



CULTURE  
HOUSE

# CultureHouse Harvard

## Impact Report



# CultureHouse Harvard

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# HARVARD SQUARE

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# Introduction



In November of 2019, just before Thanksgiving, something unusual started happening in Harvard Square. In the center of the Plaza, people peered through newly-cleared windows to see hanging balls of light, a couch, games, and even a swing. Passersby cupped their hands around their faces as they looked through the glass to try and figure out exactly what was going on. For many, it was the first time in years they had thought about the structure, the longtime home of the recently-closed Out of Town News.

All was revealed on December 3rd, when we opened CultureHouse Harvard to the public. In the old newspaper stand, we created a pop-up community space that welcomed all and served as an experimental home for trying out new uses of urban public space. Over the course of the eight months we were in the Kiosk, we facilitated inspiring interactions, learned invaluable lessons, and created positive impact. At CultureHouse Harvard, we created a space where unhoused people were treated with dignity, tested out numerous different uses of the Kiosk space, and introduced a human presence to the Square. We also faced numerous challenges; including navigating the intense unmet needs of the homeless

community and, lest we forget, a global pandemic.

Though these barriers were not always easy to overcome, our strong partners were what made it possible. We extend our most sincere gratitude to the City of Cambridge, who not only made the project possible but also were always our champions. We are deeply indebted to all our staff, volunteers, and collaborators who were critical to operating the space day-to-day. To all our visitors—whether you stayed for five minutes for five hours—thank you for engaging in our experiment. We hope you had as much fun as we did.

Though CultureHouse Harvard was a pop-up, the impact we created and the lessons we learned are long-lasting. Every day we were open, we were conducting in-depth research through data collection and observations—amalgamated and analyzed in this report. This window into our experience opening and operating CultureHouse Harvard serves as an enduring documentation of our time in the Harvard Square Kiosk. We will use this report to inform our future work and hope it will be helpful to others creating social infrastructure in their own communities.










#### We are

-  A living room for the community
-  An urban design test kitchen
-  A third space
-  An indoor public park
-  A host for regular programming

#### How to create a Culture-house

-  Create your mission
-  Connect with partners
-  Select a location
-  Build
-  Open



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9:40  
CAMBRIDGE SAVINGS BANK

Hey!  
We're CultureHouse, a  
pop-up community  
space.

Looking for a  
place to  
work?

@BTV





**Context**



# Context

## Site

### Harvard Square

Harvard Square is a major commercial district in the City of Cambridge, which grew alongside Harvard University over the past three hundred years. While still under the influence of the university, the Square has taken on a life of its own. Its bookstores, cafes, and music venues fostered a countercultural scene in the mid-1900s. More recently, gentrification and the proliferation of national chain stores have changed the tenor of the area. Harvard Square today serves a wide variety of people—including residents, students, tourists, and unhoused people.

### Harvard Square Kiosk

The CultureHouse Harvard pop-up site, often referred to as the Out of Town News or Harvard Square Kiosk, sits in the center of Harvard Square. Built in 1925 by the Boston Elevated Railway, the building was originally a headhouse for the Harvard subway station. The building quickly became a central landmark for the Square. Next to the headhouse, Sheldon Cohen would hawk newspapers and eventually go on to open the now-famous Out of Town News in 1954.



Out of Town News moved into the old subway headhouse in 1983 after the new Harvard Square MBTA station was opened as part of the Red Line Extension to Alewife. Initial plans to raze the structure during construction were thwarted when the Cambridge Historical Commission nominated it to the National Register of Historic Places. The City of Cambridge, who owns the building, renovated the structure to be a newsstand and executed a twenty-year lease with Out of Town News. Ten years later, Cohen sold the business to Hudson County News, who ran it until they handed ownership to Muckey's Corporation. Muckey's Corporation operated the newsstand until it closed on October 31, 2019.

### Present and future of the Kiosk



*Conceptual render of the renovated Kiosk.*

Over the years, the Harvard Square Plaza and the Kiosk have started to show their age and are both in need of extensive renovation. In 2017, the City of Cambridge founded a Working Group to develop a vision for the future of the Plaza and the Kiosk. Informed by community feedback, the group created a plan to renovate the Plaza to make it more accessible and to restore the Kiosk to bring it up to modern code. Construction was



anticipated to begin in the summer of 2020, but the start date was delayed.

The renovated Kiosk will include a variety of uses including a Visitor Information Center that will provide materials on Cambridge history and happenings in the community. The Kiosk will also be the home to informal public seating for gatherings, relaxing, sitting, and reading. The City plans to hire an operator to run and program the renovated Kiosk.<sup>1</sup>

While the City had anticipated that Out of Town News would stay open at least until the renovation work began on the Kiosk, the closure of the business in 2019 left an empty building at the heart of Harvard Square. To fill this temporary vacancy, CultureHouse opened a pop-up space in the Kiosk in December 2019.

## Mobility

The Kiosk is very easy to get to. It sits directly on top of the Harvard MBTA station and directly adjacent to the entrance. In addition to Red Line trains, the station is a hub for buses. In the area, there is a network of sidewalks and many walkable areas, including one small pedestrianized street. The Square has several Bluebikes stations, including one very close to the Kiosk. While there are painted bike lanes on many of the surrounding streets, most are unprotected. Due to the complex nature of the intersections in the area, biking is not safe for most riders. While there is a taxi stand next to the Kiosk and some parking available in the neighborhood, most people bike, walk, or take public transit.



