



Bethesda Downtown Design Advisory Panel

Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: 4861 Battery Lane

DATE: October 25, 2023

Attendance:

Panel

Jonathan Fitch

Yulia Beltikova

Rod Henderer

Brian Kelly

Damon Orobona

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

Grace Bogdan, Planner III

Rachel Newhouse, Parks Planner

Henry Coppola, Parks Planner

Cristina Sasaki, Parks Planner

Applicant Team

Chris Ruhlen – Attorney, Lerch Early

Faik Tugberk – Architect, Architects Collaborative

Jiayu Liu – Architect, Architects Collaborative

Josh Sloan – Engineer, Vika

Andrew Kossow - Owner

Michael Miller - Gelman

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 Comments

- In future resubmissions, it would be very helpful to have everything that is part of the review in one presentation. Moving back and forth between the separate presentations has been very difficult to follow and is impacting our understanding of the project procession.

Through Block Connections

- There was a view you shared today along the western through block connection that looks larger than what we saw in the supplemental package. It looks wider and has a public to private delineation. Is this what you are proposing?
 - *Applicant Response: The original view was taken higher up in the first submittal; it was a slightly raised view. The idea is to build on the proposed path from the western project site (4901 Battery Lane) and have a rhythm of small spaces around it, defined with plantings, seat walls, and furnishings to buffer the more private realm along our proposed building with terraces. There is about 3 feet of grade we are dealing with between the path and property line.*
 - I know you mention the grade difficulty of having entrances into ground floor units. But if you show a rendering like this that is flat and doesn't show the grade you are dealing with, it is not helpful. I need to see it so the rendering can indicate that it is dealing with the grade in a public and semiprivate way. The rendering shows its flat and makes one want it to all be public.
- On the north side of the building with the pathway, if the view into NIH is unlikely to change because it is an institution and is pleasant and open, it seems to me this planting ought to be against the building and the views into NIH should be opened up.
 - *Applicant Response: I agree, we can move around the plantings proposed in the area and clear the understory within our property line. This was just a conceptual rendering. We don't have any forest on our site but the intent is to provide a green vegetative wall on the left side and transition to NIH with an edge treatment so it is open and inviting.*

Massing

- The street view of Battery Lane in the supplemental, can we see this?
 - *Applicant Response: We did this very quickly to respond to the staff comments but we would not like to discuss it.*
 - Staff: So what was the intent of the supplemental?

- *Applicant Response: I wanted to show what happens if we eliminate the front cantilever and do a three-story base. It essentially eliminates the architectural concept of the base.*
- Staff: So this was just an exercise to show what would happen but not actually something you would like to pursue?
- Yes.
- I think the base in this presentation is much too high, your supplemental seems like an attempt to bring it down which I thought was a better move but it just needs refinement.
 - *Applicant Response: I appreciate that it just needs a lot of work and I am trying to hang on to this architectural concept with the proportions and meet the 60 foot requirements.*
 - Yes, but you have two neighbors that have created this datum.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, but they may not be built.*
 - Staff: The site to the west has site plan entitlements but the building to the east is only at sketch plan.
- One of the merits here is the top of the building where you've devised a way for the building massing to meet the sky gracefully. How the building meets the ground on Battery Lane is important and it feels like someone has raised the belt on trousers. The adjacent buildings have created a datum that should be respected.
- At risk of repeating myself, I think the supplemental view is going in the right direction but needs a lot of refinement. I think you need to resolve the band between the 3rd and 6th floor, how do you terminate that?
- In the previous reviews, we had the base that was low and then a recess for a floor with a 3 story "belt" above. It was not a clear base-middle-top. You had base 1, belt 1, then middle, then top. In this supplemental drawing, I think the 'belt' weaving into the base is helpful and a lot of detail has been put in.
 - *Applicant Response: Once I get rid of the belt concept then the cantilever disappears, they cannot exist in the same space, that is shown in the supplemental. Yes, the supplemental shakes hands with the buildings to the east and west but it loses what we are trying to do here. It just requires more time. What I would like to do is retain the 3 story so we can take the eye in and see if we can develop a base at the same height. I just did not like what was happening in the base with the supplemental, it was looking very ordinary.*
 - I think pulling the belt around onto Battery Lane and terminating it where the balconies reinforces what you are trying to do with the top and makes it more cohesive. The second floor at the top of the base, I agree.
 - *Applicant Response: Perhaps it needs to be all glass or all one material, its way too heavy.*

Canopy

- The thing that gives me pause is the raising of the building on piloti on the southeast corner. I'm not sure what it gives back to the street. A good urban building creates a

street wall and that opening begins to erode the street wall. The renderings of the previous versions, the glazing seems to offer more transparency and what we are currently looking at is more opaque. This could end up being a dark, deep, and cold underpass from the street to the car drop off behind.

