

BALTIMORE CITY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING
URBAN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE ADVISORY PANEL
MEETING MINUTES

Date: June 22, 2023

Meeting #79

Project: Park Heights Library

Phase: Schematic

Location: 4800 Park Heights Avenue, Central Park Heights, Baltimore 21215

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Connie Kumor of Gant Brunnett Architects introduced the team and project. The project is a new library building located on a site shared with CC Jackson Park in the Central Park Heights neighborhood. The library will be located at the corner of Park Heights and Woodlands Avenues, in the Park Heights Major Redevelopment Area (MRA). The CC Jackson Park and Recreation Center Master Plan were reviewed by the Panel recently, as were other nearby developments related to the MRA, including the overall Master Plan, multi-family buildings and lower-density single family housing. The library is sited at the corner of the park campus, which houses recreational opportunities and services for the community.

The following challenges and opportunities drove the building design:

- A feasibility study, completed to help with coordination efforts of the CC Jackson Park master plan and its implementation.
- Building is approximately 16,000 SF to accommodate program, which includes admin, stacks, children's library, etc.
- The landscape is a combination of programmed space, circulation, and screening of the service / loading area on Woodland Ave.
- Collections are located on Park Heights Avenue and emphasized with additional glazing; children's library is located on the north toward the park and has a dedicated (fenced) outdoor patio space.
- Main entrance is located on the southwest side of the building, on Woodland Avenue adjacent to the parking lot to accommodate people arriving in cars or being dropped off.
- There is a bus stop at the corner of Park Heights and Woodlands Avenues; the library will provide free wi-fi access, and the plaza design includes comfortable places for people to sit while waiting for the bus.
- Streetscape design is based on the approved ROW design for CC Jackson Park.
- Library is intended to serve a large catchment in an area that is currently a library desert.

The project team shared a series of diagrams depicting program organization. A main reason for the entrance location on the back of the building is to allow for afterhours use. The building would need to be secured, meaning the library stack area must be able to be locked while still allowing for use of the public meeting spaces, restrooms, etc.

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the team for the clear presentation and noted it is very exciting to review a new Pratt Library Branch, as it has been a long time since a new branch was added in Baltimore. The Panel then moved into clarifying questions and comments. The regular UDAAP Chair, Pavlina Ilieva, was not able to attend the presentation and provided comments based on the team's draft submission to the Panel.

Clarification:

- *Is the parking lot part of this portion of the project?* No, it is part of the park project, but it will be shared with the library. Planning noted that the parking lot is not allowed by right in an OS (Open Space) zone. An ordinance will need to be introduced to permit the surface parking lot.
- *The team mentioned the decisions they made about the book drop – is that next to the entrance doors?* Yes, it was located to be near the staff area and main entrance. The team was thinking that moving the book drop to the back of the building would allow people to pull up in a vehicle, quickly jump out of the passenger side of the vehicle and drop the books off.
- *Isn't the library intended to serve the greater community, across Park Heights and Woodland Avenues where the new development is occurring?* Yes, that is true.
- *The panel would like to get a feel for the size of the plaza area; what is the curb radius?* Section B:B and section C:C show the plaza is about 90' and the sidewalk areas are generous at about 30' wide.
- *Is the plaza being enclosed by the screen wall?* No, there is a screen wall that encloses the service drive that abuts the plaza. The team is exploring opportunities to make the screen wall element a more artistic, attractive feature. The wall does need to be more or less opaque to screen the plaza from the delivery vehicles.
- *Is the multi-purpose area meant to be accessed after hours?* The access would be maintained after hours to utilize the multi-purpose room and restrooms, while the main stack area could be locked to reduce the need for staff.