The Harvard Square area has a Walk, Transit, and Bike Score of 98, 82, 97, respectively.

## Streetscape



The buildings around the Plaza area are generally human-scale and well-dimensioned for vibrant public life. With varied facades and street-level activation, the buildings create a welcoming environment. On the northeast side of the Square, the center of the Harvard University campus stands prominently.

The triangular Plaza is boarded on two sides by multi-lane roads. These roads often have heavy traffic, making it sometimes difficult to have a conversation outside over the noise of vehicles. On the west side of the Plaza, a super-crosswalk provides lots of space for pedestrians to cross, but given the volume of pedestrians and high speed of traffic, it can be quite dangerous. The bike facilities are also lacking in this area, especially given the large number of trucks that pass through. Both a pedestrian and a cyclist were struck and killed by truck drivers around this intersection 2019 and 2020 respectively. If the street was pedestrianized, the Square would be safer and better-connected.

## Social infrastructure

### Activities

With a presence on all sides of the Square, many of the activities in the area revolve around Harvard University. Tourists frequently come to the Square for tours of the campus

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Community Development Department. (2020). *Harvard Square Kiosk and Plaza*.



or to walk around Harvard Yard. The Kiosk often acts as a wayfinding point for visitors. There are also many restaurants, music venues, and stores in the area that draw locals and tourists alike.



## Businesses

Harvard Square ranks as the third best retail market in the state with more than 350 businesses in a quarter square mile.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, a trend of local stores closing and being replaced by high-end national retailers has reduced the number of local residents who come to the Square as it increasingly caters to tourists. In addition to Out of Town News, recent closures include The Curious George Shop, Café Pamplona, and Dickson Bros, all stores that have been fixtures in Harvard Square for decades.

## Public space

The Harvard Square Plaza surrounds the Kiosk on all sides, providing ample space for walking and sitting. The plaza includes movable chairs and built-in seating that allows for a wide variety of uses. The prevalence of steps in the plaza does make it difficult for wheelchair users, though the planned renovation is set to fix this issue. The Plaza serves as the main piece of outdoor social infrastructure in the Square.

Nearby the Plaza is the Smith Campus

Center, the main indoor piece of social infrastructure. While technically open to the public, it is clearly a student and tourist-focused space. There are public restrooms in the building, though they are not advertised as such. For most people, the Smith Campus Center can be a nice place to get work done, grab a bite to eat, or relax. However, the space is generally unwelcoming to unhoused people, who are often forcefully removed.

There are a number of other semi-public spaces in the area, almost all of which are owned by Harvard University including Harvard Yard and the Science Center Plaza. These spaces are generally pleasant, though have a clear affiliation with the University.

## Social services

Harvard Square is the center of many social services within the City of Cambridge including the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, Youth on Fire, the Bridge over Troubled Water Medical Van, and the Y2Y youth shelter (which is operated by Harvard Students and typically only open during the school year). These social service organizations and centers are largely devoted to serving and assisting the youth and unhoused populations in Harvard Square through providing beds, meals, drop-in healthcare, and counseling services.

## Harvard University

With a seasonal student population of approximately 20,000 and over 400 acres of land,<sup>3</sup> Harvard University dominates Harvard Square in regard to both public spaces and population. Harvard University is one of the largest land-owners in the Boston area and has the biggest endowment of any university at 39.2 billion. Harvard University's seasonal student population supports businesses in the Square and adds to the overall life of the square. Not only are the students a large contributor to Harvard Square, but the public spaces of Harvard University provide settings for the greater Harvard community to

<sup>2</sup> Harvard Square Business Association. (2020). *Harvard Square Demographic Data*.

<sup>3</sup> Angulu, H. (2018). *How Harvard's Expansion Affects the Communities Around It*.



come together. Common Spaces, an initiative by the University, maintains and provides programming for several outdoor and indoor spaces around the Square.

## Neighborhood

### Greater Harvard Square



*Neighborhood map courtesy of the City of Cambridge.*

Harvard Square is located at the intersection of five of the City of Cambridge's designated neighborhoods; Mid-Cambridge, Riverside, Agassiz-Baldwin, Neighborhood Nine, and West Cambridge. These five neighborhoods are home to just under half of the City's population.<sup>4</sup>

Four out of five of these neighborhoods are whiter than the city as a whole. West Cambridge is particularly unrepresentative of the City's diversity—its population is 84% white and only 2% Black as compared to 67% and 11%, respectively, citywide. Its median household income is \$19,719 higher than the City median and its housing units are majority owner-occupied, compared to a 32% rate citywide. Additionally, 65% of out-of-school West Cambridge adults have Master's, Professional, or Doctoral degrees.

In contrast, Riverside is 63% white and 11% Black, with a median household income of

\$67,700, \$21,276 less than the City median. 67% of its population is between 18-35 and only 21% of its units are owner-occupied. 50% of out-of-school adults have Master's, Professional, or Doctoral degrees, just above the citywide rate of 47%. The area around Harvard Square is home to diverse groups of people, though the residents tend to be whiter and more formally educated than the citywide population.

### Homelessness

The City of Cambridge's Point In Time Homelessness Count from January 2019 found 555 unhoused people; 136 in transitional housing, 361 in emergency shelters, and 58 unsheltered. This number has slightly increased from 2012, when the PIT reported 485 unhoused people.<sup>5</sup> Many unhoused people congregate in Harvard and Central Squares. Harvard Square has a higher population of young unhoused people, due to the presence of youth-focused services.



