

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

Date: June 1, 2023

Meeting #78

Project: Sisson Street East

Phase: Schematic

Location: Block bounded by 28th St. / Sisson / 29th St. / Hampden Ave., Baltimore MD 21211

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Sisson Street East is a development proposed for a cluster of sites bounded by 28th Street, Sisson Street, 29th Street, and Hampden Avenue, excluding the corner parcel at 29th and Sisson. The project is located in Remington and was informed by the Remington Master Plan. Jon Constable of Seawall introduced the project as a partnership between Seawall and Blank Slate, with BCT and Mahan Rykiel supporting the development in their respective roles of architect and landscape design. The project includes some “neat old buildings” that are planned to be knit into the new development. The project team sees this site as an opportunity to continue the growth of Remington in a way that supports community wishes.

Paul Evenson of BCT Design Group continued the presentation with an overview of the context. The site has tremendous potential to connect regions of the city across I-83 by extending the perceived edge of Remington to the west, toward Druid Park and Reservoir Hill, and to the north, toward Wyman Park and Hampden. 28th and 29th Streets are a pair of one-way, east-west corridors, and are heavily trafficked as they connect directly to the on/off ramps of I-83.

The site has significant grade changes, which a 35-foot drop from east to west, and about 10’ from north to south. The amount of change across the site offered some opportunity to place the density on the lower portion and connect to the existing neighborhood at the higher point where there are rowhouses across the street. The program includes:

- 3.3 Acres or roughly 144,000 Square Feet
- 200 or so residential units with structured parking
- Approx. 10,000 Square Feet of lobby / amenity space
- Approx. 125,000 Square Feet of office
- Approx. 25,000 Square Feet of retail / entertainment

The team also included the following design goals in their presentation:

- To create a sustainable neighborhood that features adaptive reuse of 20th Century buildings and urban infill to make a protected open space for the community.
- A social, commercial, entertaining place with residential opportunities above.
- Remaining true to Remington’s soul and integrity.
- To create a block of transition and a gateway.

The team explored many options for the site, and walked through four previous schemes in which they studied how the massing, loading and service, circulation, and program could be best distributed on the site. They also studied how the new development would engage with the existing neighborhood's liveliness, color, rowhouses, parks and old industrial buildings. The team strove to focus the design on elements that would allow people to experience the new and old together.

DISCUSSION:

The Panel thanked the team for the very clear and thorough presentation and noted that the site sections were extremely useful to the presentation. The Panel then moved into clarifying questions and comments.

Clarification:

- *Is 28th Street or 29th Street the main gateway into the neighborhood from the west? 28th Street is an inbound street from the west, and 29th Street is an outbound street from the east.*
- *Existing buildings are not registered historic or contributing; what is driving the decision of which building(s) to keep?* The team looked at function, placement, etc. Keeping everything was not feasible, but the development along the Sisson Street corridor is coming from the south, and the team wanted to bookend the project with more density.
- *What is the intention for the adaptively reused buildings?* The team is prioritizing activity and gathering space – these will likely be programmed with active, entertaining uses such as restaurants, art galleries, etc.
- *Can you please walk through the ADA access to the courtyard from the south and the west?* There is a 1:20 route from Sisson Street and 28th Streets – these are sloped walkways rather than ramps. There is also an elevator to navigate the vertical circulation in the garage.
- *Has the community had engagement in the project to date?* Yes, Seawall has had a lot of engagement at formal community meetings. The majority of the community has voiced support for more density in the neighborhood, and this site seemed like a good place to do something with more density. Seawall has been involved in other successful projects in Remington is familiar with the community.
- *How is the trash being managed?* There are trash and storage in the residential area on 28th Street. The loading and trash for retail are located at the Sisson Street side to the north.
- *Who is using the vertical circulation (elevator)?* Office users, and people using the garage for the retail component. The residential core is located to the south of the site.

COMMENTS:

Site:

- The Panel congratulates the team on their approach to the project. It is a tactful, thoughtful approach. Including the previous schemes is very helpful in understanding how the design developed. The pieces are well-conceived, but there is still room for improvement.
- The level of detail is perfect for the initial presentation, before the pieces are too cemented to make significant or meaningful changes that will improve the organization and the authenticity of the design.

- Remington is an eclectic neighborhood, full of interest and texture. Buildings that have been adaptively redeveloped are not necessarily precious. Many are old warehouses and “little h” historic buildings with a focus on functionality. Exciting that this site will be redeveloped – it feels like a natural progression for a growing community.
- Seeing evolution through the iterative design process is appreciated and is helpful in shaping comments. A few themes emerged from the presentation, and the Panel comments are focused into the following themes: connectivity, authenticity, landscape considerations (including courtyards), massing, and entrances and loading:
- Connectivity –
 - The Panel appreciates the team’s focus on bridging across communities, but there are some key challenges to making the site read as a true bridge or an extension of the existing built environment:
 - The Sisson Street corridor has increased residential density developing to the south, and Wyman Park to the north – consider a gesture to meaningfully connect the park and the residential density.
 - The team could set the tone for the new development by setting the building back from the sidewalk a bit.
 - The site already relates to the community at large through a few major connections (Sisson, 28th and 29th Streets). Look for ways to strengthen, improve, and reinforce these existing connections.
- Authenticity:
 - As an exercise, consider starting from a clean slate to see if there are better options for how to organize the site. Once the broader organization of the program has been considered, allow the constraints of the existing buildings to be introduced. Use this iterative method to weave the new and old together in a more meaningful way.
 - Current proposal does not yet feel authentic – the repurposed building hasn’t been adapted enough yet. Look at ways to carve into existing buildings so they can be reused more effectively from a functional perspective. Overlaying the new function and program will help the buildings feel more authentic to the changing neighborhood than simply preserving them as they are.
 - Panel agrees that preserving an existing historic building is a nice nod to the poetic everyday character of the neighborhood; it is noted that the regular, unsophisticated structures of Remington are very grounded – they allow Remington to feel hyper local, instead of pristine or stand-offish.
 - The best candidates for preservation are structures that still have life in them; the team should not preserve buildings simply for preservation’s sake. A preserved building must allow for the site to function as it needs to.
- Landscape in general -
 - Species diversity in the street tree selection is very appropriate and appreciated.
 - Sections are helpful in explaining the outdoor spaces and their relationship to the buildings.
 - A tucked away courtyard could be a fun, hidden gem, but it can’t be too tucked away or it will feel hidden, off limits.
 - The approaches to the courtyard need to be a part of the overall experience; use the approaches to set up an entry sequence. The entry points should be integral, ADA, gracious and experiential.
 - As the building massings develop in form, ensure the courtyard openings are wide enough – 16 feet feels a bit narrow for activating the space. The other opening, which is

