



## SOMERVILLE: INNOVATION CITY

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### 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 Somerville, especially in the areas of Assembly Square, Union Square and Boynton Yards. Those have been considered the proper field to test 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 main consequence today is that the city 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

## 1 THE EVOLUTION OF THE CITY OF SOMERVILLE DURING THE YEARS

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.

As a part of Charlestown, areas existing in modern-day Somerville such as Union Square were critical military positions in the American Revolution.

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 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 Somerville<sup>1</sup>. By the early 1900s, Somerville itself had become a densely packed urban area, featuring immigrants from across Europe. Public transit made Assembly Square's thousands of jobs easily accessible. 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.

## 2 THE STARTING CONDITIONS OF THE AREA

Two events changed the city. 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 converted abandoned factories to residential uses, which produced only 60% of the tax revenues, but twice the costs of commercial uses. Secondly, the Commonwealth drew up plans for Interstate 93 (I-93) that would rip out the heart of East Somerville and isolate Assembly Square (William Shelton, 2006). Neighbors formed "Somerville Citizens for Adequate Transportation" to fight them, while the city administration opposed.

By 1976, Assembly Square was becoming a ghost town. In 1978, city officials began preparing a 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 site for a new mall was the old Ford plant. FBI agents caught them in a securities-fraud and tax-evasion scheme, so a decade after it opened, the business began a decline that would end with its closing.

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

### 3.1 THE CHALLENGE: DEVELOP AN INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

Somerville has always been suffering of the competition with its most fortunate and globally known neighbor; Boston. It had to face and answer to these Boston's effective policies that were creating incredibly various scenarios, such as Seaport by the ocean, with its high-rise development and Roxbury, with its attention to social inclusiveness. 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, referring to areas in which large scale mixed-use development is centered around major anchor institutions and related firms, entrepreneurs and 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. Large companies, universities help spread the fixed costs of research and development and help support a fledgling innovation ecosystem, which is created when a synergistic relationship rises between people, firms, and places that facilitate idea generation and accelerate commercialization. Providing a physical environment where this can take place, requires a continuum of spaces for companies.

### 3.2 A NEW VISION FOR SOMERVILLE AND ASSEMBLY SQUARE

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. Second, regional grants could only meet a fraction of the city's needs. 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 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 and 30 acres of new open space. Another point was that developers won't 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; so they required a master plan.

The citizen activists chose for themselves the name “Mystic View Task Force” and began to formulate a vision. Candidates Dorothy Kelly Gay and Joe Curtatone both endorsed it, during the election to replace Mayor Capuano (Dorothy Kelly Gay became Mayor).



**Fig. 1 Mystic View Task Force main focus area, photo taken in September 2018**

IKEA bought 17 acres of waterfront property in 1999 for \$19.5 million. Mayor Gay rejected its plans because, “it did not include sufficient mixed use on their vital waterfront acreage”. For the activists like the Mystic View Task Force the store’s traffic impacts were fundamentally incompatible with Somerville’s interests.

In 2000, the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA) acquired title to a 9.3-acre former railroad parcel and issued a RFP for developers. 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.

#### 4.1 POLICIES: THE APPROACH ADOPTED TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES – “SOMERVISION 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 long-range plan”, that driven by a sixty person steering committee and hundreds of participants at public meetings led to “SomervilleVision 2010-2030”<sup>2</sup>, 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. In 2015, the residents of Union Square wanted the same process to inform their future. The resulting document is the Union Square Neighborhood Plan; the first neighborhood plan in Somerville to put policy before physical development. Union Square residents cared deeply about their community and wanted to make sure that over time, no matter what type of growth happens, that Union Square would have been a place for everyone. 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.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2009, the city's community started a three-year process of discussions that culminated in SomervilleVision 2030; now, after 10 years into the plan’s scope, Somerville has decided to revisit it and extend its vision to 2040.

“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. 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 through 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 to protect and promote a diverse and interesting mix of small-scale businesses, establishing policies, regulations and fees for selected activities.

