

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

Date: December 7, 2023

Meeting #86

Project: Abe Dua Residences, Dominion Real Estate

Phase: Design Development

Location: 4405 Park Heights Avenue, Central Park Heights

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

Nichole Earle of Dominion Real Estate introduced the project, called Abe Dua Residences, and the project team. The project is a Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) project and is located on the 4500 block of Park Heights Avenue just south of Cold Spring Lane. The building includes +/-50 affordable residential units with additional features for the community, including retail at the ground floor and amenity space that will be usable, not just by residents of the building, but also by the broader community. The project is very community driven, and the community president has been very close to the process from the beginning. The development team wanted to be a good neighbor, and this development will provide a new building on a series of lots that have been vacant for 20+ years.

Joe Iwaskiw of Soto Architecture continued the presentation with the neighborhood context before getting into the design of the building. This part of the Park Heights neighborhood includes a mix of historic buildings and several new multi-family and mixed-use buildings. The building is a mid-block development fronting on Park Heights Avenue with mixed uses of ground floor retail and residential units above. Some community space and wrap-around services for residents will be included as part of the project. Development team wanted to deliver a project that contributes to a healthy and thriving Park Heights community.

The following design goals were drivers for the project:

1. To create a community focused project – create excellent and affordable residences, retail and community amenities for the neighborhood.
2. Add growth to the street – bring natural materials and green space to Park Heights Avenue.
3. Blend with the context – This is a six-story building in a two-story neighborhood.
4. Break up the sale – do not allow the 100-foot-wide façade to dominate the block.
5. Meet the DHCD standards – building must be durable, and have quality materials; it must be accessible, and include lovable places.

To make the building feasible, the team needed to maximize the zoning envelope. As proposed, the building is 6-stories, with 57,000 – 60,000 GFA on a site that has +/- 13,000 square foot lot area (two parcels will be consolidated). Parking is approximately 1:2 and the proposed 23 parking spaces will be

located below the building, accessed through the existing 15' wide alley on the rear of the building. Green roof, solar panel, and EV station possibilities have been explored for the project. The team concluded the presentation with several rendered views of the proposed building within the neighborhood context. They thanked the Panel and asked for questions and comments relating to the proposal.

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.

- *Has the team considered green roof and rooftop amenity space?* To keep the building within budget, there are conversations about the green roof. For CDA the team is not showing green roof, but the option is still on the table.
- *How is the team managing stormwater?* Micro bio-retention boxes will be placed above the garage; these are coordinated with the part of the building that has concrete podium below to address the weight.
- *Is there a landscape architect on the project? The less landscape you have, the more a Landscape Architect is needed.* The team recognizes this and will include a landscape architect as they move forward.
- *What is the plan for developing the streetscape and character of the street?* There is a plan to plant street trees in the 10' public right of way, between the pedestrian space and the vehicular traffic. The team understands that a landscape architect is needed as they move from the concept phase into schematic and design development.
- *What are the homes on either side of the building seeing and is there still rear access for the neighboring homes?* Yes, the alley will remain open and is 15'. There is also a 6' setback from the neighbors on one side, and a 3' public alley on the other. The most adversely impacted neighbors are the retail neighbors. The bio retention areas also give some reprieve to the neighbors.
- *Are there additional opportunities for the building to be setback on the north side?* No, the team needed the full amount of space to make the building work with the pro-forma.
- *What does the alley side of the building look like? Please clarify cladding elements.* There is a 5-story brick volume at the residential entry lobby area (southeast edge) with a steel canopy. Timber-look fiber cement covering the continuous element that snakes from the ground floor up above the residential brick volume. There are additional colors of the fiber cement that are bold burgundy to call out the corner of the building, and a lighter neutral color to blend. Additional materials on the rear and sides of the building include painted CMU block wall at the base with a horizontal fiber cement siding above.

- *Where is the mail room and delivery storage area?* This is located off the lobby, with an additional package room tucked back toward the garage. The trash is located in the garage, with the compactor room backing up to the lobby edge.

In General:

- Designing for infill mid-block housing and having to build to the edge of the zoning envelope to meet the constraints of the budget is a difficult undertaking. There is no hiding the scale of this building within the existing 2-story and 3-story buildings, which will remain for a long time.
- Massing and overall approach to the building are critical as the project continues to evolve. The panel recognizes the challenges and appreciates that the team has done a good job addressing these with the massing at this point in the iterative design process.
- Panel understands that trying to introduce natural light and natural ventilation on a very constrained site and, in this particular case having to build edge to edge in order to meet the requirements of the program, is very difficult.
- The comments from the Panel will be couched in the design goals the team set for themselves (listed above).
- The difficulty of this site is based on the context of the site, rather than what is within the site. The size of the neighboring buildings becomes the issue to solve – how can this building, with the necessary size difference, be the best neighbor possible without trying to mask the scale? Given the difference in scale, there will be no way to mask it, so understanding how to mitigate the size and proportion the building with mass and materiality will be the issues to solve.
- Panel appreciates the program and infill aspirations, as well as the team’s design goals.

Site & Landscape:

- Panel appreciates what the team is trying to do by carving away the massing in response to the surrounding context. From the point of the street scape and pedestrian experience, Park Heights is very important, but the team is encouraged to focus some energy on the rear and side elevations. Understanding that the views of these façades will be someone’s daily experience, how do you offer the surrounding residential neighborhood something beneficial?
- Blocks on Park Heights to the south and the immediate north have very low-scale buildings. Continuity from block to block is important, but questions whether the retail location is appropriately located. Sculpting the building in response to the neighboring building(s) is appropriate and the Panel is encouraged that the team has already studied mirroring the building.
- Seeing how the building form developed to create something urban and appropriate was helpful to the Panel.
- The plaza area is appreciated, as this is a challenging streetscape for pedestrians. Instinct to move the building back to give more space for greening along Park Heights Avenue is a good instinct and the Panel agrees with this approach.

