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Background and Theoretical Framework:

The stretch of Massachusetts Avenue that runs between Main Street and Memorial Drive is one that many of us at MIT traverse daily. Whether it is to buy model supplies, attend class in N51, or walk home, this path is an unavoidable and vital one in our daily lives. **For a road so well traveled, however, the journey is a surprisingly uncomfortable experience.**

The intersection at Main Street and Mass Ave is a pedestrian's nightmare; the island of asphalt does little to reassure us of our safety from the circling vehicles. Aside from the buildings just east of Main Street which house retail at street level, few of the buildings we pass are open to the sidewalk. Continuing toward MIT, parking lots surrounded by chain link fence flank the road. Although the presence of trees humanizes the streetscape as we approach building 7, the ubiquitous orange construction barrels, perpetually changing pedestrian paths, which are often seemingly diverted into the oncoming traffic, and the sound of backhoes obliterate any release from this incomprehensible urban environment.

Why is the experience of this segment of Mass Ave so assaulting? Although our project stemmed from a desire to improve the space and not specifically from class readings, Dennis Hollier's text *Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille*, suggests an interpretation of this urban space. Especially interesting is his discussion of Emile Zola's work. Zola derides the insertion of "squares" or "lawns which try to recall nature" into the urban environment. For Zola, recreation within the bounds of the city inevitably leads to corruptive behavior, so workers must spend their free time in the countryside. Hollier summarizes, "workers must not be allowed to rest in the city."

Is this the reason that Mass Ave is so inhospitable? Is there a "someone" or a "something" denying us a necessary, human-scale urban fabric to insure that all activity in this urban space is industry related? We seem to be trapped between the laws of the market (the market value of property taking over the human value of activity), the rules of modern city life today (many people cannot physically leave the city), and the absence of a direct way to express our discomfort and our wishes for the city, as inhabitants.

Our project attempts to take a more active role in actually improving the experience of Mass Ave for ourselves and our fellow Cambridge residents, by (re-)introducing the human factor on the sidewalk.

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Phase 1: Orientation

We began with a strong interest in **orientation**, defined as “a function of the mind involving awareness of three dimensions: time, place and person.”

Our goal was to create a sense of **clarity** and **direction** along this disorienting path.

We designed and constructed a prototype sign which was intended to be one of a series placed along Mass Ave. The sign named a sequence of five physical and metaphorical things with associated walking times to reach each:

Coffee Shop (30 seconds), Cupcake (20 minutes), Canada (4.5 days), North, Free Time (2 months)

The intent was to orient the pedestrian by bringing to his attention things that were physically near, physically far, and metaphorical, as well as to point out what is not available along this stretch of Mass Ave. Although the sign did pique the attention of passersbys, it was difficult to evaluate whether or not our goal of orientation was achieved. This sign seemed perhaps more enigmatic than orienting in nature.

Phase 2: Signage

To improve our mode of communication with pedestrians, we next explored **different types of signage**. We developed four iterations of our first prototype which were aimed at comparing the impact of Images, Symbols, Single words and Sentences.

Phase 3:

In an effort to redirect this project toward our original intention, i.e. to **improve the experience** of Mass Ave. for pedestrians, we developed a third series of signs. Each points to a **potentially positive aspect** of Mass Ave that is most likely overlooked amidst the sea of construction orange.

The signs are designed as a series which begins at the Main Street and Mass Ave intersection. Each alerts the pedestrian either to something that exists, such as the view toward Boston and the Hancock tower, to something that will exist in the future, such as the pedestrian plaza which is planned by the Cambridge Dept. of Public Works for the Main/Mass intersection, or to something that does not exist but is badly needed by a group of people - in this case, a coffee shop needed by MIT students. To provide the missing item, we will set up a temporary coffee shop where we will, in exchange for hot coffee and cookies, invite pedestrians to answer two questions: What do you like about Mass. Ave? What do you think is missing? Our intent is to stimulate people to think about the positive and negative aspects of their environment as well as to create a momentarily more human streetscape for those who pass. This ideal coffee shop becomes a space of dialog about the city, where residents can directly express their wishes and be heard.