



# Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

## Meeting Minutes

**PROJECT:** 7025 Strathmore Street

**DATE:** February 26, 2025

### **Attendance:**

#### Panel

Robert Sponseller

David Lieb

Yulia Beltikova

John Tschiderer

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

#### Staff

Atul Sharma, Assistant to the Deputy Director

Stephanie Dickel, Regulatory Supervisor DownCounty Planning

Adam Bossi, Planner III

Grace Bogdan, Planner IV

Darcy Buckley, Parks Planner

#### Applicant Team

Chris Ruhlen, Attorney

Faik Tugberk, Architect

Chong Cho, Architect

Ian Duke, Engineer

Andrew Kossow, Owner

Rob Tilson, Landscape Architect

#### Discussion Points:

Staff: This is the first site plan presentation to the DAP. The review will focus on architectural materials, articulation and final building design and revisions based on the Sketch Plan comments.

Panel:

### General

- The trellis at the top is new, which I think is an improvement.
- What is the parking ratio on this building?
  - *Applicant Response: 0.8*
  - That is going to be expensive. What is the cost per space? \$80,000?
  - *I'm not sure the cost of concrete right now. These are good questions but I think we can pull it off.*
  - I'm sure staff and this group would not be upset with less parking in this location.
- You are pushing your building back four feet on the alley? What will the width of the alley be?
  - *Applicant Response: Yes, we are pushing the building back four feet from the property line.*
  - (Staff) There will be no dedication, this was based on a request from MCDOT for site distance.
- Based on what is shown the structure looks like stick built over concrete?
  - *Applicant Response: Everything that's buried is concrete and the first two stories above grade are concrete then stick built above. We are working on this and it may get combined with steel or totally concrete. This is our intention but it is a challenge.*
  - And if you change structure then it can affect the building?
  - *Our floor clearance will remain 9'*

### Elevations

- What is your mechanical system?
  - *Applicant Response: Currently proposing VRF.*
  - You will have to exhaust each unit, through the façade?
  - *Yes, through the facades*
  - Then I wonder how it will look with this façade design, particularly given the white material pallet chosen
  - *We usually vent through the window structure so it won't be as noticeable*
  - That's good to hear but over time it will still get discolored
  - *We will likely choose a blander box and decorative screens so*
  - You mentioned you may use synthetic panels, can you give me some examples? Because they will definitely be more difficult to maintain.
  - *There are many out there and we are unsure at this time. Will need to balance the costs, but I can assure you the intent is not to create a white building*

- All the details and joints you are proposing, it almost leads you to a different design solution. Pulling that off here will be very difficult. All of the elements and articulation, the bay window balcony, plane, I think it's very ambitious.
  - *Applicant Response: I can show you some examples where we have done it, my first choice is panels and maybe rain screen metal panels. They all have their different challenges. These are valid points, but we've resolved these issues in our previous experiences in a variety of ways.*

### Public Realm

- What is the column grid spacing for the through block connection?
  - *Applicant Response: 8' on one side and 7'8" on the other. We tried to align the passage with the Camille apartments across the alley.*
  - I actually like the larger columns, its beguiling.
- These stormwater management boxes on the ground floor have fences on top, many that I have seen recently look more for safety rather than an element of the landscape. I hope this can reflect the landscape of a front yard and be "Less Mechanical" looking.
  - *Applicant Response: I agree with you. We redistributed the bioretention boxes to go with the rhythm of the building and sense of space and they will end at columns. We want the height of the bios to be intentional, we can lower those to be at the height of the sidewalk. We thought we should raise it. We do want and need some delineation from the sidewalk. The plants will grow about 18 inches above the box.*
- Was the stormwater the reason the walk-up entries were removed?
  - *Applicant Response: No, that became difficult because of the topography.*
  - As a modern architecture building, I think the walk-up entries would have been a great marketing perspective.
  - I think there is some opportunity to have some balcony or doors in that direction.
  - *Even if we were to provide a patio, as the street drops the floor in the building gets higher and higher, it would be rather high from the ground.*
  - I don't mind that. I think it would warm the building.
- The materials at the base being granite, brick, and the landscaping, I think will warm the building more than what is being shown in this rendering. I think this is fine as shown.
- What are the main materials?
  - *Applicant Response: White panels (metal or synthetic), masonry base, paneling*
- I think this is a nicely designed building and I think it has a unique opportunity. But I'm not sure we are taking full advantage of this great site line, coming up Woodmont Avenue looks nice but I don't see the same coming from Wisconsin Avenue. The round corner isn't pulled around and if it were, as an investor perspective, I could get a premium rent for those corner units. This would have a very unique presence coming from Wisconsin Avenue. There is nothing unique with this view from Wisconsin Avenue,

