

Urban Design Assessment: Aura Blue Hill

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9-21-21

Based on plan submittal dated 8-21-21

The Urban Design Assessment is required component of the application process, providing a preliminary determination of whether elements of the proposed development meet the urban design intent of the Blue Hill District. This assessment will be based around several categories referred to in the Blue Hill Design Guidelines. Given the interconnectedness of many of these issues some comments may overlap with similar points made in other sections.

Building Placement and Orientation (how well buildings relate to the street and public realm)

1. The buildings mostly have a continuous built edge along the perimeter of the property lines with occasional breaks for courtyard open spaces, entrance drives, a through-site pedestrian passage and a breezeway. This edge enfronts and well defines street edges along Fordham, Legion Road Extension, Ephesus Church Road and "Proposed Road."
2. Crenellated Edges in Plan: Along certain frontages, especially along "Proposed Road" there are a series of notches (crenellations) in the building edge, providing relief from long stretches of flat walls. This is encouraged wherever possible along the ground floor edges.
3. Ground floor entrances from sidewalks: Consider providing entrances directly from the sidewalks into residential units located along street frontages where possible. The entrances should not be at grade level but allow for a vertical transition via a stoop, porch, or small set of steps as required by grading conditions. In particular consider this for units A4, A11 & A7 on the ground floor along Legion Road Extended. These are the only units on this street and could be unique. For example, these might be good candidates to consider as townhouse units, with multi-story interior spaces, open stairs and loft/mezzanine levels and possibly a rooftop patio. The townhouse character could be articulated in the façade, creating a unique architectural expression along the bend of the road.

Connectivity (internal and external, relationships to existing or planned networks and surrounding features, de-emphasize vehicular travel)

4. Very much appreciate the inclusion of the Overall Context Plan (sheet CS1001) and the indication of the locations of other sidewalks, greenways, and multi-use paths in the area and how the Aura building will relate to them.
5. Sidewalks or a greenway are provided along all street frontages of the buildings.
6. A mid-block N/S pedestrian connection is provided at the building separation which is critical in breaking down the scale of the blocks and allowing pedestrian mid-block continuity between Legion Road Extended, the road system of the Park Apartments, and onward to the Elliott Road Extension. A crosswalk should be provided across "Proposed Street" between the mid-block pedestrian passage and the sidewalk across the street at the Park Apartments.
7. A by-pass lane is proposed leading from Fordham Blvd. onto Legion Drive Extended. Where this crosses the greenway path along Fordham could prove problematic in terms of potential conflicts between pedestrians, bicyclists and vehicles. This issue should be addressed by any traffic and circulation analyses conducted for the project.

Outdoor Amenity Spaces (location, size, character)

8. The open spaces are in the form of courtyards or pedestrian passages. Two courtyards are adjacent to Fordham. It is suggested that each should have its own distinct character, and be open to the sidewalk to allow public access.
9. The front (street side) portions of the courtyards should be designed to be inviting, and not "walled off" or exclusionary in character.

10. On the Ground Level Site Rendering (sheet L001) the pass through space between the buildings appears to have an urban plaza character, which could make for an interesting and lively space, especially if the non-residential use spaces (red color on drawing) become retail spaces.
11. The pool courtyard is open to the street. It is expected that the pool will need to be enclosed with a fence or some other means for security purposes. Any such enclosure should allow visual access from the sidewalk, for example a fence with open pickets or a glass wall.
12. The Breezeway should be an inviting space, with a cross sectional dimension that is comfortable in its proportion (height to width) in avoidance of a long tunnel-like character. The space should also have an interesting ceiling design in terms of articulation and lighting. If the adjoining non-residential uses become retail, the breezeway can become an attractive and lively place for café seating and gathering areas in support of the retail. The side walls should have glazing or windows that allow views into the interior spaces. The breezeway should allow pedestrian connection to the sidewalk along Legion Road Extended. Perhaps the north side of the pool space could remain open with the fence or enclosure located along the green landscape edge that is shown on the site plan, for example.

