

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

Date: May 12, 2022

Meeting #62

Project: 2507 Howard Ave.

Phase: Schematic Design

Location: Remington Neighborhood

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Matt Pinto from Seawall introduced the project, which is modeled after a development in Philadelphia and will be the first of its kind in Baltimore. Apartments will be offered at a discounted rate to residents who volunteer on a hyper-local level. The program includes ground floor retail, office at the second level, and four stories of residential above for a total of six stories. The project came before the Panel last year but the design has changed due to structural limitations of the existing building.

Gordon Godat from JP2 Architects continued the presentation with an overview of the site, which is located on Howard Street and bounded by alleys on the south and east, and rowhouses houses on the north. There are residential and commercial uses across the alleys on the south and east sides of the site. The original proposal sought to keep the existing building, but due to the structural issues, it will be demolished. The project team presented the former design proposal as a starting point for today's discussion. The new building footprint is slightly expanded, and parking will still be located on the south side of the building along the alley. There is significant grade change on the site, but the team has worked to resolve the topography and make all floors accessible via elevators, split sidewalks, and ramps.

The new building proposal includes a commercial tenant on the ground floor with office on level two and residential above on levels three through six. Units on Howard Street have been reoriented to face the street. The massing is somewhat similar to previous iterations, and the team strove to incorporate the Panel's earlier comments where applicable. The building will have a masonry base with fiber cement board above, and large industrial style windows. The building is meant to be a background building, meaning it fits into the existing urban fabric, but windows were highly important to the design.

Although the building utilizes most of the site, the team is proposing a few small green spaces that will act as pocket parks. The landscape will include a continuous planting strip covered by a grate to ensure accessibility and reduce soil compaction. Trees will be sycamore and lower shrubs and flowering bushes will be incorporated.

Discussion

The Panel thanked the project team for their presentation and proceeded with clarifications, questions, and comments.

Clarifications:

- *Who does the parking serve?* Retail shoppers and guests will use the parking lot on the south side of the building.
- *What is the tree spacing, and what is the support system for the grate covering the continuous soil volume?* Trees are spaced at approximately 25' and the grates will be supported by a concrete curb and additional bracing at the corners.
- *What is the character of Mace Street; why is there no fenestration on this side of the building?* Mace Street looks and functions more as an alley than a true street. The tenant has a requested darkroom use along that side of the building. There is also a loading dock on that side. The large ground floor tenant space includes windows on the south and east side of the building that will serve the remainder of the space.
- *Is this a full demolition with new foundations?* Yes, everything is new on this site; the new building will have three structural bays.

Site:

- The Panel is very happy to see the continuous soil volume proposed for the trees. Sycamores will be great for the neighborhood, and hopefully this tree and soil pattern will be picked up and continued as more development occurs along Howard Street.
- The pedestrian experience is more than just connection and proximity to desirable places. The quality of the east-west connection is important, and continuity is key for ensuring easy access to the amenities the team mentioned. The team must be careful of the example they will set with the landscape.

- The pedestrian experience is not just about the Howard Street side of the building, but also about the south and east sides of the building. The southern edge is a real opportunity to prioritize pedestrians.
- The south side of the building will need a ramp; when designing the ramp, consider how much room will be needed and what the approach is like for someone using the ramp. The space needs to be generous to feel comfortable and accommodate functions that might occur in the ground floor space.
- Is there a better use than surface parking on the south side? This space could become a small pocket park to enhance the pedestrian experience. Surface parking might depend on the tenant; team is strongly encouraged to reconsider the parking – study parallel parking on the side as an alternative to the proposed head-in parking.
- The south end of the site offers a real opportunity, especially given what we've learned about the demand for outdoor space in the last two years. There is a real need to prioritize people over cars – this can be achieved by rethinking the design approach. The team is encouraged to design this area for people first and foremost, while also allowing for cars to park. Use the same kit of parts – hardscape, green, etc. – and rework it to improve the flexibility and longevity of this space. This simple adjustment will give the building more importance, and negotiate the space in favor of *people*.
- Could some of the grates be replaced with plantings at the base of trees? This helps to give a human scale to the urban edge, which is much needed on Howard. Examples of this type of intervention can be seen up the street between 26th and 27th Street.

Building:

- The previous scheme was a good start, and the Panel is glad to see that some of the past comments were included. There is still room for improvement as the team continues to clarify ideas about materiality and façade organization.
- Is there a more deliberate way to treat the pilasters that will allow the building to read more as three bays instead of six? This would help the façade to feel less harsh – the design with six bays has a rhythm that marches down the block, which makes it feel unrelenting, but this can be remedied with more hierarchy and a read of fewer bays.
- Rigidity of the tall piers is emphasized by the fiber cement panels continuing through from above. Consider allowing the windows on the first and second floors to meet the masonry edge by eliminating the panel on these levels. This will also improve the proportion of the windows.

- Starting from the southeast corner, the building needs to integrate with the streetscape more purposefully. The ground floor sets the datum, and because of the slope on Howard Street, this results in a very tall base. Consider modifying the perceived scale with an intervention, such as a bench or some other element that stays level with the grade at the north end.
- If one elevator is out of service, tenants must go out and around the building to use the other due to the internal grade change. Consider revising the elevator layout to address this challenge by negotiating the grade with a platform that sits between the two different elevations, which could be ramped for accessibility.
- An uncomplicated mass is appropriate to this small apartment building program. Next presentation will need to address how the façade is handled. As the team studies materiality, look at color and evaluate how the massing is organized.
- Consider separating the building into two perceived masses; different tone can be used to emphasize the front and back masses as individual volumes that interact, rather than one extruded shape. North tower splitting the front and back volumes is a natural opportunity for a tonal change. Note that it doesn't have to be a drastic change, a simple difference in shade would work for this.
- The Mace Street façade needs more resolution and organization. Note that there are rowhouses proposed for the north end of the block, and these will have front doors facing onto Mace.
- Concern for Mace Street being treated as a back door. Team should consider introducing fenestration on the east side (on Mace) at grade. Even clerestory windows would be a better option than not including any openings; additionally, adding fenestration will help to organize the façade and address how the building turns the corner. At minimum, the masonry should echo some of the main detailing introduced at the west and south facades so that the east façade does not appear severely downgraded.

Next Steps:

Continue design addressing the comments above.

Attending:

Gordon Godat – JP2 Architects

Matt Pinto – Seawall Developers

Kelly Lindow, Jessica Krueger – CityScape Engineers

Mr. Anthony, Mses. Ilieva and O'Neill – UDAAP Panel

Chris Ryer, Ren Southard, Tamara Woods, Matthew DeSantis, Caitlin Audette – Planning