

BALTIMORE CITY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING

URBAN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE ADVISORY PANEL

MEETING MINUTES

Date: February 23, 2023

Meeting #73

Project: McMechen Multi-Family (former Pedestal Gardens site)

Phase: Schematic I

Location: 1512 Eutaw Place, Madison Park

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Developer Patrick Wagner (The Community Builders) introduced the project team before Keval Thakker (HCM) continued the presentation with an overview of the site context and an explanation of the proposal. The project is a mixed-use development with two (2) multi-family housing buildings, which will replace the existing Pedestal Gardens multi-family housing. The site is located at the corner of Eutaw Place and McMechen Street in Madison Park, both of which are broad boulevards with planted medians.

The buildings will be comprised primarily of residential housing, with a mix of 1-BR, 2-BR and 3-BR units and ground floor retail at the corner of McMechen and Eutaw. Building “A” on the northeast (front) portion of the lot is a 4-story with neighborhood retail and 3 levels of residential above; this building has (39) 1-BR and (42) 2-BR for a total of 81 units, and it is situated on the portion of the site that is located within the Bolton Hill Historic District. Building “B” is located at the southwest (back) portion of the lot; the building is 3-story residential and contains (14) 1-BR, (18) 2-BR, and (14) 3-BR for a total of 46 units. There is a small, mid-block park to the south of the parcel on Eutaw Place called Madison Park. Improvements at Madison Park have been proposed but the team does not have an expected date of completion. As is, the park contains trees, open space, tables, and a few mounds which are paved in rough brick or granite blocks.

There is a grade change of several feet across the site, which the team has accommodated for with the landscape. An easement splits the site down the middle and, and no building improvements are allowed above the easement. Due to the location of this easement, the buildings have been placed along the street edges on Eutaw Place and Madison Avenues. The team envisions the interior of the site will be used by families and residents; parking is located between the two buildings and the perimeter includes a pergola along the interior of the site at the rear of the buildings.

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the team for their thorough presentation and began the discussion with clarifying questions and comments.

Clarification:

- *Can you please review the site analysis for the Panel?* The team looked at the views, the topography, the easement, the historic district, etc.
- *What decisions did you make based on the site analysis? For example, how did you determine the location of the residential entries?* The team wanted to place the entries in such a way that made sense from both the interior and exterior. The entrances are located away from the retail / public entrance at the northeast corner. One of the goals in redeveloping this site (the Pedestal Gardens site) is to reconnect the buildings to the neighborhood and face the building outward as opposed to the current design, which faces inward. To serve the residents who are using cars, the team placed the entrances on from the parking lot side directly across from the entrances on the street side.
- *What is the response of the building to the McMechen side and on the park side? This conversation [about the attitude to the different elevations] is important to helping focus the Panel's comments on the team's design goals.* On the park side, the team was focused on connecting to that space as an amenity. They wanted to create a strong street wall on Eutaw and anchor the corner at McMechen with a lively public space (at the northeast corner).
- *Please walk the Panel through the trash pick-up process. How do you envision this process happening?* Trash pick-up will occur along Mosher Street edge, where the dumpster is located.
- *How big is the outdoor amenity space?* It is about 1,800 square feet.
- *Please walk through separation of public and private spaces; What is the separation between the sidewalks and the building?* The buffers around the exterior of the building with plantings are about 5' wide, give or take. McMechen has a slightly smaller planted buffer closer to about 4'. The overall ROW varies from 15' – 18' depending on the side.
- *Where are the vehicular entries to the parking lot?* There is one entrance on McMechen and one on Mosher (please clarify if this is one or two) - this has changed recently and it appears to be only the single entrance, rather than two parking lot entrances.
- *Please clarify the location of the historic district.* The line for the historic district runs approximately through the midpoint of the site, from the northwest midpoint to the southeast midpoint. Despite the fact that only Building A (on Eutaw) will be required to meet the CHAP guidelines, the buildings will be designed as a set, meaning that that Building B (on Madison) will compliment Building A.

- *Is the team building to the maximum allowed by code?* The project is below the maximum number of units, but that is because of other constraints such as parking, SWM, etc. Team has applied for funding and met with neighborhood groups in Bolton Hill, Upton, Druid Heights, Marble Hill, etc. to arrive at an agreeable density.