#### *Homelessness in Cambridge*

**63%** – male

**40%** – Black

**47** – number of unaccompanied youth

### Observations

Most people use the plaza as a way to get across the Square or get into or out of the T station. During a fifteen-minute observation on a sunny day before the opening of CultureHouse Harvard, we counted 164 passersby. There are approximately 650 passersby an hour, with higher numbers during rush hours. That would mean there were 5,200 people passing by the Kiosk each day during the eight hours CultureHouse was open. Of the passersby, 55% were male and 45% were female. 40% were between the

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge Community Development Department. (2019). *Cambridge Neighborhood Statistical Profile*. Cambridge, MA: City of Cambridge.

<sup>5</sup> Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs. (2020). *Cambridge Homeless Point-in-Time Count*.



ages of 20–40, 30% were between the ages of 40–60, 10% were younger than 20, and 20% were older than 60.<sup>6</sup> The high student and working population in the area is reflected in the overwhelming majority of observed people being in the 20–60 age range.



*Desire lines showing pedestrians in red, bikes in green, and cars in blue.*

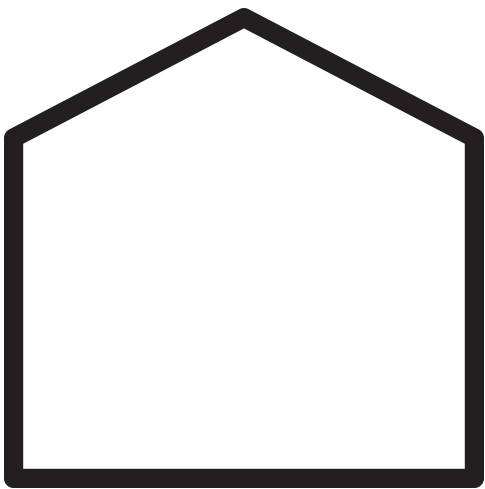
In our observations, we found major desire lines across the plaza, many of which began or ended at the T station entrance. Many people crossed by the super-crosswalk, while others crossed over to Harvard Yard. While a large majority of people did not sit and stay in the Plaza, those who did congregated around the seating areas at the northern tip and in the Pit, the area behind the subway entrance. People tended to either sit and stay for a long time or not at all. With the exception of tourists, very few passersby stopped for only a few minutes. While the Plaza has incredible foot traffic, it is clear that for most, it is a place to go through not a place to spend time in.

<sup>6</sup> *Observational data is based on identity perceptions, not an individual's understanding of their own identity.*









**Pop-up**



# Pop-up

## A site-specific intervention

### A crossroads

Harvard Square is a crossroads—both literally and figuratively. While the Square is often dominated by wealthy, Harvard-affiliated individuals, it also harbors people with a wide variety of wealth and levels of formal education. The Harvard Square Kiosk has the conditions—a central location and built-in foot traffic—for a space where these people can interact. Our goal with the CultureHouse Harvard pop-up was to create a space where people could step off the street, pause for a minute, and cross paths with neighbors and visitors.

“

[CultureHouse Harvard] is super welcoming, could not be more centrally located, and I love that it's a place where people without permanent homes and more bougie Harvard denizens like myself can hang out together.

—A frequent visitor

”

### Keeping the Kiosk active

The primary shared objective between CultureHouse and the City of Cambridge was a desire to keep the Kiosk and the Plaza active during the period of time between Out of Town News' departure and the beginning of the renovation work. Vacant storefronts have myriad negative consequences on community well-being—an issue already prevalent in Harvard Square due to the high commercial turnover in recent years.

With the Kiosk occupying such a central location in the plaza, it was important to keep the structure active throughout the winter. As

one visitor shared, “There is so much turnover in Harvard Square right now, it is nice to have a positive example of pop-up and temporary uses that a developer or landlord could undertake while their property is in a transitional phase.”



In addition to providing a gathering space inside, keeping the Kiosk brightly lit and active provided a sense of warmth and energy in the Square. When we were open, the warm light emanating from the building and exterior art installations created vibrancy even on the darkest days. We hung bulb string lights around the perimeter of the building that we kept on 24/7, even when we were closed. Several visitors told us that even before they entered the space, they appreciated the activity it provided as they walked by the building every day.

“

As a resident of Cambridge, one less vacant space in Harvard Square is an improvement to my quality of life.

—A local resident

”



## Creating a human-centered experience



CultureHouse's aesthetic—bright colors, warm light, exposed wood, and swings—and the presence of a staff person made CultureHouse Harvard approachable and welcoming. CultureHouse staff members acted as a person to talk to—whether to ask about bus routes, get restaurant recommendations, or share a personal story. Even with Google Maps pulled up on their phone, people would come and have staff point them in the right direction, proving that sometimes you need to talk face to face with someone. In the chaos of a city, having a person to turn to makes the urban environment a more friendly and humane place.

“

CultureHouse is a beacon of positive community life in a square that keeps getting more sterile.

—A CultureHouse Harvard visitor

”

Because we were not selling anything, we had the freedom at CultureHouse Harvard to create a space that centered people rather than profit. From the welcoming staff member, to the ever-popular yellow swing, to the historical photos and exhibits on the walls, the space felt distinctly different from the surrounding businesses.

