

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

Date: February 24, 2022

Meeting #58

Project: 401 W. 26th Street (26th & Sisson)

Phase: Schematic Design

Location: 401 W. 26th Street (26th & Sisson)

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Joel Fidler with Ayers Saint Gross introduced the multi-family residential project. Site constraints include CSX rail line to the south/east along with a steep grade down to the rail line, 60' ROW at W. 26th Street, and cell tower on site along Sisson Street. The site is located near industrial buildings and typical Baltimore rowhouses. The proposed building is composed of two masses, one five-stories tall and the other four stories, for an overall max. height of approximately 60' tall. Tarek Saleh, lead designer presented updates to the design of the building. Abigail Thomas presented the landscape design including street trees, a vegetated outdoor amenity space, green roof, and additional lighting.

The team has also explored materiality and building proportions through the lens of the neighborhood. The material selection focuses on the intersection between traditional and modern – the building is intended to read as a transition between old and new; the existing neighborhood consist of rowhouses and warehouses built in the early 1900s, with more recent buildings mixed into the urban fabric. The resulting building façade is organized with vertical and horizontal patterns and break the massing down into shorter sections.

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the team for the presentation and moved into clarifying questions and comments. It was noted that in future presentations should include previous images (plans, elevations) and associated comments for the Panel's reference.

- *Loading dock and trash removal – how does this work?* Residents will perform move-in functions through resident entrance; the trash is located inside the building, behind the garage door. Trash will be wheeled out for pick-up; truck will back into loading dock area. There is not a fence, but this will be screened with landscape elements.

- *What is the height of the ground floor tier?* Podium is set at 15' but rises to 20' at the east edge due to grade change. This allows for the two-level units at the east end of the building.
- *What is the intended use for the unprogrammed space at the east edge of the site?* This area is intended for stormwater tank. There are some use issues with regard to noise, environmental aspects, etc. limiting use options. The tank is required to meet catchment minimums; site contamination limits surface catchment approach.
- *What is the utility box located on 26th Street?* That is a proposed transformer box; it remains at this location due to the placement of the main electrical room within the building.
- *Is there parking on 26th Street?* Yes, there is ample parking in front of the building on 26th Street, in front of the existing warehouse. The stretch of 26th Street is shown as a planted strip between the street and sidewalk, but there are pass-throughs for pedestrian access between trees and planted areas.
- *Planted areas along CSX – is this vegetation existing?* Yes, this area is planted as shown. Note the slope is almost 45 degrees, which makes it difficult to plant and the project team plans to leave the existing planting in place.
- *What is the intent for the retail located at the corner; are the tables shown in the plan intended to serve this retail function?* The anticipated use is corner store type of retail; tables are anticipated for use by customers. The retail would potentially offer some sort of carry out (sandwiches, coffee, etc.) options.

Site:

- The project context is very interesting, with the location at the edge of industrial and residential land-uses. There is some concern with the future development around the site – has the team thought through what might happen across 26th or Sisson Streets? The building does not seem to address future potential of the area around the site.
- Overall tone for the project can be set with programmed outdoor space; green spaces would offer a precedent for pocket parks in the neighborhood.
- Trees around the cell tower area are encouraged to bring pedestrians' view down to the ground level and de-emphasize the tower. Panel makes this suggestion with the understanding that planting cannot encroach on the fenced area. Additionally, loading dock paving could be elevated to match sidewalk; keeping the sidewalk elevation continuous will help to downplay the back door nature of the space and make for a better pedestrian experience.

- Extremely important to add trees along Sisson Street for a continuous pedestrian experience and to mitigate the taller mass at the corner.
- Good that the existing planting along CSX edge is set to remain but having a very deliberate planting plan to transition to the more heavily planted area will be key to ensuring that this does not feel like the “back door” of the site.
- Second-floor amenity patio on the north side has the potential to feel cold and expansive; incorporating more movable planters will add greenery and flexibility to the space. This will help to soften it and make it feel cozier, even in colder months.
- Placement of utility box is concerning; the current location makes it a focal point. The current design makes the location seem as if it was resolved from the inside-out (based on the location of electrical room within the building), rather than locating it from the neighborhood context. Program and electrical room can shift to allow for a better (less visible) location of the transformer.
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Building:

- Primary entrance is located directly across from the curb-cut, which is not ideal. Justification seems ok, but there could be more shielding to help the entrance area feel more welcoming and protected from vehicles.
- The project could make a more meaningful effort to stitch itself into the neighborhood with an entrance and forecourt at the corner instead of at its present location near the middle of the block.
- Balance between openings and panel façade is successful.
- Loft-like units are unique and still fit with the context (typical in neighborhoods experiencing a shift from industrial to residential). It would be great if these units could express themselves more visibly as two-story from the exterior.
- Misalignment between the awning at the entrance and the awning at the corner of Sisson and 26th Streets needs more study – project would benefit from these elements relating more to one another.
- Separation between the fitness center and the sidewalk is important; without a buffer this space may start to feel like a fishbowl.
- Public, retail use is very important to ensuring liveliness at the corner.
- Opportunity to create areas around the entries where gathering can occur informally and organically; this will help to better integrate the building into the neighborhood.
- The different pieces of the building are starting to feel more unified with the placement of the brick.
- Team is advised to set stylistic narrative aside and look at the various architectures; these are fit into a base / middle / top language and addressing this language will help to direct the design as it develops.

- Brick at the corner is unarticulated, which pushes it toward a modern typology instead of the classical language expressed in other portions of the building. Ribbed panels appear additive and foreign to the traditional approach of the brick volume.
- Signage surface backdrop needs to find its way more into the building to make it feel less foreign or applied; appears as a departure which makes it seem like an afterthought.
- The top portion of the building needs more resolution; as designed it stops abruptly. There is an opportunity to integrate the top and the signage piece more intentionally by bringing some of the color from the sign background (wood color) elements into the top of the west portion of the building.
- Vertical panels at the east end of the building (in the punched window openings) are concerning because they are so different from the brick – they want to be playful, but they risk looking cheap if there is not more integration and connection between the panel elements and the brick.
- Corner of 26th and Sisson needs more anchoring; the current design doesn't present itself to the neighborhood in the same way as the other side (which is less prominent) because it is a mid-block entrance. The entrance can stay at the mid-block but the corner hierarchy still needs to be resolved visually.

Next Steps:

Address the panels comments above and work with Planning staff on next steps.

Attending:

Al Barry – AB Associates

Joel Fidler, Tarek Saleh, Abigail Thomas, Tim Shook – Ayers Saint Gross

Richard Shure – Development team

Mr. Anthony, Mses. Illeva and Bradley – UDAAP Panel

Tamara Woods, Ren Southard, Caitlin Audette – Planning