

August 31, 2020

Re Mill Plaza Architectural Design Review

Dear Members of the Durham Planning Board,

While the August 26 presentation is still fresh in my mind, I would like to offer some suggestions for improving the project. I offer these not as criticism but in the spirit of wanting the appearance of the buildings to be the best they can be.

For those who are not aware of my background, I have a BFA in Art, but more to the point, my life's work of 50 years has involved working with and teaching about the visual impacts of color on composition. I have taught visual literacy to students and teachers across the US, US Commonwealths and Territories, and Canada. Locally, I have participated in several town architectural design/color committees, including Madbury Commons, Mark Henderson's buildings on Main and Madbury (informally, by request of the owner), and Pauly's Pockets.

While I am not a trained architect, a few design elements jump out at me that could benefit from some refinement to improve the overall project. I offer the following constructive feedback because even small refinements can have a huge positive impact on an overall project.

Color palette and mass

- The idea of breaking up the massing with a variety of colors for each vertical section of a large building is a good one.
- However, the colors selected should be carefully considered given that color has such a huge impact on how we experience the built environment. Large swaths of light colors, full intensity warm colors, and bright colors, for instance, will make a building "come forward" and appear larger. For such a massive project, this is not a desirable effect. Cold colors and darker colors will create a heavy, unappealing experience. Thus, muted colors, more neutral in tone, can enhance a building or buildings without creating a more massive, overly dominant, or unappealing appearance.
- Additionally, the color palette that is selected should contain colors that work harmoniously together. This often means choosing colors that are made from the same base color so that the colors offer variety but look like they belong together. In the proposed color palette, the cold dark gray and the light yellow cream do not work together, nor do they work particularly well with the Country Lane Red Hardie Board or the brick. While they do break up the mass, other color palettes could do that just as effectively *and* also read as an integrated, harmonious, and aesthetically pleasing whole.
- Given the size and scale of the proposed project, color selection is critical. One challenge is that given the size of the project, there needs to be several colors interspersed to break up the mass. Within the 20 standard Hardie colors, there are few groups of colors that actually go well together. The various shades of more neutral browns in Madbury Commons is about the only grouping of multiple colors in the standard Hardie palette that work together. That is one option.

- While bemoaning the limited color palette of the standard Hardie Plank colors, I discovered a full range of lovely muted colors on the Hardie website under their Dream Collection that I did not know existed. I wonder if the Harriman team is aware of these as they were not easy to locate. Go to: <https://www.jameshardie.com/dream> to find dozens of soft muted colors that offer variety within a specific color palette. A few carefully chosen colors from this collection could create a truly handsome project. I would suggest some soft gray/browns found in the Grays & Neutrals section or some soft muted greens that would complement the brick found in the Blues & Greens section. With so many wonderful colors to choose from, I am sure that a colorist could pick out Hardie colors and a brick make the buildings “sing.”
- While some might be concerned that muted colors are “too dull,” trim and accent colors can add points of interest while complementing the neutrals. Madbury Commons is an example of a large scale project that used a successful color palette of neutral Hardie Board colors along with a bright accent color.
- On Building B, West Exterior façade, the top 3 floors appear strangely disconnected from the bottom floor. This could be remedied by changing the gray horizontal band to black to tie in windows and black balconies (suggested below in next section).
- The view of Building C from the neighborhood path highlights the impact of color. The light color makes the building appear larger than it need be, which is not a desirable outcome so close to a residential neighborhood. Muted neutral colors would be a better choice.

Windows, balconies, bands

- Black balconies (rather than what I think are currently depicted as white) would greatly enhance the look of the building along with black horizontal bands above the first floor where signage will be posted. Black will create contrast and enhance the look of the adjacent color(s) while also tying together the first floor to the upper floors.
- Black windows, balconies, and horizontal band above the retail floor would help create an integrated sophisticated look (assuming proper color choices for the buildings are made) and a more unified whole that would not occur should white or gray be used for these elements.
- The banding above the first floor could be proportionately a bit narrower, giving the buildings a more streamline, less heavy appearance.

Brick and mortar

- The color of the brick and even the color of the mortar should be carefully selected *after* the color palette of the buildings is finalized. The current choice of brick has some yellow/orange undertones which may not complement the color of the clapboards. Nuanced color selections of brick *and mortar* can make the project “hang together.”

Awnings and roof

- What appears to be white or grey awnings in the renderings should either be black to tie in with the other black accents or some bright accent color(s), colors that complement the color of each building. Rather than use primary colors as depicted in a previous rendering (red, yellow, blue), why not select some bright attractive tertiary colors?

(These are mixtures of primary and secondary colors that can add great range to a palette.) These rich, bright colors could be stunning against the more muted neutrals. The awning colors should all share the same value (i.e. the same degree of lightness or darkness) and would be carefully selected to complement each specific building color.

- I am not sure what color the roof is above the clock tower (light green?), but I have seen some stunning examples of similar type roofs that are copper-colored. That same copper color could be picked up as an awning color as an alternative to the above suggestions.

Miscellaneous

- I am not sure what the gray squares are below each retail sign. If they are doors, I would suggest black or an accent color or colors tied in with the awnings rather than an uninviting gray.
- Once the color palette has been finalized, the Hannaford building should also use colors from the same color palette to help tie the project together.

All these elements should work together as a whole to make a building or buildings sing. (We all know the experience of looking at an aesthetically pleasing building—which involves a combination of both design and color elements. While it may be hard to put into words, the aesthetic experience makes us feel good inside.) This should be a requirement of such a prominent, downtown project.

These are just a few suggestions from someone sensitive to the impacts of color and design on the success of a project. I am sure that a trained architect would be able to offer many more helpful refinements. Unless the Planner or members of the Board feel qualified to evaluate the architecture and color palette, I urge the Board to request an independent review to obtain suggestions for refinements to both the color palette and the architectural design. This can only serve to enhance the project.

Given the scale and mass of this project and its prominence downtown, an architectural review would insure that this project be the best it can be. Keep in mind that our most successful projects in Durham included not only an independent architectural review but also a citizens committee of Durham residents skilled in architecture and/or color theory to work with an independent architect to insure the best possible result for Durham. There is much to be gained and nothing to lose from such a process. It would be an excellent investment by the Town, appreciated for years to come by residents and visitors alike.

Respectfully Submitted,

Beth Olshansky