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The urban planning
fragility
of the in-between city



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Abstract

The innovation economy in Somerville: Assembly Square from a neglected to a vibrant area

Luna Kappler

Abstract

The city of Somerville has answered in the last ten years to the rise of Innovation Districts, especially in Boston and in Cambridge and its outcomes, complaining that the term “innovation district” has almost become a slogan, instead that focusing on creative forms of strategic policies. That is why it has decided not to create a specific district related to innovation but to build its own economy around innovation, including the use of new economic tools and development processes to build a solid ecosystem within the whole city. The article aims to present a focus on the territorial and economic transformation that has affected the area of Assembly Square in Somerville, chosen by the administration for the abandonment that had struck it and destined to urban and social segregation. Empty space and neglect made it to be considered the proper field to test



Partners Healthcare's headquarters and public space in Assembly Square, photo taken in September 2018

new economic tools for a development based on innovation. Still today, the definition of a community vision is giving the possibility to innovative businesses and start-up to locate in a friendly and inclusive live/work environment. The result is that Assembly Square is becoming compact and benefits from the creation of a dynamic physical realm which strengthens the proximity and the impact of knowledge. The research is the result of on-the-spot analysis and interviews with the protagonists in the phases of the process, selected among promoters, entrepreneurs, citizens and professors.

KEYWORDS:

innovation districts, innovation economy, vision, proximity

L'economia dell'innovazione a Somerville: Assembly Square da spazio abbandonato ad area vitale

La città di Somerville ha risposto negli ultimi dieci anni all'ascesa dei Distretti dell'Innovazione, in particolare a Boston e a Cambridge e i suoi risultati, lamentando che il termine "distretto dell'innovazione" è diventato quasi uno slogan piuttosto che concentrarsi su forme creative di strategia politiche. Questo è il motivo per cui ha deciso di non creare un distretto specifico legato all'innovazione, ma di costruire la propria economia attorno all'innovazione, incluso l'uso di nuovi strumenti economici e processi di sviluppo per costruire un solido ecosistema all'interno dell'intera città. L'articolo mira a presentare un focus sulla trasformazione territoriale ed economica che ha interessato l'area di Assembly Square a Somerville, scelta dall'amministrazione per l'abbandono che l'aveva colpita e destinata alla segregazione urbana e sociale. Lo spazio vuoto e la negligenza lo hanno reso il campo adatto per testare nuovi strumenti economici per uno sviluppo basato sull'innovazione. Ancora oggi, la definizione di una visione comunitaria sta dando la possibilità a imprese innovative e start-up di localizzarsi in un ambiente di vita / lavoro amichevole e inclusivo. Il risultato è che Assembly Square sta diventando compatta e beneficia della creazione di un regno fisico dinamico che rafforza la prossimità e l'impatto della conoscenza. La ricerca è il risultato di analisi in loco e interviste ai protagonisti nelle fasi del processo, selezionate tra promotori, imprenditori, cittadini e professori.

PAROLE CHIAVE:

distretti dell'innovazione, innovazione economica, vision, prossimità

The innovation economy in Somerville: Assembly Square from a neglected to a vibrant area

Luna Kappler

Assembly Square's role during the years for the city of Somerville

Somerville was first settled in 1630 as a part of Charlestown, and was established as a town in 1842, after being separated from the urbanizing Charlestown because it was still largely rural. It was incorporated as a city in 1872, due to its growing population and increasing industrialization. By the early 1900s, Somerville itself had become a densely packed urban area, featuring immigrants from across Europe. As a part of Charlestown, areas existing in modern-day Somerville were critical military positions in the American Revolution.

Fig. 1 – Somerville in 1884, Pos. Perkins - Heliotype Printing Co., 1894



City residents under the age of forty mostly know Assembly Square, by the Mystic River, as a vast tract of underused land, but it has had a long history as a vibrant economic center.

When Governor Winthrop built a home nearby what is now Assembly Square was a salt marsh. He launched the first sea-going vessel built in Massachusetts in 1631. Nine other shipyards would eventually locate nearby.

In 1803, the Middlesex Canal connected Lowell with Charlestown, spurring development of a textile industry along the Merrimack River. The Assembly Square area's proximity to, first the canal terminus, and after 1842, the Boston and Maine Railroad, made it a center for industry and commerce. Tidelands were filled and factories were built.

The site would host businesses, manufacturing machine tools, confections, clothing, ceramics, and appliances, and distributing petroleum, dry goods, groceries, structural

steel and other products over the next century and a half.

In 1926, Ford built an assembly plant, from which the square took its name, while one year later First National Stores built a warehouse complex running from what is now Circuit City to Lowes Theater.

The Olmstead firm, designers of Boston's Emerald Necklace, planned a tree-lined boulevard connecting Broadway (now Foss) Park to the Mystic River that became the Northwest border of Assembly Square when built in 1897. The rail station built at the Southwest tip of the site in 1901 served streetcars and an elevated line. Streets lined with homes and businesses integrated Assembly Square with East Somerville¹.

