

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

**Date:** August 16, 2018

**Meeting #6**

**Project:** Middle Branch Fitness + Wellness Center

**Phase:** Schematic

Developer: Baltimore City Recreation and Parks

**Location:** Cherry Hill Reedbird Park, Baltimore, MD

**CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:**

The project was introduced by Adam Boarman, Chief of Capital Development for Baltimore City Recreation and Parks. It is planned in phases with an expanded program for a Fitness and Wellness Center and a larger complex with regional activities. Project goals were focused on a desire to make connections, between local community and the region, between indoor and outdoor activities, between existing trails and new site circulation.

Kate Scurlock of GWWO architects discussed how these goals informed the building configuration and siting, while describing the project's context and surrounding features. The site is approximately 33.9 acres and is located along a critical wetland area adjacent to a non-tidal wetland. It fronts onto a thickly wooded waterfront along the Patapsco River, and has direct access to Potee Street and Medstar Hospital from Reedbird Avenue. The site has access to the Cherry Hill community and its elementary schools from Seamon Avenue and access to the Gwynn Falls trail head under the bridges on Potee Street.

Siting studies were presented listing pros and cons, with the goal of finding the optimum location for the new facility within proximity of Seamon Avenue for convenient access to the community; providing visual and physical connections to the recreation fields and siting the Center to not preclude continued use of the outdoor pool or future improvements to the existing recreation and community facility. A phasing plan was shared to illustrate how the project will advance and address its many challenges.

Alice Storm Jones with Floura Teeter landscape architects presented a site master plan concept which viewed the site as a full park containing a number of activity centers. These include a community plaza, an event lawn, play area, dog park, a field house, pavilions, ball courts and multi-use fields. Pedestrian circulation paths connecting the park to the community as well as vehicular circulation, parking and drop-off zones are identified. Pedestrian and vehicular access is from Reedbird Avenue.

The building is organized based on functionality. Uses with large spaces and tall ceilings are clustered into a linear mass that establishes the northern wing of the facility. In contrast supporting uses with lower ceiling heights are assembled as a low mass and configured as a curved block to establish the southern wing. An intermediate volume consisting of a two story circulation space connects the north and south wings, with a ceiling height in between that of the high and low volumes. An indoor elevated track circulates through the high volume and the intermediate connecting volume.

## **COMMENTS FROM THE PANEL:**

### **Site:**

Much of the pedestrian circulation utilizes the site successfully connecting many activities and creating pockets of interest. The addition of pavilions and a field house are welcoming as they serve as outdoor rest and gathering spaces strategically located at intersecting paths. The meandering path along the wooded water edge contrasts well with the direct and straight segments of the fitness loop.

In some location paths are misaligned and direction isn't always clear. At the main entry and community plaza, the circulation into the forecourt is unclear with many paths leading to and from the pedestrian drop off, the existing community facility and the parking lots. Organize the circulation along important axes that reveal distinct geometries and clear sight lines. Use key intersections to define nodes, such as the main entry/forecourt, to link and align important access paths serving the main parking lot with the access walkway from Seamon Avenue. Similarly, extend the central walkway through the main parking to meet the path around the crescent and connect to the fitness loop or provide distinct landscaping and separation from the fitness loop.

Additional study is needed to improve re-entry for all pick up spaces of the passenger drop off area, through the internal circulation of the parking lot area without exiting onto Reedbird Avenue.

Adding social gathering spaces like the event lawn conceptually links similar communal uses, the outdoor pool and indoor natatorium. Further study is required to clarify access and compatibility between the lawn events and aquatic uses.

A more developed site plan showing a comprehensive approach to landscaping design that defines screening, shading, decorative species or other planting; hardscaping and amenities and other purposeful use of urban features is useful.

### **Building:**

The panel noted that siting of the building was thoughtful based on its program which consists of spatial activities that complement the multi-use nature of the park as depicted in the site master plan. This siting provides good access to the community; opens the facility to the outdoor activities and provides visual and physical connections to the park.

The main building mass is organized around an axis that defines the extension of Seamon Avenue and follows the regular geometry of the site. However, the curved low volume seems to arbitrarily follow the traffic circulation loop out of the site and diminishes the presence of strong linear mass set by the program. Consider eliminating the curve in favor of a linear bar juxtaposed in a manner that balances the tall mass both in orientation and in volume. This strengthens and preserves the entry axis while allowing the intermediate volume to be fully expressed in a scale and proportion that is more complimentary with the entry off the forecourt/community plaza. A slightly narrowed entry is an appropriate counterpoint to the wider opening onto the park plaza at the opposite end of the central intermediate volume.

Large oversized openings to allow extensive amounts of light and make strong visual connections between the interior and exterior of the facility is intentional. Consider further study specific to the quality of the interior space when exposed to a very high level of light intensity and whether the intimate experience of being indoors while appreciating the visual connection with outside, is still acceptable regardless of use. Further fenestration study would be useful to inform the building massing, and contrast

solids with voids. While the corners are intended to be eroded, they are expressed as large extractions because of the oversized openings. Along many facades, oversized openings significantly minimize solid surfaces changing the proportions of solid to void which ultimately dilutes the expression of the mass. Consider varying the proportions of solid to void in a more unequal ratio to create more visual interest and present the building massing in a more engaging manner.

More study is needed at the indoor elevated track in locations where it emerges from the gymnasium to the outside, at corners through large openings.

Revisit the ideas developed and organize them hierarchically as primary and secondary elements with consideration for location, scale and proportion. While the ideas seemingly point to the goal of connectivity, more attention should be given to the progression from one space to another, the modulation between spatial intimacy and communality. This may better express and balance elements and features of the design including massing of the cascading volumes, entries and openings when compared with solid surfaces, the indoor experience looking out when compared with the outdoor experience looking in, the scale of the eroded corners compared with the mass of the glazed connecting spine, and the overall qualities and features that anchor the building in its park setting and gives it presence.

**Next Steps:**

Discussion Only. The Panel was excited to learn about such a great project for the neighborhood and the City overall and looks forward to seeing the project evolve considering the comments above.

**Attending:**

Kate Scurlock, Jess Dancer, Eric Feiss, Kevin Miller – GWWO

Alice Storm Jones, Matt Ellingson – Floura Teeter

Julie Soss, Edy Ruano – MK/Civil Eng.

Adam Boarman, Lance Decker, Kate Brower – BCR+P

Alvin Lee - FHCB

Mr. Anthony\*, Mses. Ilieva and Wagner -UDAAP Panel

Anthony Cataldo, Christina Hartsfield, Director Tom Stosur, Kristin Ahearn, Brent Flickinger - Planning