- Has the team considered providing street trees for the entirety of the block? The development team could help facilitate or coordinate that with city agencies and applicable street improvement programs.
- Parking under the building, utilized by alley is a good urban approach - that is exactly what alleys are for.

Building:

- Building massing and façades:
 - Even though the massing is as good as it will likely get, the team should be asking how the building can be in a positive dialog with everything around it. This way, the building is no longer emphasizing its larger scale, but rather allowing it to be a bit more seamlessly connected.
 - The jump from two-stories to five is not a huge jump, but the way the building is massed and how the materials are applied will be critical to ensuring the building is successful within the context.
 - To achieve a more connected feel for this building within the lower context, revise the front elevation. Perhaps even within the 5-story brick volume, provide a simple definition at that second-story level – this could be a line that goes through the façade to continue and denote that this is public program (versus private above).
 - The 5-story residential entrance clad in gray brick feels abrupt – look at how this is capped. The Panel also suggests bringing this down to read as a 4-story volume but understands this additional space may be necessary to meet the program needs.
 - Allow the snaked piece of the front façade to read more as the primary volume of the building:
 - Providing a 2-story read along the whole base will be much better for the project; the community program on the second floor can be expressed in the same language as the base to achieve this.
 - If the same materiality is adopted for the first and second floor (above the retail sign), the community program will be more visible.
 - Coupled with lowering the 5-story volume and uniting the materiality of the base, the snaked surface will feel as though it had increased. This increase will allow it to read as the primary volume, out of which these two other volumes are being extruded, which will clarify the entire front façade.
 - The frame around the corner:
 - This could be more graceful. As designed, the burgundy color feels very constrained by the lighter-colored frame, which also reads as very thick and heavy because of its proportions.
 - Panel notes that the actual condition is mid-block, and the building is not a corner building. What is the purpose of calling out that particular corner? Consider that a future building may be as tall, which defeats the purpose of

calling this out as an important feature. It undermines the team's design goal of fitting into the context.

- The front elevation has received a lot of attention, but the other sides need more study. Animate the façades with windows wherever possible. The Panel appreciates that lot-line windows are not a preferred approach, but team is encouraged to look for ways to introduce more windows, especially to alleviate the large blank façades that will be highly visible.

- Materiality:

- Panel is worried about the fiber-cement material on the ground plane. The surfaces that people are closest to at the ground plane are the most important materials. These need to be the most tactile and durable for the building to be successful.
- The aspiration for timber-look cladding is appreciated and actual timber would feel appropriate to the multi-family program, but the timber-look fiber cementitious products are often not believable and may work against the biophilic approach. The fiber cement never quite feels right in close contact. Brick is a much more tactile and durable material.
- Given the fact that the team has set the goal for a biophilic building, and breaking down the mass to blend more with the lower scale context, what then should be the approach? By chopping up the façade, the architecture can begin to feel defensive. It would be better to have this read honestly as 5-story stick-built over 1-story concrete podium.
- Would the budget allow for more natural material – brick – to be used along the base? Fiber cement could be used above, perhaps starting where the courtyards indent. This would allow the most visible materials to be the most durable.
- The building would benefit from a more limited material palette. Even the precedents shared had more limited palettes than what is proposed here. This would also help the team achieve a more elegant building within the budget constraints.
- Maximum of 3 materials will both make this building more readable and will cut down on cost. Additionally, at each material change, there is risk of water infiltration or other failure of the façade materials. Using fewer transitions will help with maintenance costs later on down the line.
- There is an opportunity for this building to read more as a pair of buildings, rather than five (as currently designed with all the different materials).

- Building Layout:

- By losing one parking space, the retail space could become much bigger (going from 1,000 SF to more like 1,500 SF) and be more leasable for a small coffee shop or similar establishment. The parking could shift slightly and use the footprint more efficiently by rotating the last space (furthest in toward the retail) and placing it against the stair tower.

- Building lobby could use a clearer organization – as the team gets into interior design consider how the space will be used and circulation paths.
 - The recording studio is such an exciting piece of the program. If there is room to bring the recording studio down to the ground level, the team is really encouraged to explore that as an option – it would make the visibility better and show that there is space for the community here. People would feel invited into the building in a meaningful way.
- Concluding Comments:
 - Panel believes that with a little more refining and editing, the building can be resolved to a point where there aren't as many competing elements. This is very small building in the end of the day. Sure, there are 2-story rowhouses around it, but this is a relatively small footprint, and the building can be very sophisticated with a little more polish.
 - A simplification of the language will help this building to feel elegant.
 - Develop a palette of quality materials and detailing for the parts of the building that will be seen up close. These areas are critical, and the team is encouraged to prioritize these within the limited budget.
 - As the primary façade quiets down, spend a little more time on the secondary (side façades) and tertiary (rear). As proposed, these feel like we are going from five big moves at the front, to zero on the other sides. There is an opportunity to have a more unified feel within the building, as well as the goal to feel unified with the neighborhood.

Next Steps:

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

Attending:

Nicole Earle – Dominion Real Estate

Andy Davenport, Ray Wetherbee – Community Housing Partners

Joe Iwaskiw, Gabriella Adorno – Soto Architecture

Kevin Anderson, Gerardo Nazario – KWC Engineering

Ed Gunts – Baltimore Fishbowl

Ms. Cherring Spence – Attendee

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

Ren Southard**, Matt DeSantis, Nick Chupein – Planning

* UDAAP Chairperson

** Assigned Planning Staff

