

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

**Date:** November 16, 2023

**Meeting #85**

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**Project:** Reservoir Square, Parcel C – Lennox Building

**Phase:** Schematic I

**Location:** 700 W. North Ave., Reservoir Hill

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**CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:**

Josh Neiman of MBC Real Estate introduced the project and noted that the team has been working on this development for a number of years. This project marks the gateway of Reservoir Hill, located at the corner of Park Avenue and West North Avenue. The basic program includes roughly 30,000 square feet of retail a grade anchored by a full-service grocery store. There are 2.5 levels of parking above. One half the second level is for the retail; the other half is for parking.

The project came to UDAAP at a schematic level in 2020 but JP2 is the new design team working on the project. While the program and site have not changed, the Panel recommended this new project team review the previous comments offered in 2020.

Gordon Godat of JP2 continued the presentation with a very brief overview of context, which included the new townhouse development (phase one) of the project, which is currently in construction. The team also studied where the taller buildings are located in and around the neighborhoods. Most of the taller buildings are located on the primary streets, which are wider and more able to handle taller structures.

The design team shared studies of different building massing options, but decided on the version proposed today for the following reasons:

- The proposed configuration results in equally sized courtyards, which allows for more meaningful programming (one will be active and the other will be passive).
- Allows the courtyard on the north side of the project to be exposed to as much daylight as possible.
- Relieves the new townhouses from too much shadow.

The grocery program posed some challenges. There will need to be significant loading space for trucks delivering goods to the store, customers will need to be able to push carts to their vehicles, and trash will need to be stored. The site has quite a bit of grade change, with the grade rising more than a full story from the southeast corner to the northwest corner. The grocer tenant also needs to use much of the wall space for merchandising, which let the design team to explore options other than fenestration, such as shadow boxes, to help break up the façade.

The presentation concluded with an explanation of the façade organization, materiality, and landscape elements. The team shared concept renders of views from around the site to show the building within the context of the site and adjacent buildings.

### **DISCUSSION:**

The Panel thanked the team for their very thorough presentation and continued with questions and comments together in the interest of time.

### **Clarifications:**

- *The grocery occupies the southeast corner – can the team please clarify the relationship between the parking and the grocery?* There is a grade change of a few feet between the parking and the grocery use. The team needed to minimize this because people will be carrying groceries, pushing carts, etc. The vestibule will be used for the grocery tenant.
- *Was the courtyard located to break up the massing against the new townhouses to the north?* Yes, this was intended to maximize the amount of light the new townhouses receive, especially in the winter months.
- *Can the transformer be buried into the building more? Can the access be coupled with the loading dock to free up more space on Park Avenue?* The team did look at this option but the turning ratios didn't work for trucks backing into the garage. The need to get a tractor-trailer up to the building was a driving factor.
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### **Site:**

- The Panel appreciates that this is a tight urban site and dealing with a linear, sloped sight is a difficult challenge. Panel thanked the team for sharing the project today and for showing their work.
- Unfortunately, some of the difficulties the project currently has were the same issues discussed during the Master Plan phase of review. It should be no surprise to the project team that you would, indeed, run into some of these issues.
- Building should be sited with respect to the previous comments on the master plan. Please review the comments already provided by the Panel – these are available on the UDAAP website here: <https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/node/19273>
- Further development of all four sides of the project is needed. The streetscapes will be critical to the vibrancy and success of the project, especially on the North Avenue side, where there is a lot of retail.
- For a new master plan – a mini neighborhood within an existing neighborhood – the Panel needs to see more about what exactly the streetscape looks like. What trees and plantings are

being considered? What does the ground plane look like? What is the materiality? How is it organized? How does it pick up on the existing context?

- The goal of the landscape plan should be to create a biophilic character for the neighborhood, not simply meet the minimum of the Landscape Manual. Team noted that they are striving for the more biophilic strategy, with approximately 20% more than what is required.
- As the plan develops, the team needs to study planting material and placement. There was a comment about not having room to plant on the north side of the building, which is fine because that side will not get a lot of light. It would be appropriate for the sidewalk to meet the building on the north edge. The team should instead focus on separating pedestrians from the traffic of West North Avenue.
- Deeper soil depths should be studied to ensure the trees are able to create proper root paths, which will allow the street to flourish instead of being stunted. This will be very important on all sides on, but especially on that north edge.
- Be careful with the selection of trees, as well. Use of maple trees as shade trees is discouraged because they tend to laterally root very aggressively, which is not particularly compatible to adjacent pavement. Additionally, maples are very dominant – the team is encouraged to avoid the risk of creating a monoculture by diversifying plant and tree selection.
- Need to see sections of the patio space that is carved out of the grade on the western edge. This could be nice since it faced the park, but it needs to be studied.
- South-facing courtyard has the ability to contribute to the streetscape. Pay careful attention to the plantings on both of the courtyards, and make sure these are planted very well with the correct species. Stay away from the sedum mats on the North Avenue side of the building. The plantings may be diagrammatic, but the Panel expects the south-facing courtyard to develop as a lush landscape rather than a few scattered plants surrounded by mulch.
- On the north side, again the plant selection is critical. There will need to be a water source to hose off the dog area in the summer or it will be very apparent to adjacent neighbors. Note also that townhouse neighbors will be facing this side of the building. The plantings will provide a nice view if selected correctly.
- Deeper soil depths on the courtyards will require structural accommodation.
- There is a significant challenge with activating the street. Placement of retail is appropriate, but the entry point to the grocery is concerning. Mid-block access to the grocery through the vestibule would be more appropriate than having the entrance at the corner of Park and North.
- Having lively, active use at the predominant corner (Park and North) would help bookend the project and make it more engaging.
- All projects have transformers, utilities, etc. to address. Locating this out in front of the building is not a great way to handle this. Instead, consider reorganizing the parking to accommodate the transformer inside the garage:
  - Locate more parking on the third level and move some of the program – units and community room – to another location.
  - Shift the utility spaces at the corner of Bolton more toward Watts to give more of the public frontage back to the street.

