

At the Crossroads: 901 Monroe Street and Brookland's Future

Executive Summary

The 901 Monroe project represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fill a gaping hole in the fabric of the Brookland streetscape. The site has been vacant for over a decade, following the demolition of the Colonel Brooks Tavern and the court challenge that blocked the original development plan. We applaud Menkiti and Horning for reviving the project. The new plan will bring much needed housing and residential density to Brookland.

Yet, in our exuberance for something—*anything*—to happen on this vacant lot we must not lose sight of the special features that make 901 Monroe so strategically important to the neighborhood. The development site occupies Brookland's commercial and transportation crossroads. The plan, as currently envisioned, does not fully embrace this key fact and therefore falls short of its potential to reinvigorate Monroe Street.

Fortunately, **a few small modifications to the plan would cure the project's deficiencies:**

- **Repurposing a portion of Monroe-fronting residential space to retail**—as little as 2,000 sq. ft for a coffee shop or similar use—would help fill the hole left by the demolition of Colonel Brooks Tavern, reconnect the 12th Street and Monroe Market retail corridors (as envisioned in the Small Area Plan), and properly activate street life directly across from Brookland-CUA Station;
- **Designating all garage spaces as “compact” parking only** would accommodate most vehicles, while excluding the largest and most dangerous SUVs and pickup trucks from what should be a transit-centric development and freeing up ~1,800 sq. ft. that could be used to backfill residential space repurposed to retail;
- **Moving street facing “stoop” designs from Monroe Street to the surrounding side streets** would make room for the retail frontage described above while improving the building's communication with street life on the Lawrence, 9th and 10th Street sides.

Changes affecting a mere 1% of gross floor area in a 250,000 sq. ft. project would yield a project that will stand the test of time and serve the community for decades to come. Real estate cycles come and go, but this building at Brookland's literal crossroads will be with us for generations to come.

We urge the development team to incorporate the proposed changes into its plan. The following memo presents the case in more detail.

Brookland's Commercial and Transportation Crossroads

It is not an exaggeration to say that the intersection of 9th and Monroe Streets is Brookland's commercial and transportation crossroads:

- **Brookland-CUA Station.** Located directly across the street from the proposed development, Brookland-CUA is a major multi-modal transportation hub. Approximately 10,000 riders enter or exit the Red Line at this station every weekday. The station also connects 9 metrobus routes. One can reach Brookland from any part of the region through the Station.
- **Bicycle Trail Connectivity.** The development site also occupies a strategic position in DC's bicycle trail network. Dedicated bike lanes connect, just over the bridge, with the Metropolitan Branch Trail—one of the most loved and heavily used multipurpose trails in the DC system. The Met Branch Trail provides a direct, carless path to downtown, Union Station, and the National Mall. The bike lanes also connect westward to the Irving Street bikeway, which links Brookland to Washington Hospital Center, Park View, and Columbia Heights.
- **Monroe Street Market and 12th Street NE Retail.** This stretch of Monroe Street connects Brookland/Edgewood's main retail thoroughfares, namely the Monroe Street Market development and 12th Street NE. Notably, despite the covid-era downturn that affected retail across the entire country, there are signs of "green shoots" on both sides of the bridge. Monroe Market finally has its "anchor tenant" in the form of a new Trader Joe's that will open in early 2025. As demonstrated by other urban locations, including in DC, TJs will drive an upsurge in foot traffic around Monroe Street Market. (We speculate that the "Trader Joe's effect" will cause other vacant storefronts at Monroe Market to soon be filled.) New activity is also planned for the historic 12th Street corridor between Monroe and Newton, where Miller has earmarked a significant portion of the west side of the block for mixed use development, including modern retail space at the corner of 12th and Monroe.

These attributes informed the last [Brookland Small Area Plan](#), which envisioned the Monroe Street Sub-Area as a "a revitalized, tree-lined urban street, connecting Brookland from west to east with retail, residential and cultural and arts uses." More specifically, that plan called for "Mixed-use development with community-serving retail, residential, cultural uses and public spaces along Monroe Street from Michigan Avenue to 12th Street to connect Brookland from west to east."

The 901 Monroe project, with the proper attention to neighborhood context, could serve as the missing link to realize this vision. Or it could prevent the vision from materializing for decades to come. We have truly approached a crossroads for Brookland's future.

Key Features of the Proposed Development Plan

The property comprises 60,000 square feet of land on the block bounded by 9th Street, NE to the west, Lawrence Street, SE to the south, 10th Street, SE to the east, and Monroe Street, NE to the north. The [zoning application](#) calls for a Planned Unit Development (PUD) and Zoning Map Amendment that would rezone the property from MU-3A and R-2 to MU-5. The resulting building would contain approximately 230 residential units in approximately 252,000 square feet of total gross floor area.