Site:

- Project would benefit from more site analysis; a simplified diagrammatic drawing would allow the team to see if and how design is responding to the stated goals (which have been articulated verbally but not shown in drawings).
- The intentions of the project team are appreciated but could be better articulated through a simple drawing or series of drawings. This is not for the benefit of the Panel, but rather to show the team whether the design addresses the ideas. Diagrammatic drawings serve the purpose of evaluation – they are tools for quickly verifying that the design does what the team intends for it to do without adding a lot of detail at this early stage.
- There is a balance between achieving the necessary unit count, parking count, etc. and the larger design objectives – returning to the conceptual diagrammatic phase will help to balance project needs with the site challenges, context, and project goals.
- The easement is making the site seem under-built, divided and not utilized to its full extent. The feeling of under-utilization can be remedied by pulling the buildings together more.
- In the initial site analysis, a lot of *analysis* is still missing. The project is surrounded by public green spaces of varying sizes and different programmatic elements. The design does not address important context elements or make deliberate connections. The new project should strive to engage with the neighborhood assets and urban fabric, but the design is not yet achieving a feel of integration with the neighborhood.
- The Panel appreciates the idea that this new development will invert the previous project’s inward facing orientation. However, the interior space has been turned over to vehicles – a successful project will prioritize the residents and pedestrians over vehicles. Consider windows on the parking lot side and what the views are from those units.
- Outdoor amenity spaces need more attention – work to balance and prioritize the exterior spaces with the need for parking:
 - Reduction to a single parking lot entrance is an improvement; with the adjustment down to one entrance, there is an opportunity for the edge along McMechen to become a green portal, a mews, or an inviting green space to welcome residents or visitors walking to the site.
 - Paved path cutting through the middle of the parking lot feels arbitrary and gratuitous – no effort is given to this idea. The landscape is an afterthought and cannot be solved with special paving. There are better places for the pedestrian paths, and better ways to execute, but they need to be integrated in the site design, not applied afterward.

- The outdoor spaces feel wedged in and leftover – people will not want to spend their time in these spaces. Differentiate between what is outdoor hangout space for adults, play space for kids, dumpsters, parking, etc.
 - Look at these spaces objectively to evaluate them – note that way is proposed is not necessarily better than what currently exists, it is simply an inversion.
 - Decisions have given the priority to the parking lot and not to the buildings as they connect to the neighborhood, the historic fabric.
 - Arrange the parking differently to provide more green space and give more of a buffer while also connecting more toward Madison Park.
 - Consolidate the infrastructure to make the site and building fit more intentionally. Number one goal is to protect the outdoor spaces and prioritize them over parking. Instead of allowing the parking to dominate the interior, consolidate it on one side to allow generous space for the amenities on the other.
 - Locate dumpsters and utilities in such a way that they respect the existing context and neighboring buildings.
 - The parking layout is causing other elements to push back. Instead of battling the site, allow the layout to evolve naturally and organically to what is around the site. The parking and building need to respond to the site.
 - Tuck dumpsters and utilities into the building and connect the building to the green spaces – allow the patios to look at each other, to have a relationship, not simply get tucked in around the parking lot.
- More attention must be paid to how the building footprints engage with the street, and how much privacy is provided for the ground floor units. This is true for all sides of the site, despite the fact that each building façade should have a character that responds to the immediate context of the street it faces.
 - There has not been sufficient investigation into how the project sits in the neighborhood, how the pair of buildings is accessed by pedestrians, and how it impacts the surrounding built environment.
 - McMechen extends from Pennsylvania Avenue to Mount Royal, and Eutaw is also a main thoroughfare from downtown to Druid Hill Park. This building is at an important intersection, on a unique site. There are wonderful opportunities for this site to tap into the larger context.
 - Madison Park has been talked about [by the team] as an important feature, but the building has not addressed it as such leaving an eroded edge and a wide view into the parking lot.
 - The approach to the site and the project is very safe – it feels like this design is simply checking the box for placing two buildings on a site. The team has the ability to reach out and respond to the site in a subtle and sensitive way to the rich historical context.

- The Panel would like to see more of the site and the critical elements in the community – investigating them and rationalize and demonstrating how the building and project site are able to respond to the unique pieces.
- Note that the act of design is a balance of analyzing what is around, and then determining how the needs of the project will respond architecturally. The team must make decisions about their design criteria, what shapes it, and what the formal response will be. If these ideas are clearly articulated, the design response will feel more authentic to the site.