Public transit made Assembly Square's thousands of jobs easily accessible. Residents picnicked along the Mystic River. The city's 170 manufacturing concerns generated ample property tax revenue.



Fig. 2 – Ford assembly plant that named the area Assembly Square, Boston.com, July 19, 2012

The starting conditions of the area: false hope and corruption

Two events changed Assembly Square. First, deindustrialization hit Somerville early: Ford closed its plant in 1958, followed by First National in 1976, each laying off more than a thousand workers. Most of Somerville's factories closed between those two dates.

Developers, who often had personal relationships with city officials, converted many of the city's abandoned factories to residential uses, which produced only 60% of the tax revenues, but twice the costs of commercial uses. The city came to rely increasingly on state aid to meet its budget, and residential taxes crept up.

Secondly, the Commonwealth drew up plans for Interstate 93 (I-93) that would rip out the heart of East Somerville and isolate Assembly Square. State officials sat on evidence developed by Cambridge-based consultants Bolt, Beranek and Newman showing that the expressway would flood the neighborhood with pollution up to ten times federally allowable limits (William Shelton, 2006).

Neighbors formed "Somerville Citizens for Adequate Transportation" (SCAT) to

TABLE 1
Manufacturing and Key Industries as a Percentage
of Private Sector Employment in Somerville

	1947	1955	1963	1966	% D 1947-1966
Total Private Employment	20,444	21,861	17,688	17,350	-11.2%
Manufacturing Employment % of Total	7,742 37.9	7,734 35.4	4,763 26.9	4,319 24.9	-44.2%
Food and Kindred Products 2,753 % of Total	2,660 13.5	1,653 12.2	973 9.3		-64.7% 5.6
Transportation Equipment % of Total	1,518 7.4	1,898 8.7	148 0.8	183 1.1	-87.9%

Source: Community Renewal Program, Economic Analysis: Plan of Development, Somerville, MA; The Planning Services Group, Inc.

Fig. 3 – Community Renewal Program: Plan of Development, Somerville, MA; The Planning Services Group, Inc.

oppose these plans, while the city administration opposed. The Commonwealth and its city-hall allies prevailed, but many SCAT members continued to participate in civic life over the next three decades.

By 1976, Assembly Square was becoming a ghost town. In 1978, city officials began preparing an Assembly Square redevelopment plan. They declined to develop a master plan, but embraced a developer's initiative and presented it as the city's redevelopment plan.

Then, as now, the developer's site was the old Ford plant. The plan called for the city to take properties from existing owners and give them to the developer. Citizens were

Fig. 4 – The construction of the Interstate 93, June 13, 1971, Photo by Ellis Herwig, The Boston Globe via Getty Images



given the hope that turning the old auto plant into a retail center would subsequently bring high-value development across Assembly Square.

The city approved the plan and got a \$3.3 million government grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to build the road improvements required by the developer.

In the process, FBI special agents caught them in a securities-fraud and tax-evasion scheme. The mall did not stimulate a wave of new development. During the period of its greatest popularity, it had the highest incidence of car theft of any location in the Commonwealth. A decade after it opened, it began a decline that would end with its closing.

From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, a few speculators became interested in the 50 acres of Assembly Square land that would later become the focus of city redevelopment efforts.

Two machine tool manufacturers owned the property adjacent to the Assembly Square Mall, later targeted for an IKEA store. Home Depot wanted to put a store on Middlesex-Avenue. Stephen Bobrow, president of the New-York based company that owned the property, assured the former mayor Capuano that he would not sell it to Home Depot. Instead, in April 2001, he executed a 40-year land lease. In the mid-



*Mrs. Joyce Ralph (2d left) holds son, Tommy, 2, as she stood in line with pickets to halt huge grading machines working on Route 93 along Mystic ave. Construction was blocked for the day and Mayor White of Boston has joined the fight to stop the road. Youngster Tommy is Somerville's most notorious draft dodger and now has "hit the road" to earn more "accolades."
—Record American Photo, Leo Tierney*

Fig. 5 – Somerville residents block I-93 construction, June 1970, Record American Photo, Leo Tierney via flickr

1990s, the store had the highest per-square-foot sales of any Home Depot in the U.S (William Shelton, 2006).

Meanwhile, national stores left Assembly Square and mall management began offering short-term leases to little-known retailers.

In 1999, IKEA bought the properties for \$19.5 million, having held them for less than two years, making \$9 million in profit.

