

MAKING SPACE FOR ART

Securing Cultural Infrastructure in Boston, Cambridge & Somerville



Municipal Action Plan *CITY OF CAMBRIDGE*



CITY of BOSTON



Municipal Action Plan Overview

Developed in 2024 and finalized in 2025, this action plan provides specific recommendations for Cambridge to improve its policies and processes to preserve and expand cultural space based on findings from the Making Space for Art project. The action plan builds on prior planning efforts to protect arts and culture spaces in the face of displacement. Given Cambridge's unique set of cultural assets concentrated in Central Square, recommended actions propose piloting cultural planning recommendations in the Cultural BID and Cultural District. However, the recommended policies should also be considered for other areas of Cambridge in the future. The vision for this action plan is to outline arts and cultural spaces as a priority in Cambridge's planning, development and future growth in ways that further equity, support a vibrant cultural community and thriving creative economy.

GOAL 1: Cambridge's development review processes proactively account for impacts to cultural spaces and resources.

1.1 Use and improve cultural space data

Cultural space data is critical to support a thriving creative economy by identifying where spaces exist, what activities and communities are served by those spaces, flagging potential impacts of new development, managing potential conflicts, and mitigating displacement.

- a. Standardize the integration of cultural space data into planning and development review processes.
- b. Continue ongoing data collection using the Making Space for Art digital tool.
- c. Continue review and verification of data by Cambridge Arts Council and Director of Arts and Cultural Planning.
- d. Collect data on cultural spaces and uses through planning, development review and permitting processes.

1.2 Create and activate cultural plans

The City of Cambridge needs to document the existing assets, challenges and needs of its broader creative community to guide future investments and planning priorities.

- a. Review core needs of artists, arts and culture organizations, around arts and cultural spaces, from prior cultural policy recommendations (i.e., 2019 Mayor's Art Task Force Report, 2024 Central Square Lot Study).
- b. Use planning efforts, such as a cultural plan for Central Square, to document the economic impact of production and presentation spaces in Cambridge.
- c. Use cultural planning documents, including cultural plans, studies, and data, to guide planning and development review.
- d. Explore coordinated approaches for future development for arts and culture production spaces connected to opportunity areas like Alewife and throughout East Cambridge.

1.3 Integrate arts and culture staff into municipal systems and processes

The Cambridge Director of Arts and Cultural Planning and the Cambridge Arts Council should be integral partners in Cambridge's planning efforts and have clearly defined roles in development review processes to identify the cultural impact of proposed developments.

- a. Include Cambridge Arts Council and cultural planning staff as part of standard development review meetings and processes, specifically drafting staff memos that inform development project approval.
- b. Expand application of the Percent-for-Art program to include cultural spaces in addition to public arts for permit approval and to mitigate displacement.
- c. Formalize partnership and cultural policy goals with the Economic Development Department to support production spaces for artists.
- d. Develop a fact sheet for arts and culture micro-retail.
- e. Create standard process for new retail and commercially zoned projects to identify opportunities for potential production spaces for artists
- f. Strengthen relationships between City cultural planning staff and the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority through cultural planning efforts and an evaluation of the economic impact of the Foundry.

1.4 Engage arts community in public processes

The community engagement process for development review should establish clear guidelines for how arts and culture stakeholders might provide evidence of impact and input on future development efforts.

- a. Revise the Community Benefit Agreement process so arts and culture use is prioritized and justified.
- b. List prioritized items for arts and culture investments that might be leveraged for Community Benefit Agreement processes.
- c. Make community engagement processes for development review more accessible to artists and creative workers.
- d. Provide opportunities for community feedback about the cultural value of spaces within a community and the impact of spaces on the creative economy.

GOAL 2: Cambridge’s land use policies expand cultural space by allowing cultural uses in zoning bylaws and incentivizing development of additional accessible cultural spaces.

2.1 Improve policy & definitions

Identify policy language and definitions to support the development of arts and cultural uses.

- a. Establish clear and comprehensive definitions for arts and culture uses, aligning definitions used in Planned Unit Development (PUDs).
- b. Define the arts and cultural uses that would be included in an arts and culture set aside, noting neighborhood specific cultural assets, such as ethnic grocery stores or restaurants that might require more inclusive definitions.
- c. Draft broad policy language that can be adopted for a 5%-10% set aside for arts uses in commercial development along cultural districts, similar to Somerville’s FAB District with less specificity.
- d. Outline the requirements for the set-aside payment structure aligning with Massachusetts General Law (i.e., identifying the appropriate fund, potentially mirroring the Percent-for-Art fund).

2.2 Prioritize cultural use in planning and zoning

Prioritize land use that supports arts and culture uses in the Central Square Business District / Central Square Cultural District in ways that can be replicated in other priority areas for arts and cultural investments.

- a. Prioritize the adoption of arts and cultural set-asides in areas primed for redevelopment potential.
- b. Revise zoning to incentivize arts and culture uses within Central Square Cultural District and other appropriate geographies.
- c. Identify priority areas of investment for arts and culture development using cultural space data (i.e., what types of spaces exist and where do they exist, who is able to access these spaces).

2.3 Expand artist housing

Develop a pilot artist live/work program that improves the accessibility of arts and culture production and residential spaces.