This kind of human-centered space was in contrast to what many people perceive as a Harvard Square that is out of touch with its community.

## Collaborating with the City

From our first conversation, it took the City of Cambridge only about two months to get us approved to activate the Kiosk. From a city government perspective, this timeline is incredibly short. By framing the activation as a temporary pop-up, our partners at the City were able to fast-track the approval process and allow us a great degree of freedom. As challenges came up throughout the pop-up, they were always responsive and helpful. This strong partnership was critical to the success of the project.

While our original contract for the Kiosk was only scheduled to last through the end of April, the construction timeline was pushed back and the City asked us to stay for an additional three months to continue our impact and keep the Kiosk active. While we were closed during part of this time due to COVID-19, the City continued to support our mission. Their support allowed us to offer remote programming, keep the Kiosk active, and eventually reopen the space.

## Design

### Plaza activation

The Harvard Square Plaza surrounds the Kiosk on all sides, so we created an active facade to engage passersby. While Out of Town News attracted people by covering the windows with a wide variety of magazines and newspapers, CultureHouse took a different approach. We cleared out all of the windows to create lines of sight out onto the Square that gave a feeling of transparency and connectedness.

While one of the long sides of the Kiosk had windows, the other side was taken up by two large roll-down display areas, only visible from the outside. When the newsstand was



open, these roll-downs held display racks full of magazines and papers. To keep these spaces active, we installed lighting and created a series of rotating installations.



In the left box, we collaborated with an Olin College student to create an interactive display where we asked people to text their response to the question, “What do you want to share with the world?” to a phone number. Once they sent the text, their response was printed out on a receipt printer on the display. Replies ranged from “It’s perfectly alright to start over,” to the entire lyrics to “All Star” by Smashmouth. The installation encouraged people to stop for a minute to think and reflect. We also painted the left roll-down cover in chalkboard paint so people could respond to a prompt and read what others had to say, even when we were closed.

“

I’ve been in CultureHouse more times in the last month than I went into Out of Town News in years. CultureHouse feels so open and welcoming, and I’m very grateful to have it there!

—A frequent CultureHouse Harvard visitor

”

On the right roll-down, we hosted a series of installations in tandem with our monthly themes. These included a lightbox project by Jaywalk Studio and a custom neon sign by

Lesley University.

## Interior

While the 500 square foot space constrained the scale of design and gathering, we used the small footprint to create a cozy public space in the hustle and bustle of Harvard Square. It was easy for the hustle and bustle outside the space to come in with the entrance of a large group. However, visitors generally described CultureHouse Harvard as a “chill space” where “people come together.” Other people shared that the space was “warm and welcoming” and a “nice, calming, fun, energetic place to hang out.”



Before we moved in, the City removed most of the magazine shelves, leaving a mostly-empty space. One of the first things we did was paint the shelves that were left around the perimeter of the space. The white paint immediately brightened up the inside and gave it a more clean and modern feel. Because the shelves used a standard slatwall system, we got hooks and shelf supports that allowed us to easily change displays.

Given the age of the building, it suffered from a leaky roof and had not been cleaned in a long time. The brick floor was also quite chipped in places, but nothing a well-placed rug couldn’t fix! The building also lacked Wi-Fi access—something we had hoped to provide. Luckily we found partners at MassMesh who were able to set up a wireless network in the Kiosk for our staff and visitors.



Because the space was so small, we designed it to be as adaptable as possible. The only immovable structures we built in the space were an elevated stage at one end of the building and a small bar. For tables, we used finished OSB mounted on top of collapsible sawhorses. This design allowed us to fold up the tables and store them flat when we needed more space in the Kiosk. We also used our own cube stool design and other open-source plans to make wooden CNC-cut furniture. To create more distinct zones in the space, we added warm hanging lights and more directed spotlights.

As we have done in all our previous pop-ups, we installed an indoor swing at CultureHouse Harvard. As expected, it was a popular seat and used by all ages. The two tables also converted into a ping pong table that saw frequent use and allowed visitors to interact with each other. These active play elements created a relaxed atmosphere inside CultureHouse Harvard.

In one corner, we installed an exhibit with photos and stories about the history of the Kiosk building. It was a popular attraction in the space—on more than one occasion, a visitor came in and told their child or grandchild stories from when they used to work at the newsstand selling papers.

Over the course of the eight months we were open, we tested out several different arrangements for the space. Initially, we arranged the space to fit as many people as possible but quickly realized that due to its small size, having more than ten people inside at a time felt crowded. We adjusted the design to focus on shorter interactions like charging a phone, playing a game of ping pong, or looking at the art on the walls. Unfortunately, our experimental time was cut short by COVID-19, but the adaptable design allowed us to easily rearrange the space for physical distancing.

## Uses

### A hangout spot for unhoused people



CultureHouse Harvard was free to enter and had no policies regulating length-of-stay, so it became a popular hangout spot for the homeless community in Harvard Square. During the winter months, it was especially important for unhoused people to have a place where they could sit down and warm up without being harassed.

“

CultureHouse Harvard has provided me with warmth and shelter this entire winter season. It not only does the community at large a great service, but also shows that there will always be a place where the people are allowed to meet in safety and with liberty.

—A young unhoused man

”

Although Harvard Square has a number of businesses with seating, including the recent addition of the Smith Campus Center, unhoused visitors remarked that those spots often required you to purchase something or were regularly policed. People returned to CultureHouse Harvard in part because of our pro-loitering policy. As one young unhoused visitor put it, “People enjoy somewhere we can chill with no issues.”



