

# Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

## Meeting Minutes

**PROJECT:** Battery Lane District Site C

**DATE:** June 22, 2022

---

*The **Battery Lane District Site C** project was reviewed by the Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel on June 22, 2022. The following meeting notes summarize the Panel's discussion, recommendations regarding design excellence, and the exceptional design public benefits points. The project is in the Site Plan stage and the Design Advisory Panel will determine if comments from Sketch Plan have been incorporated and take the final vote for design excellence public benefit points if it is determined the Project is suitable. Should you have any additional questions and/or comments please feel free to contact the Design Advisory Panel Liaison.*

---

### **Attendance:**

#### Panel

George Dove

Brian Kelly

Qiaojue Yu

Paul Mortensen, ex officio member, Senior Urban Designer in the Director's Office

#### Staff

Robert Kronenberg, Deputy Director of Planning

Elza Hisel-McCoy, Chief of DownCounty Planning

Grace Bogdan, Planner III

Adam Bossi, Planner III

Hyojung Garland, Park Planning Supervisor

Emily Balmer, DownCounty Administrative Assistant III

#### Applicant Team

Nancy Regelin – Shulman Rogers

Robert Graham – Rodgers Consulting

Siti Abdul-Rahman - WDG Architects

Joanne Trumbo - WDG Architects

Eric Schlegel – WDG Architects

Trini Rodriquez – Parker Rodriquez Landscape Architect

Steven Sattler – Parker Rodriguez Landscape Architect



## Members of the Public

Holly Clemens

Anita Kramer

Dina Soliman

Michael Fetchko

## Discussion Points:

Staff: The project is at Site Plan therefore the review is focusing on detailed architectural review, and the DAP may vote on design excellence points at the meeting's end. Staff provided a memo outlining a summary of changes in response to the DAP's comments from the previous two meetings in 2019 when the related Sketch Plan for the Battery District was reviewed.

Panel:

### *General Comments*

- I think the project has advanced well from the initial design, including connectivity and the layout and geometry is great.
- For an urban site, this project has really a tremendous amount of outdoor experiences that will be an active, positive result. The amount of space that will be available will be successful. I want us to keep in mind that in most urban projects, this one is over the top in terms of public, and semi-public spaces.
- The consolidation of the building access and moving the mass of the building to the north compared to the Sketch Plan phase is far better and puts the mass and density where it belongs on Battery Lane.
- Are the light poles just rendered in green?
  - *Applicant Response: Yes. Ultimately, it depends on DOT.*

### *Through Block Connections/open space*

- Have you thought about putting your vegetable gardens down at grade behind the building? This might help to activate the back lower space.
  - *Applicant Response: We have not, these were going to be private community gardens, so we had them above. At grade, we did want to have something else that was public and activating.*
- I'm asking because I'm very concerned that the back, behind this building is not going to be well activated and might create safety concerns. This is a bigger discussion for this side of Battery Lane because the lots are so deep, on the north side there will be a public through block connection along the entire northern end of the sites and there will be continuous energy and activity and eyes on the path. On this south side I'm not sure what the back of this lot will look like and similarly for the lots to the west.
- I share your concern about that area in the back, not sure if the vegetable garden will be the cure though. The community garden will allow residents to pick their fresh vegetables and herbs and cook in the same location. Maybe the dog park can meander in that rear space? What are the green rectangles?

- *Applicant Response: Stormwater management bioboxes that treat water from the amenity area.*
- In the southwest green area, could there be more programming elements for those working from home?
  - *Applicant Response: Since we have this nice sizeable space, we were thinking about something more active and public. We could work on adding those programming elements but we thought the courtyard area being more useful for that.*
- I agree, the size of the site may also lend to a strange space. These two through block connections do not really go all the way through, and there really is only a 4' sidewalk at one of the connections past the Police Station. I know you can't do much offsite, but I hope you do what you can to make the connection a reality. If this western through block connection really became something and connected to Rugby Ave, you would have hundreds of people using it everyday just because it is such a necessary connection.

#### *Site Layout*

- I do have a question about the northwest corner, there are pavement areas that interrupt the green panel, can that be removed to have a continuous green panel in this area?
  - *Applicant Response: That is actually utility services for the building, there is an engaging area to the west side of the lobby.*
- Is there anyway to shift that so the entrance could be more continuous? It seems to interrupt the green panel greatly.
  - *Applicant Response: we can work with the utility companies to see what we can do.*
- On several of your drawings it shows the cycle track and a planting strip and a sidewalk, what exactly is going on there?
  - *Applicant Response: That is a graphical error. There will be a hardened median in between the vehicular travel way and the cycle track and it will end at the property line, beyond that will be striping. We are working with DOT on the materiality, the bus station will be concrete, but we are hoping for something like grass or other vegetation. We are limited based on what DPS will accept but trees are not possible given the utility line locations.*
- I would defend the setback on Battery Lane based on context and not necessarily on ambiguous mathematical dimensions. The building setback to the east is excessive and not an appropriate response to the urban context that the Bethesda Downtown Plan is trying to achieve.