Building:

- Site is begging for a more sensitive approach than what has been presented here today. Employ concept diagrams to vet ideas before applying them liberally.
- At the moment, the buildings are not shaped properly to respond to the uniqueness of the site. Eutaw is very formal, tree-lined, which turns onto McMechen, but this building does not respond to the unique conditions: the setbacks, green space, boulevards, existing buildings, Madison Park, and other conditions already mentioned.
- The buildings are simply pushed up to the property line on all sides. Instead of taking this basic approach to the building massing, respond to the specific conditions on the different sides of the site. Start from the macro (neighborhood) and move to the micro (site) – consider what is happening in the community as a whole and decide what elements to bring into the project and which things can be left out. Use the building as an opportunity to respond to macro and micro context.
- The building massing can be improved by extending the leg of building A on McMechen to tighten the gap between the two buildings.
- Buildings are massed and laid out so the entire viewshed from McMechen looks toward the parking lot. Narrowing the aperture [between the buildings] is an easy fix. The wide viewshed into a parking lot not a new issue and needs to be avoided on this site.
- Usable program can be added to the McMechen side or the distance between the buildings can be tightened. McMechen is not a side view; this side needs to be treated with respect. Panel understands there is a 20' easement running down the center of the site, but there is a better approach than what is shown.
- The architectural language is not unique enough for this particular context –
 - This type of architecture is seen all over. Consider how the building can contribute to the *specific* architectural language of Eutaw Place and the broader community in a meaningful way.
 - These new buildings have an opportunity to blend without copying. The design uses a “base-middle-top” approach, but this is not the only way to respond to the existing datums. The datum doesn’t necessarily need to be a literal line – the datum can be a vertical plane; it can be done with the fenestration, etc.

- The precedents are older projects – can't keep doing the same thing no matter how successful it was. Precedents shown are great projects, but the team cannot simply rely on previous projects. This is an opportunity to move ahead.
- Continue to innovate and look ahead; find a way to contribute without the language feeling borrowed or too busy / simplified. Find balance and use design language that has a conceptual relationship to the place.
- Façades must be addressed in a hierarchal manner – the different sides of the site require different responses:
 - McMechen and Eutaw sides: these are the primary façades along major corridors. These façades front on to wide green boulevards and have the opportunity to provide breathing room, and to contribute to the grandness of the boulevard.
 - Madison side: this portion is more intimate, but still feels public. There are stately rowhouses across the street and adjacent to the south – these existing buildings have snug lot lines and create a strong street wall punctuated with marble stoops and street trees.
 - Mosher side: there is an opportunity to give this portion of the site new life, yet it is treated as a back door. Long term this can offer a more to the neighborhood. It can become a quiet, intimate street that offers a portal to Madison Park from the west.
 - Madison Park side: the park contains an alley of trees – this is a lush and luxurious park. The multi-use room is adjacent to this space, but there is an opportunity to place some outdoor space to connect.
- Building entrances need more study:
 - Entrance locations do not make sense in their current locations; they have been placed through the middle of the buildings, which means that residents must cut through the parking lot to access amenities. This is a bad idea.
 - The entry can be pushed to the south. This would allow for a connection along the park edge, not through the parking lot. The connection could be reinforced with trees and planting as an extension of Madison Park.
 - Alternately, the parking could be pushed to the other side – there is not just one way to approach prioritizing the outdoor experience, rather the team should explore options diagrammatically and evaluate the success of each scheme to locate the entrances.
 - Treat the elements that were developed as a kit of parts – explore the ideas as opportunities for how the site can be arranged.
 - Main entries can still be located logically but prioritize the amenity spaces. Create systems of decisions to help prioritize and evaluate various layouts. There is a way to utilize the elevator core where it is, but realign the spaces to be more inviting around these fixed elements. Approach this like a puzzle to be solved around fixed points.

- In general – return to a schematic, diagrammatic exploration of the site and defining architectural elements before incorporating too much detail:
 - The design is well intentioned, but it misses the mark. Not only is the approach safe, but it is lazy. It feels like elements have been borrowed from other projects, rather than tailored to the site and neighborhood.
 - The overall siting of the buildings is fundamentally flawed; revisit the team’s stated goals and reevaluate the design through the lens of what was envisioned for the project. The vision is appropriate, but the design falls short.

Next Steps:

Continue project addressing the comments above. Meet with Planning and CHAP staff to resolve questions, and return to UDAAP before continuing for CHAP review.

Attending:

Keval Thakkar, Santosh Chandane – HCM

Kevin Anderson, Scott Rose – KWC Engineering Technologies

Matt Ellingson – Floura Teeter

Pat Wagner, Sathya Moorthy – Community Builders

Omar Hanza, Derek Moore, Stephanie Hanley, Ed Guntz, Melody Simmons – Attendees

Messrs. Anthony, Ms. Bradly - UDAAP Panel

Ren Southard, Caitlin Audette, Chris Ryer, Matt DeSantis, Chad Hayes, Lauren Schiszik - Planning