

July 21, 2020

Planning Board
8 Newmarket Road
Durham, NH 03824

RE: Public Hearing - Mill Plaza Redevelopment. 7 Mill Road. Presentation of proposed architectural design. Continued review of application for site plan and conditional use for mixed use redevelopment project and activity within the wetland and shoreland overlay districts. Colonial Durham Associates, property owner. Sean McCauley, agent. Joe Persechino, Tighe & Bond, engineer. Ari Pollack, attorney. (Rick Taintor is serving as the Town's Contract Planner.) Central Business District. Map 5, Lot 1-1.

Topic of this letter: Architectural design | Architectural standards

Greetings,

First, it is difficult not to think that dissecting the Plaza's proposed architectural design seems a bit lightweight in view of Durham's the more grave concerns Dennis Meadows lays out in his letter dated July 16. I hope you will consider those seriously.

My points in this letter begin with an elephant and end with what some might see as mice but that are more related to the elephant than might appear at first blush.

The "elephant": Too big, in the wrong place

The application poses a challenge for the Planning Board—and for Durham residents—like no other. The proposed siting of massive student housing on a mostly-paved prominent 10-acre site adjacent to both mostly-historic Church Hill and a single-family neighborhood reveals the limitations of our site plan regulations and zoning ordinance.

Unlike some municipalities, including Portsmouth, Concord, and Manchester (see below*), we have no "transition district" zoning that would lay out specific ways to mitigate the dramatically different uses of two abutting zones, such as height restrictions. Instead, we rely on the Conditional Use Permit criteria, whose beauty lies in the eye of the beholder.

And that is just what we're facing: Very different perspectives. One is of those whose quality of life is not affected by the impacts of the development. The other is that of those for whom it may make an enormous difference.

Planner Emily Innes walked the Board through the new site plan at the January 22, 2020 meeting. She noted that, "as you travel from Main Street down Mill Plaza, you're really transitioning from that downtown, more clustered environment, to the neighborhood. We see our site as that transition."

How can an expansive rectilinear parking lot and massive, rectangular buildings, with no softening curves in view and with minimal landscaping and no inviting pedestrian areas ever be considered a transition between downtown and a family neighborhood?

If there were a park-like green space at the southern edge of the parking lot along a restored brook, wide enough to allow for picnic tables or several pedestrians walking dogs and meeting and greeting each other, that might be a horse of a different color.

The proposal also would remove the natural wooded buffering in which the historic structures on Church Hill are nestled. Furthermore, it does nothing to improve the buffering for Brookside Commons, Chesley Drive, and Faculty neighborhood residents.

If the Plaza is redeveloped, whatever is built will be highly visible and may alter our views not just to the Plaza but to Church Hill. To some of us, that would be a real loss.

Architectural Design Standards (emphases added):

One: It is difficult to tell from the January 2020 updated renderings just what we would see, in part because the perspectives included in the renderings file are marked “no scale.” If I read the Architectural Standards accurately, **elevations drawn to scale are required.** (Maybe I’m missing something in interpreting the submitted elevations?)

Part II. Site Plan Review Process, 2.2(A) Formal Application Content
A Formal Application shall consist of the following items:

J. Elevation Drawings....

- 1. Three (3) 24" x 36" copies and fifteen (15) 11" x 17" copies of elevation drawings of each pertinent façade, **drawn to scale.** One 11' x 17 copy of the elevation drawings in color.*

In addition, **we are not shown the elevations in context**, i.e., both to scale and against the existing structures on Main Street and Church Hill and against the woods, or with a view from Brookside Commons. That significantly limits our ability to visualize the proposal.

Two: The parcel is in the Central Business District—but at the very edge bordering both a single-family neighborhood and Church Hill. The Architectural Design Standards **for the Church Hill district** state:

(G)(2)(a) Overview of Zoning Districts: Church Hill, General Character:

...New development shall be designed to resemble a single-family house, as generally described above, rather than an apartment block. (page 9)

The proposal appears to place three- and four-story buildings up against 1700s- and 1800s-built structures representing Town history that the Historic District Commission has vigilantly protected—and that would sit squarely in the backyards of single-family two-story homes.

See above regarding context: I can’t tell where the “cottages-style” buildings are situated, perhaps in part also because the “view legend” on the plan sheets remains the same across several perspectives.

