

BALTIMORE CITY DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING

URBAN DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE ADVISORY PANEL

MEETING MINUTES

Date: January 19, 2023

Meeting #72

Project: 21st Century Schools – Commodore John Rogers Elem. / Middle School **Phase:** Schematic

Location: 100 N Chester St, Baltimore, MD 21231

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Michael McBride began the presentation by introducing the project and noting that this is the final 21st Century elementary and middle school project of this 28-project cycle. During the 21st Century cycle over the course of the past several years, there have been 81 presentations of the various 21st Century School projects made to the Panel. Todd Vukmanic of Crabtree, Rohrbaugh & Associates Architects continued the presentation with a description of the program and site. The site, located in Butchers Hill, is very challenging and slopes from east to west. There is limited parking and site access, with North Washington Street being the main access point. Most students travel to the school on foot and come from the northwest.

The team tried to address the following challenges with the proposed design:

- Building organization and parking lot alignment
- Play area separation
- Building services, access and drop-off areas
- Building is undersized for the enrollment demand
- Interior space is not configured in a logical, efficient way
- Create a sense of balance between the site, program and amenities

The resulting building is organized into a T-shaped building with a very strong east-west bar, which bisects the site and helps to navigate the topography. Classrooms are organized along the east-west axis with support spaces tucked into the building strategically. Note that the existing building will be razed, and a the building presented today will be newly constructed on the site. The team explored several ideas for locating the building, but those ideas were not included in the presentation shown today.

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the team for their very efficient presentation and noted that this project has a lot of potential, which makes it an ideal end of the successful 21st Century School series. The Panel began the discussion with clarifying questions before continuing with the general discussion and comments.

Questions / Clarifications:

- *The majority of students will arrive from the northeast side of the site and will be traveling on foot; is the intent for the students to continue along Chester and then along East Fairmount toward North Washington?* The students will queue on the play areas at the northeast corner.
- *Along North Washington there is an area for staff parking on the northwest side; why is the parking lot located here specifically?* The team considered maximizing the parking and locating as much of the parking need on site while also maintaining site access, safe drop off, clarity of circulation, etc.
- *Clarification: is this building a renovation, a combination of renovation and addition or is it a new construction project?* This project will be full raze and rebuild.
- *Is the green area lawn or a safety surface?* This is proposed as a hard surface – it is not organic green material (grass, planting, etc).
- *How many staff members at the school?* There are 124 staff members employed at this school.
- *Has the team studied other configurations; what other site responses has the team pursued prior to settling on this T-shaped building response?* The team looked at a handful of other options, but the site constraints and the need for support services located near classrooms drove the design. Additionally, the design was impacted by vertical constraints, solar conditions, and excavation that would have been required by other layouts. These constraints were identified during early feasibility studies.
- *Has the team studied an option with all of the parking consolidated at the northwest side?* No, the service access is most intuitive access at this corner.

In General:

- The Panel would have expected more site analysis included in the presentation, including early diagrams and sketches. This information would have been extremely helpful in understanding how the design evolved. Diagrammatic site analysis is essential for communicating design ideas and decision drivers. Future presentations should include evolutionary information to help communicate ideas about how and why decisions were made.
- Additionally, the Panel expected to see more process and related diagrams to understand the neighborhood context, circulation, and functionality. The current arrival sequence for students is at the rear of the building; students are expected to navigate the curb cuts that will also serve vehicular traffic. This does not seem like the safest or most intuitive configuration.
- Diagrams showing the relationship between the circulation routes, and layered in with program requirements and topographic impacts will help to identify potential problem areas, and highlight moments requiring careful study.

Site & Parking:

- Look at the perimeter of the site and the elements of the building that touch the perimeter. The building is in an urban setting - it should touch much more of the perimeter of the site – all the parking to move instead of having it dominate the edges. Moving the building to the edge may allow the layout to be more efficient and make more sense for both the site and context.
- It's very unfortunate that the front entrance is dominated and dictated by parking. This will be many students' first experience with a school – the arrival sequence needs to be nurturing, inspiring and all about the students (not about the vehicular traffic). Having the parking be the dominant feature undermines the experience of the students, especially the younger ones.
- Queuing space must feel like a social space, arrival and excitement are paramount to the success of the space.
- The experience must be intentionally designed beginning at the sidewalk. The expression must have a quality of procession and hierarchy, and one that elevates the student population.
- As designed, the site is anti-urban; the building is positioned in the center of the site and surrounded by parking and other hardscaped uses.
- Panel notes that the site is challenging, but all of the challenges presented here have been solved in previous 21st Century Schools projects. There is an opportunity to learn from those previous projects and embrace this challenging site as a series of design opportunities – the site has potential for a very exciting design response that is a community asset and a beacon of the neighborhood.
- The proximity and distance from the sidewalk is problematic. The civic / educational use must reinforce the urban street wall and engage with the sidewalk. Surface parking lots at the front are discouraged in urban settings – this positioning is not appropriate or acceptable for this particular use despite the challenges of the site. Reposition the building to anchor the site and center of civic pride.
- Nestle the parking deeper into the site with more prioritizing of the pedestrian circulation. The building entry and classroom wing need to shift toward the corner and create a forecourt.
- Angled parking is not ideal for the site; the sidewalk is the transition point from the public realm onto the school site. Per the previous comment, finding a way to consolidate more of the parking in the site where it is out of site or near the service areas will help it to feel more organized and serve the staff needs.
- Parking at the northwest corner doesn't meet the need of staff as designed with less than a quarter of the number of spaces per staff – it does not make sense to sacrifice the arrival sequence of the school and still not serve the needs of the staff.

Play Areas:

- The Head Start playground needs to be more nurturing; greenery and shade trees are critical to early childhood development. The creative play area for the 2 to 5-year-old children is much too large and could be reorganized to be scaled more appropriately.
- Hard surfaces with no relief are a disappointment – it would be better if the green on the southeast side was a playing field instead of a hard surface. There is an opportunity here to introduce green, organic spaces.
- Marie H. Reed in Washington, DC is a good precedent for navigation of topography. This school has educational elements that embrace the challenging topography to integrate environmental literacy programs and storm water management.
- Be mindful of wall heights – think of the average height of the student population, which will be smaller than a typical adult person (think of what it is like to be 3’ tall and surrounded by 10’ or 12’ tall walls).

Building:

- The gym can be moved more centrally into the building and away from primary views and pedestrian activity; this would allow for it to take advantage of the northern light and make it seem less dominating along the street edge. Reconsideration of the gym location can alleviate the appearance of a large blank wall at the street edge, which feels inhospitable.
- The current location of the gym is incorrect for the site – the program needs to be relocated so it is not so visible to the community. This will help to mitigate the topography and eliminate the need for extensive fencing. With the building moved closer to the sidewalk and the gym moved back, the building edge will function as the topographic transition and remove the need for a fence.
- The Panel is not necessarily suggesting a full redesign, but a reshuffling of main program clusters with a view from the outside with a strong focus on the urban edge. The team has successfully organized the program from the inside and now it is the appropriate time to look from the outside in so it is better integrated with its surroundings.

Next Steps:

Continue project addressing the comments above.

Attending:

Messrs. Anthony, Mses. Bradly and Ilieva - UDAAP Panel

Ren Southard, Caitlin Audette - Planning