

Date: October 5, 2009

To: Anthony Hood, Chair, Zoning Commission

Re: **Case 08-24**

Catholic University of America Former South Campus Development

From: Richard Houghton, DC Resident (Ward 5)

The Catholic University of America Former South Campus Development proposal presents the promise of opportunity—opportunity for the applicants, opportunity for the near-by communities and opportunity for the city. These communities include Brookland, Edgewood, Michigan Park and the CUA campus population itself, among others. It also presents significant change in the physical fabric of the city. Based on a review of the July 10 Pre-Hearing Submission, the proposed changes detailed therein are often long on rhetoric—both verbal and visual—and short on substance. There are significant concerns raised by aspects of the proposed development, concerns that should preclude Zoning Commission approval of it as it currently stands.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Demographics and Growth

The adjacent neighborhoods are characterized by a number of different household types: singles; couples of diverse ages; families with babies and young children, youth and young adults; and elders—couples and widows and widowers. Students, principally CUA students, but also a diverse population from Trinity University, Howard Divinity School, religious houses and the Bennett School, provide a lively mix as counterpoint to the core population. What is the projected mix of unit types for Blocks A-1, B, C-1, C-2 and E? What measures are in the proposed development to encourage and build on this mix and in particular to encourage families to move here? The townhouse is obvious part of the answer, as is mandated affordable housing component under Inclusionary Zoning. But where are the other necessary community-building elements and places? Parks? Play spaces? Day care facilities? The list could go on.

Infrastructure: Utilities

Given the extent of the development proposed, the vast benefits that accrue to the applicant with plan approval and re-zoning, the general high quality exhibited in the building design, landscape and streetscape and the applicant's stated goal "to create a unique mixed-use development" and arts

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destination, it is troubling indeed that the applicant is attempting to pass the buck on one of the single most important infrastructure elements contributing to the quality of the project, i.e. “undergrounding” utility lines, stating that the “Applicant is committed to coordinating with and allowing relevant utility companies and District government agencies to complete undergrounding”

This is a significant issue. The District government and “relevant utility companies” do not have a good track record when it comes to “undergrounding” utilities. This has been made abundantly clear to this community in studies, including the Brookland Streetscape study (DDOT) and the Brookland/CUA Small Area Plan (OP) and public and community meetings, including regularly scheduled and special ANC meetings, Garden Club events and the Ward 5 Councilmember’s economic summits.

But the Small Area Plan is clear and concise: “Open spaces and new street trees, made possible by the undergrounding of utilities, **are envisioned to be part of EVERY new development.**” (Open Space and Environment, emphasis added)

Additional implications need to be considered:

- The “lively streetscape” and “college main street” character “created with a six-foot planting strip, an eight-foot sidewalk, and a four-to-eighteen café zone” will be diminished by the incursions of utility poles overhead utility lines.
- There are no overhead utility lines shown in the precedent photos, a quality which adds considerably to the visual “placeness” and memorably of these images.
- Mature street trees as shown in the elevations are likely unrealistic if the lines remain above ground.

It is easy and convenient for the applicant to leave above ground utilities out of the elevations and it is easy to photoshop them out of composite perspectives and montages, but these simple actions do not make them go away. Put most simply, not “undergrounding” utilities is not an option.

Height, Massing and FAR: The Goldilocks Conundrum

Is there too much development? Is there too little development? Are the buildings too big? Are they too little? Or is everything just right? These are the real questions embedded in the technicalities of zoning. There are undoubtedly some in the community who would say “no” to any development as there are some who would say “yes” to all development: both are shortsighted and unthinking.

The Applicant would have the community—and the Zoning Commission—believe that the proposed development is “just right”. But “just right” for whom? For the community of present and future residents? The four massing diagrams on page 76 suggest not. A visual inspection demonstrates that the burden of transition is placed outside the PUD, on residential neighborhoods and existing neighborhood and stand alone institutional use patterns. A visual inspection demonstrates that these buildings are not, or not yet, fully integrated into the existing fabric. A visual inspection demonstrates that these buildings, in their massing, like ocean liners moored in a small harbor, are not, or not yet, a comfortable fit.

The visual evidence in this proposal suggests that the jump in absolute size and mixed use development at Metro stations in accordance with the city’s desire to encourage transit-oriented development and mixed use nodes at Metro stations needs to be modified in gross terms and refinements provided throughout.

Setbacks

Given the extensive discussions and general endorsement of setbacks during the Small Area Plan process of which the applicant is aware of, having had attended or hosted a number of the public meetings, the absence of continuous horizontal building setbacks above a certain elevation is troubling.

