



City of Ann Arbor Design Review Board
June 22, 2011

The Design Review Board met on June 22, 2011 to review **The Varsity at Ann Arbor** proposal at 425 East Washington Street. The following report contains a summary of priority issues the Board would like the developer to consider in finalizing the design proposal. In addition, a summary of the meeting discussion meeting is provided for background.

Summary of Priority Issues

Examples of applicable guidelines are noted in parenthesis; the full text of each referenced guideline is provided at the end of the summary. Please note that the East Huron Character Area guidelines also apply.

Huron Street Frontage/Façade

1. The pedestrian experience at street grade is not enhanced by the north building elevation, due to a large garage entrance on this façade and the lack of any active use on this portion of the building. As a result, the Huron Street façade looks like a back door on a front door street (see Guidelines A.1.2, A.1.2, A.4.1-2, C.1.1).
2. The base of the building obscures the adjacent historic buildings; the building base and tower need to better respect the low-scale residential character of these buildings and grounds (see Guidelines A.1.1, B.1.1).
3. The design of the Huron Street façade is bland in comparison to the East Washington façade and adjacent buildings (see Guideline B.1.2-4).
4. The setback is shallow in comparison with neighboring buildings and should be moved back to complement the current setback of adjacent buildings (see Guidelines A.1.1, B.1.1).

Mews

1. The narrow width of the proposed path will discourage public use; a wider path with focal points at both ends would be more inviting to pedestrians (see Guidelines A.1.2, A.5.1).
2. Discussion with the adjacent church about lighting, landscaping and improved visibility from Washington and Huron is necessary to ensure the Mews is a positive contribution to both properties (see Guidelines A.1.1, A.1.2, A.3.1).

East Elevation

1. The east face looms over the adjacent historic structures and is bland in comparison to the south façade (see Guidelines A.1.5, B.1.1, B.1.1-4)
2. The wall would benefit from variation on the longitudinal façade (see Guideline B.1.2-4)

Driveways

1. Driveways significantly reduce the pedestrian orientation of downtown sidewalks. The impact of the Washington Street driveway/service area on the sidewalk is of particular concern. If the parking levels could be connected, this would eliminate the need for garage access off of Washington, since the structure could be accessed by a single driveway off of Huron. (see Guidelines A.1.2, A.4.1-2, C.1.1).

East Washington Plaza/Entry

1. The East Washington plaza design would be enhanced by providing pedestrian amenities, awnings, landscaping and active uses in or adjacent to the plaza (see Guidelines A.3.1-2, A.3.6-7, C.1.1, C.3.1).

Base treatment

1. More attention needs to be paid to the base at the north and south facades. The “pulled-out” effect does not contribute positively to the design (see Guideline B.1.2-4).

Referenced Sections of the City of Ann Arbor Downtown Design Guidelines

Design Guidelines for Context and Site Planning

- A.1.1 Identify and then reinforce the positive characteristics of adjacent sites.
- A.1.2 Design sidewalk level features and facilities to provide enrichment of the pedestrian experience.
- A.1.5 If the street geometries are such that the mid-block is the termination of a perpendicular street view, consider a design with enough presence and detail to make that view noteworthy.
- A.3.1 Design an urban open space to maximize activity and usability for a diverse population of different abilities.
- A.3.2 Locate an urban open space where there is a high level of existing or potential pedestrian activity.
- A.3.6 Provide dining opportunities, movable tables and chairs, public art, lighting, interpretive materials, historic markers, water features, and architectural details such as windows and storefront walls, to frame urban open space.
- A.3.7 Enrich the space using special paving, plants, trellises and site structures.
- A.4.1 Locate and size driveways, access points, service entries, alleys, loading docks, and trash receptacles to minimize impact on pedestrians and maintain pedestrian safety, circulation, and comfort.

A.4.2 Provide a pedestrian-friendly street edge at street level adjacent to surface parking areas and enclosed parking structures. Provide a landscape buffer appropriate for urban conditions at the edges of surface parking areas.

A.5.1 Pedestrian walkways should be well integrated with the existing infrastructure in a way that supports pedestrian connections within and outside the areas of the proposed project.

Design Guidelines for Buildings

B.1.1 Design a building to minimize its impact on adjacent lower-scale areas.

B.1.2 When a new building will be larger than surrounding structures, visually divide it into smaller building modules that provide a sense of scale.

B.1.3 Provide a clear definition between the base (the lower floor or floors) and upper floors to maintain a sense of scale at the street level.

B.1.4 If appropriate to the context, establish a design treatment that includes a differentiated building top.

Design Guidelines for Building Elements

C.1.1 Use building elements to create a street edge that invites pedestrian activity.

C.3.1 A high level of ground floor transparency is encouraged throughout downtown.

East Huron Character District

...Generally, structures are set back from the sidewalks, with landscaping in the foreground, either in the form of a lawn or a landscaped plaza or planter. A landscaped buffer strip is also found between the sidewalk and street, with grass, pavers, trees, or similar elements.

The East Huron Character Districts are integrated with or adjacent to three designated historic districts—Division Street Historic District, Ann Street Historic District, and the Old Fourth Ward Historic District. There is a significant contrast between the massing and scale of the structures within the character districts and the residential scale of the adjacent historic neighborhoods.