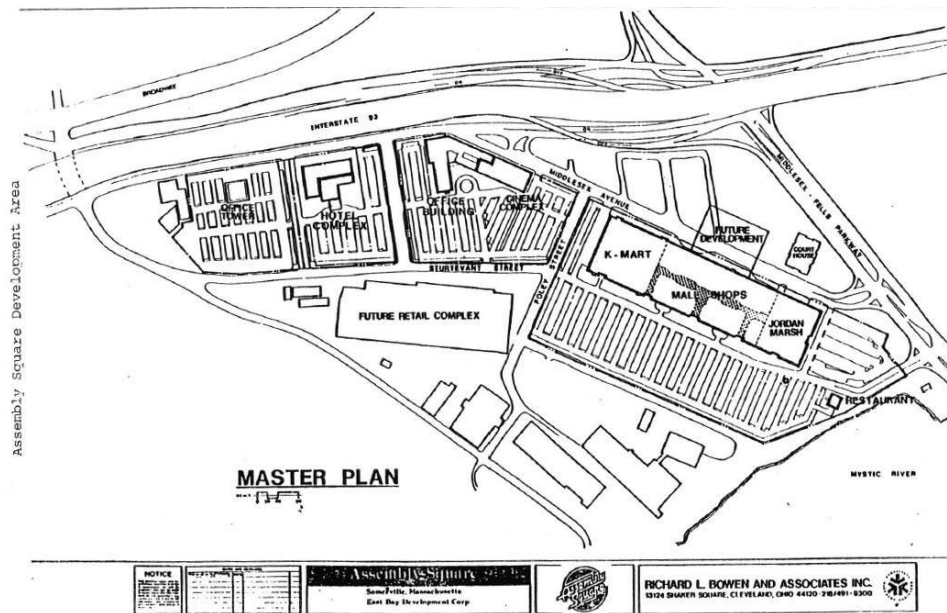


Fig. 6 – “Assembly Square Revitalization Plan,” a 20-year urban renewal plan, 1979

The challenge: develop an innovation ecosystem

Somerville has always been suffering of the competition with its most fortunate and globally known neighbor; Boston. From 1950 to 1970, with the Urban Renewal projects it had witnessed an increase downturn of middle class residents migrating away from downtown and into the suburbs. The population declined rapidly due to massive suburbanization and suffered from poor public maintenance and civil protection. The majors’ programs marked a turning point to bring back order to the ailing city. While the inner part was experiencing densification in the Downtown and Financial district, much of the most dynamic growth areas were becoming in-between. Those are still today the most promising ones and they are creating incredibly various scenarios, such as Seaport by the ocean, with its high-rise and innovative development and Roxbury, with its attention to housing and social inclusiveness.

Somerville had to face and answer to these Boston’s effective policies. So it decided not to create a specific district related to innovation but to build its own economy around innovation, including the use of new economic tools and development processes to have a solid ecosystem within the whole city. For this purpose, places of concentration of interests were identified among those that where in the program of Main Streets: Union Square and Boynton Yards together with Assembly Square.

The term “innovation district” has almost become a slogan in Greater Boston. The

Brookings Institute describes Kendall Square as the “anchor plus” model of an innovation district, where large scale mixed-use development is centered around major anchor institutions and a rich base of related firms, entrepreneurs, and spin-off companies (Katz, 2014). Anchor institutions typically come from the education or healthcare fields, but can also be non-profit cultural institutions, locally-focused philanthropies, libraries, or even large for-profit corporations.

These organizations tend not to move locations and reinvest their economic, human, and intellectual resources to intentionally improving the communities where they are located. Large companies, universities, and other anchor institutions help spread the fixed costs of research and development and help support a fledgling innovation economy.

An innovation ecosystem is created when a synergistic relationship develops between people, firms, and places that facilitate idea generation and accelerate commercialization with a focus on basic science, applied research, and business expansion. Providing a physical environment where this can take place requires a continuum of spaces for companies at different stages of their development.

A new vision

A new way to think about developing Assembly Square emerged in the late 1990s. Grant writers unrelated to Assembly Square who worked for the city’s nonprofit organizations began to meet regularly, and acquainted them with several realities. Somerville received a share of charitable grants that was disproportionately small in comparison to what its neighbors received. In the fields of education, social services, health, recreation and open space, Somerville’s needs were disproportionately large. Nevertheless, the city had an extraordinary potential as a community, home and workplace.

In April 1998, residents were invited to discuss this potential at “SomerVision”, a citywide event with attendees from economic development, real estate, business management, and environmental backgrounds. First, the best way to meet many of Somerville’s needs was full employment; while Boston and Cambridge had two jobs for every resident, Somerville had two residents for every job.

Second, regional grants could only meet a fraction of the city’s needs. The economic causes for the lack of jobs also denied it a strong tax base and put the tax burden disproportionately on homeowners. Third, the only land left that could accommodate development adequate to produce needed jobs and tax revenues was Assembly Square and the Inner Belt.

The benefits and burdens associated with different development patterns were investigated and their economic requirements, market potential, and environmental impacts were analyzed.

Degradation changed Assembly positive features deriving from its close position to the city center into negative ones, but it emerged that Assembly Square was the best

development site left in Greater Boston for high-density development. Its \$6 billion in infrastructure investment, second only to Boston's financial district, includes the Orange Line, three commuter rails, Routes 28 and 38, the Mystic River, and I-93. It's less than 15 minutes from downtown, the airport, financial centers, Harvard and MIT.