Streetscape Activation (character and coordination/relationship to surrounding areas)

13. Consider providing shade trees along all street frontages. Or alternate a shade tree and an ornamental along the Fordham and Ephesus Church Road frontages.
14. Non-residential use spaces (red color on the site plan) should be retail and/or an active use to help activate the streetscape character. These spaces should have entrance doors onto the public sidewalks or spaces. Doors or entrances should especially be considered at building corners. The architectural character of the ground floor should be designed at the human scale, with quality materials, glazing (avoiding overly dark tinted glass), and pedestrian-scaled signage. Awnings, overhangs, or other architectural projections are encouraged at entrances and other highlighted areas.
15. In the pedestrian passage between the two buildings consider strategies to help activate the ground floor of the parking ramp as much as possible with lighting, built in seating, landscape, and enhanced architectural character. One example of how this might happen is the “retail porch” that will be a feature of the East Rosemary Street Parking ramp in Downtown Chapel Hill which is now under construction.
16. Suggest revising the sidewalk location along Legion Road Extension where it ends at the intersection at Ephesus Church Road. Instead of curving the sidewalk to follow the road, continue the sidewalk straight, next to the building edge along the non-residential use space. The sidewalk here could be widened to include a small gathering space or an outdoor eating area (the corner interior space could be an ideal spot for a restaurant or food/beverage oriented business). The triangle park space has been designed as a passive green space as part of the Millennium project. It was not known at the time what would be proposed on the Aura property. Consider working with the Millennium developer to tweak their design of the park space to work well with the proposed character and uses along the Aura frontage.
17. Consider treating the sidewalk along Legion Road Extension in a more urban manner. For example, colored or textured paving bands or patterns (perhaps utilizing some of the materials featured in the pedestrian pass-through space and pool area) could be added to create a kind of plaza character to the entire frontage. This would also help break down the scale of the 10' wide sidewalk. At a minimum, this strategy could be considered for the portion of the sidewalk where there are no street trees, between the pool space and the mid-block pedestrian connection.

Parking (location, screening, and architectural treatment)

18. The parking ramp is accessed by two driveways. This allows traffic to be distributed in multiple directions toward Fordham, Ephesus Church Road, or the new Elliott Road Extension via roadways in the Park Apartment development.
19. The parking structure is exposed its full height on two sides which will require careful architectural design to screen vehicles as much as possible and to incorporate the garage into the overall architectural character of the multifamily buildings. The façade along the pedestrian passage is of particular importance especially at the ground level (see comment 15 above). A portion of the

top of the garage is exposed on the Legion Road Extended façade, approximately 1.5 stories, but is set back from the street from approximately 10-40', and covered by a 3 story building mass with apartments.

20. The proposed parallel street parking along Legion Road Extension is a positive feature in terms of traffic calming, and buffering sidewalk pedestrians from moving vehicles. These on-street spaces would also provide convenient parking for retail that may be located on the ground floor of the Aura buildings.

Massing (providing a sense of human scale)

21. The most significant aspect of the massing is that it has been broken into two separate buildings, connected by pedestrian open air bridges. This helps reduce the scale of the project and allows a mid-block pedestrian connection.
22. The inclusion of the various courtyards and passages also helps break down the massing and reduces long uninterrupted building facades.
23. There is a variation of heights which helps create some variety in mass.
24. Along the Fordham Blvd. frontage, the buildings step up from 3 stories (with an implied 4th story "frame" over the roof terraces) along the street with a 6 story building mass recessed back from the street edge. This defines a "base" that helps relate the building to the pedestrian edge along Fordham. When considered in the context of the neighboring Millennium building, it also sets up a clear transition of heights from low to high toward the corner of Fordham and Ephesus Church Road, ranging from the 3 levels at Aura, to the 5-7 stories on the Millennium.
25. A similar massing strategy featuring a 3 story base with an implied 4th story is also utilized along Ephesus Church Road, helping humanize the scale of this frontage.
26. Massing along Legion Road Extended: The Millennium building is mostly 5 stories, with some at 4, along this frontage. The Aura building is proposing heights from 3 to 6 stories. At 6 stories, it exceeds the height of the Millennium building but this is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the 6 story masses are along certain limited portions of the street elevation-see sheet A100.3, (Level 4,5 & 6 Composite Plan) for reference. Other portions are at 3 levels with an implied 4th level by use of a rooftop façade frame over roof terraces. In examining the street level perspective A1 on Sheet AROO2 the façade design positively features recesses, some setbacks, and material changes to create height reference lines to the Millennium building. In order to verify a comfortable and properly scaled cross sectional design of Legion Road Extended, street cross section drawings which include the profiles of both the Aura and Millennium buildings should be provided in future submittals. These sections should be taken at several locations to illustrate the various massing conditions. Approximately 1.5 stories of the top of the 5 level parking structure are exposed to view but it is possible this would not be seen from the street. In future submittals, ground level perspective views from Legion Road Extended should be provided to verify if this is correct.
27. Massing Along "Proposed Road": The Park Apartments are 5 stories in height. The Aura building rises to 6 stories along this frontage. In examining the street level perspective B1 on Sheet AROO2 the façade design positively features recesses, some setbacks, and material changes to create height reference lines to the Park Apartments. A cross section drawing across "Proposed Road" should be provided in future submittals, including the building profiles of both Aura and the Park Apartments.

