

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

Date: April 20, 2023

Meeting #76

Project: Keys Point

Phase: Master Plan

Location: O'Donnell Heights, Baltimore MD

PRESENTATION:

Context / Background:

Courtney Galiber with Morris Ritchie Assoc. reintroduced the project, which is part of a 62-acre site, developed as a post war housing project in 1942. The Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) has funding to redevelop the site and began the planning process and demolition more than a decade ago. The Phase II site is surrounded by cemeteries on the west, southeast, and northwest. There are 144 new units built in Phase I (completed). The presentation today is focused on Phase II, which is 22 acres. Each phases contains multiple sub-phases. The completed Phase I includes buildings that function and appear as if they are townhomes and others that function like true multi-family buildings. The project utilizes parking lots because they allow for aggregated parking, consolidated stormwater management and more generous rear patio areas. The patio areas function as outdoor amenity space for the residents and are accessed by the rear door of each unit.

This is the team's second presentation to the Panel. There have been several changes to the site layout as suggested by the Panel. Significant changes include the following:

- Utilization of primary blocks wherever possible
- Reinforce streets and make strong urban blocks
- Strengthen edges along O'Donnell Street and at the east side
- Minimize extreme grade changes to minimize number of stairs
- Create open spaces that feel intentional instead of left-over
- Give more thought to the pedestrian movement through the site
- Create architectural language that reduces "noise" and contributes to feeling of residential urban fabric while also allowing for future changes
- Minimize parking

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the team for the very clear and thorough presentation and noted that the team did a nice job of addressing previous comments and advancing the project. It was noted that the plan has evolved in a positive way. The Panel then moved into clarifying questions and comments.

Clarification:

- *The sections showing larger sets of steps – how does this new plan compare?* The previous plan had 10-13 steps and this plan has more like 6-7 steps. The team was able to reduce the number of necessary stairs by about half.
- *Why doesn't the alley at the east go through to Boston?* The neighboring alley punches through to Boston and the team thought having two alley intersections immediately adjacent to one another would not be beneficial.
- *Does the long dead-end pose a fire access issue?* No, there is fire access through the front that satisfies the fire code.
- *Did the number of units increase; and if so, can the area for commercial and retail increase?* The team took the location of the future potential retail from the Master Plan and envisioned that this could be a smaller, corner store use. The development team is not responsible for this future commercial site; additionally, there is commercial not shown on the plan but very nearby (at the northeast edge).
- *In terms of the overall phasing, does the team know when the park will be developed?* The team understands that BCRP has been developing the park, and the team has been in touch with the team developing the park.

COMMENTS:

Site / Landscape:

- This plan feels more integrated into the grade – it is a gentler approach and appears to be less forced than the previous iteration. The approach is more rational, with very solid ideas.
- Panel is very happy to hear the transformer in the northeast corner can be relocated.
- With regard to the alley connections, be selective about the access points into the site. Students will be walking to and from school and access points may invite unsafe mid-block crossing.
- Also note that too many entries diminish the intimate feel of the neighborhood.
- With regard to the primary arteries, consider opportunities to subtly break up the rear yard view corridor. Consider moving the end units or adding landscape elements to make this view more forgiving (rather than relentless line of parked cars).
- Another option (for breaking up the view) would be to limit vehicular access to one side on some of the parking access roads. For instance, the team could look at closing off the parking access along the extension of Gary Avenue. This would both allow for a little parklet with landscape to soften the view and it would reinforce this street extension as a promenade that terminates on the new park. A simple move like this would be very nice – it would prioritize pedestrians and reduce impervious surface.
- Team is encouraged to add another layer of scrutiny to the pedestrian path. The most rational path to the community center is along the new N/S artery street and then through the (future) park, but this is also the steepest grade.

- People will likely gather at intersections; building blocks will need to be responsive to how the pedestrians move through. Perhaps there is respite where the E/W streets meet the N/S streets and the sidewalks get a little wider to allow for people to gather.
- Good housing is improved with commercial / retail opportunities – noted that there are existing commercial uses off site very nearby (grocery, etc.) and this site is developed by HABC / AFH, Inc., both of whom are focused on affordable housing and not retail / commercial.
- There are many advantages to trying to reduce the concrete and asphalt in favor of green space that becomes an asset to the residents.
- The “leftover” spaces have been addressed, which is an enormous improvement to the previous plan. This updated plan gives a purpose to the site – whether it’s housing, amenity space, circulation space, utility function – and organizes these various functions in a clear and cohesive manner.
- Amenity area access is visible to the rear; team needs to study the approach to green amenity spaces for more visibility from a pedestrian vantage point.
- A small tweak will help these green amenity spaces feel more intentional and public by aligning its access point with a pedestrian crossing – Panel notes that uncertainty about ownership (in between public or private and hidden away) will almost always become a safety concern. Either tighten the gap to make the space feel more private or open the gap up wider to make it more public (clarify the definition of the space using the design cues).
- Look at the alignments of the blocks to ensure the alignments make sense in both plan and elevation. Consider how the buildings relate to each other – having them off just a little will feel more awkward than allowing an intentional alignment or offset.
- Look at the last block that punches through to Boston Street; consider reorienting this block to make Boston the primary street by continuing the stick of rowhouses to the corner (comment is intended for the street to the east of the main N/S street along the park only).
- Use a simple Sketch-up massing model to ensure the viewsheds make sense. Make sure the blocks are presenting themselves within the topography in the way the team had intended on the more diagrammatic plan view.

Buildings / Architecture:

- Assign a rule to the pop-up:
 - Does it occur at the corner?
 - Does it occur at a specific moment?
 - The image shown is 5 units, but what happens at 4 or 6 or 7 units?
 - The rule will become important for legibility overall as the team lays out several block of homes with this architectural language.
- Architecture is attractive, but has the team thought about how the houses sit within the undulating landscape? The orientation of the rowhouses follow the land scape. Looking down from the park, the homes will cascade down from the slope, which means more typologies will be required.
- Panel suggests looking at precedents from European villages.
- Look for complimentary typologies as the team moves ahead.

Next Steps:

Continue moving the plan forward with consideration to the Panel's comments. Work with Planning staff to complete design review.

Attending:

Courtney Galiber – Morris & Ritchie, Assoc.

Aaron Zephir, Magda Westerhout – Moseley Architects

Kerina Spencer, Mary Claire Davis – AHC Inc.

Cynthia Newman-Lynch, Lembit Jogi – HABC

Christina Davis, Ted Ludvigson, Ed Gunts – Attending

Anthony Osbourne, Sharon Bradley and Pavlina Ilieva* - UDAAP Panel

Ren Southard**, Caitlin Audette, Matt DeSantis, Chris Ryer - Planning

* UDAAP Chairperson

** Assigned Planning Staff