

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

Date: December 10, 2020

Meeting #40

Project: SNF Agora Inst. At JHU

Phase: Schematic II

Location: 3100 Wyman Park Drive

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Lee Coyle with JHU introduced the project for the SNF Agora Institute at JHU. Renzo Piano Building Workshop is the design architect, and ASG is the architect of record. Mr. Coyle continued with a short summary of the Panel's comments from previous review.

Stephen Wright with ASG continued the presentation, focusing on what has changed in the building. A summary of key changes are as follows:

- Strengthen physical connection to the broader campus and edge – use building to resolve the different geometries of the campus together instead of separate
- Establish stronger pedestrian circulation through the site, diagonal path and rotated café and community space (holds 150 people)
- Relocated main entrance
- Team will bring on a consultant to help integrate the Baltimore Greenway segment that runs along the edge of the site.
- Resolve fragmented program
- Increased the floor plate of the “factory” building and reduced height by one floor
- Loading dock tucked away and screened by trees

Sarah Leaskey (Landscape) continued the presentation with a description of the Landscape approach. The team is not trying to recreate the woodland character but are taking a strategic approach with a not to the unique features that occur in the Wyman Park woods. Grade changes are integrated to landscape resulting in a seamless, user-friendly approach. Terrace walls sweep across west area of site and hold the pedestrian walkway. Tree plan calls for a wide variety of native tree species in a variety of sizes and colors to help enliven the views. Groundcover layer approach is similar with low, medium and higher cover in a wide variety of species.

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the team for their thoughtful approach and for continuing to resolve the already sophisticated design. The design team thanked the Panel for their comments, which they felt were very relevant and helpful to the project development. The Panel continued discussion, beginning with clarifications.

Clarifications:

- *Lighting – pathways will be lit to show themselves as a ribbon of light; how will this be accomplished?* 40" bollard would be used to illuminate the paths; stairs will have fully recessed step light.
- *What is happening with the parking lot?* Access to parking off Wyman Drive will contain bicycle parking, as well (bicycle parking will be located on east and west sides of the building).
- *Where will pedestrians be coming from?* Most pedestrian traffic will be coming from the east, across Wyman Park Drive. Garden walls at the garage across the street have been removed because they were deemed hazardous (driver views of the sidewalk were obstructed by walls).
- *Shifts have been positive, but how are pathways integrated with existing paths, how do they welcome visitors?* Perimeter is brick (standard for JHU) and interior paths are concrete.
- *Where does woodland landscape start and stop?* Stark contrast between manicured lawn and woodland ground cover will be mitigated by a softer, less manicured ground cover that transitions between the two very extremes. A clearing on the east side of the building gives more visual between building and campus. Lighter brown pathways are not for circulation, but for maintenance crews to move about without damaging the plants.
- *What is the tall element on the "spider" portion of the building?* A mast or spire to denote a place of importance.

Building:

- Building sits beautifully in landscape; separation of building sections allows woodland landscape to weave among built elements and dominate the composition. Experience from within the building could be magical, treehouse-like.

- Pedestrian circulation is separate from vehicular circulation, provides a separate experience. Assume the circuitous path south of Café is ADA access, can be a pleasant way to experience the site while serving this function.
- ADA path through the site will offer opportunity to create small moments of respite with benches.
- Still no strong connection to Wyman Park Building, but that might be for the best. If the connection can't be made well, best to disconnect it altogether and let them be separate entities. But pedestrian connections still need to be well-considered and not sure they're there yet. Sidewalk along north edge of building appears to dead-end at eastern edge?
- Really appreciate attention to landscape elements and level of consideration to tree preservation and reforestation, relevant and native plant species (excellent species selection).
- One caution – new walls within critical root zones of existing trees might harm them. Damage is often not evident until 2-3 years later, with potential visual and physical impacts to new building when trees fail. Advise that the team works with a highly qualified arborist as soon as possible for advanced tree preservation work (gradual root- and canopy-pruning, etc).
- Crystalline set of boxes in the landscape enhances the campus and is a successful proposal, but connection to main campus remains challenging. Aggregation of buildings can be mitigated by connections – work to resolve these more.
- Very bold twist of the smaller cube needs to be reconciled. Diagonal paths set up a visual connection, but do not physically align with the existing paths (they miss the connection to the crosswalk, etc.) – expanded node can help create arrival point to help pedestrians navigate site geometry.
- Arrival points need more hierarchy.
- Subtle change of surface can help announce these nodes – its ok that the transitions are not so literally aligned, but they don't feel intentional yet. A subtle shift would help to invite people into the site – could be as simple as moving a tree or increasing the bricked area at key points.
- On the west side, sidewalk feels very compressed – consider revising the service drive a Wyman Park Drive to give more room to pedestrians.

Building:

- Shift from the read of one building in the landscape to two companion volumes with landscape weaving between the two makes a stronger project.
- Diagonal cube identifies critical functions, but the shift is so powerful that it begins to dilute the relationship between the two cubes. The chamfer of the stair and the corner of the larger building contradict the powerful initial tension between the two cubes; increasing the paving between the two buildings could help unite them and resolve the geometry.
- New proportions of the “factory” are not as elegant as they were as a cube; perhaps a little more erosion / breathing room at the ground level with the volume retaining its shape above (cantilevered above the path to allow continuation of the diagonal axis through the site *and* a reading of the building as a glass cube).
- Glass on the bridge and spider could change to a more transparent type, allowing landscape to read as if it runs through the building. This would allow the building to successfully read as two separate pieces.
- Decoupling the service dock is good, but alignment with the vertical “spider” objectifies it – would be helpful to move it to the south to make it more a part of the landscape and conceal it. Another approach to deemphasize the service façade is to separate it by extending the landscape across the loading dock.
- Good that the smaller rotated building has moved closer to the sidewalk to establish a closer relationship to the urban context.
- Clear glass is recessed, with frittered glass projected in front of the shaded elements – this softens the severity of glass façade; building façade will move and shift in relation to the direction of the sun.

Next Steps:

Continue the design of the project addressing the comments above.

Attending:

Stephen Wright, Sarah Leaskey – Ayers Saint Gross

Dan Loveless – WRA

Stacey Ko, Lee Coyle, Catherine Pierre, Jennifer Mielke, Amy Argasinski – JHU

Samantha Hollowmon – Light Works

Zah Kuehn – Renzo Piano Building Workshop

Ed Gunts – Baltimore Fishbowl

Hallie Miller – Baltimore Sun

Stephen Ruckman, Julekha Dash, Michelle Moseley, Renard Baker, Amy Mercurio – Attendees

Mr. Anthony, Ms. Ilieva (Ms. Bradley supplied comments via email) – UDAAP Panel

Laurie Feinberg*, Chris Ryer, Ren Southard, Tamara Woods, Jeff La Noue, Matt DeSantis –
Planning