but bringing the round corner all the way would really improve the overall look and investment of this building.

- *Applicant Response: I don't mean to disagree, but I think my design philosophy is completely different. Shape and function in combination with each other is thesis and antithesis, it's a dialogue. The rectangle is connecting with the circle. But the building says that is not the case. This is a very small site and the building cannot be everything to everybody.*
  - Thank you for saying that, I think I am trying to offer a compromise and accentuate the quality of the visual experience.
- I know this has already gone through sketch plan, so I try to avoid the massing comments since the time has passed, I do think the corner could have been done differently and stronger, but my bigger concern is all the detail. Can we get a sense of materials as part of this review? Can we ask for a commitment of the material? In my experience knowing the materials will strengthen the design and architecture of the building. I appreciate the questions regarding the floor heights and the vents because I don't think those are accurate based on what may change. Detailing a resin panel and a metal panel are very different.
  - *Applicant Response: I think that is something I need to discuss with my client. I think it would be unfair to lock them into something, I don't know what is ahead of this.*
  - *One thing to keep in mind is the public benefit points for architectural elevations and there is an ability their to acknowledge this.*
- This is a highly articulated and ambitious project, its very hard to see it come to fruition so how do we evaluate this? The massing, the through block connection, the street presence has all come together very well. But if we are grading this based on articulation and this gets value engineered, this will be a very different project with a very different score.
- (Staff) We typically have examples of materials at site plan and we can work through two different options, but we do not have that level of information right now and its up to the Panel whether you have that level of information to feel comfortable making a decision based on that.
  - *Applicant Response: So we are being penalized for showing details?*
  - This is a standard request we ask of all applicants.
- One of the things I liked about this building is that it is all white, many of the new buildings in Bethesda is there is a load of material changes, and I understand it's a way to break down the mass but sometimes it makes the buildings hard to relate to. So, I like this move of the all white building, but the introduction of this wood material seems like an afterthought and I don't understand the move on the other elevation, I don't understand.
  - *Applicant Response: To be clear this is more of a light grey, we aren't trying to make a Richard Meyer building. I hear you, this is something we will consider. To be fair this material is in some of the other areas.*

- To me it took away from the unity of the white material presented in the building.
- The gesture of that canopy becomes a weak street level presentation. I can't understand why you wouldn't raise the building to address the presence at the corner.
  - *Applicant Response: We can't raise because we can't get any higher*
- I agree on the round corner, the sunken nature of that part of the building takes away from an opportunity, but my bigger question is about the planting panel. The fact that the sidewalk isn't all the way up to the building seems very suburban, office parklike to me. I assume there is no maximum sidewalk width but to me it would be far preferable to have the sidewalk up to the building.
  - *Applicant Response: I am not opposed to that, we are working with tree canopy goals.*
  - (Staff) The tree canopy is associated with the street trees, not against the building. Also, DOT will likely not let you plant those trees based on site distance.
  - *We may be able to raise the platform of the lobby to have a better relationship with the outside. We will review the trees and make sure there is no site distance conflict since the turning movement is only a right turn.*

**Panel Recommendations:**

The Panel requests the Applicant return with the following:

1. Update of the ground floor layout showing the sidewalk material up to the building at the corner and removal of plantings.
2. Additional exterior information on materials with detail of a typical bay with the main material options being considered, options A and B.
3. An updated landscape plan showing plantings, street trees and a partial street section showing the relationship between the base of the building, stormwater facilities (Including fence), street trees and the sidewalk.