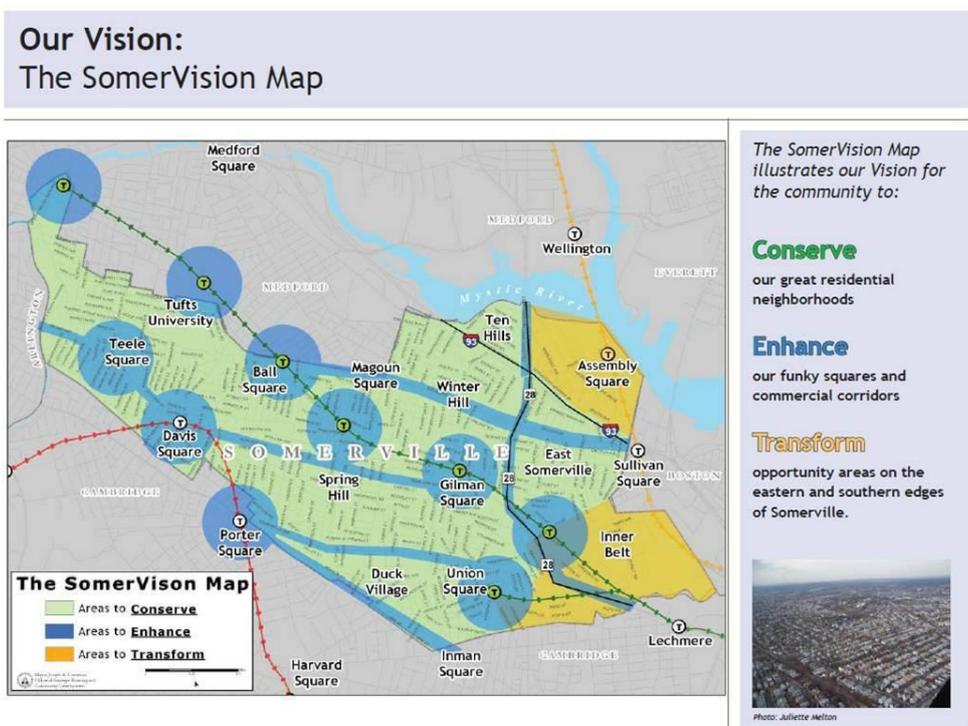


Fig. 2 The “SomerVision Map” of the “SomerVision Comprehensive Plan”, April 2012, p. 17

The main aim was to allow these changes ensuring that appropriate businesses could be easily permitted in designated areas, such as close to transit stations. As a consequence, 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.

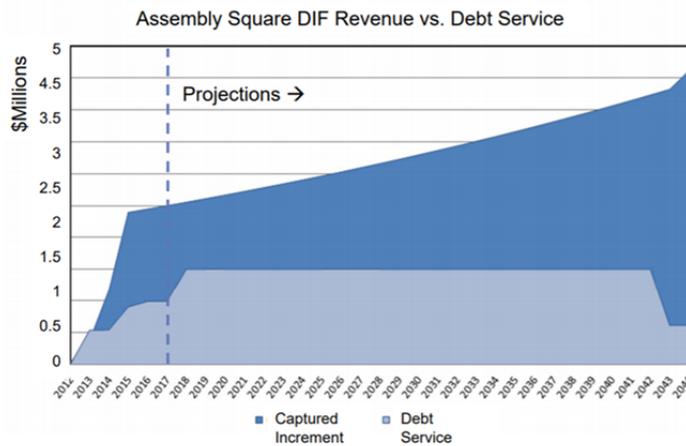
## 4.2 GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE AND PARTICIPATION PROCEDURES

A leading role has been played by the economic development office, 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 with developers, on urban renewal plans and project management to make sure that the processes driven even by other forces are focused on 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, it is focused on attracting new companies to Somerville. The third component of the office is workforce development to prepare residents to work in the companies that the city is trying to attract (Ben Sommer<sup>3</sup>, 2018).

### 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. 3 Introduction to DIF, City Staff & RKG Associates, October 11, 2017**

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.

<sup>3</sup> Economic Development Specialist, interviewed at Somerville city hall in September 2018.

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 for companies 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 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 with the mission of building the innovation ecosystem of Somerville through creative policies, partnerships, programs and connecting this wave of innovation within the neighborhoods<sup>4</sup>.

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 city.

## 5.1 ASSEMBLY: 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 Process<sup>5</sup> 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 Thomas<sup>6</sup>, 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 Kmart place to Partners Healthcare (where it was supposed to be IKEA). The presence of Partners HealthCare's in Assembly is ushering in a new wave of development on Somerville's east side<sup>7</sup> and it was made possible thank to the Orange Line, which came there in 2012 through I-cubed, the 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. Federal Realty said "if we don't get it there is no project to the scale that we want" (Ben Sommer, 2018). 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.

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

<sup>5</sup> The urban renewal is a state process, in which the state overseas through DIF and TIF, accompanied by state policy and investments.

