

September 20, 2017

Planning Board and City Council
City of Newburyport, Massachusetts
by email

Memo: Urban Design Critique of Waterfront West – Memo 2

Dear members of the Newburyport Planning Board and City Council:

This is my second memo regarding the design of this project. In the interest of brevity, it will attempt to not repeat the points of my first memo, dated May 31, 2017. However, it would be useful to review that memo, as the issues that it raises are still valid, and some still require attention.

Since that memo and my public presentation in Newburyport in June, I have met twice with the development team in their offices for design sessions. Through this time together, and more time spent by the designers on their own, the plan has been modified in a number of significant and positive ways, and now is more in keeping with the criteria expressed in my earlier memo and presentation.

I say this while understanding that the criteria expressed in my memo and the criteria that matter to the people of Newburyport and their leaders may not align fully. As a city planner, my goals for this development are, in no particular order, that it succeed, that it contribute positively to the success of its surrounding area and the city, and that it make Newburyport an even more attractive and desirable place. From what I have heard at meetings, the local goals include that the project not inordinately block views of its neighbors, that it not create inconvenience for people driving and parking, and that it end up looking and feeling appropriate to its neighborhood and to Newburyport. I bring up this distinction not to discount the value of local opinion, but, on the contrary, to point out that my expertise should be understood for what it is, representative of a national best-practices approach to placemaking, but inevitably not as attuned to local wants and needs as it would be were I a Newburyport citizen.

To that caveat, I should probably add a contrasting warning. Looking at the perfectly legal alternatives to the current proposal, under both conventional and 40B scenarios, it is clear that the developer's imperfect design represents a tremendous improvement over what is possible on the site, and perhaps likely if this scheme is rejected. Sadly, I have seen the perfect be the enemy of the good many times in my career, with the outcome of rejected imperfection being constructed abhorrence. Were this proposal to be shut down, the city would not just lose a decent development by a proven developer with a history in Newburyport and a significant stake in the outcome, but it would likely gain something built the way that most developers currently build: badly, with little concern to the quality and longevity of the materials and the character of the waterfront public spaces. For that reason, my professional advice to the City is that this proposal, with certain

improvements discussed herein, should only be rejected if we can have a well-founded confidence that other, more conventional projects on this site can be just as easily stopped in the future.

With that warning complete, this memo will have two parts. First, I want to address those aspects of the project that I feel still need to change for it to meet the criteria which I laid out previously. Second, I want to address the specific issues that have been raised by the City as impediments to the approval of this proposal. We will call these *Urban Design Criteria* and *Prominent Issues*.

Urban Design Criteria

Of the eight criteria that I discussed earlier, four still seem to need some attention: *Spatial Definition*, *Active Edges*, *Fronts and Backs*, and *Architectural Variety*.

Spatial Definition

In the plan presented on August 23, there seems to be one key location where public spaces lack proper edges, and that is along the parking lot at the rear of the hotel. This was a problem in the original scheme that was fixed during our summer working sessions but now seems to have reappeared in the most recent design. This parking lot is not a proper public space; it is an asphalt back-of-house area that should be hidden midblock, and not exposed to the two paths that pass it its right and left. There are many ways to solve this problem, and it needs to be solved again, so that the path to Merrimack street to the water's edge is a pleasant one.

The alternative would be to keep the parking lot exposed as it is, but design it as a public square surrounded by the friendly faces of buildings (and not garage doors). In that case, the hotel would function as its own block, with a front on both its south and north flanks. If such an outcome is the intention, the plan should be modified to show that. Absent such a significant change, the parking lot should be hidden.

Active Edges and Fronts & Backs

These two criteria are presented in tandem, because the latter is a tool towards providing the former. One of our strategies during our design sessions was to establish a clear ABABA rhythm in which streets alternate with alleys so that each building can have a front and a back. This approach requires that all the best parts of the buildings, like front doors, go on the streets, and all the worst parts, like the electrical meters and garage openings go to the rear. The rear alleys are then screened as much as possible from view and receive fewer landscape improvements than the front streets.

I am confused by the current scheme. It clearly establishes an ABABA rhythm, in which tree-lined street alternate with sparse alleys, but the buildings still seem to be designed with two fronts, and the alleys are not in any way screened from the waterfront plazas. Maybe this just needs clarification, but it appears that the concept of fronts and backs has

been applied only halfway, a hybrid that makes no sense.

