



City of Ann Arbor Design Review Board

April 18, 2012

The Design Review Board met on April 18, 2012 to review the **AATA Blake Transit Center** proposal at 331 South Fourth Avenue. 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 is provided for background.

Summary of Priority Issues

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

Fifth Avenue Street Frontage/Façade

1. The pedestrian experience at the street level could be enhanced. Pedestrians should be able to see the main entrance to the building from the sidewalk. The Fifth Avenue façade could be enhanced by creating a focal point in this location. The site could be softened in a number of ways. The canopy should be clearly visible from the right-of-way. The building is very geometric and could be improved by creating variation in the massing so that it appears less box-like. A small canopy could be placed on the southeast corner of the site. A change in building materials that enhances texture and color would help. The windows should be set back (see Guidelines A.1.2, A.1.2, A.4.2, B1.1, B1.3, B1.4, C.1.1, C.2).
2. Consideration should be given to relocating the building to the northwest corner of the site. A temporary transit center could be provided during construction in the City owned lot south of the site. The NW location would help facilitate safer pedestrian movement including mid-block crossings from Fourth Avenue to Fifth Avenue and connecting across Fifth Avenue with Library Lane. The NW location also allows for superior opportunities for solar access.
3. The building is very rigid and could be softened; architectural details should provide a sense of scale. Sunscreens should be provided; clear glass is recommended. The wall on the street edge on the first floor, Fifth Avenue side, is very blank. Building operating systems need to be thoughtfully located. The use of sustainable and locally manufactured materials is recommended. The primary pedestrian access point to the building should be near the main corridor, not deep within the building. (see Guidelines B1.1, B1.3, C1.1, C6.1, C7.1).

Base Treatment

1. A clear definition between floors should be created. (see Guideline B.1.3).

Walkway along the North Side

1. The 10 foot wide pedestrian path proposed on the north side of the site should be designed to encourage active pedestrian use and provide visual interest. Providing well considered landscaping would help. (see Guidelines A.1.2, A.5.1, A.5.5).

Plaza

1. The plaza area could be enhanced by providing opportunities for art, a place for community announcements, and other points of interest. Uses that activate the plaza are encouraged. (see Guidelines A.3.1-2, A.3.6-7, A5 (all), A6.1, A6.2, C.1.1, C.3.1).

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.1.3 Corner sites are an opportunity to express an architectural gateway or focal point and a dominant architectural feature.
- A.1.6 Where adjacent properties are underdeveloped and/or the block lacks inviting and interesting characteristics, consider a building, site and streetscape design that helps to create a vibrant pedestrian setting.
- A.3.1 Design an urban open space to maximize activity and usability for a diverse population of different abilities.
- 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.

- A.5.5 Link on-site open spaces, such as courtyards and plazas, directly to a public sidewalk.
- A.6.2 Consider use of convenient bicycle racks, including proximity to building entries, weather protection and security when selecting a location for bicycle parking and storage.

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.2.1 Clearly define a primary entrance and orient it toward the street.
- C.3.1 A high level of ground floor transparency is encouraged throughout downtown.
- C.4.1 Operable awnings could be considered at storefront and window locations.
- C.6.2. Locate and sufficiently screen mechanical systems to minimize or eliminate noise impacts on adjacent sites and buildings.

Midtown Character District

“Architectural styles in Midtown include some 19th century wood-framed residential (mostly converted to office use) but stylistically, the district is dominated by an array of 20th century mid-rise office and government facilities”

“The primary north-to-south street is Fifth Avenue. It can be considered Ann Arbor’s “civic corridor”, anchored to the south by the Ann Arbor District Library’s Main Branch, the Blake Transit Center and Federal Building”

“With the exception of the Library, the buildings in Midtown have limited hours and are used primarily during the business day”

“Future development should find opportunities to establish an identity for Midtown, increasing its vitality and expanding its offerings. Primary residential access to buildings along the civic corridor should be from the corridor street”

Meeting Discussion Summary

Members Present: Tamara Burns (chair), Paul Fontaine, Chet Hill, William Kinley, Richard Mitchell

Members Absent: Mary Jukuri, Geoffrey Perkins

Design Team: Rob Sherman, DLZ; Stephen Kromkowski, DLZ; Terry Black, AATA; Matt Berg, Spence Brothers

Design Guidelines for Context and Site Planning – Midtown Character District

The Board noted the proposed building appears fairly cold and would benefit from additional design elements. The pedestrian experience from the street and through the site could be enhanced by relocating the building to the northwest corner of the site. The Board discussed the importance of creating an architectural expression, particularly from the Fifth Avenue side of the site, by creating a visual focal point that reinforces the importance of this significant public building. The design team suggested that the project was still in development and they would consider addressing comments related to urban pattern, material, configuration, access, spatial relationships, and form more carefully.

A large part of the discussion focused on the pedestrian experience through the site. The site will be accessed by thousands of patrons each day and the pedestrian experience should be sensitively considered. The Board emphasized the need to devote great sensitivity in the design of this public space by incorporating landscaping elements, adding public art, creating relief, and paying attention to a multitude of design details.

The Board and design team discussed the connection between the plaza and Library Lane on the east side of Fifth Avenue. The Board recommended that the design team carefully consider this critical pedestrian crossing since a large number of AATA patrons will cross Fifth Avenue midblock on their way to the Library or points east. The fence along the 10-foot wide pedestrian path on the north side of the site should also be sensitively designed to consider actual pedestrian movement and landscaping opportunities.

The Board asked about elements of environmental sustainability. The design team explained their efforts to incorporate a variety of energy efficiencies including the use of gray water, solar opportunities, and innovative storm water systems. AATA is proposing to heat the driveway in winter to preclude the need for snow plowing.

In general, the Board felt the project would benefit from creating a stronger pedestrian experience throughout the site, as well as creating a building and site with more interesting design elements. Well placed lighting and distinctive paving patterns could also help. Some board members recommended moving the building to the northwest corner of the site.

Board members inquired about bus access issues and pedestrian safety. This issue will be analyzed by the City Transportation Engineer.

Design Guidelines for Buildings

Members of the Board felt that the building could be enhanced by having a focal point on the east side of the building that creates visual interest and vibrancy. Better articulation of the building entrance could also enhance the appearance. Members of the Board asked if the building could be taller. The petitioner's architect indicated that the building was being designed to accommodate a vertical addition as well as an addition to the south. The petitioner's architect indicated a willingness to modify the site and building to address these concerns.

Design Guidelines for Building Elements

Extending the canopy was mentioned as a way to create visual interest as well as cover pedestrians and parked bicycles from the elements. The Board recommended the addition of important site features such as seating, art, and well considered pedestrian paths.

Summary

In summary, the Board believed the proposed building and site design could benefit from adhering to a number of aspects of the Downtown Design Guidelines. Using stronger design elements for the building (such as material, massing, glazing, entrances, and the canopy), considering pedestrian access issues, and adding various site design elements such as impressive landscaping, seating, and art will help the site become an impressive public focal point in downtown Ann Arbor. Board members also recommended that the petitioner consider the possibility of reconfiguring the building to the northwest corner of the site to enhance pedestrian linkages and provide excellent solar access.

JK/WLR

4/25/12