

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

**Date:** October 26, 2023

**Meeting #84**

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**Project:** North Charles Village PUD

**Phase:** Schematic / Design Development

**Location:** 3121 St. Paul Street

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**CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:**

Doug Schmidt introduced the project and provided additional background on the history of the project and previous presentations to the Panel. This project site is within the North Charles Village Planned Unit Development (PUD). Very early concepts for the building were reviewed in a previous presentation on the Master Plan in February 2022. Aaron Zephir of Moseley Architects continued the presentation, with the context of the PUD, various massing studies explored by the design team as the building developed, and finally a series of façade studies.

The building was originally proposed as 8-story mixed-use building with ground floor retail (the existing grocery use would return) and multi-family housing above. The updated design has been reduced to 7-stories to address concerns from the community about the height. The team engaged with the Charles Village community over the course of nearly two years and has adjusted the proposed height as a way to mitigate concerns for shading and density near the smaller 2- and 3-story rowhouses on adjacent blocks. The majority of the building massing has been oriented toward the commercial side of the block on Saint Paul Street. This results in less density at the rear of the site, where the neighboring buildings are smaller scale.

As a part of the project development, the team studied various façade arrangements, fenestration patterns, and materiality. The project strives to have a modern, warm feel. To achieve this, the team is proposing a mix of warm-colored masonry at the base, with wood-look fiber cement panel above as in places where the floor plates break out of the 5-story masonry box. The presentation concluded with an explanation of the landscape, which will be a continuation of the street improvements implemented in the recent past. There is also a public right of way directly to the south that will function as a public space that the team will improve and program as part of this project.

**DISCUSSION:**

The Panel thanked the team for the clear and straightforward presentation and moved into clarifying questions. There were several questions to clarify the neighboring context that were answered before the Panel moved on to their comments.

- *You mentioned the building height and massing, but please share the existing sidewalk widths, and do these widths change at the north and the east?* The sidewalks on Saint Paul are approximately 15' wide, and the sidewalks on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street is a little narrower to the east, and there are tree pits located at regular increments. The sidewalks proposed match the
- *What is the intent of the right of way to the south?* The team envisions this as a “pocket park” or plaza to be activated as a space for people to spread out, have lunch, a cup of coffee, etc.
- *What is the quality and character of Hargrove Street?* It is very much an alley - everything there is back of house. Bottlenecks happen in the current alley due to the narrowness of the street and the commercial uses fronting on to Saint Paul. The building was stepped back about 5' to allow for a wider (20') alley to alleviate the parking access and loading that occurs there for the entire block.
- *What is the program at the ground floor of 32<sup>nd</sup> Street?* The program along the whole ground floor will be retail.
- *What is the intent of the sloped roof?* The team wanted more of a break between the massings and serve different program needs.
- *Can the team clarify the projections?* These are all 4' – this is the maximum allowed by minor privilege. Having these 4' projections was helpful in getting the height down, as it allowed the floor plates to get slightly bigger.
- *Are green roofs proposed?* Yes, about 50% of the roof will be green roof to help satisfy the stormwater management requirements.
- *How will the loading for the grocery program work?* Smaller loading would likely happen at the rear – box trucks, delivery vans, etc. – and the larger loading needs could happen on Saint Paul Street as they currently do. Tractor trailers would continue to pull up at the Saint Paul side of the building.

### **Site & Landscape:**

- This is in a transition area at a literal crossroads – 32<sup>nd</sup> Street goes from feeling like a busy urban street to a quieter residential street rather quickly, and Saint Paul Street is a bustling commercial street. Using landscape and building mass to transition to the rowhouse character to the south and east is critical.
- In plan, the building seems to fit into the context, but the axon views give the appearance that the building feels like it is too encroaching too much on the established setbacks (on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street).
- Scale and materiality will need to be carefully considered with regard to the pedestrian sequencing around the building. Study the proportions in section – consider the horizontal space of the sidewalk and landscape to the verticality of the building.