It would seem that the developer needs to choose one of two paths and embrace it entirely. A front-and-back scheme would properly screen the alleys from view while also creating buildings with all their front doors on one flank only. Alternately, if it can be demonstrated that these buildings are capable of having two fully active fronts, without awkward utilities and other unappealing features, then the ABABA streets and alleys scheme should be rejected in favor of one in which every north-south right-of-way is a proper street with trees and landscaping.

One of the two approaches must be selected and the plan modified as it would dictate. A hybrid would provide the worst of both worlds.

Architectural Variety

This issue is less a clear problem than an ongoing concern. The most recent presentation does little to represent the developer and designer's voiced commitment that the individual buildings in this scheme appear to be the work of different hands, and not a singular "project" by a single firm. Ordinance language exists that can be applied toward this purpose.

Other Details

While there are more issues to be argued ahead, I believe this project would be best served by attending to what legal processes the City can use to secure the quality of the public realm and guarantee the sort of outcome suggested in (most of) the renderings. Much is shown that is not guaranteed, and a few things are shown that need to change.

The most important detail in the completion of the landscape may be to ensure that the entire ground plane between the north ends of the buildings and the water's edge be finished like plazas and not like parking lots. Since this area will welcome cars, it is essential to its walkable quality that the ground be surfaced in cobbles or bricks rather than painted asphalt, and detailed as a series of plazas that accept cars rather than a collection of parking zones. Most of the public plazas in Rome attract tourists while being half-full of vehicles, because they were designed as plazas, not parking lots, with more urban, walkable materials.

In the most recent presentation, some of these areas, especially to the west, seem to be plain old striped parking lots between the buildings and the water. I believe that this detail needs to change. Incidental to the upcoming discussion of heights, it is of course easier to demand durable and expensive materials from a developer who is building a larger and thus more valuable project.

Prominent Issues

In recent correspondence, the City raises five large and eight smaller issues. I will discuss each of these in turn. On the pages ahead, the Planning Board's comments are presented in bold, followed by my discussion.

Height. Improvements could be made if the buildings were massed differently. A central problem may be that every building follows the same rule, the progression from 3 to 5 stories by the water. The Board challenges this logic (so consistently applied), and some even suggest the opposite approach would create a more appealing skyline (and view from the river). Five-story buildings do exist in Newburyport, yet they are the exceptions and add pleasing diversity to the building fabric. Development on this site should reflect the more organic, less consistent pattern of growth found throughout the City. The Board unanimously insists on access to a 3D model. It would be incredible helpful in understanding the impact of building heights on the skyline and the Board feels increasingly handicapped without it.

Agreed that a 3D model should be part of the submission for a project of this scope.

As already noted, a diversity of heights is characteristic of Newburyport, which means that a neighborhood with less consistent heights would fit in better. However, there is a beauty to be found in consistent cornice lines, and sometimes it can be more appealing to have the height of buildings correspond to a consistent logic rather than to vary in a scattershot way. Places do change as they evolve, and this is not inevitably bad. That said, if the City prefers it, I do not see why the developer should not apply greater variety to the building heights. The key point to stress in this discussion is, again, that the amount of real estate that the developers are allowed to sell will have a direct impact on the quality of the public spaces that they can afford to build. From a strict city planning perspective, a development with more units will help create a better waterfront than one with fewer, however the heights may vary. Higher density is also known to correlate with walkability and reduced car use/ownership.

This conversation obviously has its limits. Nobody would suggest putting towers on the Newburyport waterfront, despite the density they could offer. I just want to make sure that the benefits of density are adequately considered in the decisionmaking process.

Massing. In part due to the repetitive nature of the five “finger” buildings, the accumulated result does not resemble anything in Newburyport—maybe Portland. There is no precedent for so many massive buildings in one place in the City and the aerial images bear this out (this appears so obvious that it seems disingenuous to suggest otherwise). There are buildings in town that are 100+’ long (additively) but few that are also consistently 40’ wide. Large, bulky buildings are the exception, and therefore contribute positively to building diversity. The experience of Waterfront West—which should feel like an extension of downtown and abutting neighborhoods—should have

similar variety and a degree of unpredictability.