If developed only as parkland, Assembly Square would be a permanent fiscal and physical burden, instead, housing development would create a greater burden, offering more than new tax revenues, together with large retail stores.

It has been considered that office development can create about four times the amount of jobs and taxes per thousand square feet of building as retail can, and ten-to-twenty times the amount of jobs and taxes per acre of land; yet offices create only about one-tenth the traffic. Developed as an office-based urban district with supporting housing, retail, a hotel, and cultural facilities, Assembly Square could produce \$30 million in net taxes and 30,000 new jobs. Because office buildings can afford more public amenities, it could also produce 30 acres of new open space.

Another point was that developers would not undertake projects unless they have assurance that surrounding properties will be well designed, supported by sufficient transportation infrastructure, and not include uses that would undermine their investment; that is why they required a master plan.

The citizen activists chose for themselves the name "Mystic View Task Force." And began to formulate a vision, to be shared with elected officials. Candidates Dorothy Kelly Gay and Joe Curtatone both endorsed it, during the special election to replace Mayor Capuano. Dorothy Kelly Gay had been elected Mayor and attended the Mystic View vision.

While the former owners of the mall settled in the area manipulated to avoid



Fig. 7 – In 1998, Mystic View Task Force formed to advocate for community interests in future Assembly projects, photo taken in September 2018

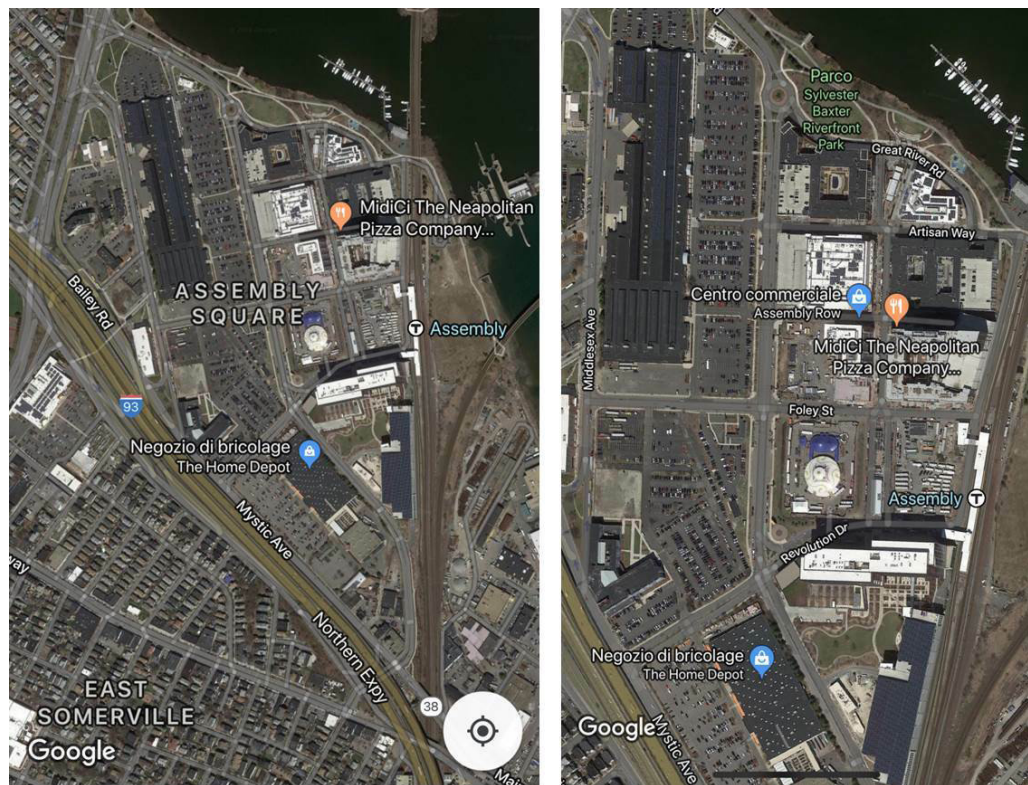
regulatory requirements, IKEA undertook every regulatory process required of them. Yet, they initially encountered more resistance from city government than did the mall developers. The world's largest furniture retailer bought 17 acres of waterfront property in 1999 for \$19.5 million. The company submitted plans for their typical sprawling, windowless, blue box, but the mayor and her staff rejected them.

IKEA offered new plans in June 2000 that called for a larger store. The blue box would become cream-colored brick, and IKEA would build a little league field next to

the store, to make it more sustainable. Publicly, the mayor’s spokesman said she was “pleased with IKEA’s revisions, but she would like to see more”. Six months later, IKEA submitted its “final proposal”. Mayor Gay rejected the plan because, “it did not include sufficient mixed use on their vital waterfront acreage”. For the activists like the Mystic View Task Force an IKEA store’s traffic impacts were fundamentally incompatible with Somerville’s interests. Therefore, IKEA should have not received a permit unless it was willing to develop a new model for doing business in an urban setting, as in England.