Articulation and Materials (architectural expression and character)

As it is relatively early in the design and review process, the focus of this review has been mostly on massing and siting issues. Following below are some preliminary comments regarding the elevational character and articulation strategy, with an understanding that these issues will be a more central focus in upcoming submittals and reviews.

28. Generally, there is a good sense of layering and depth to the facades, most clearly indicated in the two street level perspectives on Sheet AROO2. One area for improvement that shows on the Fordham/Legion Road Extended perspective (drawing A1) are the ends of the two 6 story setback massings that have the "roof wrap" coming over from the top and extending downward.

The ratio of solid to void seems off here, and the façade looks a bit blank compared to the end mass in the middle of this elevation or on the wrap shown on the other perspective along Ephesus Church Road. Providing more widow openings on these elevations would be helpful. Generally, any windows in these wraps should be set back from the wall plane to help contribute to the sense of mass of the wrap element.

29. The building massing along both Fordham and Ephesus Church Road features a 3 story street fronting component that has a “frame” element at the top of the façade implying a 4 story reference height at the roof terrace level. This is an appropriate strategy, as a 4 story reading seems more appropriate along these frontages, given the context, than a 3 story reading. Suggest further articulating these frames utilizing pergolas, lighting, cornice treatments, or other architectural details to create interesting silhouettes against the sky and to make the frames more of a crowning feature.
30. The exposed surfaces of the parking garage will pose a challenge. The cars will need to be screened in some manner and the architectural expression should be integral with the other portions of the residential buildings. The green wall system indicated on the elevation drawings is an intriguing idea. Elevation drawings of the other surfaces of the parking structure were not included in this submittal.
31. An important elevation that is easy to overlook is the south elevation of Building B, which will be viewable as one approaches northward along Fordham Blvd. This elevation, along with the east elevation around the back, can pose a challenge as the interior space behind these facades is the corridor. Consider projecting bays to help avoid an overly “flat” character to these facades. These bays could also enhance the interior character of the corridors, helping to break up any overly long unbroken views down long corridors.
32. Providing an interesting ground floor elevation character around the garage entrance on Legion Road Extended will be a challenge due to the wide driveway opening and the service/electrical ground floor uses that are adjacent and don’t have windows. Suggest articulating the garage opening more as a frame element in avoidance of a “hole in the wall” reading. Consider specifying a more decorative louver on the electrical room, or painting it as a mural. Murals or artwork might be an option for other expanses of blank wall surfaces in this area as well.
33. Consider providing more “depth” to the glass wall along the ground floor on the Ephesus Church Road façade (perspective B1 on sheet AR002). This could be accomplished by highlighting entrances into retail spaces, especially as corner accentuations, with accompanying awnings or canopy projections and architecturally incorporated signage. The Breezeway entrance, where a solid material is currently indicated on the elevation, should be made more inviting, to help draw people into the Breezeway.
34. Opportunities for art: It is anticipated that some form of public art will be included in the Aura Blue Hill project. The Breezeway might be a good location for art pieces, either within the space itself or on the walls. Another potential location for art would be in the mid-block pedestrian connection space.
35. Material Palette: The proposed material types and colors appear to be complementary to those featured on both the Park Apartments and the Millennium. The “roman brick” size and proportion of Brick 1 provides a good human scale, as this brick type is proposed along many ground floor pedestrian areas. One note of caution is in regard to the fiber cement claddings 2 & 3. These claddings should have adequate joint lines, battens, or other ways to help break down the scale of any larger panelized surfaces, especially when they are utilized along ground floor frontages.
36. Lastly, the fact that the building massing has been broken down into two separate buildings offers the opportunity to provide distinguishing nuances in the material strategy. For example, rather than using the same palette of materials on both buildings, can each building have its own distinct character in terms of materials yet be related in a unified articulation and compositional strategy? This subtle distinction could help in further humanizing the scale of the project.