I agree that more variety and less density would make this plan more appropriate to Newburyport, while again stressing that reductions in saleable square footage will reduce the budget available for the public spaces.

Building variety. The massing of each building is similar and height changes are prescriptive. Dynamic forms occur mostly above the eave line. Stylistically, buildings look generally indistinguishable. If height and massing varied more creatively (and with more standard Newburyport dimensions) maybe more building variety would naturally follow. Currently the buildings look like a single development, with a single designer, built at one time. They do not appear as an organic extension of downtown and the neighborhoods.

I raised this same point as well and agree entirely, except I should repeat that many of the most desirable and walkable places have a variety of architecture within a consistent urban fabric. The buildings of Paris are mostly remarkably similar in height and footprint, but they make a great place because (among other reasons) each was designed by someone different.

The Board anonymously wants a boardwalk in front of the wetlands area and Michael's to be pursued. The current scenario takes the path along the face of, and entry to Michael's (an awkward confluence of activity), and through a parking lot. A much improved solution has not been proven impossible.

I agree that this solution would seem preferable.

Finally, there needs to be a full accounting of the parking—enough for each residence and some spaces for commercial—on site.

A proper accounting is certainly needed. That said, you are probably aware that a leading conversation in city planning these days is about how parking needs are almost certain to decline dramatically in the years ahead, and that current investments in parking may end up to have been money wasted. Progressive cities continue to lower and eliminate parking minimums, and in some case replace them with maximums, in order to discourage the auto-dependent lifestyle.

It is logical to assume that having fewer parking spaces on site is likely to cause future residents to park in places beyond the development, making it harder for people who already live nearby to find parking. However, it is worth considering that, as Donald Shoup puts it, “parking is a fertility drug for automobiles.” The more parking provided, the more future residents will arrive with cars, and expect to drive them all over Newburyport. Experience in other cities suggests that offering units with less parking can result in them being purchased by people who do not own as many automobiles and who would rather bike, walk, or take transit than drive.

One way to keep existing residents from being threatened by future competition for their on-street parking is to create a permit parking program for which new residents north of Merrimack Street will be ineligible. This technique has proved effective in many cities.

Brown's courtyard is surrounded by garage doors and openings to garages, and is filled with parking. Spatially it contributes, but the reality may be dead space.

It is important that the plans show that the new buildings on this space treat it as a public place and surround it with friendly faces.

The "backs" and "fronts" of the building blocks may not be resolved yet. There appears to be dependence on street width and trees as the sole distinction between "alley" and "main access street".

Agreed to point one, as already noted. On point two, this is not my impression of the plan. What matters, also as noted, is that the design of the alley as alley or street corresponds to how the building faces it, and that rear alleys are screened from view to the extent possible.

More exploration of a pass-through at building 1.

Given the current layout, with walkable streets being located on both flanks of the hotel, I do not recommend the addition of a pass-through at midblock. Unlike the Boston Harbor Hotel, such a pass-through would open up a view to a parking lot and the center of a block. This does not make sense unless the center of the block becomes the "A" street rather than the flanking streets that play that role.

Need more information on building 6.

Agreed.

The courtyard behind the hotel lacks definition (what makes this space successful?).

It appears to be a parking lot, and should not be thought of as a public space but rather as a private mid-block area that should be screened from view rather than occupied by people walking.

There is a caveat, however. See "Spatial Definition" on page 2 for a fuller discussion of this area.

How the water will be accessed for boat launching and other recreational uses is unclear (how does a truck with boat trailer move through the courtyard to the boat lift?)

Agreed.

How cars and pedestrians circulate and means by which pedestrian access is prioritized (e.g. mention of McKays being a mostly pedestrian walkway is positive but I don't believe it as I see the plans).

For me, this will be an outcome primarily of the quality of the paving materials, as already discussed.

The project is ~40 parking places short.

See earlier discussion about parking.

This sums up my comments. Thank you for your patience in reading them, and also for asking for my honest assessment. I hope I did not ruffle too many feathers. My goal was to provide what I believe to be unadulterated best-practices thinking for the City to interpret with a stronger eye to its own character and desires. I hope it has been helpful.

Sincerely yours,

Jeff Speck, AICP, CNU-A, LEED-AP, Honorary ASLA