- a. Expand home-occupation designations under accessory use to support more creative uses.
- b. Identify priority uses for artist live/work spaces (i.e., ceramics, woodworking, music rehearsal that currently don't align with allowed accessory uses).
- c. Draft Artist Live/Work Housing guidelines, drawing on Boston's Artist Live/Work Housing Guidelines.
- d. Identify potential sites for redevelopment to include artist-live work studio spaces.
- e. Create an artist certification process.

2.4 Develop shared language for development community

Share guidance with developers on core cultural use needs and how cultural uses might be developed.

- a. Explore partnerships with affordable housing developers and community development organizations to support local arts space development.
- b. Create guidance for developers on specific space needs for arts and cultural uses, building on the MOAC Boston Live-Work Artist Housing guidelines.
- c. Develop an arts development training or certification program and an active list of developers with interest in arts-development projects.
- d. Invest in organizations, groups and individuals to build up a pipeline of cultural space-operators.

GOAL 3: Cambridge is known as a place where nightlife, live entertainment, and cultural gatherings are valued and protected.

3.1 Improve sound management policy

Establish a structure to support the management and mitigation of conflicts for entertainment related sound.

- a. Establish a sound advisory board including local venues, developers and sound engineers, to guide adoption of agent of change principles.
- b. Develop a process for initiating and conducting sound studies for venues located in proximity to new development, particularly when that development includes residential uses.

- c. Develop a list of resources and department staff that can support venues and developers navigate sound regulation.
- d. Establish a point of contact for entertainment sound regulation enforcement with standard enforcement methods.

3.2 Adopt agent of change

Adopt agent of change principles into policy practices to support local venues and cultural gathering spaces.

- a. Use cultural space data to identify venues and cultural establishments that produce sound (i.e., music venues, rehearsal spaces etc.).
- b. Incorporate relevant cultural space data into development review process to flag sound mitigation assessment (e.g., within 50 feet of venues/spaces).
- c. Assign responsibility of sound mitigation to party initiating changes in development.
- d. Require initial sound assessment for new venues and cultural spaces with entertainment uses.

3.3 Mitigate sound impacts on residential development

Incorporate standard noise mitigation into the planning and approval process for residential and mixed-use development in proximity to cultural venues and artist workspaces.

- a. Establish sound management standards for new residential construction to reduce impacts of sounds from nearby cultural venues and establish process to resolve related conflicts.
- b. Initiate working group on mitigating sound impacts from artist workspace in mixed-use development to inform policy development.
- c. Require sound disclosure agreements for residential tenants in buildings within proximity to cultural venues.

In addition to this action plan, other priority areas for the City of Cambridge Cultural Planning team and Cambridge Arts Council include noise regulation and enforcement, cultural planning within cultural districts, arts-based economic development, and loading zones for entertainment-related vehicles.

Accounting for Cultural Space in Development Review Processes

Understanding the development review process is a critical component for preserving cultural spaces, and each city has a unique process for reviewing proposed development projects for approval. These processes are integral to flagging potential conflicts between proposed developments and zoning and regulations, and they often require developers to assess potential impacts related to transportation, environment, historical resources, and neighboring businesses or residents.

During the development review processes, municipal planners rely on existing data and plans to assess the impacts of new development. The review process also includes meetings with the developer and often provides an opportunity for community members to provide input on the proposed development.

This section highlights the core recommendations for incorporating cultural space into municipal development review processes.

Cultural Space Data and Mapping

- Integrate cultural space data (including location data) into standard development review processes to trigger cultural impact assessments and flag potential conflicts with or displacement risk to existing cultural uses.
- Track cultural space square footage, type of cultural spaces, and the economic impact of cultural spaces (e.g., total employment) to be incorporated into municipal development review decisions.

Cultural Planners and Developers

- Include cultural planners in municipal development review processes as key contributors to staff memos documenting potential cultural impacts on existing cultural spaces and resources.
- Train developers on local cultural space needs and uses as part of any required set-asides, and guide planning efforts to mitigate cultural space displacement, such as conducting sound studies.

Arts Community

- Collaborate with representatives of the arts community to identify community needs, update and maintain cultural space data, collect input, and determine the impacts of proposed development on cultural spaces.
- Coordinate with representatives of the arts community to ensure developments implement the cultural space set-asides impact studies and provide equitable opportunities to access cultural spaces.

To account for cultural space in Metro Boston, cultural space data, cultural planners, and arts communities must be integral to the development review process.

Cambridge Development Review Process

Some types of buildings and development in Cambridge need public review. The City's Community Development Department (CDD) oversees development that is subject to a Planning Board Special Permit, but there are different types of review and different special permits based on the kind of development that is proposed.

For projects seeking a special permit from the Planning Board, there are often staff memorandums from the Community Planning & Design Division as well as the Zoning & Development Division. Staff memos often contain a brief summary of the planning history of the area, including commentary on current land uses and development patterns in the neighborhood and a summary of area planning recommendations and goals that are applicable to the site. Arts & Culture work, specifically in plans and related documents, can be a powerful tool in advocating for more equitable development in the field. One example of this could be including specific comments on arts and culture considerations in the staff memo.

Separate to CDD, the City of Cambridge established the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority (CRA) in 1956 as a development entity that could help achieve broader City goals and planning objectives in the Kendall Square and East Cambridge area. The CRA released a strategic plan in 2023 which includes recommendations for supporting cultural space development within the City. Looking ahead, the City and CRA should continue to identify opportunities to partner and collaborate on development that can include arts and culture uses.