In 2000, the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA) acquired title to a 9.3-acre former railroad parcel in Assembly Square and issued an RFP for developers. At the same time, the City initiated an extensive public planning process, producing the “2000 Planning Study” which set out a new vision for Assembly Square as a 24-hour mixed use district. In 2004, investors voted to sell the areas to Federal Realty Investment Trust for \$64 million.

Fig. 8 – Federal Realty’s areas, Google Maps, captured in September 2018



Policies: The approach adopted to address the challenges – “Somerville Vision 2010-2030”

Aim of the city was to reconnect and revitalize marginalized areas, with a special focus on Assembly Square for its need of being redefined in terms of urban space and uses.

For this purpose, in 2009, there was a call to residents: “Help create Somerville’s

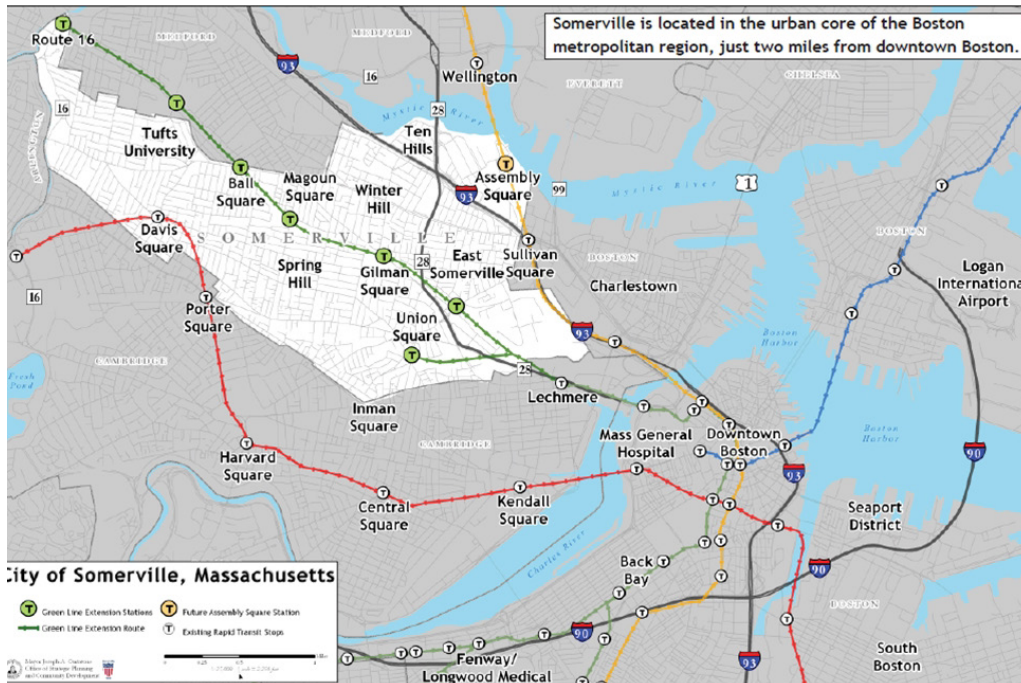


Fig. 9 – Overview of the “SomerVision Comprehensive Plan”, April 2012, p. 13

long-range plan”, that driven by a sixty person steering committee and hundreds of participants at public meetings led to “SomerVision 2010-2030”², the City’s first comprehensive plan. Shared values and long-term goals have been vital steps for the next 20 years development.

Each neighborhood answered to the plan’s indications. For the first time in Somerville, policy has been put before physical development. The “Vision for the Future” chapter details the programs that would have helped the community to reach goals for equity, public realm, housing, economy and mobility.

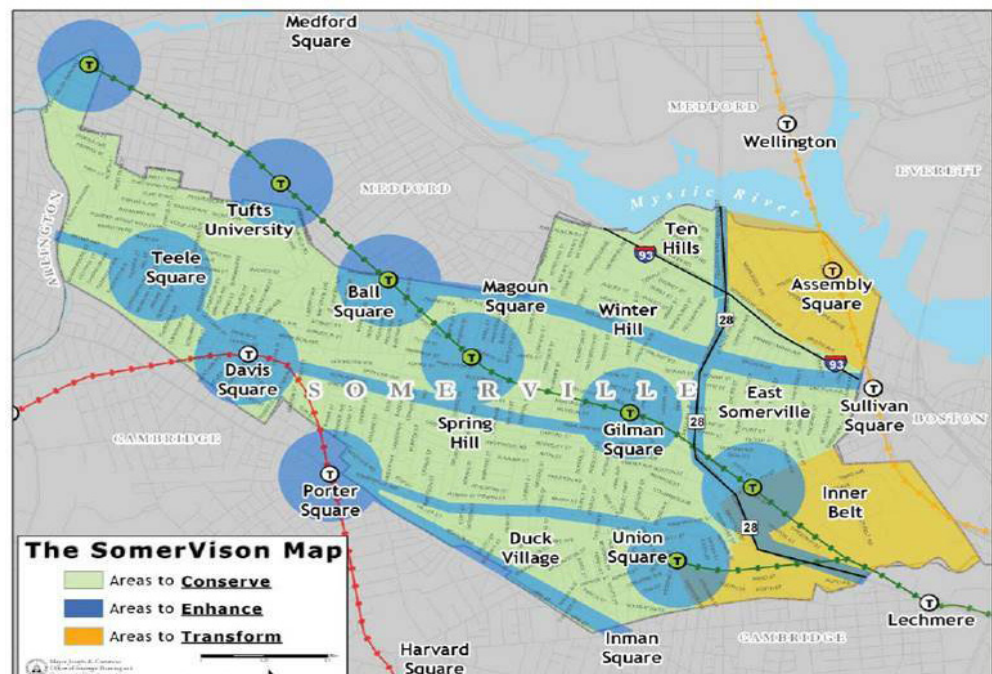
“SomerVision” came from shared learning between residents, the business community, nonprofit groups and public officials. It was based on a series of research reports prepared by the Mayor’s Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development (OSPCD) in which information available on demographics, economics, housing, transportation and land use was assembled to help the citizens to understand and participate in the Comprehensive Planning process. After these Trends Reports were completed, ten open community workshops were held to discuss the implications for the city’s future.

