

**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 A - Office Building

**Phase:** Schematic I

**Location:** 850 W. North Ave., Reservoir Hill

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**CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:**

Theresa Stegman of MBC Real Estate introduced the project and noted that the team has been working on this development for a number of years. The aim of this project is to deliver a quality project to West Baltimore that includes mixed-use buildings, retail, office and newly constructed rowhouses. Rowhouses and street infrastructure is currently being built, and the buildings today, Parcel A and Parcel C, are the last pieces of the project. Davin Hong and Ryan Pietrowski of Hanbury continued the presentation with an analysis of the neighboring context, and a review of the overall master plan.

The team proceeded by introducing the design, framed within the larger urban design goals of the project:

- Respond to context.
- Improve the public realm.
- Design to be exciting and dynamic, not stagnant.
- Create welcoming, inviting, and open spaces.
- Have a clear prominent entrance.
- Show thoughtful internal organization.
- Apply sustainable strategies.

There was a robust discussion on how the garage entrance was placed. The team reviewed several options for placement of the garage, but ultimately decided on the northern edge of the site, as they felt that was the best location to address concerns about visibility (for drivers entering and exiting the garage) while preserving the edge of the site along North Avenue for the future building that would have an active ground floor use. The neighboring building to the north is a new 21<sup>st</sup> Century School, Dorothy I. Height Elementary School. The school serves the neighborhood, and it is anticipated that many students will walk to school from within the neighborhood and the surrounding catchment areas.

The site is sloped and irregularly shaped, which led to many of the design decisions that shape the proposed building form. Additionally, a portion of the project will occur in a later phase, leaving the southeast portion of the site unbuilt for some time. There will be a temporary grass lawn and plantings in that space until the second phase is ready to move ahead at a future date.

The presentation concluded with a discussion about plant selection and trees, façade organization and materials and several rendered views of the project from different vantage points around the site.

### **DISCUSSION:**

The Panel thanked the team for their very thorough presentation and continued with questions and comments together in the interest of time. It was noted that having many images of what was studied and a description of what did or did not work based on the context and site features is extremely helpful and will result in a constructive review.

### **Clarifications:**

- *Is the landscape being handled in house with the civil team?* Yes, the landscape is being handled in house. They are working with the design team on the plant selection, etc.
- *Did the team study wrapping the garage with building program?* Yes, the team studied putting housing units on the north edge, facing the school, but wrapping the garage made the building too wide. It did not work with the geometry of the site.
- *Are the streets around the site all two-way?* Yes, the streets are all two-way streets.
- *Is the neighboring school two stories?* Yes, but because the grade rises to the north of the site, it can feel like a three-story building depending on where you are viewing the building from. On the south side (Lennox Street) it can feel taller.
- *Is there a way to navigate the grade change for the pocket plaza in the interior of the building?* The team studied this but felt that it took up too much real estate inside the building.
- *How big is the pocket plaza?* This is 30' x 30' and envisioned to have tables and chairs for the café program at this corner.

### **Site:**

- Please engage the landscape architect early and often to help shape the spaces and streetscaping. These should not be afterthoughts - leftover spaces to be filled with plants. The landscape architect needs to play a larger role in shaping the spaces, the character of the spaces, the horizontal and vertical relationships, ratios streetscape design. All of those need to have a stronger part in shaping the overall composition.
- The second phase of the project should be studied for the daycare use. A minimum of about 75 square feet per child should be used to size the outdoor courtyard space. The walls of the neighboring buildings are quite tall, and understanding the horizontal and vertical ratios from the perspective of a small child will be critical to making comfortable space.
- City grid diagram is very helpful to understanding the thought process of the team.
- Pocket plaza and southeast edge of Phase 1 building:
  - Additional diagrams showing the size of the plaza relative to the vertical heights adjacent would have been helpful to understanding relative dimensions.

- Study size of the plaza relative to the building height as the design progresses; getting this space right will be extremely important to how it is used, whether it thrives or sits empty.
  - Really study whether the grade can be negotiated within the building to better integrate universal access. This will allow the restaurant program to spill out onto the sidewalk and make a better integrated space.
  - Having the plaza area at grade even with the sidewalk will also create a nicer experience for the future daycare use.
  - The pocket plaza will potentially also be facing the lobby of the future residential area, and right now it is being shown as being ringed with ramp and stair elements. Team is encouraged to find another way to integrate the plaza more to make it a friendly element.
- North Avenue is a boulevard and will need to read as a part of the overall context. This includes what happens in the median, on the east and west ends, and across the street.
    - The proposed design should speak to the existing elements, street tree selection, and the materiality on the ground plane.
    - Ask, “How are all of these elements working together within the larger context?”
  - For the surrounding streets, look at the scale and the context to make decisions about sidewalks, planting strips, trees, etc. This is a tight urban site, so having it feel integrated is important.
  - On the north side of the building, the team will need to scrutinize plant selection, as this side will not get very much sun. Easy to show lush plantings in the render, but careful selection will be critical to ensuring the plants last. Examine for appropriateness of plant materials.
  - Refine the landscape to pick up on the surrounding patterns and rhythms.
  - Panel appreciates the school neighbors being given consideration. When development impacts kids having their first experiences as students, it is critical to consider how they engage with design elements.
  - There are significant issues with how the project is sited, particularly the completely exposed parking garage structure lining the street across from the school. Together with the remaining undeveloped portion of the site, this site configuration offers very little in terms of site activation and ‘eyes on the street’ that could invite unwanted activity or signal low value and lack of care for the neighborhood.