Meeting Discussion Summary

Members Present: Tamara Burns (chair), Geoffrey Perkins, Chester Hill, Richard Mitchell, William Kinley, Paul Fontaine.

Members Absent: Mary Jukuri

Design Team: Bob Keane, WDG Architecture; Matt Lam, WDG Architecture; Scott Patterson, WDG Architecture; Brad Moore, J. Bradley Moore & Associates; Earl Ophoff, Midwestern Consulting

Design Guidelines for Context and Site Planning – East Huron Character District

The Board noted the proposed design reinforced positive characteristics on adjacent sites and helped to enrich the pedestrian experience but felt both features could be further enhanced. They mentioned the setback and streetwall offset on East Washington Street was generally consistent with the existing pattern. However, the setback on Huron Street did not align as well with the neighboring structures, particularly those to the east. It was noted that the East Huron Character District is unique in that the buildings have generous landscaped setbacks. The base of the proposed building obscures the adjacent smaller historic buildings because of its relatively shallow setback. The design team suggested that the project was still in development and they would consider the urban pattern and form guidelines more carefully.

The Board and design team discussed incorporating natural systems into the project design. The Board suggested porous pavement and other means of promoting water infiltration. The design team explained their efforts to incorporate energy efficiencies into the proposed building but noted that porous pavement for the plaza and mews would not help water infiltration because these areas are over the roof of the underground parking garage and not over earth.

A large part of the discussion focused on the plaza proposed off Washington and the mews along the east side of the site. The Board was very appreciative that these features were included in the design, addressing several of the guidelines for the Open Space and Pedestrian Connections design principles, and suggested several ways to make them more inviting and more likely to be utilized. The Board felt the mews might be mistaken for a private path and encouraged it to be wider and have focal points at either end to attract users. Lighting of the mews was discussed, which will be lamp-posts as preferred by the First Baptist Church, as well as safety in general of pedestrians using the mews. The proposed plaza was called out by the Board as potentially “cold” and probably underutilized. Additional landscaping on the west side of the plaza and having retail uses, and/or the proposed fitness center within the building, face the plaza was suggested by the Board to encourage even greater use of this space. Retail uses on the ground floor was especially emphasized by the Board as the best way to bring activity to the area and liven up the space. The design team indicated they will take all comments into consideration as they continue to refine the proposed project plans.

Design Guidelines for Buildings

The Board complimented the design team on their effective use of variation in horizontal and vertical massing to break down the scale of the building. Notwithstanding their comments on the relatively shallow base setback on Huron, the Board noted the north face of the tower was offset so that it had a similar setback as the existing structures to either side. Ways in which the east façade could be further minimized were discussed by the Board and the design team, including wrapping the north and south façade base design around to the east façade base – carrying the treatment around the corner on northern and southern ends of the east side. Flipping the proposed tower/base brick colors on the northern two-thirds of the wall was also suggested by the Board, so that the tower had a darker color and the base a lighter tone on the northern segment. Another suggestion by the Board was to make an internal stairwell abutting the east wall into a glass box projecting outward.

The streetwall on the north side was called out by the Board as particularly “bland” and unattractive to pedestrians. The Board commented on the “pulled out” effect, noting it didn’t function well as a solid building base nor as a building screen. A true green screen might work better in this instance, the Board suggested.

Design Guidelines for Building Elements

The Board felt the Washington and Huron street edges could be improved by having only one driveway to the site, the majority favoring Huron Street, rather than a driveway to both streets. Having two driveways is a significant obstacle to a positive pedestrian experience in the general vicinity of the site. The design team explained that just one level of underground parking, and an additional floor parking on second floor above ground, was much more economical and took advantage of the existing conditions of the site (the current building has a basement and the underground parking would take advantage of that existing excavation but no further deepening is proposed).

Awnings were specifically mentioned to enhance the street level character. Moving the leasing office within the building to free up space for potential retail uses was again brought up to increase plaza activity, as was finding a more interesting use for north side ground floor rather than a maintenance office. In general, the Board felt it would behoove the project to create a stronger presence, and a more unique identity, on Huron. The Board noted that more people will experience the project from Huron, whether pedestrian or driver/passenger, and thus the project should look like more than just a garage door and maintenance office.

Design Guidelines for the East Huron Character Area

The Board expressed concerns about the north portion of the building’s incongruity of height and setback with the existing East Huron streetscape. The design does not attempt to sympathize with the existing historic structures flanking the building on East Huron and the single and two-story character of the block between North Division and the First Baptist Church.

Summary

In summary, the Board believed the proposed design responded favorably to the Downtown Design Guidelines. Stronger aspects of its design included complementing setbacks and greenspace, the plaza at the southeast corner, the mews along the east side, the slender, offset towers reducing the building's mass, and the variety in materials. Weaker features included significant area devoted to vehicle circulation (both on site and within the building footprint), disconnected front facades on the base, lack of end treatments for the mews, underutilized plaza, dominant east facade, and uninviting north streetwall.

AD/JST/WLR

7/1/11