<sup>6</sup> Senior Economic Development Planner, interviewed at Somerville city hall in September 2018.

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

In Assembly Square Community Advocacy Groups played 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" followed the preliminary exploration of the conditions of the area and the remediation process paid by the developer.

## 5.2 ASSEMBLY: THE URBAN CONTEXT TODAY AND IN PROGRESS

Federal Realty decided to build a neighborhood with the challenge of creating something out of nothing. Assembly will comprise 1,800 apartments, 635,000 square feet of retail space and 2.8 million square feet of office space (today according to Ben Sommer we are at 40% of the process). The project had to answer to the South Boston Innovation District in which it was recognized a sense of desolation and alienation. The Federal Realty team has paid attention to pedestrian space, especially the sidewalks. A majority of the neighborhood's retail stores are intentionally outlets, to respect people's needs after the recession (William Shelton, 2006).

Assembly Square has attracted people who want the convenience of city living along with easy access to public transit and the highway. Though it's pricey, rents range from \$1,900 a month for a studio, to \$4,200 a month for a three-bedroom, it's less costly than downtown Boston. The more than 1,600 residents comprise approximately 2 percent of Somerville's population of just over 81,000.

## 6 UNION SQUARE AND BOYNTON YARDS: RELATED AND FUTURE INITIATIVES

The city is now looking for new proposals to improve the underused potential of other neighborhoods, focusing on innovation in arts and creativity. Union Square, thanks to a planned new stop of the green line, is going to benefit of a new transit oriented development comparable to Assembly Square's one. The plan wanted to boost the commercial corridors in the area, but they are mostly still to be built. Meanwhile, industrial agglomerations with plenty of empty space as Inner Belt and Boynton Yards in Ward Two could benefit from DIF unlocking development through infrastructure, bringing in new tax revenue to offset borrowing costs.

Union Square's arts and creative economy is a diverse collection of sole-proprietors, small firms, and larger corporations integrated throughout the neighborhood. By 2011, Somerville Open Studios became the largest one-weekend open studios in the entire country with over 390 participants. Companies like Greentown Labs and Artisans Asylum along with hundreds of individuals and small start-ups have clustered together to form a community of innovation.

As Union Square and Boynton Yards evolve into an urban employment center, many of the existing buildings that creative enterprises call home today will feel market pressures to meet the demand for housing or even office space. New development so should support an expanded presence of the arts and creative economy by including space for these uses in new construction. With the help of Responsible Real Estate Developers and Investors, the City and community currently have a better understanding of the priorities for community benefits and each large-scale developer will contribute to community benefits as a part of their permitting process. The Economic Development office continues working with landowners and developers in Union Square and Boynton Yards to increase efforts marketing the Square as a viable alternative for anchor institutions to Kendall Square and the Innovation District.

Open space is created by zoning requirements and through zoning and city acquisition, renovation and reuse. The neighborhood plan identifies 13.5 new acres of open space through private funds and reclaiming wasted space, while the other 1.5 acres needed to reach the SomerVision target goal will be created by the city.

Greentown Labs, an innovative idea incubator for industries of clean energy has moved from Boston's innovation district to the Somerville Innovation City. It has brought 24 start-ups to Union Square in 33,000 square feet and was facilitated through a working capital loan that utilizes Community Development Block Grant Funds, agreeing to hire Somerville residents in all available job opportunities. "People are figuring out that this isn't the innovation district or the innovation center—Somerville is the Innovation City. We are a city that prides itself on innovation, creativity and originality," Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone said in 2013. "We have made it a priority as part of our SomerVision plan to bring in companies like this".

## 10 RELEVANCE OF THE EXPERIENCE

The focus on innovation economy seems to be the proper answer to years of abandonment and lack of an urban planning strategy. Within the whole city creative enterprises and individuals from the creative workforce are a defining characteristic of the local economy and culture. 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 most recent policy decisions surrounding the Arts and Creative Economy in Somerville which will lead the near future of the city.

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### WEB SITES

[www.somervillema.gov](http://www.somervillema.gov)

### AUTHOR PROFILE

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Awarded in 2011 by the President of the Italian Republic of the title "Alfiere del Lavoro". Engineer and PhD student at "Sapienza" University of Rome in "Infrastructures and Transport", with curriculum "Planning of Transport and the Territory". Researcher in mobility at "Northeastern University" of Boston for the "Sapienza" FOCUS unit on the topic of "Innovation Districts", as part of the "MAPS-LED" research, "Marie Skłodowska-Curie RISE", funded by the EU program "Horizon 2020".