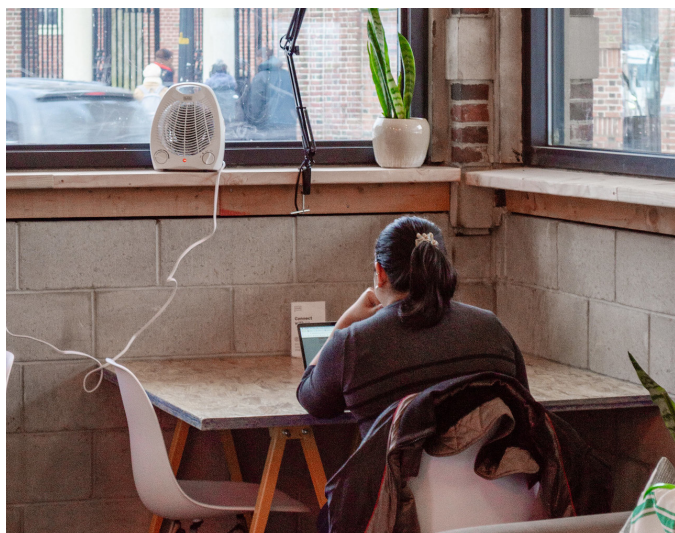
“

The staff understands the youth more than in other places. Everyone is welcomed. Everyone is treated with respect.

—An unhoused visitor

”

## A place to stop in



Given its central location, many people stopped into CultureHouse Harvard for short periods of time to take a break, look at the art on the walls, or meet a friend. Many people walked by and peaked their heads in, curious about the new use of the space or interested in having a short conversation. While these interactions were short, it was an important role for CultureHouse to play—providing a public space people could use to fill short periods of time in their schedule.

“

It's a perfect place for killing time before a bus or meeting.

—An occasional visitor

”

## Wayfinding

Since CultureHouse Harvard was right next to the entrance to the Harvard Square T

stop and Harvard University, both tourists and locals came in to ask CultureHouse staff for directions, recommendations, or for general information about the area. Given that the visitor information booth next-door was only occasionally open, and that the Kiosk says “Harvard Square” on it, many people believed it was an information center. CultureHouse Harvard staff were more than happy to provide visitors with maps or direct people to the correct bus stop. Often regular visitors to the pop-up would also provide recommendations or directions to newcomers.

## Programming



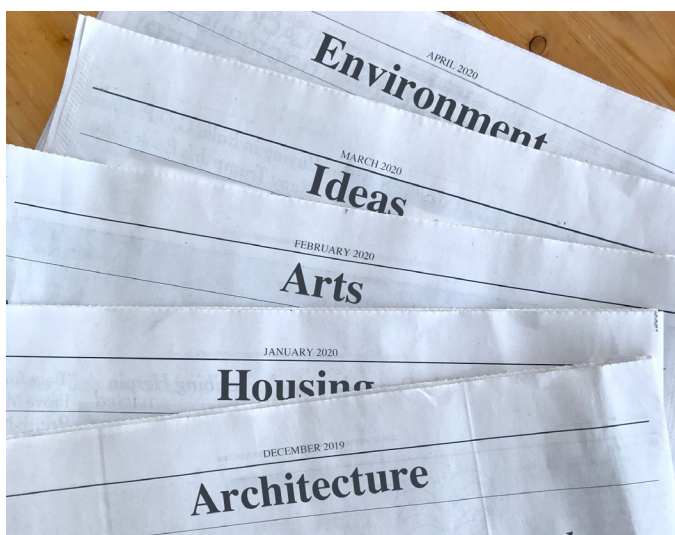
At CultureHouse Harvard, we hosted fewer events than we typically do at a CultureHouse pop-up. Due to both the high foot traffic and small size of the space, we were highly intentional about what events we hosted. CultureHouse Harvard hosted 11 events, all collaborations with local organizations, businesses, or residents. Over 250 people attended events at CultureHouse Harvard. We found the most successful events were ones that were drop-in, provided several ways to engage, and did not require a long time commitment.

## Themed months

CultureHouse worked with community partners to create programs that allowed visitors to explore issues central to the Harvard Square community, such as housing,



arts, and education. When Out of Town News first opened, access to national and international news was hard to come by and their newspapers provided access to the outside world. With the centralization and globalization of news in recent decades, we are now much more likely to know what is going on in Congress but not have a clear understanding of what is happening in our local city council or state legislature. During our tenure in the Harvard Square Kiosk, we shone a spotlight on the hyper-local by elevating local assets and issues through themed months we called sections, playing off the organization of a newspaper.



We completed three month-long sections: Architecture, Housing, and Arts. Each section had collaborators, events, and exhibits in line with the theme. Unfortunately, the Ideas section, in collaboration with Lesley College of Art and Design, was cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Environment section, planned for April, never occurred.

### **Scout Magazine release party**

Scout Cambridge is a hyperlocal bimonthly magazine that's distributed for free throughout the city of Cambridge. Their sister publication, Scout Somerville, brings the same focus to Somerville. Scout Cambridge's first issue of 2020 was entitled Then & Now, and explored the past and present of the City—including the history of the Harvard Square Kiosk.