Three: Standards across the board:

*H) (2) General Principles: Traditional idiom. No particular architectural style is stipulated but **buildings shall be harmonious with traditional Durham, New Hampshire and/or New***

England architecture. Thus, the general approach should express traditional or neo-traditional design. However, innovative design is not discouraged provided it is **respectful of context and these principles....**

What elements of the proposed design meet the above standard? (The cottage style? Peaked roofs? Clapboarding?) We strove to make Pauly's Pockets reflect the New England vernacular, in part by using brick and granite lintels above windows, reflecting the architectural design of New England's historic mills.

What's presented appears to be a generic, Anywhere, USA design that communicates "contractor and subdivision" rather than "architect and prominent downtown site"—a design that is unlikely to wear well for fifty years and that certainly will not be the pride of the community.

J) Scale and Massing

1) Human scale. **Buildings shall above all possess a human scale, both in terms of their overall size and in their details and materials, in order to promote a sense of pedestrian friendliness.**

How, exactly, are four-story buildings with this kind of mass "human scale?"

How do they "promote a sense of pedestrian friendliness?" I'd like to see more renderings of the pedestrian areas in context, so one can get a sense of proportion.

How does a 13-foot tall retaining wall topped with 30-inch guardrail factor in?

K) Proportion

6) Variation in heights. Some variation in building height within a block is desirable to help break up the mass of the block and to create variety and interest; generally, however, **there shall not be more than a one- or 1-1/2 story difference in height between adjacent buildings in order to maintain continuity along the streetscape.** This limitation does not apply when the adjacent building is one story.

How is the site not going to look off-kilter with a fake half-story façade added to the Hannaford building, adjacent to a 4-story (or even 3-story, if the design changes) new building?

And how does that fake half-story factor into the calculation?

The "mice" (not addressed in the Architectural Design Standards):

Siding color: Could we please have something other than the pale beige that is now ubiquitous and that to some smacks of mediocrity and low-budget construction? Beige:

- Would visually exaggerate the mass, as opposed to a darker color, which could help blend in with whatever woods are left and visually minimize the color (take a look at Bagdad Wood on Madbury Road)
- Does not relate to traditional New England architecture
- Sets a terrible backdrop color for landscaping

Why not use a warm grey (perhaps with a cream or white details), such as Rich Espresso; Aged Pewter; Deep Ocean—examples from a Hardie Board chart viewable at <<https://i.pinning.com/originals/f6/bb/13/f6bb139607a4c8388774b8846702dcd4.jpg>>

Window trim: I agree with Beth Olshansky's preference for black window trim to "make an ordinary building look more handsome."

It was six years ago, in 2014, that Richard Kelley asked CDA to "Dazzle us!" -- a request reiterated since then by, among others, Councilors Kitty Marple and Andrew Corrow. I'm sure that architect Sharon Ames has been working within the programming constraints provided by Colonial Durham, but I am hopeful that the Board will encourage Ms. Ames and Colonial Durham to bring fresh ideas to a future meeting. **How might the design look with 80 fewer parking spaces?**

Sincerely yours,

Robin

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*** Transitional zoning ordinance examples from New Hampshire**

Concord Development Ordinance (undated, accessed July 18, 2020)
<<https://planning.concordnc.gov/PlanningWeb/CDO/Article%207.pdf>>

(7.6.2) (G) *Standards for Base Zoning Districts: Height transitions*

*In the R-C [Residential Compact] district, multi-family and other attached residential or mixed-use structures or portions of such structures shall be **limited to a height of 35 feet or two stories, whichever is less, if located within 100 feet of a lot used for a detached single-family or duplex dwelling.***

Manchester Zoning Ordinance (as amended through October 1, 2019)
<<https://www.manchesternh.gov/pcd/Regulations/ZoningOrdinance.pdf>>

4.01 Establishment and Purpose of Districts

A. Base districts.

4. Residential Two Family District (R-2). *The R-2 district forms a loose band around the densely developed inner city area, **representing a transitional district** between lower development densities of the single family districts and the maximum densities of the inner city. This district was established to maintain the integrity of existing moderate density neighborhoods that are nearly fully developed with a mix of single family and two family structures, but which are close to the Central Business District.*

Portsmouth Zoning Ordinance (as amended through December 16, 2019)
<<http://files.cityofportsmouth.com/files/planning/zoning/ZoningOrd-191216.pdf>>

Section 10.410 Establishment and Purposes of Districts

Mixed Use Office and Mixed Use Residential: *To provide areas where a limited range of business establishments, including live/work units, can be located near or adjacent to residential development, **providing a transition between residential neighborhoods and commercial districts.***