**Building:**

- Team has provided a lot of good ideas about how to handle the building massing. The work the team has done is very quality work.
- Studies are very much appreciated, as they allow for a discussion about the program and difficultly shaped site.
- The garage is posing a significant challenge:
  - All entry points through the garage are in the center, and there is an extensive curb cut facing the school.

- As designed, the garage is very prominent and facing the neighborhood on two sides of the block.
- Garage ramping is counterintuitive to the slope of the site. The resulting garage is very prominent and creates too much presence on the street.
- The configuration of the stair tower creates a big blank wall at the corner – even covering this with a mural doesn’t mask it. It will still read as a big blank wall and be obvious that the
- The grades are not working in favor of the garage – it is at the highest point of the site and extremely visible to the neighborhood.
- The garage ramp is counter-intuitive of the grade of the site and is too prominent. As designed, it creates too much presence on the street.
- The way the garage is configured, there is a big blank wall at the corner where the stair tower is located – even covering this with a mural doesn’t mask it. It will still read as a big blank wall.
- Any time a mural goes on a brand new building, it indicates there have been a series of bad decisions.
- Garage façade elements are precast, which is in such stark contrast to the office building’s brick façade. This makes it stand out; makes a statement of its own. If there are elements of the office program that can wrap the garage, the team is encouraged to explore them to help hide the garage more.
- The rowhouse approach applied to the massing works well, but the way the program is arranged on site is not ideal. North Avenue is more well-equipped to handle the garage than the residential side of the neighborhood and the school. The garage should not face the neighborhood.
- Pushing the garage into the neighborhood has significant repercussions for the neighborhood.
  - Nowhere else in the city would we allow for a bare garage facing the new 21<sup>st</sup> Century school that has just been remodeled and historic rowhouses.
  - This area has not seen new development in many years, so it is critical for this development to contribute to the feeling of Reservoir Hill being a nice neighborhood.
  - The streets need to feel safe and attractive, and the building needs to contribute to the urbanity of the neighborhood to help attract future development.
  - Locating the garage and the office building service on Lennox results in 500 linear feet of unprogrammed space, which has serious impacts on public safety.
  - It is extremely important now to consider alternative solutions.
- The project is clearly three components (garage, office building, and future residential mixed-use). Perhaps the garage is the most rigid structure of all because it has both dimensional requirements that are not malleable. The housing is probably 60’ or so and the office is more flexible. Housing is presumed to be 4 stories of stick-built over a concrete podium.
- The Panel suggest the following approach to address the garage being a challenge to the site, as noted above in earlier comments:
  - Panel understands that the program cannot be stacked, since this adds cost to the project, but a simple reconfiguring of the site will help the building immensely.
  - Garage width is more or less fixed to around 120’ x 180’ and cannot necessarily be manipulated too much.

- Rotate the garage 90-degrees to minimize the impacts on the public streets. If the shorter faces need to daylight on North Avenue and Lennox Street, that is still far better than having the long side along Lennox.
  - North Avenue can handle garage program if it is only 120' and bookended by other (livelier) program.
  - Introduce housing program on Brookfield Avenue – the housing can be narrower than the 60' standard with needed for a double loaded corridor if needed. This could slim down to 40' and wrap the corner to Lennox.
  - Really good analysis of the site, but important for the team to continue moving forward by studying how to make a better block.
- Office building is handled appropriately but could the brick color be brighter to heighten the contrast between the masonry and the curtain wall.
  - There is no doubt the team is putting their best effort forth, but the design is trying to protect the project from itself. The team is trying to mask the things that they, themselves, are embedding into the project.
  - Solve toward orienting the garage on the site in such a way that its impacts are minimized. This can be accomplished despite the irregular geometry. Reorienting the garage will fundamentally address the challenges created by the proposed current placement.
  - Placement of café is questionable – at the corner of Linden and North Avenues is a more appropriate location for this element. The café program will have longer hours, and the office will likely be dark by evening. Placing it at the corner will make a livelier block.
  - There is concern that the 100-unit multi-family building will not be built. The team is encouraged to envision what happens to the green space if the building is not built in a
  - The façade of the office building is very attractive; the team has developed something that has its own presence. The team started with analysis of rowhouses, but thankfully this precedent didn't register too literally on the proposed façade.
  - If every new building copied the rowhouse typology it would be a very boring city, so the Panel is pleased with the more subtle interpretation. Moving forward, do not feel obligated to stick to the rowhouse precedent.
  - The main massing has a nice articulation. The edges of this block aren't the same – on one side is a major boulevard, on the other you have a smaller street and a school. The building is small and does a nice job of addressing the different character of the streets.
  - As you move forward, look to further refine, simplify, and streamline the building.
  - The key is how to integrate with the rest of the pieces of the site, which are currently not ringing at the same level of sophistication as the office building piece.
  - The team has made some very good decisions up to this point, but the site is still unresolved. Showing your work allows for a productive conversation, and the team is encouraged to move ahead with the design at the same level of quality and care as what has been applied to the office portion of the building.

**Next Steps:**

Continue the 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  
Davin Hong, Becky Ensogna, Ryan Pietrowski – Hanbury Architects

Ed Gunts – Baltimore Fishbowl

Amber Fults, Ammi Chaveas, Claire Holmgreen, Julian Frost, Ross Smith– Attendees

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

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

\* UDAAP Chairperson

\*\* Assigned Planning Staff