CultureHouse Harvard hosted Scout Magazine's release party for the issue. Attendees enjoyed refreshments from local businesses and listened to a series of short talks about the community and the state of local media from Scout editor Lilly Milman, Cambridge Day editor Marc Levy, and Cambridge Historical Commission Director Charles Sullivan.

### **Smart Growth Massachusetts housing discussion**

The Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance (MSGA) promotes healthy and diverse communities, protects critical environmental resources and working landscapes, advocates for housing and transportation choices, and supports equitable community development and reinvestment. MSGA joined the Housing section at CultureHouse Harvard by leading a dialogue about potential housing solutions for the Metro Boston region. Our location provided a unique opportunity to have a discussion in a space where both housed and unhoused were present and comfortable. Many people from the homeless community stayed for the discussion and joined in on the conversation. At the event, individuals came together to share their experiences, discuss policy solutions, and learn how individuals can get involved in this vital regional debate.

### **Art-processing**





Two community members, Sam Musher and Marianne Moskowitz, invited people to stop by and create a small artwork using found and reused materials, responding to the question “Where are you at with climate change?” Visitors could stay for as long or as little as they liked, but were encouraged to share their artwork with the group. Participants appreciated the time to be creative and share their experiences through art. This event allowed several different levels of engagement and encouraged connection across boundaries.

## IDEAS!

We partnered with Lesley College of Art and Design for the month of March. Students from LA+D’s Environmental Design Studio created installations for the Kiosk, displayed their artwork, and hosted events. This series, called IDEAS!, included a day of free soup, an interactive projection installation, and zines for purchase. While the COVID-19 lockdown ended this series after its first week, we were able to host some of the planned events online. Though it was shorter than expected, the collaboration allowed students a chance to be involved with the space and gave CultureHouse an opportunity to involve a local university in our pop-up.

## Visitors

### Traffic



Pre-pandemic, CultureHouse Harvard was open six days a week for eight hours a day. Over the 77 days we were open we had 7,620 visits with an average of 99 visitors daily. With such a small space, our capacity was mostly limited by size. Our busiest day of the week was Saturday with an average of 122 visitors over the course of the day. CultureHouse Harvard’s busiest day ever was Sunday, December 22, when we welcomed 255 visitors—that’s over 30 an hour!

Our first month open, December, was CultureHouse Harvard’s busiest month with a total of 2,488 visits. This large number of visitors was wonderful, though made the space quite crowded. By adjusting the design, later months had a more manageable number of visitors. The busiest time of the day at CultureHouse Harvard was 12pm–2pm, reflective of the fact that many people came in when we opened and stayed, on-and-off, throughout the afternoon. In the evening, traffic tended to be slower as more people went home or to a shelter for the night.



### *By the numbers*

**99** – average daily visitors

**255** – visitors on busiest day

**12pm–2pm** – busiest time of day

## Demographics

CultureHouse Harvard attracted a younger crowd, with 38% of visitors falling between the ages of 18 and 24. This is in line with the large population of college students and young people in the area. The second-largest age group, 55 to 64, was composed mostly of local residents, tourists, and people who worked in the area.

53% of visitors identified as women, a good indication that CultureHouse Harvard was a space that felt safe. Additionally, 42% of visitors were not in permanent housing. While there is a large number of unhoused



people in the Square, they are greatly underrepresented inside other businesses in the Square. Likewise, in spaces designated for the homeless community, there are very few housed individuals. The split at CultureHouse Harvard is another sign that the pop-up was a space where all felt safe to come, regardless of housing status.



#### *Visitor demographics*

**54%** – white nonhispanic

**52%** – women

**42%** – not in permanent housing

## Responding to COVID-19

In March of 2020, the world changed dramatically. As in-person activities abruptly halted, we braced for what we assumed would be a temporary pause. We closed CultureHouse Harvard to the public with the thought that we would be able to resume normal operations soon. We had so much planned and so much we wanted to try. Despite our optimism, it quickly became clear that this new normal was here to stay. After closing completely for about three months, in accordance with local guidelines, we reopened in a limited capacity for June and July, the last months of the pop-up. While closed, we had the chance to reflect and transition our work to meet our goals in new ways.

### Public art

With COVID-19 rendering our normal operations unsafe, we looked to alternate ways to activate the Kiosk. Public art allowed us to work with community members and add vibrancy to the Square without necessitating in-person interactions.

When COVID-19 forced businesses across Massachusetts to close, street photographer Jeff Larason began documenting the

signs businesses displayed. CultureHouse displayed this photo series on our website and in the windows of the Kiosk during our own closure.



With funding from Cambridge Arts, CultureHouse paid two local artists to create murals on the outside of the kiosk. Valerie Imperato created a colorful depiction of three Black women's faces, while Curtis Williams used spray paints to create an eclectic black and white scene, including a dinosaur being hoisted into the air by a balloon.

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Painting this mural, at this time, was an act of protest. The fact that now when people walk into Harvard Square they have three huge images of Black women staring at them, I hope that makes us harder to ignore. To me, this mural is a further declaration that we're here, and we're here to stay.

—Valerie Imperato

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### Reopening

When it was safe to do so, we reopened CultureHouse Harvard, for limited hours and limited activities. Visitors could enter, two at a time, to play a fifteen-minute game of ping pong. All visitors were registered at the door and gave CultureHouse staff contact



information we could use if the need for contact tracing arose. All visitors had to wear masks and stay six feet away from others at all times. Ping pong has physical distancing built into the activity, making the need for separation less awkward. While we were open, we stationed one staff member outside the Kiosk to safely engage with passersby and the population in the Square.

