

Patrick Braga:

Good morning. My name is Patrick Braga. I am a second year Master in Urban Planning student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. It is a delight to speak this morning, which also happens to be my mother's birthday.

Patrick Braga:

I often find that city skylines appear quite majestic at night. Perhaps it is because of their seeming capacity to collapse all the stars in the sky into fragmented arrays of light closer to the horizon. When I'm looking out at the Boston and Cambridge skylines from the Mass. Ave. bridge over the Charles River, I like to remind myself that under those lights are people at work, in thought, and at rest. They are our neighbors, whether they live next door in Central Square or Roxbury, a bit farther out in Arlington or Newton, or if they commute by train from Lowell or Lawrence.

Patrick Braga:

Yet beneath this otherwise attractive landscape is the unfortunate fact that so many people are burdened by the cost of housing. Although our economy has been experiencing tremendous growth, our regional core especially has been adding jobs faster than housing units. Meanwhile, the rules that govern the creation of new housing in Cambridge and Boston are outdated. Development ordinances here are a palimpsest, layers of shifting attitudes about cities, shaped from times when Boston and Cambridge were losing population, all the way to dialogues mediating historic preservation and the creative impulses of modern architecture. The fixity of the rules that shape our cities, ultimately, it makes it difficult for us to respond dynamically to changing conditions.

Patrick Braga:

During my first year here at Harvard, I attended a public meeting in City Hall and offered a comment about a policy order, since any member of the public may speak before officials on record. For three minutes afterward, I was approached by a member of A Better Cambridge, a local housing advocacy organization, to join their policy committee. I eagerly accepted and became involved for a year in a local campaign that I'll never forget. Cambridge was considering a law called the Affordable Housing Overlay, which would allow four-story buildings to be built as a legal right anywhere in the city, and on major corridors up to eight stories, so long as rents were capped at levels affordable to households making the Boston area median income.

Patrick Braga:

The aim was to expedite production of housing, to help Cambridge retain and attract teachers, police officers, firefighters, service workers, and other working families and older adults of moderate and strained means. New units would prioritize housing long-time Cambridge residents at risk of being displaced by rising rents. And unlike our current system, where a disgruntled opponent of affordable housing can jeopardize a project so easily, a project following the rules would receive approval unless it violated building codes or dimensional regulations.

Patrick Braga:

I found this proposal sensible, especially since attractive four-story buildings exist all over Cambridge. This is a result of an earlier 1920s law, which stipulated four-story buildings with courtyards throughout the city, so long as the building were made of brick or stone. Other laws will protect these historic

streetscapes from demolition. Any existing building, for instance, could be subdivided into affordable apartments under the proposed overlay.

Patrick Braga:

Nonetheless, the proposal garnered vocal opposition, especially from Cantabrigians who own the place where they live. Homeowners are about one third of Cambridge residents, and I commend their high levels of local civic engagement. Yet, attending a Planning Board or City Council meeting, one would imagine that the proportion of homeowners versus renters in Cambridge were the inverse. Granted, I still believe that the city should have led the proposal with more illustrations for the public to understand how this new housing would look, but it remains true that voices of people who rent or who are experiencing housing cost burdens are frankly underrepresented in City Hall. Last year, City Council didn't bring the ordinance to a vote, but at the last local election, Cambridge residents, myself included, voted for a majority pro-housing City Council. Now, the Affordable Housing Overlay is again making its way through the policy process, and I hope to see it passed into law in the near future.

Patrick Braga:

When any city considers a proposal to make housing more abundant, I urge us all to welcome new neighbors so that we may arrive at the same conclusion as the Rev. Thomas Merton did during a visit to downtown Louisville, Kentucky. And I quote: "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. And if only everybody could realize this! There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Sally Hammel:

Let us pray. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.