COMMENTS:

In General:

- Libraries are evolving and still relevant despite how media is consumed. Enoch Pratt has continued to be important to the civic life of neighborhoods.
- The Panel reiterated the importance of this project and their joy in seeing a new Pratt Library. Sharing how the program developed and thought process behind the big design moves is helpful to the Panel. The team should now take a step back and explore the potential opportunities here, because the current design works against the project's main goals.
- There are some fundamental concerns about the proposed design:
 - Location of the entrance.
 - Relationship of the plaza to the entrance
 - Programming of the outdoor areas
 - Programming of the back of house program locations.
- The following comments were provided by the Chair, and were based on the draft presentation:

- Based on the Space Planning diagrams and concept plans, it appears that the primary access to the library has been organized around the 50 shared parking spaces available on the project site. This approach is fundamentally flawed as it appears to prioritize those few who would be able to park in the parking lot over those whose will not be driving or are arriving via public transportation and would have to walk around the building to enter.
- Furthermore, the location of the main entry is hidden from all primary views to the site and only visible across the parking lot. The public library's approach should be based on sound planning principles that consider surrounding context and how people are arriving to the site in order to provide equal access, as well as important views to the site in order to provide a prominent, inviting, and inclusive access suitable for a civic building.
- Revisit the primary organization of the program on the site and employ sound planning and urban design strategies in order to locate the main entry to the library at a more prominent, visible and inclusive location on the site - along Park Heights or potentially Woodland Avenue with access to the corner plaza.
- Corner plaza appears very disconnected from the rest of the building and everything else on site. Relocate main entry so it has a direct connection to the plaza. The space can be reshaped into a more linear plaza if needed to facilitate that connection.
- Corner Plaza layout appears arbitrary and episodic. Study patterns of circulation, separate paths from destinations and articulate spaces not as a list of design elements but rather specific experiences.
- The beacon element at the corner is overwhelmingly large for the plaza. It appears to dominate the entire space and undermines further the building that has already turned its back to Park Heights and the plaza. It is deceitful to announce the space as a gateway plaza, and not providing a direct physical connection to the civic building on site. One would have to go around the building in search for the front door. This is a very poorly conceived design proposal and signals disconnect and disfunction.
- Patio program does not seem to have a direct relationship to the park and can be relocated elsewhere on the site in order to facilitate revisions to the overall layout while maintaining the required adjacencies.
- Utility and service spaces are located at a very prominent portion of the building, triggering an unsightly opaque screening wall. Relocate these elsewhere so as to not compromise the primary views and main approach to the site.
- Building design and articulation would benefit from an integrated approach between landscape and building, in order to take full advantage of the park setting and to respond more directly to the various site conditions. Current proposal gives it a distinctly institutional feel. Consider introducing lighter, more playful elements as the building engages with the site and where people would engage with the exterior more directly - at the plaza, patio, and entry areas.

Site:

- The team touched on the idea that this is an important civic building; the relevance of the immediate community should not be underscored. In the presentation, the team highlighted how the building will be located in an area of the city undergoing major redevelopment; new

multi-family housing buildings have already been approved or in construction immediately adjacent to this project site.

- The development happening around the site cannot be ignored.
- The intersection of Park Heights and Woodland Avenues will likely have a significant amount of foot traffic because of all the new development. If this is the case, and the Panel suspects that it will be, it is very likely the intersection will be signalized. Foot traffic reinforces the need for the entrance to be on the more public side of the building – the Park Heights Avenue side – and the very real possibility of a new signal at this intersection reduces concerns for safety that were raised by the team.
- The site should be considered as if it were a master plan; the library has the opportunity to act as a gateway to the new development. It is a very exciting opportunity, with very rare urban conditions:
 - New buildings to the south and east;
 - A park and recreation center undergoing major renovations to the north and west;
 - The team must view this building in its [near future] context to understand the full potential.
- This library is a unique opportunity to integrate with the park – capitalize on the strong interrelationship of the library and the park.
- The library is meant to broaden horizons through access to learning, and parks have the ability to open minds with nature. Utilize the site to create strong relationships with nature – the building should have an indoor / outdoor experience that embraces the site and its opportunities to the full extent.
- Use the park setting to enhance learning and experiences that may not be available to the patrons of the library anywhere else.
- There is a prime opportunity to use the northwest façade integrate more meaningfully with the park. As designed, the patio acts as a buffer and fences the building off from the park – yet the fence is not intended to be secured per the team’s description of it. There needs to be more clarity around the patio – either this space needs to be integrated more meaningfully or fully separated from the park.
- The wall from the children’s area to the patio (on the northwest side of the building) is a big opportunity. As designed, it reads as a barrier to the park – a wall – but it could be a visual connection to the park (and vice versa – a connection from the park to the books). Is it just the movie wall? Or does it serve a more important role between the building and the park? Consider these relationships to ensure the decisions are not made arbitrarily. Understanding the intent will help point to whether the wall needs to be glazed and open.
- The goals are great, but the design needs work to uphold them. The entrance should be a celebratory experience – urban libraries are pedestrian-focused buildings for a reason: because many people in urban areas walk, bicycle, or take public transit. That is true of this site, as well.