Varied massing, bays, balconies, dormers and other architectural elements are not substitutes for actual building setbacks, the benefits of which include:

- Breaking down the scale and actual size of the proposed buildings within the neighborhood context. See e.g. pp. 25, 26, 79.
- Providing “eyes on the street” and the possibility of street-oriented activity at multiple levels, not solely the ground plane.
- Creating outdoor living space as an amenity to the tenants or condominium owners. The applicant makes mention of approximately 43% of units in Block A1 having usable private outdoor space. The provision of outdoor space is a precious commodity and cherished amenity in urban multi-family housing and the provision of the same is to be encouraged. A comprehensive tabulation of probable approximate percentage of units having usable outdoor private space for all blocks, further broken out by street frontage location versus courtyard would be very helpful and should be requested by the Commission.

- Suggesting an urbane domesticity consistent with the applicant's project goals.

Arts Amenity

Details and specifics that might begin to lend credibility to this proposal are missing. As presented, the disarming lack of detail of this element, one of the supposed 'signature pieces' of the plan, generates skepticism and a foreboding that it is a "if we build it, surely they will come" wish.

Questions abound:

- Funding—What is the relationship with the Cultural Development Corporation (CuDC)?
Who is the CuDC?
- Structure and Operations—What constitutes reduced rents? Is a membership/vetting process (like the Torpedo Factory) contemplated?
- Perception—How does the arts community really feel about being ghettoized?
- Media—How will media with intensive industrial processes, such as hot glass or metal casting (ironically a matter of right under current C-M-1 zoning?) be accommodated?
- Contingencies—What is Plan B?

In the abstract, an arts component is potentially intriguing; and who, after all, can be against "the arts"? But at a time when the nearby Mount Rainier and Hyattsville arts initiatives, generators of redevelopment and community renewal, are facing severe hardships and the Cafritz arts centric proposal for the Fort Totten Metro is on hold, introducing arts amenities as the centerpiece of this development seems highly questionable and risky.

Drawings and Renderings

I. Renderings

There are four primary perspective views provided: Rendering of Public Square (p. 25); Rendering of Monroe Street (p. 26); Rendering of Arts Plaza (p. 27); Rendering of Arts Walk (p. 28).

Significantly none of the views (with the possible exception of Monroe Street) are true ground level pedestrian perspectives. None of them answer the question "What is like to be on the ground, in this place with these buildings around me?" This should be corrected in future submissions.

In addition, the perspective of Block B (p. 26) illustrates a building with four floors above the ground floor retail and decorative railing and what can be interpolated as two floors above the decorative railing and below the cornice. Elevation B of Block B (p. 50), however, illustrates three floors above ground floor retail and below the decorative railing and one floor above the decorative railing and below the building cornice. This is a two floor difference between the perspective and the elevation. Please clarify.

II. Street Elevations

The street elevations (pp. 32, 33) are not sufficiently inclusive and tell only part of the story:

- Elevation A (p. 32): Block A-2 has been omitted to the south and Michigan Avenue and CUA building(s) north of Michigan Avenue have been omitted. These elements should be included for an understanding and analysis of the extended street elevation and of the relationship of proposed development with adjacent structures.
- Elevation B (p. 32): Block A-1 south-facing Monroe Street elevation and tower have been omitted and Block E south-facing Monroe Street elevation has been omitted. These elements should be included for an understanding and analysis of the fuller extent of proposed development.
- Elevation C (p. 33): Block D and the Monroe Street Bridge have been omitted. These elements should be included for an understanding and analysis of the extended street elevation and of the relationship of proposed development with adjacent structures.
- Elevation D (p. 33): The existing building at the corner of 7th and Monroe Street has been omitted. This building must be included in order to more fully understand and analyze the extent of proposed development. This street elevation also omits the Monroe Street Bridge and CUA buildings which would be visible at the head of 7th Street reconfigured. These elements should be included for an understanding and analysis of the extended street elevation and of the relationship of proposed development with adjacent structures.

III. The Views not Taken

Several significant views are left to the reader to imagine:

- Michigan Avenue “prow”, illustrating the approach from the west, the relationship of the flatiron building and plaza to the reconfigured Monroe Street, approaches to Drew Bridge and CUA buildings and property on the north side of Michigan Avenue.

- Seventh Street NE, looking north, illustrating the significant transition from a residential zone to the denser configuration of proposed mixed-use and multi-story residential.
- Views and viewsheds from north, northeast and northwest of the project site.

Building Mechanical Excrescences

Unaddressed in the submission, but vital to the aesthetic success and urban presentation of buildings, is the discrete and out of public view placement of necessary but visually undesirable elements of contemporary life: utility meters and heating, ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) intake and discharge points. Apartment, condominium and townhouse HVAC and utilities, including but not necessarily limited to electric meters, bath and kitchen exhausts, mechanical intake and exhaust grilles, should not be located on the facades of buildings from the public right of way.

Full building services, including but not necessarily limited to garage intake and exhaust grilles, should be carefully integrated into the architectural fabric of the proposed construction.

Style and Architectural Treatment

The cohesiveness of space and development of place that we often associate with the evolution of communities over time—usually generations—and multiple building owners/developers/builders—perhaps dozens—is necessarily precluded by this owner’s one-time, one-developer approach and this developer’s strategy to attempt to create a “destination” in a relatively short, intense build-out.