The Comprehensive Plan is an easy-to-use guide for future growth and development in the City. The choice was to include both neighborhood and capital plans with a broader view on diversity, community, economy, accessibility, sustainability and innovation. The horizon considered was 2030, to guide decisions though a 20 years process.

The plan is the first to have a participatory, long-range and inter-disciplinary view about Somerville’s future with a specific focus about five themes such as neighborhoods, commercial corridors, squares and growth districts, resources, transportation and infrastructure, housing.

The “Small Business & Entrepreneurship” policy has connected the five themes

Fig. 10 – The “Somervision Map” of the “Somervision Comprehensive Plan”, April 2012, p. 17



to protect and promote a diverse and interesting mix of small-scale businesses in Somerville’s neighborhoods, establishing policies, regulations and fees for selected activities.

The main aim, especially in a neglected area as Assembly, was to allow these changings ensuring that appropriate businesses could be easily permitted in designated areas, such as close to transit stations. To allow it the review of zoning regulation has been a priority. To drive a smart growth process the city had to identify a community vision and give the possibility to innovative businesses and start-up to locate in a friendly and inclusive live/work environment.

Governance architecture and participation procedures

A leading role in the Assembly Square process has been played by the economic development office, which is a division of the office of strategical planning and community development with a special interest in the fields of housing, planning, transportation and economic development. The team is still today made of six full time people who work on real estate development with developers coming to Somerville, on urban renewal plans and project management to make sure that the processes driven even by other forces are focused on the administration aims. It has worked with other divisions on innovative economic tools such as District Improvement Financing (DIF) or I-cubed and community grant contributions. Other than real estate, the business development sector is focused on attracting new companies to Assembly. The third component of the office is workforce development to prepare the residents to work in the companies that the city is trying to attract (Ben Sommer³, 2018).

The framework of the development was made of new strategic policies from the government of the city and of new tools to drive the changings. First of all, the “Innovation Fund” or “I-Fund”, a \$1 million loan fund for Somerville businesses with innovative products or business models, has been used to help promising businesses move to or stay in Somerville.

In 2017, the City of Somerville, Greentown Labs, and the Northeast Advanced Manufacturing Consortium launched Form to Factory, a cross-sector partnership to support the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ advanced manufacturing industry. It is meant to create new workforce pipelines and connect local manufacturers with innovative hardware startups. The support given ranges from ideation through prototyping, to training new young specialists to be in manufacturing. The state’s Economic Development Administration’s Regional Innovation Strategies grant program is funding it for a \$1-million three-year initiative. The only restriction is that the company must be based in Middlesex, Suffolk or Essex Counties.

Moreover, a new concept of building has been experimented with the name of FabVille, a public fabrication space within Somerville High School that complements the collection of professional, semi-professional, and artist-focused spaces already available in and around the city.

Always in 2017 the Innovation and Opportunity Lab has been established to complete the innovation scenery and to give to it solidity. It is a Mayoral advisory committee composed of technologists, community leaders, and Somerville residents. The committee has the missions of building the innovation ecosystem of Somerville through creative policies, partnerships, and programs and connecting this wave of innovation within the neighborhoods⁴.

These new solutions enhanced the rise of an innovator spirit around residents and entrepreneurs, which led to animate the interest towards the redefinition of the Assembly Square area; the fact that it was a blank canvas made it even more valuable.

Start-up of the initiative and its following modifications

From 2010, the 45 acres designed with the name of “Assembly Square” went through a difficult process to find who could be interested in developing them through a Urban Renewal Process⁵ that was driven by the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA) in charge of creating reports and documents to let the city be able to take the grants and to acquire private land (Sunayana Thomas⁶, 2018).