## Challenges

### **Working in areas with high social-service need**

Free, indoor spaces are rare but highly needed in areas where there are many people who are unhoused or in unstable housing. A 500 square foot building managed by a small staff is insufficient to meet this need in Cambridge. Many people who need a place to spend time during the day have service needs that aren't being met. CultureHouse staff are not social service providers, and therefore have a limit to the support we can provide to visitors. Like libraries and other public spaces, CultureHouse provides training to our staff, while also being clear about where our abilities and expertise ends. CultureHouse policies have to continue to adapt to the specific social service landscape of the neighborhood they serve.

In addition to the high need for services, we also encountered deep-seated preconceived notions and discomfort from both housed and unhoused people about each other. While there were many moments of interaction, simply providing an open space was not effective in creating a space where those assumptions could be shed. We found that casual events and activities like ping pong were most effective in creating the conditions to break down those walls.

### **Balancing diverse uses in small spaces**

At CultureHouse, we believe that diverse uses invite diverse users. However, in a small space, it is challenging to balance uses. The

kiosk is small yet completely open, it became easy for one use, and therefore one user group, to dominate the space.

While attempting to balance uses, sometimes all potential uses became more difficult. As one visitor shared, "There seemed to be no focus to why it was there. If it was to sit and talk with friends, there weren't many chairs. Didn't work as a quiet place to get out of the noise of Harvard Square—too noisy, too many comings and goings." This challenge was one we took to heart and had hoped to address with changes to the space in April to encourage shorter and more passive engagements in the space. We believe that creating a shorter more specific engagement in the space, while not meeting all needs, would have done a better job of creating a space that felt useful for all visitors.

### **Adapting to unique traffic patterns**

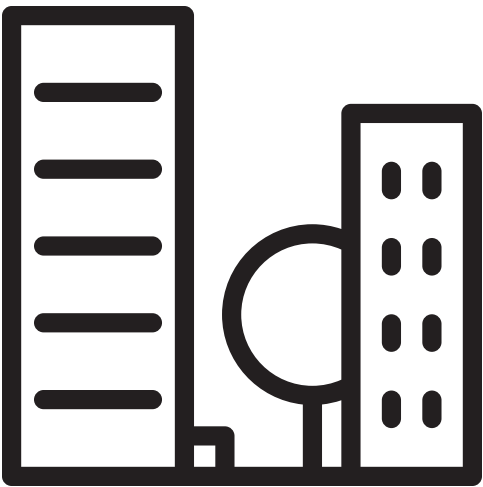
The Kiosk is uniquely situated in the center of a very busy plaza. It is surrounded on all sides by flows of traffic. The large windows we uncovered made the building more welcoming, but sometimes limited separation between inside and outside. For instance, any altercation on the plaza was highly distracting to those inside and it could feel like you were in a snowglobe, with outsiders peering in. The calm, cozy nature of our previous pop-ups was hard to transfer to such a dynamic location. While we hope to keep some elements consistent across different CultureHouse locations, other elements need to adapt to new conditions.

With the front and back doors in the Kiosk open people sometimes used the space as a thoroughfare. This created motion and noise that was distracting and made it difficult to keep a feeling of calm. Later in our stay, we experimented with keeping one door closed which helped manage traffic flow. CultureHouse pop-ups have to adapt to both the social and physical contexts of their sites. In the future, a deeper analysis of traffic, soundscape, microclimate, and lines of sight will allow us to create more effective designs.









## Impacts



# Impacts

## Creating indoor space where unhoused people are welcome



With CultureHouse Harvard, we had two main goals; to create a space that responds to the needs of the community, and to imagine what a future long-term use for the Kiosk could be. In many projects, these goals are one and the same, but that was not true at CultureHouse Harvard. Given the severe and overwhelming need for services for the homeless community, the space ended up being defined by that need. While this was certainly challenging, and limited what we were able to do in the space, we also learned valuable lessons.

Harvard Square is a central gathering place for Cambridge's homeless community. However, there are very few places where they can spend their time during the day. While there are spaces that work to meet service needs, these spaces are not often open during the day. When providers have daytime programs, they are focused on social services. Being constantly in service-oriented spaces means unhoused individuals can feel as if they are defined only by their homelessness.

CultureHouse Harvard provided a warm place to sit and an opportunity for housed and unhoused people to cross paths. While other indoor spaces like the Smith Campus Center were more heavily policed and less appealing, at CultureHouse Harvard unhoused people were seen as visitors, like any other person.

People of all housing statuses benefit from a place to warm up in the winter and cool down in the summer. While the homeless community had the most to gain from a free, warm space, people waiting for friends or for a ride would step in briefly to get out of the cold. Even in the least segregated areas of our cities, people rarely engage in conversation with neighbors of different backgrounds. Once inside the Kiosk, visitors were much more likely to make a connection, even if only a brief one, with someone else. While we saw some conflict across differences, we were impressed with the overwhelmingly positive connections that visitors made across boundaries. By creating a space that welcomed all, CultureHouse Harvard cultivated an environment that removed barriers and created a more connected community.

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Social infrastructure is the missing piece of the puzzle, and building places where all kinds of people can gather is the best way to repair the fractured societies we live in today.