- *Applicant Response: This is just a rendering, we are trying to respond to massing issues. I appreciate your comments and I understand the urban edge. My point is that not every building has to do the same thing. Buildings in Woodmont Triangle all have varying elements with through block connections doing all different things. These are all freestanding buildings unlike downtown and what does it offer to the pedestrian? A view of a green plaza that may be semiprivate but it is also an attractive arrival point for a resident. My point with the supplemental was that, if it was very critical for a three-story base, this is what would happen.*
- *Applicant: We also would like a point of clarification that the previous minutes stated this is at site plan, but this is just sketch.*
- *Staff: Correct this is at Sketch Plan, that was a mistake.*
- Differing from my fellow Panel members, I actually like the view from Battery Lane into the courtyard so I'm not as troubled by that, it allows some sense of depth, and penetration into the building, and mystery. I agree with the improvements with the roof of the building and relieving the pressure on the north façade from NIH.
- The west façade and NIH façade I see there are additional balconies, and I think that is a positive move that I like a lot. There is a lot more detail here. I agree with the view into the courtyard, the space looks quite pleasant.
 - *Applicant Response: Thank you, I am looking at it as an opportunity to bring art to the space.*
 - *Staff: It will definitely need some activation or help because many months of the year it will be a dead zone with cold blowing breezes. Yes, there will be a view into the courtyard but the activity on the street will be lacking. Something like public art will be necessary. Also, the driveway off Battery will provide a wide view into the interior court area. Isn't that enough to let pedestrians see that something is behind?*
- The canopy and view into the site from Battery Lane, you've talked about how inviting that is, but I disagree. We don't have any imagery to convince me otherwise and I'm very skeptical.
- Agreed, a couple of eye level perspective of how the building meets the ground rendered so we can understand the architecture and that the greenery is transparent enough. That would be a tool we can use to improve the street edge.
- The open space that is deeper into the site, it is not meant for the public, so making that visible isn't the point. It might be more inviting to the public if the lobby and other lobby improvements that the public could be invited into were present along a majority of the street edge.
 - *Applicant Response: I respect the comment, but I disagree, it is a pleasant green space with a view that will provide relief on the street. I see a lot of opportunity*

under the canopy to light up, the whole building at the first floor is glass and transparent, daytime or nighttime. I would also like to have the street connection in the plaza other than from the driveway. We do not intend on leaving that area vacant, maybe making the columns more art like or green.

- I don't think I can offer a firm endorsement of this without seeing it.
- Staff: It would also be helpful to see how the drive through interacts with this space with this wide void into and beside the building. It may help the conversation.
- *Applicant Response: This seems like an awful amount of detail to be providing at sketch, is this right?*
- Staff: At sketch we are just taking straw vote, these can be items that are brought back at the site plan level, is that what the Panel is intending?
- Well I am nervous that if this is not addressed now it may be too late at site.
- Staff: At sketch we are discussing massing, this is a massing issue. If we do not have enough information then maybe these additional exhibits will help.
- *Applicant Response: I have found the view of that space based on our first submission. But this view has not been updated based on the resubmitted design.*
- What I'm hearing from my fellow panel members is that the space needs to be inviting and active but I feel this can wait until the next stage.
- There are differing opinions here today and it seems like it does need to get resolved, but my personal opinion is that I like this design and while I could go both ways, I think this could move forward.
- *Applicant Response: I am willing to resolve the base, but I would like to retain this view into the courtyard. I think some of this will resolve itself at the site plan stage as we will have more information to be able to answer them at that detailed level.*

Panel Recommendations:

The Panel voted 3 -2 that the Application is on track to meet the minimum 10 design excellence points with the following to be addressed during the site plan review:

1. Further refine building massing and base-level design to be responsive to the datum line along the street to the east and west.
2. Provide eye level perspectives and a section from Battery Lane into the site showing how the architecture of the building meets the ground and refine the design under the canopy to include activating elements.
3. Provide eye level perspectives of the through block connections showing the site's topography, proposed architecture, and landscaping, and refine the design of public and quasi-public outdoor spaces.