Between 2011 and 2012 a request for proposal was held for 9,3 acres which correspond to the development now visible in Assembly Square. Federal Realty still owns from

DIF is an infrastructure financing tool

• DIF = District Improvement Financing

• DIF fundamentals

1. Infrastructure unlocks development, bringing in new tax revenue to offset borrowing costs
2. DIF makes infrastructure affordable in the short term through better borrowing terms By shifting significant borrowing costs out 3 years, it aligns debt service payments with anticipated development tax revenue

The Assembly Square DIF is working

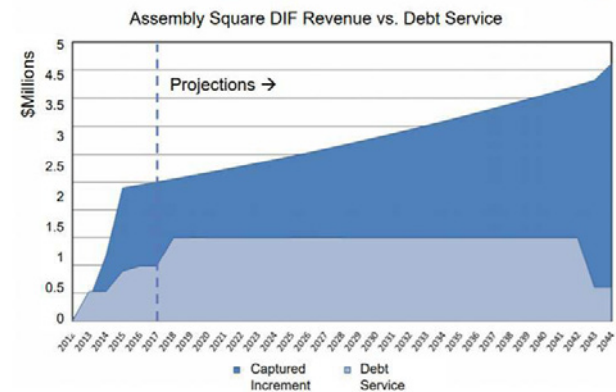


Fig. 11 – Introduction to District Improvement Financing (DIF), City Staff & RKG Associates, October 11, 2017



Fig. 12 – Partners Healthcare’s headquarters in Assembly Square, photo taken in September 2018

Kmart place to Partners Healthcare. The presence of Partners HealthCare’s in Assembly is ushering in a new wave of development on Somerville’s east side⁷.

Where it is now it was supposed to be IKEA that after an exchange of land that would have pushed the big box far from the Mystic River, has renounced settling in the area. One of the reason that made it possible to have Partners Healthcare there was the Orange Line, which came there in 2012. The city has been able to get it there through the use of I-cubed – Infrastructure Investment Incentive.

The city has assembled the site paying the market value for those properties from different owners and the developer had to pay all the other costs associated with the project. The city of Somerville and the private developer asked to have the extension and the new stop of the Orange Line, the first new MBTA station in 27 years, to the Commonwealth in conjunction with the MBTA. They could have developed it with or without it, but the magnitude of the project would have been smaller. Federal Realty said “if we don’t get it there is no project to the scale that we want, in terms of apartments, number of jobs (30 000 expected) and open space”. A public-private partnership was created before asking for proposals and there were contractual agreements with Federal Realty to give directions on the project in order to achieve all the city requirements, represented by SRA along the whole process.

In Assembly Square Community Advocacy Groups played even a fundamental role of supervisors, ensuring that the best intentions of the residents and users of the area were captured, as job count, open space and facilities.

The “Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection” has had a role in the preliminary exploration of the conditions of the area and in the remediation process as in every large scale project that could have an impact on the surrounding environment. For this particular project the developers paid even for the remediation process. Union Square is different; the city gave a contribution. In general it depends on which is the amount of city owned land and on the developer strengths. Another aim was to complete the environmental impact report that had to be signed up by the State to prove what will be done to remediate.

The trick was: “you have all this land close to Boston, but how do you market it, how do you make it attractive for people and companies? There are many other places, why this one? The Orange Line station has given answers to this” (Ben Sommer⁸, 2018).

The urban context today and in progress

Federal Realty decided to build a neighborhood offering a “great environment”, with the challenge of creating something out of nothing. Assembly at the end of the development will comprise 1,800 apartments, 635,000 square feet of retail space and

2.8 million square feet of office space.

The project had to answer to the South Boston Innovation District in which it was recognized a sense of desolation and alienation, instead of what the architecture critic Robert Campbell calls a human touch. Unfortunately, this impersonality is even in Assembly Square and due to the absence of an architectural selection of firms' projects.

Assembly Row's development is divided into phases so that Federal Realty has more control on the initiatives. Today according to Ben Sommer we are at 40%. Federal Realty owns 66 acres in Assembly Square including stores, restaurants, a boutique hotel, a gym, and more office space, and apartments. A large portion of one of Assembly Row's current parking lots will vanish, and the neighborhood will fill out.

The Federal Realty team has paid attention to pedestrian space, especially the sidewalks. Many young families who live in Somerville and Charlestown are reaching the area and bringing strollers that need the sidewalks to be wide enough.

Currently, a majority of the neighborhood's retail stores are intentionally outlets even of well-known brands (J.Crew, Nike, Banana Republic, Saks Off Fifth). Federal Realty didn't want to bring in high-end retailers during a time that after the recession, everyone was asking to save money (William Shelton, 2006).

Assembly Square has mainly attracted 20 to 30 millennials who want the convenience of city living along with easy access to public transit and the highway (Route 93). People can get to their job at Amazon in Cambridge's Kendall Square in 35 minutes. Though it's pricey, it's less costly than downtown Boston. The more than 1,600 residents of Assembly Row comprise approximately 2 percent of Somerville's population of just over 81,000.