- The transformer could be relocated off the public right of way and give that frontage back to the public realm.

### **Building:**

- The way the building is massed is well intentioned, but the current configuration is backing the project into a corner. The proposed massing doesn't seem to relate to the uses. There is too much happening:
  - So many elements do not relate specifically to the mass or to the program: attic element around the top of the building, capped with the eyebrow elements, and the framed corners, all contribute to the incoherent read of the building.
  - The framed elements at the corners don't relate to anything in particular.
  - The vestibule element being highlighted with the covering above doesn't make a lot of sense, since this is not a special moment in the building. It appears that it is only there to break up the façade.
  - This is a challenge not just for the parking levels, but for the overall understanding of the building. The façade does not appear to relate to the program.
  - The program can fit nicely on the site – some changes to the organization are needed, but overall, the site can absorb this amount of program.
  - There are nice elements, but they are not organized in a coherent fashion to create an architectural statement.
  - Moving forward, the team is encouraged to edit the façade down. Allow the program and massing decisions to register on the façade with fewer distractions.
- The corner location of the grocery is very unfortunate.
  - The corner at Park and North is a very important location and needs to have a more active use. It deserves a more prominent program that would align with the visibility and gateway feel. This is the entry point to Reservoir Hill from the south and east – it's a critical moment.
  - Having attracted a grocery tenant is fantastic for the neighborhood, but it needs to be located properly within the project.
  - Consider reorienting the grocery to be deeper into the site instead of wrapping the corner. The loading dock can stay where it is currently located, but the grocery should start at the westernmost point of the loading dock.
  - Relocating the grocery program into the middle of the building will do a few things: it will relieve the need for architectural gymnastics to hide the fact that there is not fenestration, and it will free up the corner for more active retail use.
  - There are also ways to make that grocery tenant feel like it is at the corner – think of signage, a compatible retail use that, even though it opens on to the street, will feel integrated with the grocer.
  - Parking, vestibule, and lobby can slide to the west, and the grocery plate can get deeper (toward Watts).

- Reorganizing the program will also help with the organization of the façade.
  - As designed the façade feels very busy. The Panel acknowledged the difficulty with a project of this scale.
  - The first step is to clean up the façade to see what the team is working with. There is a natural instinct to break up the large façades, activate the ground plane, etc.
  - Agree that there needs to be a solution, but the various roof lines are happening at too small a scale and creating too much visual noise rather than a meaningful differentiation on the massing scale. Differentiation of heights can be appropriate but needs to happen at a different scale.
  - Establish two material palettes for the building – one for the corner volume at Park and North, and one for the other volume further west.
    - The palettes can be cousins and speak to each other and use similar language but use the mass to differentiate the building as different parts. This will help it feel less massive.
    - Use the low portion as a connector piece – this could be different from the two volumes. This will help the building feel as though it is broken down more naturally by volumes rather than in a planar fashion. Articulating the volumes will bring more interest.
    - Façade tricks only work on smaller buildings.
- Consider using the break of the grocery store at the courtyard to introduce a larger volume, and the garage level can be incorporated into the materiality.
- Express the two levels of parking above as a more skeletal layer; then either incorporate it with the ground level or subtract it. Either way, it needs to be studied. The bases of the massing do not need to be the same; they can read as either two- or three-story.
- Limit the number of superfluous elements.
- Use the strategy of approaching this as a series of individual masses all around the building. On the north façade, the portion that mimics the rowhouses across Watts almost seem guilty. Instead of trying to match the neighbors, simplify how the materiality is applied and avoid a planar read. This will help it feel like an assembly of five or six buildings.
- Simplify, clarify, and make the façade more elegant.
- Consider moving the residential entry to Watts, even consider locating it at the corner of Bolton and Watts.
  - This can be accomplished by moving the utility room deeper into the building as discussed earlier.
  - Locating an entrance on Watts would also allow for more activity and eyes on the corner, which makes it safer and relates well to the townhouse neighbors.

**Next Steps:**

Continue the schematic design of the project addressing the comments above. Work with Planning on next steps.

**Attending:**

Theresa Stegman, Josh Neiman, Daniel Rigaux, David Polonsky – MBC Real Estate  
Gordon Godat, Dana Tharrett – JP2

Ed Gunts – Baltimore Fishbowl

Adam Morris, Al Barry, Amber Fults, Ammi Chaveas, Claire Holmgreen, Julian Frost, Ross Smith, Peter Smith, Omar Hamza – Attendees

Ms. Ilieva\*, Mr. Anthony, Mr. Storm, Ms. Bradley – UDAAP Panel

Ren Southard\*\*, Chris Ryer, Caitlin Audette, Matt DeSantis, Nick Chupein – Planning

\* UDAAP Chairperson

\*\* Assigned Planning Staff