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# A new face for Kendall Square

By Paul McMorrow

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THE THING about generational opportunities is just that — they're generational. And since they don't pop up every day, when one gets botched, lots of people are stuck with the consequences for a very long time.

There is a generational opportunity in MIT's bid to rezone Kendall Square, a plan that's pending before the city of Cambridge. The proposal takes stock of a few decades' worth of complaints about the city's core business district, and offers to erase all of them through a few years of concentrated redevelopment effort. MIT wants to transform the most important technology cluster in the world, making it more lively and more productive, and knitting it into the social fabric of the city, to boot. All the university needs is a few building permits and some zoning relief. But the city should not grant them until MIT adjusts its proposal.

The university's pitch — 100,000 square feet of new retail development, 1 million square feet of office and academic space, and 120,000 square feet of new residences — is the most ambitious plan to reinvent Kendall Square in a half century. Fifty years ago, Cambridge officials took a decaying industrial neighborhood, ticketed it for urban renewal, and laid plans to fill the acreage next to MIT with new (and highly taxable) offices and high-tech space. That vision reshaped Kendall, not to mention the state's then-flagging economy. But now that vision is badly in need of refinement.

The practice of constructing vibrant urban spaces has evolved greatly since Kendall Square was slated for clearing. Oversized super-blocks and monolithic-use zoning have long since been discredited. Walkable streets and the integration of commercial and residential uses aren't just development best practices; they're acknowledged as common sense. The MIT rezoning plan aims to cover up the most egregious of the urban renewal era's sins, while putting a modern face on Kendall Square.

The stretch of Main Street around the Kendall MBTA station is the square's geographic hub, and also its most drab and lifeless-looking stretch. It's dominated by blank brick walls, parking lots and loading docks. The rezoning plan aims to transform the space into a hub for shopping and dining. It aims to harness the after-work vibrancy that already exists at Kendall's edges, concentrate it, and give it a new outlet at MIT's front door. The rezoning would also replace parking lots and inconsequential structures with new workspace for tech workers and researchers; the new commercial space would be headlined by a pair of signature towers.

But the housing portion of the proposal is comparatively unimpressive. The latest plan calls for 120,000 square feet of new residential space — double what was offered in earlier drafts of the rezoning petition in December. It's a marginal improvement on one of the city's big complaints — that you can't have a live-work-play district without anywhere to live. But the problem with the MIT plan isn't just the quantity of residential space the university is pitching. It is where the university wants to build the apartments.

The rezoning effort diagnoses Kendall Square with lifelessness, and then only goes halfway in attempting to revive it. MIT pitches its plan as creating a destination to live, work, and play, but the fine print in its zoning request gives each activity its own holding pen: Retail and office space get to remake the central drag along Main Street, while new residences are shunted off to the side, restricted to Third Street and the north side of Broadway. The plan is curiously un-modern in this respect. It doesn't put new residents where they're needed most — in the heart of the square, where they would foster after-hours activity. Instead, it plunks them on the other side of a busy artery, and then expects them to lend the square vibrancy from afar. The plan resembles the same sort of dated urban renewal-era planning that it's supposed to correct.

Kendall Square is the state's most economically important commercial district, and MIT's bid to redevelop it is much more than a local zoning question. We all have a stake in whether the university's plan makes Kendall a more attractive destination to work and study and live — or whether it just repeats old mistakes.

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