closer to 27 feet is more appropriate for program and activation, while still allowing it to feel tucked away.

- Precedent images for the courtyard are right on target for the neighborhood. Hopefully the neighborhood will be involved in selection of the materiality, character, etc. Having community input ensure residents are a part of the project and that the end result reflects the true character of the neighborhood.
- Landscape approach is much appreciated – the team has proposed a very thoughtful typology of outdoor urban spaces based on use and context.
- Massing –
 - Buildings along Hampden Avenue are so tall that they are incompatible. Take another stab at how the program is spread around the site. The corner of 28th and Sisson could accept a little more density. A solution could be as simple as removing one story of the multi-family building and redistributing it toward the corner (of 28th and Sisson).
 - There is concern the existing building may undermine what the team is trying to accomplish. Study stronger integration between old and new.
 - The building the team elected to keep seems like an appropriate choice, but don't objectify it. This building is not precious – play with how it can interact with the new massing. Allow the existing building to be transformed in a way that compliments the new development.
 - Question the relationship of the existing building to the larger mass of the multi-family building. There is an opportunity for the existing building and the base of the residential structure to have a meaningful exchange. The base of the new should be in conversation with the existing and vice versa.
 - The openness into the block is appreciated, but the corner piece really needs to feel integrated and not leftover. Integration of the existing building can be solved by applying or connecting some of the multi-family massing to this portion of the site.
 - The ground level units relating to the rowhouse fabric to the east is a strong move, and this portion of the building feels appropriately massed, but there is an issue in the cohesion along 28th Street. The project will benefit from creating an intermediate zone.
 - Team should explore ways to remove one bay of the existing building and allow the multi-family building to step down.
 - Panel wonders if there is an opportunity to remove a portion of the existing building to accommodate more density. Can the some of the retail come out from under the residential and create more of a transition. Putting more density of the active recreation use would also create a neat rooftop opportunity for amenity space with direct visual connection the public zone.
 - Office building is sited nicely, there is a very clear edge while also allowing for a future development on the corner parcel (Burger King building) that is not included in this project.
 - View from 29th Street and Hampden – the building reaches out as the street curves away. The massing of the office buildings is elegant, but the building doesn't necessarily need to respect the street wall.
- Loading and Entrances -
 - Placing the residential loading on 28th Street undermines what the team is trying to accomplish (a feeling of continuation and connection to the west).
 - Consider relocating the residential loading – can the residential elevators be decoupled, and one elevator be moved to the 29th Street? The office dominates the viewshed, which will help the loading feel tucked in and not as exposed.

- Moving one elevator to the 29th street side will also allow for a secondary entrance to the building. This is a walkable neighborhood, and having entrances on both sides will contribute to the walkable feel, making the building more accessible to the amenities on the north side as well.
- 28th Street has a very prominent façade, so everything is exposed. This is the logical façade for the primary entrance – the entrance could be very grand and attractive. Rethinking the access can enable this face of the multi-family residential to be organized more appropriately and give more grandeur to the entrance.
- Keep studying the connective tissue between the buildings and the site.
- Final thoughts:
 - A clear definition character and quality is emerging. Ensure the pieces are in place before any detailed design of the space or buildings happens.
 - Buildings are the biggest program driver, but the team has narrowed the potential enough to allow the landscape to drive integration between the buildings and the site. Look at the sections with a critical eye and ask what can be done to make the spaces great.
 - Continue using a non-linear approach, iterating between the site, program needs, existing buildings, and the context.

Next Steps:

To be completed by the Director

Attending:

Jon Constable – Seawall

Alex Aaron – Blank Slate Development

Paul Evenson, Chris Holler, Brandon Brooks, Bryce Turner – Brown Craig Turner Architects

Mark Polusey – Mahan Rykiel Associates

Ed Gunts – Baltimore Fishbowl

Melody Simmons – Baltimore Business Journal

Melanie Monaco, Ryan Hochfelden, Scot Foster, Peter Smith, Steve Rubin, Susan Ellsberry, Ted Ludvigsen, Todd Connelly, Mack Bennett, Deon Butler, Jed Weeks, John Smith, Katie Marshall, Anthony Cortea, Al Barry – Attendees

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

Ren Southard**, Caitlin Audette, Marie McSweeney Anderson, Chris Ryer - Planning

* UDAAP Chairperson

** Assigned Planning Staff