At the Montaje, a 20 story building and Somerville's first residential tower with a six-story structure with apartments and retail attached, rents range from \$1,900 a month for a studio, to \$4,200 a month or more for a three-bedroom. One-bedroom apartments start at \$2,500.

A lottery for the 56 affordable units in Montaje has taken place in 2017; they ranged from \$767 a month for the seven available one-bedroom apartments to \$1,572 for the affordable three-bedroom apartment.

Two other apartment buildings, AVA and Avalon, opened in 2014 with 56 affordable units. The number of rental units at Assembly Row will be brought to 1,387 (Gail Waterhouse, 2017).

The retail shops, restaurants, bank, supermarket, movie theater and the proximity to the MBTA's Assembly stop on the Orange Line are what have drawn an increasing number of people to move to the area.

The evolution of the area

Evaluating the outcomes of the initiative it has to be noticed that there are no residents in this area other than what has been build; it's a completely new population. The

citizens affected by this project the most are East Somerville ones and Ten Hills. The Mystic view task force represented the most sensitive folk that lived in other parts of Somerville and included environmental groups. They have had a huge focus pointed on the Mystic riverside and green areas in terms of monetary contributions to make it a more comfortable space.

Creative enterprises and individuals from the creative workforce are a defining characteristic of the local economy, culture, and image of the city. However, the arts and creative economy is reliant on inexpensive space to think, create, publish, rehearse, perform, sell, and teach. Policies should be established to both preserve existing buildings with the characteristics creative industries need to function and create new floor space that remains accessible and affordable to artists and other creative individuals.

The concept that the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development has embraced is that “Space means Work”. This has driven the policy decisions surrounding the Arts and Creative Economy in Somerville. It first came from a portion of Somerville’s artist community based according who without space for creative enterprises and members of the creative workforce to do their work, the sustained and noticeable presence of artists and creative individuals in the community would have disappeared.

Relevance of the experience

As construction continues, and the area moves toward becoming a recognized, if not geographically contiguous, part of Somerville, the developers hope to demonstrate both a boost for the city’s employment, as well its affordable housing portion. The focus on innovation economy seems to be the proper answer to years of abandonment and lack of an urban planning strategy. The involvement of Somerville’s citizens and the perspective of attracting new residents is confirmed by the success of recurring events⁹ such as Riverfest that annually animates the Mystic River’s waterfront. Livability and the definition of well-designed public spaces between shops, restaurants and apartments are making possible to compact an example of “in-between city” as it has been proudly underlined by the Mayor Curtatone, who called Assembly Square Somerville’s “newest, greatest neighborhood”.

ENDNOTES

¹ About Somerville”, <https://www.somervillema.gov>, accessed October 2018

² In 2009, the city’s community started a three-year process of discussion, debate, and big ideas that culminated in SomerVision 2030, the City’s comprehensive plan for 2010-2030. Now, after 10 years into the plan’s scope, Somerville has decided to revisit SomerVision and extend its vision to 2040

³ Economic Development Specialist, interviewed at Somerville city hall in September 2018

⁴ Innovation economy in Somerville, <https://www.somervillema.gov>, accessed October 2018

⁵ The urban renewal is a state process, in which the state oversees through DIF and TIF, accompanied by state policy and investments

⁶ Senior Economic Development Planner, interviewed at Somerville city hall in September 2018

⁷ Partners selected the Assembly site from 55 contenders because of its size, cost, and proximity to public transportation

⁸ Economic Development Specialist, interviewed at Somerville city hall in September 2018

⁹ Assembly Row has hosted recurring events, like art lessons, a handmade arts market, outdoor movies on the waterfront, yoga classes and a run club sponsored by Reebok and Nike.

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IMAGES SOURCES

Figure 1: Somerville in 1884, Pos. Perkins - Heliotype Printing Co., 1894

Figure 2: Ford assembly plant that named the area Assembly Square, Boston.com, July 19, 2012

Figure 3: Community Renewal Program: Plan of Development, Somerville, MA; The Planning Services Group, Inc.

Figure 4: The construction of the Interstate 93, June 13, 1971, Photo by Ellis Herwig, The Boston Globe via Getty Images

Figure 5: Somerville residents block I-93 construction, June 1970, Record American Photo, Leo Tierney via flickr

Figure 6: “Assembly Square Revitalization Plan,” a 20-year urban renewal plan, 1979

Figure 7: In 1998, Mystic View Task Force formed to advocate for community interests in future Assembly projects, photo taken in September 2018

Figure 8: Federal Realty’s areas, Google Maps, captured in September 2018

Figure 9: Overview of the “Somerville Comprehensive Plan”, April 2012, p. 13

Figure 10: The “Somerville Map” of the “Somerville Comprehensive Plan”, April 2012, p. 17

Figure 11: Introduction to District Improvement Financing (DIF), City Staff & RKG Associates, October 11, 2017

Figure 12: Partners Healthcare’s headquarters in Assembly Square, photo taken in September 2018

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