The main entrance to the building would be located at the corner of 9th and Monroe, across from Brookland-CUA Station. The plans call for Monroe frontage to consist of lobby space, a fitness center and yoga studio for the private use of building residents, and five small residential units with "stoop" entrances onto the

street. Other frontages, along 9th Street, 10th Street, and Lawrence largely consist of masonry and window façades with no entrances to the street.

The new plan has three notable differences from the [previous incarnation of the project](#). First, the new plan calls for more residential capacity than the previous plan (230 units on six floors versus 212 units on five floors). Second, it contains significantly less parking (54 versus 150 spaces), likely due to the elimination of an underground level. Third, the development team has not included any retail space in its design. By contrast, the previous version of the project had earmarked over 12,000 square feet facing Monroe for up to 6 retail tenants. The development team says that it commissioned a study that concluded there is, at present, insufficient demand for retail space in the immediate area. The pictures below show some of these differences.



Old Development Plan: Monroe Street Elevation



New Development Plan: Monroe Street Elevation

Assessment of the Proposed Plan: Good but not Great

The plan, as presented, has much to offer. An empty lot serves no one. This plan will turn a block full of dirt and weeds into much needed residential density. This essential aspect of the project should be applauded. The reduction in parking from the previous plan, by approximately 100 cars, is also to be celebrated. Brookland, like many other parts of DC, has experienced a traffic safety crisis. This location, directly across from a major transit hub, is not appropriate for an outsized garage. However, we note that while the 23%

parking rate (spaces per residential unit) is in line with some other nearby metro-adjacent buildings (e.g., the Rowan and Brookland Press), [DDOT's CTR guidelines](#) (figure 10, page 39) call for a starting presumption of zero parking for developments within ¼ mile of a Metro station. The current parking allocation should therefore be viewed as an absolute maximum, not to be increased as the zoning process proceeds. Lastly, we appreciate the on-site bike storage facility.

Our review of the project plans also reveals some important deficiencies:

1. **Lack of Any Retail Component.** The demolition of Colonel Brooks Tavern, to make way for new development, eliminated the only retail establishment along Monroe Street between 12th Street and the bridge, leaving a retail “hole” in the heart of Brookland.



The Monroe Street Retail “Hole”

As noted above, the Small Area Plan envisions retail mixed in with residential use to connect the neighborhood’s two main commercial corridors. Retail also promotes foot traffic throughout the day, which helps with street safety—especially important given the location across from the Metro station. The lack of retail is a glaring about face from the previous project design, which, as noted above, called for a substantial retail component. Understanding that real estate is a highly cyclical industry, and that this building will be with us for the long haul, it is not logical to build for an estimate of demand at a point in time when the pendulum seems to have swung from one extreme to the other. As noted above, we have reason to believe retail demand will return soon to Monroe Street. To believe that retail will never come back is quite an extreme position to hold. Surely there is a reasonable middle ground between the previous plan for 12,000 square feet and the current plan for zero square feet of retail space? The building design includes 6,500 square feet of lobby space and nearly 2,000 square feet for a private fitness center and yoga studio, all fronting on Monroe Street. Surely the developer could make room for some publicly accessible retail on this level? The developer’s decision to completely rule out retail seems unnecessarily shortsighted.

2. **Insular Posture to Surrounding Blocks.** The design is striking for its insularity when considering the non-Monroe Street sides of the building. Neighbors will face walls of windows, with no doors. (See the architect’s rendering, below.) There will be little opportunity for neighbors to meet building residents—an opportunity to build community squandered. Ground level “eyes on the street” will undoubtedly be blocked by window blinds. The lack of comings and goings will make the blocks less safe than they otherwise could be. This design philosophy is especially confounding when one

considers the proposed “stoop” entrances on Monroe Street. Those entrances face northward (unfortunately shaded by the building structure) on a very noisy, busy street. 9th Street, Lawrence Street, and even 10th Street are more pleasant, sun-directed blocks that are inherently more amenable to a “stoop” treatment. Tenants might even pay a premium to have a direct entrance on those streets.



A Wall of Windows: The View from 9th and Lawrence Streets NE

3. **Minimizing Car Problems.** Even in its reduced scope, the creation of a new parking facility in the midst of a residential neighborhood raises issues. Recent research has revealed that pedestrian safety is [disproportionately impacted by oversized pickup trucks and SUVs](#). Moreover, these types of vehicles are especially incompatible with neighborhood streets sized for smaller vehicles. (Recently, a neighborhood childcare worker was [seriously injured by an oversized pickup truck](#).) Additionally, the developer’s plan is silent with respect to street parking by building residents and misses the opportunity to promote mass transit use in such a uniquely transit accessible location.