In making each block unique, the result may not necessarily be pleasing diversity, but an unconvincing architectural and urban pastiche. One wonders what the compelling reason is for a different design strategy and a different set of precedents on nearly every block. The Tudor and arts and crafts qualities of blocks A1 and E perhaps have some affinities with collegiate gothic; the high style nineteenth century urban eclecticism of the flatiron iron seems wholly out of place, particularly given the urban multi-family/commercial block/ecclesiastical ambiguity of the dome. The warehouse type untransformed of Block C is attempting to invent a history for Brookland and Edgewood, but on a scale it never had. While some of the images are very beguiling, a cohesive architectural urban ensemble has not yet been achieved. Precedents alone do not justify a building; there must be recognition of the rigor imposed by neighborhood character and the discipline of community building.

BLOCK SPECIFIC COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

Block A1

- What is meant by shingle roofing? It appears that a single roofing material is proposed; however, given the Applicant's building materials and choice of precedents, upgraded roof materials—in whole or in part—including metal, slate and or tile would be appropriate.

Block A2

- In two locations—B1 unit at corner of Proposed Kearny Street and Proposed Lawrence Street and A unit at corner of proposed Kearny Street—townhouses violate the building set-back line established within the block, making unsatisfactory resolutions at these corners. Scale-giving architectural elements respecting the building set-back lines, as successfully used at the corner of Seventh and Kearny, could be incorporated at these locations.
- Why is the phasing of Block A2 to be determined at a future time (p. 85)? What is the anticipated build-out of Block A2 within the overall context of project development?

Block B

- Placing the building entrance on Michigan Avenue ensures pedestrian circulation and by providing an address on this busy street, begins to domesticate and civilize it, consistent with community comments during the Small Area Plan process. The Brookland and Edgewood communities look forward to the next iteration of the CUA campus plan to review the university's proposals for addressing the south edge of its campus along Michigan Avenue and integration with the former south campus area in this PUD.
- The height and presence of this building in the approach from the west, in relation to the nearby Dominican House and CUA buildings is of concern. Further study of the appropriate relationship of elements is warranted and it is suggested elsewhere in these comments that additional views should be provided. Refer to massing diagrams (p. 79).

Block C and Arts Walk

- The delivery and trash removal sequence is detailed on pages 17 and 18, indicating that residential tenant trash collection in C2 (east block) is across the arts walk, i.e. at grade. Given a single parking garage for both blocks, a single below grade delivery system,

including trash removal and tenant move-ins and move-outs, be handled below grade through a single point of entry on the alley accessed off of Bunker Hill Road.

- The Metropolitan Bike Trail transition from track-side to 8th Street corridor at the southern end of Block C2 is an important node. Building and streetscape could respond in a stronger way to this transition (change of level, emergence into a more urban setting, etc.)
- The single-loaded corridor configuration of C-2 negates visual connectivity to the east, guarantees all living activities (except perhaps the occasional walk to the trash room and morning and evening outing to walk the dog) are directed inward to the development and inward to the arts walk. This is odd for a project that is stressing connectivity. A variety of plan, massing and elevation strategies can be employed to animate this façade, bridge the gap of the CSX/Metro right of way, promote visual connectivity to the east and integrate this building more fully into a larger neighborhood.
- C2 turns its back on the community to the east. That the applicant feels compelled to supergraphics (sanctioned graffiti?) on a three hundred foot long minimally relieved facade which is for all intents and purposes a blank wall, indicates how unresolved this block is at the present. The billboard character of the unrelieved façade is clearly evident on pages 80 and 81 in the views looking toward the Shrine from Monroe Street near 12th and Newton Street near 12th.
- P 57 where is fiber cement siding proposed?
- What material is the “decorative spandrel panel”?

Block D

- The proposed arts/flex space has much more potential, perhaps including commercial potential, than it is currently being afforded. The small site, although adjacent to the tracks sits on Monroe Street, sits near the bridge abutment and is an important marker and node in the Monroe Street corridor: it deserves to be more than a simple one story pad building with a mute, blank facade to Monroe Street.

Block E

- Elevation D on page 66 needs to show the full extent of contemplated development on this block by adding south elevations of Block E Monroe Street development.

- A street section cut looking west including Block E 7th Street elevation and adjacent existing single family development south of Lawrence is needed to help properly assess the relationship between the proposed development and neighborhood fabric. Even in the absence of the street section, the massing diagrams (p. 79) clearly show that the majority of the burden of transition from the prevailing single family land use pattern to the proposed mixed use development falls on the homeowners, not the new development. Block E needs to go on diet and lose floors or bulk.

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing concerns as well as the concerns of fellow citizens, it is evident there are significant flaws in this proposal. For these reasons I urge the Zoning Commission **NOT** to approve PUD Submission 08-24 in its current form and urge restraint in the review of subsequent corrected submissions.