#### *Architecture*

- The tripartite architectural expression of the facades is not only unusual but very effective and appropriate on this scale of building. The two-story residential extension on the west does a nice job of completing the cycle of types of units and transition. In my opinion this is far better solution than where we were.

- I think the building has come a long way and I really appreciate the efforts to engage the building with the street. The top of the building, the cornice, is basically the same thick planar top all the way around. The massing diagrams talk about this iconic element of the northwest corner, but it is exactly the same as the rest of the building. I wonder if there is some way to express that differentiation of the corner in the elevation as well. Perhaps there is something different at the top here. At the back you have a colonnade that gives a defined top floor, that was a great move. Is there something else you can do on the rest of the building to further define that?
  - *Applicant Response: We did look at incorporating something like a trellis, and we ended up with an outdoor view at the rooftop and didn't want to block those views. So, we focused on the south of the building. Maybe we can look at different fenestration but that's where our focus was.*
- Your roof plan does not do the building justice. It is much easier to understand as a Nolli plan from the street experience. It took me a long time to realize there is a transparent lobby and a view into the courtyard, and that is an extraordinary aspect of the building and mitigates the pressure of the building to the north.
- One thing that struck me is that there are many languages as to how this building grounds, there are about 3 or 4 strategies. Maybe the building can only ground with one or two variations for better continuity, maybe there is a way to frame the piece along Battery Lane to transition that into the townhouse, and transitions to the rear. I don't know what the answer is.
- If there is something that can heighten that corner mass at the sky, I think that would be helpful. It may be that those top windows are taller? I'm not sure, something that makes the corner band thinner, not sure what the answer is, but you've made an iconic form and it needs to be expressed a little better as a corner element.
  - *Applicant Response: We will look at it.*

*Public Comments:*

- The presentation proposes connectivity, but I don't think it really provides better connectivity. I only see appropriate setbacks on 3 sides. I feel the proposed building is not in step for other buildings on our block. I don't consider the existing setbacks excessive. Our garden residential character that exists on Battery Lane will be destroyed. Moving some of the rear setback can be moved to the front to address the safety issue. We must not be forced into a downtown urban design when our current character is a garden design.
- In the discussion I hear that they hope the design strengthens the residential character and trying to create an urban character more like downtown. The pedestrian experience is a particularly narrow street and bringing a building of this height and mass 20 feet from the pedestrians, it will actually detract from the pedestrian experience and will be a lesson on what not to do. I would like to see the building pushed back and the open space in the back is excessive.
- I spoke to the DAP back in February with similar concerns that the 4901 Battery Lane will be too close to the street. I think if these distances become real, it will create a canyon along Battery Lane. What really activates the pedestrian experience is more

space, not the uses adjacent to the pedestrian area. The people who use the pedestrian path from Woodmont to Old Georgetown get more space rather than it being hidden behind the building. It will be better programmed at the front of the building. I have two requests: 1) please visit Battery Lane and walk the street and see the open space described today and 2) listen to the pre-submission meeting from Aldon last week. More residents on Battery Lane want to see that space retained rather than being surrounded by brick and glass. I just don't understand a building facing the sidewalk enhances a pedestrian experience, I would like to see more open space.

- *Applicant response: We did discuss this at the community meeting. One of the elements that drives the placement of this building is the fire code. We need a maximum of 50 foot access to the building from the firetruck location, and the maximum distance that a firefighter can traverse around the building can only be 450 feet. When we look at those provisions together, the building footprint can really only fall where we've placed it.*
- Panel: It would be interesting for the Applicant to do a street section, a diagram street section blackening the building (at full proposed heights) on either side, so we can see the width to height ratio of the street better. Below this section should be a partial street plan drawing.
- Panel: A diagram illustrating the life safety restrictions would be helpful also. Rationalizing setbacks on a merit basis is not as successful as a contextual basis. I did say the Bethesda Downtown Plan is advocating a less suburban scenario, but did not mean that it is advocating for a downtown Bethesda/Wisconsin Avenue scenario. Demonstrating the implications of the setbacks with a diagram and understanding it in regard to other elements proposed would be very helpful.

**Panel Recommendations:**

The Panel requested the Applicant return with comments addressed from today's meeting.