Building & Corner Plaza:

- It is true that all four sides of the building are visible, but the façades can still have a hierarchy. Embrace the idea that Park Heights Avenue is a major avenue with prominent buildings.
- The building employs grand gestures, but they are meaningless. The portal at the corner doesn’t take the user to the entrance. The portal is a key feature of the corner plaza, and welcomes people to the library, but the building turns its back on the corner plaza. The design is working against the goal of having a civic presence and welcoming the community.

- The plaza at the corner seems to be located appropriately, as it marks the entry to the community, but should also serve as an entrance to the building.
- The arrival element at the plaza needs to relate directly to the front door. As designed, the front entrance is tucked around the building and located on the side of the building with the *least* level of hierarchy.
- Corner element is oversized – team must decide what purpose of this feature is. The building is a one-story building, and the corner portal element dominates the building without serving a functional purpose.
- The plaza could be reworked with the entrance relocated slightly to be more direct and continuous. Elongating the plaza gives it the opportunity to have a meaningful connection to the building instead of a disingenuous one. The plaza is an opportunity to create an entry sequence that welcomes the public to the building.
- Plaza seems large on paper, but using the building to articulate the plaza will help scale it appropriately.
- It should be noted that while the team mentioned the parking lot is not part of this project, the parking lot is not yet approved. The site is zoned OS, which means the parking lot requires an ordinance by City Council. This reinforces the points that have been made about the entrance being located in a more public side of the building, whether along Park Heights Avenue or at the corner of Park Heights and Woodland Avenues.
- Consider the option of pulling up on Woodland Ave. to drop off the books. There is a way to make the book drop function with the program, while also acknowledging that this is a library in an urban setting. The way the book drop is designed feels very suburban and ignores that a large percentage of the population will be arriving by bus or foot.
- Locating the service entrance on Woodland Avenue is problematic, because now it needs to be screened. Try tucking the service entrance around the corner to conceal it more. This will help to consolidate the program and allow the public spaces to open up in a more meaningful and relevant way that actually connects to the public realm.
- The patio area contains program that makes sense but consider how a library functions: a library is full of moments for hushed reading and quiet study. This needs to be considered for the outdoor design, as well. Consider the following:
 - Outdoor spaces may have unintended consequences of being distracting if they are too open.
 - Think through how the space can be shaped by the building; use the building to mold discreet and intimate outdoor rooms.
 - The building could create quiet nooks that are protected to lend itself to quiet reading, and contemplative moments.
- The ideas to capture views are nice, but there is an opportunity to better articulate the program and provide more separation between quieter and louder elements.
- The building could take on a more playful, softer attitude to invite the community. Colors could be lighter (use other EP libraries for reference about colors).
- The project is at the very beginning of the design review process, which is good news. The team still has an opportunity to take advantage of this unique urban site, in a neighborhood that is redeveloping and reinventing itself.
- The Panel has full faith that the design will benefit from more study and a solution that responds both to the program needs and the urban context is within reach.

Next Steps:

Continue design addressing comments above. Work with Planning staff prior to returning to UDAAP.

Attending:

Gordon Krabbe, Clarence Felder – Enoch Pratt Free Library

Connie Kumor, Jim McArthur – Gant Brunnett Architects

Scott Scarfone – Mahan Rykiel

Husam Albatrawi – Baltimore City DGS

Kate Brower – Baltimore City Recreation and Parks

Kelly Baccala – Baltimore City DHCD

Ed Gunts – Baltimore Fishbowl

Melody Simmons – Baltimore Business Journal

Brandon Brooks, Barbara Wim, Jocelyn Larson – Attendees

Anthony Osbourne, Sharon Bradley* - UDAAP Panel

Ren Southard**, Caitlin Audette, Eric Tiso, Matt DeSantis, Kari Nye - Planning

* UDAAP Chairperson

** Assigned Planning Staff