

Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: Montgomery Pearl

DATE: September 24, 2025

Attendance:

Panel

David Lieb

Yulia Beltikova

Robert Sponseller

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

Staff

Robert Kronenberg, Deputy Planning Director

Elza Hisel McCoy, Chief, West County Planning Division

Atul Sharma, Chief, Design, Placemaking, and Policy Division

Stephanie Dickel, Regulatory Supervisor West County Planning

Sandra Pereira, Urban Design Supervisor, Design, Placemaking, and Policy (DPP) Division

Jeffrey Server, Planner III, West County

Tsaiquan Gatling, Planner III, West County

Grace Bogdan, Planner IV, DPP

Darcy Buckley, Parks Planner

Applicant Team

Pat Harris, Lerch Early Attorney

Rob Eisinger, Developer

Jack Bearman, BKV Architect

Benjamin Younce, BLV Architect

John Neilson, Landscape Architect

Patrick LaVay, MHG Engineer

Chad Bederka, Churchill Architect

Eric Padget

Discussion Points:

Staff: This is the second sketch plan presentation to the DAP. The review will focus on general mass and bulk and conformance with the Design Guidelines and revisions based on the first round of comments.



Panel:

General

- Thank you for the changes you've made and the walk-through model, it really sets the tone and acknowledges how difficult this site is.
- You have significantly furthered this project, especially in terms of the landscape and public realm.
- I especially like the redesign of the ramp at the end of Pearl Street from the 90 degrees to more open and irregular shaped. It brings the scale of the project and the human body together.
- I look forward to seeing the next level of definition, in my opinion you have definitely shown what is necessary in terms of Sketch Plan for massing. I would like a few more perspectives of how you are articulating the building corners.
- I appreciate your efforts and how what seemed to be a moat is now a transition. This has come a long way.
- When you come back at site plan it would be helpful to understand the architectural relationship for each of these buildings, will they be similar or very different or a "kit of themes" between the buildings. That would be helpful to understand upfront.
- Do you plan to bring all three buildings under the same site plan?
 - *Applicant Response: There may be an office to residential fast track option for one of the buildings, but we don't know if that's possible. We may need to remove one building to keep it under the fast track.*
 - Staff: Then the kit of parts will be useful to continue the conversation.
 - *We can do that, even if we'd remove one building from the Site Plan it would not be as though it's a ten year gap between the whole site development. We can make a commitment that we wouldn't be reviewing each building's architecture separately.*
- *Staff: John and Sandeep were unable to make it to the meeting but provided written comments that I will send along to the Applicant. Here are some highlights from their comments:*
 - Suggest providing a kit-of-parts to include shading, lighting, art, site furniture, bike amenities etc. to understand how the public space will be activated near the CCT.
 - The plan and rendering for the mid-block connection do not match. It will help to see additional information for that area.
 - The integration of the CCT with the plaza spaces now feels intentional and addresses the comments from the last round. The hierarchy and scale of spaces is better defined between the more public/open, intimate and private areas (patios). It will help to see enlargements of the individual areas.

Massing

- This massing looks more simplistic to me in the way I was hoping based on my last remarks. The Central Building, was that stepped back more in the previous iteration? Or is that the rendering? It looks as though its straight in line. Not a total issue but it does look compressed.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, its straight now. Once we start articulating the floor to floor design and balcony design we think it will open up a bit.*
- In the rear it seems to be a cantilever or an odd angle? Curious about your thinking about how those facades relate?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, the geometry is difficult at this point because there is an angle that meets orthogonal. It is easier to see in plan than massing. We are thinking about giving those units terraces that will cantilever over those underneath.*
 - I encourage you to articulate the central façade so there is some scale and breaks.
- The outline of the building, the footprint, remained the same?
 - *Applicant Response: The Central Building remained the same, but we pulled back the East Building.*
- I think you showed a precedent image from a building on Wisconsin Avenue, it appears that precedent used a simple material, and I appreciate that and hope you go in a similar direction here. I recall the cousins verse sisters discussion from last time and I am interested in how the materials and expression is refined at site plan.
- I still find the massing to be frenetic along the two frontages, the stepping doesn't match the north side, there's a juxtaposition and likely an architectural solution to complete the theme around the side. I don't think you have to mark all the corners so formally. I also like the precedent image from the other project that is simplistic.
- I appreciate the alignment of the Central base and the West Building at the Pearl Street gateway. However, it seems like that slot above the Central base appears like a removal of space rather than a movement of volumes, I think that could be treated in a variety of ways like just making the front continuous from the base all the way up the tower and possibly moving the tower mass back from the Pearl Street base so that it steps back. There are several ways to achieve this but currently the Pearl Street side looks too much like a subtraction of a thin slot rather than a mass set back from the base.

Public Open Space/CCT

- Do you have access to the ten feet of space offset from the property line and CCT to connect to and manipulate as proposed here?
 - *Applicant Response: We will need to work with MCDOT and likely enter into a Maintenance and Liability agreement to use that space. It would be helpful to have staff support in conversations with DOT.*
 - *Staff: We think the conversation should start now but keep communication ongoing, since this is a long-term project and thoughts may change. It would also be helpful to get a view of what that would look like if DOT will not allow the respite areas. Getting the IAC support will be helpful to you as well and will be more helpful than we are.*

- Is it true that from the Central and Eastern Buildings you are able to walk between the buildings on the property to the east?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes. And the East Building was pushed back to make that space larger.*
 - The east side is much improved and I applaud you for that. I hope you are successful on the ten feet.
- The end of Pearl Street is clearly an iconic moment to the overall Pearl experience. It has a circle, terraces and steps, and it is obviously an attraction. However, there are not entrances to the Central building to help activate this very important location. Could there be an entry or secondary entry at this circle location into the Central building? Could a liner use be added there with access to the sidewalk and plaza? It would be nice to help activate this important space from the Central building.
- Programmatically, what are the uses along the trail on the Central Building? Could you put windows in?
 - *Applicant Response: The intent is to add some windows, but there is an operational constraint in regard to entrances.*
 - It will be tricky but I think the windows will be helpful.

Panel Recommendations:

The Panel voted that the project is on track to meet the minimum ten points for design excellence and that additional information regarding site amenities, landscaping, and architectural themes between the East, Central, and West buildings should be provided at Site Plan.