- Concern for the piece of right of way to the south that is planned to be used as outdoor plaza space. The dead-end condition will function as a dead space if it is not programmed properly. Team is encouraged to activate this space to ensure it functions and feels comfortable for people to pass by, to enter and use.
- The café seating will need to be studied in relationship to the shading and circulation to ensure it will actually work in the narrow space between the buildings. Note also that if the sun does not reach the ground there, it will not be comfortable in the spring, fall or winter months.
- Micro plaza is a great idea, but it will be critical to furnish it and program it properly.
- This plaza area must be very purposeful in its design – this could feel leftover if it is not designed with close connection to the program in the southern edge. The intentionality of programming it is essential for it to function as intended.
- The proposed design seems to introduce a lot of ground plane material – there needs to be more cohesion between the existing materials and what is new; additionally, the program and circulation diagrams should inform how these materials are placed to reinforce natural patterns of movement.
- Visitor bicycle parking will need to be thoughtfully considered to not interfere with café seating and pedestrian circulation as people enter and exit the grocery program at the ground level. Team is reminded that this is an urban corner with a lot of activity.
- This is a very challenging project – the overall context will determine how to negotiate the lower scale residential to the higher density. The way the team has addressed earlier concerns from the community and comments from the Panel is encouraging.
- The team is encouraged to free up valuable real estate along the perimeter of the building. The site plan and loading are important issues that still need to be addressed. Show turning radii and diagrams with trucks to ensure rear loading space will function and allow traffic to flow through as the team has stated the plan would work.
- The rear access needs more study at ground plane:
  - Team must look at parking access, loading, operational needs, etc.
  - Loading issue can impact whether people can get into (or leave) the garage.
  - Note that service alleys in an old city were not designed to handle big trucks, but the new building provides an opportunity to sequence services – does not need to drastically impact the shape of the building. These could be location of ramps, signage, etc. Marginal changes can lead to big improvements and will go a long way.
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### **Building:**

- The building is trying too hard to meet community comments – Panel applauds the effort to be a good neighbor by including community input, but incorporation of all the comments is having a negative impact on the resulting design.
- Design by committee is not working for the project, and the architectural direction is getting confused, diluted by trying to appease too many opinions.
- The architecture seems defensive, as though it is trying to appease too many things.

- Each of the façades and the massing need to address the character of the streets they face, and this includes the alley side of the building. Addressing the specific character of the various streets will help to clarify the façade and massing as these pieces continue to develop.
- There are two very public-facing frontages with very different character: one on 32<sup>nd</sup> and the other on Saint Paul:
  - Saint Paul is very public – it feels like a busy commercial street.
  - Moving east on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, the quality and character shows that homeowners take a lot of pride in their property. This side feels quieter.
- The alley side of the building (west side) needs to be more porous to give more indirect presence into the alley and on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street.
- Public amenity at the second-floor rear is applauded – this will be a nice space on the east side of the building in the morning hours.
- Opportunity to articulate the 4’ projections that the team is calling “bay windows” as bay windows. These projections are not yet reading as bay windows, but if articulated differently, they could provide cadence and rhythm needed to help the building fit into the neighborhood context.
  
- Building massing:
  - Stepping-down of the massing at the corner (of Hargrove Alley and 32<sup>nd</sup> Street) is helpful, but the Panel is concerned about the u-shaped volume wrapping the courtyard.
  - If the massing could be reorganized a little to allow the northern edge of the u-shape to meet that 5-story height of the brick volume, that is a favorable move. This move would bring the height down as the building transitions from the taller buildings on Saint Paul Street to the smaller residential rowhouses on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street.
  - Staggering the volumes can be a successful strategy in maximizing density while also mitigating the building size and proximity to smaller buildings and lower density.
  
- Materiality:
  - Materials on the more public-facing façades seem to fit the context.
  - Horizontal lap siding is too suburban in look and approach. There is no precedent for the amount and scale of this product within the neighborhood.
  - East side of the building with the proposed lap siding is exposed at the alley, which allows the lap siding to be very visible.
  - The highly visible alley side of the building is important (despite the fact that it is technically the rear) and will compromise the other successful moves of the building.
  - Panel understands budget is partly driving this material choice, but team should consider other cementitious panels.
  - The wood paneling is not working yet. Including wood can be an elegant move, but it must be more cohesive.
  - Application of brick on the façade gives the building a stocky quality. The team discussed this approach as a brick box, out of which the projections are breaking.

Could the residential entry (on 32<sup>nd</sup> Street) be a natural break in the brick? A break at the residential entry could provide a natural transition to a more economical material and also resolve some of the challenges of having a squat proportion.

- The height can work – even 8 stories would be appropriate for this neighborhood, as it is a dense urban neighborhood. Look at the rhythm and cadence of the street and draw on this as the building design continues to develop to help scale the proposed 7-story building appropriately to the site.
- This project is an exciting opportunity to contribute architecturally, economically, etc. to the block and neighborhood. It is an opportunity to transform the block.
- The building can be exciting, vibrant, new – more modern and playful. Move away from the forcibly traditional approach. Moving forward, take the language of the building in a more cohesive direction.
- Providing a more modern cornice will also help with the overall look of the building.

**Next Steps:**

Address the panels comments above and work with Planning staff on next steps.

**Attending:**

Aaron Zephir – Moseley Architects

Scott Huot – Landscape Architect

Doug Schmidt – Workshop Development

Chris Mfume – The Civic Group

Josh Neiman – MCB Real Estate

Ed Gunts – Baltimore Fishbowl

Melody Simmons – Baltimore Business Journal

Hallie Miller – Baltimore Banner

Alex Eisler, Andrea Drake, Jared Spahn, Matthew Myers, San San Yu, Sandy Sparks – Attendees

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

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

\* UDAAP Chairperson

\*\* Assigned Planning Staff