The output formats are varied, too. The engineers can burn CDs and CD-ROMs, as well as audio and video DVDs. They can make analog tapes and create files in three Internet-friendly modes: Real Audio, MP3, and MP4. (The last two are playable on iPod devices; the music library keeps several, so patrons can borrow one, go into a listening room, and work directly with MP4 files that APS has reformatted and placed on a library server.)

Recordings show up in a range of conditions. “The Harvard College Library has enormous holdings of audio and visual material,” says Ackerman. “It is scattered throughout many units and has been cared for differently in different places.

Storage conditions vary widely, from good to very bad. We’ve seen tapes that were stored in a hot, humid attic. Some recordings are unplayable.”

Take certain audiotapes manufactured during a particular period in the late 1970s and early 1980s that tend to suffer from “sticky shed syndrome.” With age, the tape’s backing gets sticky and starts to peel off, shedding the ferric oxide on the recording side of the tape, where the magnetic signal resides. “You can do things like ‘baking’ those tapes in a laboratory convection oven,” Ackerman says. “If done properly, you may be able to recover all or some of the magnetic signal.”

“Sticky shed syndrome” causes inadvertent loss of data, but deliberate loss of data, as in the compressed-file formats used to save memory space, can pose even more vexing problems. “Compressed file formats are a nightmare for us,” says Ackerman. “It’s about throwing the data away.” He explains that closed proprietary file formats like those used by Apple’s iTunes build in copy protection—

Off the Fast Track

Slow down, please, said community members comprising the Harvard-Allston Task Force. May we take things one at a time? Of course, said Harvard.

The University announced in December that it wished to build a new museum of modern and contemporary art at 224 Western Avenue in Allston and begin construction work quickly—this fall. (The Harvard University Art Museums urgently need the new facility as part of a plan to vacate and rebuild the aged Fogg Museum building in Cambridge; see “New Museum on Fast Track,” March-April, page 62.)

The University submitted a project proposal for the Allston museum to the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) on December 15 for review by members of the public in general and by the Harvard-Allston Task Force in particular. In its January 24 response to the BRA, the task force raised numerous concerns, among them that the building was too large for the site and too small for the community and public-education programs essential to the project.

At the same time, the task force had been asked to consider and react to Harvard’s well-advanced plans for four interconnected buildings reaching 120 feet in height and totaling 695,000 square feet of floor space—the start of a vast science complex to rise in Allston, on which construction might begin this year (“An Allston Metamorphosis?” November-December 2006, page 66). Additionally, on January 11 the University released its master plan to transform Allston (“Harvard’s 50-Year Plan,” March-April, page 58), beginning a mandatory yearlong public review of the campus-building project.

“There are too many documents, too many deadlines,” said task-force chair Ray Mellone at a public meeting on February 28, according to the Crimson. “It makes it impossible for the task force to actually scope specific projects.”

Mellone said that the request to halt the project was not motivated by opposition to the museum concept, but only by concern that meaningful public debate was difficult with so much happening at once and in such a short period of time. “We’ve asked the community to digest a lot,” agreed Kevin McCluskey, Harvard’s director of community relations, who attended the meeting. “We’ve asked the neighbors. Harvard is treading carefully because it does not wish to risk alienation over the larger plan.

Mellone said that the request to halt the project was not motivated by opposition to the museum concept, but only by concern that meaningful public debate was difficult with so much happening at once and in such a short period of time. “We’ve asked the community to digest a lot,” agreed Kevin McCluskey, Harvard’s director of community relations, who attended the meeting. “We will be putting the art discussion back at least a few months.”

The task force and its Harvard respondents will now focus attention on the science project, and after the give and take, when those plans are final—perhaps in May!—the community will be asked to revisit the art museum.