While the plan has much to like about it, we should be honest about ways in which it could be improved, at the margin, to the benefit of the neighborhood. The developers are asking for zoning relief to achieve their business goals. It is fair to ask whether the plan aligns with the community’s long-term interests, especially as the community will have to live with the resulting product for decades to come.

Moving from Good to Great

In the spirit of moving from “good to great”, we propose a few common-sense alterations to the plan:

1. **Add a modest retail component to the plan.** The developer should add a modest amount of retail space on the Monroe Street frontage. To be clear, we are not suggesting anything near the scale of the previous plan. Rather, we envision “just enough” retail space to properly activate the block. Removing or relocating some of the “JR2” units fronting Monroe Street would free up ample room for a retail tenant, while affecting less than 1% of the building’s floor space. Here are few ideas to illustrate the possibilities:
 - **Coffee Shop.** A nice-sized coffee shop/cafe can be accommodated in as little as 1,500-2,000 square feet (example: Pluma, Union Market/The Wharf). A coffee shop in the building would undoubtedly be viewed as a major amenity by residents.

- **Commercial Gym.** Expanding the existing fitness/yoga center space to ~4,000 square feet would accommodate a commercial gym (example: Sweat DC). A commercial tenant would have the obvious benefit, compared to a private fitness studio, of providing rental income.
- **Mini Food Hall.** Reclaiming a bit more space (e.g., from the lobby) could create a 6,000 square foot space for a small multi-vendor food hall (Example: the Spot or its much smaller cousin, Spot Mini, in College Park).

Again, these are just examples of possibilities. Importantly, as we believe it is possible to free up approximately 1,800 square feet on the ground level just by moving to compact parking (see below). Additionally, the existing lobby is quite large at 6,500 square feet. With a bit of architectural ingenuity, floor plans could be adjusted so as to not materially reduce the total housing capacity of the building. If nothing else, additional space fronting Monroe Street should be flexibly designed so that it could be converted to retail when the market inevitably rebounds. (In the event that the space is slow to fill it could be occupied by temporary uses such as the leasing center currently slated for the lobby, thereby allowing more lobby space to be reclaimed for residential use).

2. **Make all parking spaces “compact car” only.** Standard parking spaces are 9 feet wide by 18 feet long. (11-C DCMR § 712.5) “Compact” spaces are slightly smaller at 8 feet wide by 16 feet long. (11-C DCMR § 712.6) Despite the name, “compact” spaces are large enough for most vehicle types, including many SUVs. (See the picture, below.) Compact spaces are *not* big enough to accommodate the large SUVs or pickup trucks that pose a disproportionate safety risk. DC’s zoning regulations permit 50% of spaces to be compact by right. (11-C DCMR § 712.3(a)) However, a special exception may be granted by demonstrating “a reasonable difficulty in providing the number of full-sized parking space” (11-C DCMR § 712.11) Moving from Standard to Compact spaces would free up approximately 1,800 square feet on the ground level (34 feet per space x 54 spaces). Given the checkered history around the previous underground parking and the importance of freeing space for other community needs (e.g., retail), we believe a strong case can be made for a special exception.



An SUV Parked in a Compact Space at Union Market

3. **Add street-level entrances to ground level units facing side streets.** The clever “stoop” concept (or something similar) could be readily adapted to provide direct entrances to units especially on Lawrence, but also on the 9th and even the 10th Street sides. Doing so would make the building communicate much better with neighbors and promote street safety. It’s likely that these street-

level units would be prized for their direct accessibility. The developer might even consider converting these units to two-level “family” units or condos. (This could, in turn, allow some of the multi-bedroom units on the upper floors to be broken up, replacing small units fronting Monroe Street.)

4. **Promote 901 Monroe as a transit-forward building.** The site’s metro- and bicycle-accessible location is one of its biggest selling points. The developer should agree to place a residential parking permit (RPP) restriction on tenants (except, perhaps, street-accessible “stoop” units on the Lawrence, 9th, and 10th street sides) via an RPP voluntary exclusion (D.C. Law 23-164). The building should also provide tenants with MetroCard benefits to encourage use of mass transit. Lastly, the building should consider designating a few spaces for car sharing services such as Zipcar or Free2Move to provide carless residents with occasional access to a vehicle.

Conclusion

In summary, while the 901 Monroe development is a step in the right direction, some relatively minor adjustments could transform it from a good project into a truly great one that better serves the Brookland community over the long term. Modifications affecting a mere 1% of floor area could yield a massive improvement in the project. We appreciate due consideration of these ideas. We stand ready to support additional analysis and appreciate bringing an open-minded problem-solving approach to find creative solutions that work for all.