasing consistency across municipalities in setting policy goals for preserving and expanding creative spaces, defining arts and culture uses, and incentivizing those uses through zoning would promote creative space development and preservation across the metro Boston region. As the Making Space for Art project has shown, among only three cities in the region, Boston, Cambridge and Somerville, has each taken a different approach to planning for creative uses and defining cultural uses within zoning. A regional approach to creative space will require efforts to increase consistency across municipalities while respecting the different roles that different municipalities play in supporting the regional ecosystem. Looking at the three cities in this study, Somerville holds an important role as a home to production spaces while Cambridge has a larger share of presentation spaces. Boston, as the metropolitan core, has both production and presentation spaces, with a mix of well-known regional destinations, hyper-local creative spaces, and everything in between.

In addition, the context of amending and applying zoning regulations varies across the three cities. Cambridge and Boston both have incredibly complex zoning regulations, where use definitions may vary based on district and associated location. In Cambridge cultural use definitions show up most prominently with Planned Unit Development (PUD), with mixed uses including arts. Defined arts and cultural uses are allowed by special permit in PUD Districts. Boston has adopted a similar strategy to Somerville's ACE Set-aside providing provisions for new Planned Development Areas in South End Neighborhood District in Article 64-29 and 64-40 of the Boston Zoning Code.⁶ Figure 02 outlines the various places and ways cultural use definitions show up in the zoning for the three municipalities.

⁶ *Zoning Code, City of Boston, Massachusetts*, Article 64, "South End Neighborhood District," §29 "Planned Development Areas: Use and Regulations" and §41 "Definitions." Accessed December 1, 2025.

https://library.municode.com/ma/boston/codes/redevelopment_authority?nodeId=ART64SOENNEDI

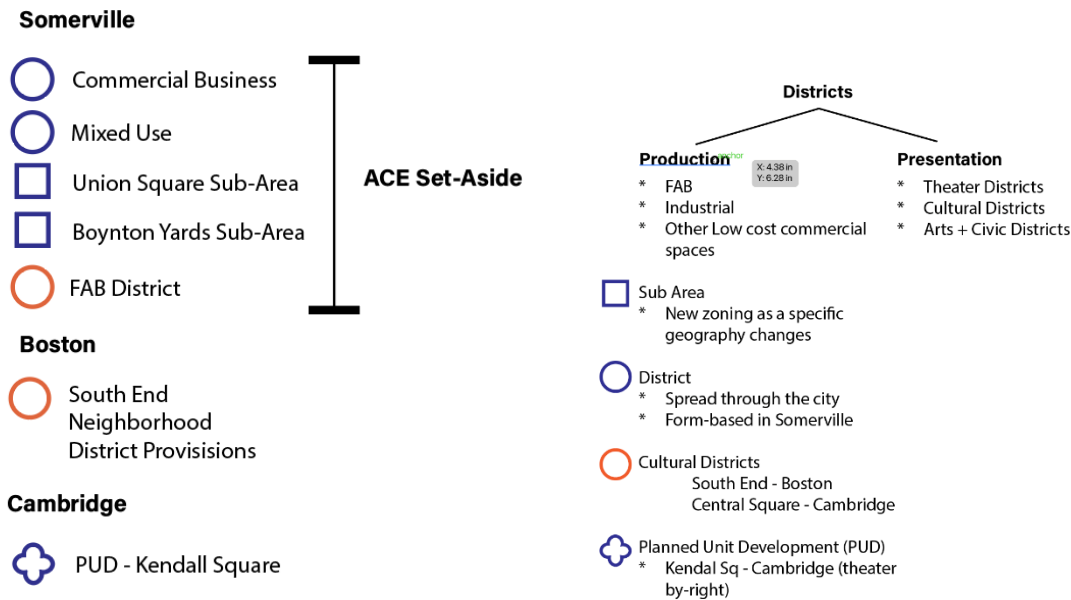


Figure 2. Specific Spaces and Districts with Arts and Cultural Use Definitions

All three cities also have different processes for applying zoning regulations and integrating information about creative spaces as part of their development review. Development review processes for have opportunities to embed strategic checks, triggers, and requirements for arts and culture uses and can help catalyze development, making space for artists and cultural bearers in the region whether that be through data, arts and cultural staff, or planning documents.

Applying a regional framework for defining cultural uses will require that individual municipalities understand their starting point by reviewing existing cultural policy documents to determine whether zoning regulations are aligned with cultural policy goals. In addition, municipalities can identify and revise or eliminate duplicative and inconsistent definitions. Cambridge, for example, could apply its cultural use definitions for home occupation and Planned Unit Development regulations to other zoning districts and regulations across the city. Boston has an opportunity to apply the cultural set-asides established for the South End Neighborhood District to other areas of the city.

Incorporating arts and culture uses into zoning is an important tool for building consistency and broadening access to cultural production and presentation spaces in the region. Somerville's ACE use, FAB district, and set-aside policy provides a starting point for developing a regional framework for defining creative space. Because Somerville is an important site of production spaces, its zoning definitions are oriented to spaces of production. Cambridge is well-positioned to develop zoning definitions and approaches that encourage the preservation and development of spaces of presentation. The City of Boston has an opportunity to craft zoning definitions that distinguish between its major cultural destinations and the neighborhood-based sites of local arts and culture production and presentation.

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Zoning Code, City of Boston, Massachusetts. Article 64, "South End Neighborhood District," §29 "Planned Development Areas: Use and Regulations" and §41 "Definitions." Accessed December 1, 2025. https://library.municode.com/ma/boston/codes/redevelopment_authority?nodeId=ART64SOENNE DI