—Eric Klinenberg (*Palaces for the People*)

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### Opportunity

Cities are rarely designed with unhoused people in mind, even though they are often the people who spend the most time on the



streets. When designs do take unhoused people into account, it is often in the form of hostile architecture designed to keep them away—without any regard for where else they would go. Unhoused people need somewhere to spend time during the day, especially in bad weather. That need is not currently being met.

Unhoused people want somewhere to spend time where they aren't expected to receive a social service—somewhere separate from the shelter where they spend their nights. Libraries often fill this need but are often burdened with more than they have the capacity to support. For such a space to be successful, it would need intentional design and marketing, a secure place for people to leave their belongings, and trauma-informed policies and procedures.

Not only would a space like this benefit the unhoused population, it would also allow organizations like CultureHouse, libraries, and businesses to focus on their mission rather than spending resources meeting needs they are untrained and unsuited to tackle.

## Testing out new uses for the Kiosk



The second main goal of CultureHouse Harvard was to prototype many different ways the Harvard Square Kiosk could be used after the renovation is complete. While

community needs somewhat limited our ability, we were able to try out many different designs, uses, and programs in the space. By framing the space as a living prototype, we use the space as an urban test kitchen—trying out ideas and observing how people interact with them.

When we first opened, we designed the space to focus on longer interactions. We had a couch, tables to work at, and encouraged long lengths of stay. We also designed the space for a capacity of around 20 people. However, we quickly realized two things. First, we found that due to the small size and open layout of the space, it felt full even with only 10 people inside. Second, we found that many people walking through the Square were looking for a short activity, not a place to spend a long time in. After a few months observing this behavior, we switched out some of the casual hang-out seating for a ping pong table. This better served the quicker and activity-oriented interactions that many visitors were looking for. We also focused our events on drop-in experiences. These events allowed the visitor to choose their level of engagement and length of stay while providing a memorable experience.

At CultureHouse Harvard, we were testing new concepts in some of the most extreme conditions anywhere in the area. By doing so, we created frameworks and designs that serve all residents better, no matter their background. Having the ability to rapidly change and adapt allowed us to test out more ideas in just five months than most organizations can do in several years. These lessons gave us valuable insight, much of which we share in this Impact Report for others to learn from and to inform future projects in the City.

### Opportunity

When the Harvard Square Kiosk reopens to the public, it will be most successful if it can combine a mix of uses that center short, but meaningful, interactions. Passive engagement opportunities like historical



exhibits, art shows, and reading materials are a great way to offer a specific interaction. In addition, more interactive elements like a prompt response board, ping pong table, and a swing can provide deeper engagement. For programming, short drop-in events like art-processing, winter markets, and community engagement exercises will draw people in and keep people engaged.

In order to provide a consistent experience, the operator should provide a base function in the space that exists no matter what is going on. The space should include consistent branding, a unique and distinct feel, and activities and engagements that are always there. These constant variables will create an identity in the space that will encourage people to return. They will also reduce barriers for program collaborators by providing an existing structure to slot into. As events, collaborations, and other uses happen in the space, this clear foundation will ground the temporary experiences in a larger narrative.

Together, these strategies will create a space that is useful and enjoyed by local residents, a great resource for visitors to the City, and welcoming to both housed and unhoused people.

## Providing a human-centered space in Harvard Square



Harvard Square is a chaotic place where streets intersect, bus routes cross, and tourists wander. The Harvard Square Kiosk is at the center of it all. The central location and lettering spelling out “Harvard Square” led many to expect that the Kiosk was an information booth. CultureHouse staff were happy to oblige—pointing visitors in the direction of a coffee shop, museum, bus stop, or a Harvard tour.

CultureHouse provided wayfinding for a wide range of people. Tourists were always happy to receive a map and a smile, and local residents appreciated our help finding bus stops that had moved due to construction. Many people who had lived or worked in the neighborhood in the past would come in and reminisce to their friends and families. Passersby would ask about the fate of the Kiosk building or the story behind other construction going on in the Square. While subjects varied, all these people had a similar desire to gain and exchange information—and they all wanted to do so through a conversation with another human being.



In a survey we conducted, 15 people mentioned how much they appreciated the welcoming staff at CultureHouse Harvard.

While everyone that came in for information had a phone with them—often with Google Maps up on their screen—it was more comforting and encouraging to have a person orient them and chat with them. Visitors were consistently grateful to have a welcoming space where they could ask place-based questions. They were also happy that CultureHouse Harvard was human-scaled, colorful, and friendly—a contrast to other new fixtures of the Square that follow a less personal aesthetic.

Both first-time and regular visitors commented on the personal environment



CultureHouse Harvard provided. Our staff—and their willingness to talk about serious topics, silly ones, and everything in between—were consistently called out as one of the most positive elements of the space. In an increasingly digital and disconnected world, an approachable and friendly human presence was a critical impact that CultureHouse Harvard had on the Square.

### **Opportunity**

After renovations are complete, there is a unique opportunity to make the Kiosk not just a tourist information booth, but also a place where residents, students, and visitors alike can come for information. By capitalizing on the Kiosk's iconic look and central location, the City can create a space that plays a key wayfinding role for people traveling through the Square. A critical component to making a space like this successful will be having approachable and friendly staff. While maps and resource sheets can be useful, they are not what make people feel welcome. With properly-supported staff and inviting design, there is an opportunity to create a welcoming community space centered around human connection.







