



CITY OF RICHMOND

DEPARTMENT OF
PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT REVIEW
COMMISSION OF ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

To: Members of the City of Richmond Planning Commission
Members of the Urban Design Committee
Members of the Public Art Commission

6 April 2016

Re: Maggie Walker Memorial Plaza, Broad Street Old and Historic District, Urban Design Committee
Conceptual Review

At its 5 April 2016 Quarterly Meeting, the Commission of Architectural Review ("CAR") considered the proposed Maggie Walker Memorial Plaza, to be located within the Broad Street Old and Historic District. The Commission of Architectural Review (CAR) respectfully offers the following recommendations in recognition of the duties delegated by Council to CAR, which include the charge to "Assist and advise the city council, the mayor, the chief administrative officer, the planning commission, the board of zoning appeals, property owners and individuals in matters involving the historic resources relating to appropriate land use, zoning, and other issues" (Code 1993 § 32-930.0; Ord. No. 2004-360-330, § 1, 12-13-2004). While this letter provides Council with our comments under the above provision, we believe that this project should have been presented to CAR for a Certificate of Appropriateness, or at the very least a location, character, and extent review.

Recognizing that this is a conceptual, rather than final, review, the following comments are offered with the understanding that the design remains under development to a certain degree.

Location:

The location selected for the Maggie Walker Memorial Plaza is appropriate. It is located within the Jackson Ward neighborhood where Ms. Walker lived, built her businesses, and achieved the renown for which she is justifiably being recognized. The site allows the statue to be widely visible, both to visitors to the site and passersby on busy Broad Street. We do have some concerns about the site. One of the stated goals of the project is to create a contemplative space for the memorial, which is a laudable goal. However, the site will be a busy, noisy one, especially with the creation of a bus rapid transit station adjacent on the south side of Broad Street. Additionally, it is small without access to bus parking, making it difficult to be visited by school children, one of the stated goals.

Character:

In assessing the character of the proposed Maggie Walker Memorial Plaza, the CAR's formally-adopted Guidelines offer some specific parameters. Two sections of CAR's "Standards for Site Improvements" offer the following direction:

- 1) "Streetscape design includes all design elements located within the public right-of-way that are not privately owned. Those elements may include, but are not limited to: street lights, traffic and pedestrian signals, sidewalks and curbs, landscaping, signs and parking lots. When designing

streetscape elements for locations within a City Old and Historic District, particular attention should be paid to pedestrian scale and character of the District.”

- 2) “Streetscape elements are the most public aspects of any historic district, and as such they belong to the community as a whole. Therefore, it is particularly important that these elements support and reinforce, rather than detract from, the overall historic character of the district. In general, the more public the site feature, and the more closely located to the front of the site, the more strongly compatible historic design will be encouraged.”

These two sections specifically encourage development of a pedestrian-oriented streetscape and, because of the siting of the statue, a compatible historic design. Initial publically-circulated designs placed the statue on a tall drum, an arrangement more appropriate for a statue to be viewed from a passing motor vehicle rather than someone on foot. The later revision, which lowers the drum, is much improved. Similarly, reducing the number of plantings has been an improvement. Successful urban plazas are a combination of simple hardscapes, not overly complicated with plantings; we note that the revised planting plan remains overly-complicated, and thereby reduces the monumentality of site. Continued simplification of plaza design, including removal of planters and further restriction of plantings, would continue to improve the plan. The currently-proposed elaborate paving pattern has no connection to other designs in the neighborhood and appears to have been designed not from the perspective of a visiting pedestrian. Materials should be permanent, (granite, brick, cobbles etc.) and not the tall grasses and planter boxes proposed. This is an urban plaza, not a suburban park. Successful urban plazas are defined by and united to the buildings that surround them. This plaza appears to have been designed in isolation, and only later was consideration given to the surrounding buildings. The site design should be linked to the surrounding buildings by similar materials (granite, brick, and cast iron) and site elements (lighting and benches). This is especially important in this instance, as the buildings that define the site were built during Ms. Walker’s lifetime, making the connection especially significant.

Further recommendations drawn from the CAR Guidelines for site improvements specifically state that existing granite curbing should be retained whenever possible, including most significantly the curbing that defines Brook Road. Furthermore, sidewalk design should allow for the installation of appropriate urban landscaping, and sidewalks and curbs should be built of common building materials found throughout the District. Generally, simple paving designs are more compatible with the diverse building styles and better unify the various elements found on streets throughout Old and Historic Districts. The use multiple paving materials within an area is discouraged, as is the case in the paving pattern proposed. In particular, Brook Road is not clearly acknowledged in the plan, either by width, depth of road bed or materials. Retention of the granite curbing and the width and depth of the roadbed are essential. Replacing the paving with an historically-appropriate paving material such as cobblestones would allow the historic roadbed to remain visible, while keeping open the possibility of future reversibility. The strategy employed on Adams Street is a useful model, as the historic road bed and curbing remain in place allowing the road to be clearly recognized as what it is and, if desired in the future, it would be easy to reverse the closure and open the road to public access.

The subject of the live oak tree, approximately thirty years old, has become a controversial one. Sec. 30-930.1 defines major plantings as “Major plantings means any substantial existing or proposed plant material, including but not limited to trees or shrubs with trunks greater than three inches in diameter or eight feet in height and hedgerows exceeding ten feet in length.” To address Sec. 30-930.1 the CAR Guidelines state that “Mature trees contribute to the character of Old and Historic Districts, provide visual interest, reduce the negative impacts of parking areas and ease the effects of temperature and wind conditions. Every effort should be made to preserve and maintain them.” The tree in and of itself is not directly associated with any historic events, however it is one of the oldest street trees on Broad Street.

Extent:

In closing the block of Brook Road adjacent to the site, this project proposed to close the terminus of one of oldest roads in the City (Brook Road Turnpike Co., chartered by the General Assembly in February 1812) which played a significant role in the War of 1812. In evaluating the proposed project under the rubric of extent, the question moves beyond whether or not the larger site works well, asking whether the monument requires the larger site to work well. Furthermore, in the proposed design there is no acknowledgement of the correct width of Brook Road or retention of the granite curbing in its current location. While we do not believe that Brook Road must be closed in order for the monument to be successful, we recommend that the Planning Commission consider other alternatives, such as the treatment of Adams Street adjacent to the Jefferson Hotel in which the existing roadbed and curbs are retained intact. While closed to traffic, the road remains in occasional use and could, in the future, be easily reopened.

In recent years many streets, especially north-south streets, have been closed in downtown Richmond, including Virginia Street, Adams Street, Linden Street, 17th Street (approved, though not yet closed), 11th and 12th Streets, Governor's Street, and Capitol Street. These changes to urban fabric were each evaluated and judged beneficial *individually*, but their impact on the City's grid and traffic flow is cumulative. We have been closing streets with little consideration of the overall impact upon the urban fabric of Richmond, slowing eroding an intact grid.

Too often, we begin with interesting, unique places in Richmond, places where the natural and the cultural interact – such as this site, where the diagonal of Brook Road creates a unique triangular site where an attractive, if not historic, tree flourishes. We then remove the unique and interesting elements – in this case Brook Road and the tree – and replace them with elements of our own design -- the statue and the plaza -- and pronounce the places unique. Why can't we build on what we have, instead of replacing it with something invented?

In our opinion, there are three significant site qualities that define the site selected for the proposed Maggie Walker Memorial Plaza which should be appropriately acknowledged. These three site qualities are 1) the presence of Brook Road, dating to before 1812 and around which the grid of the city grew; 2) the unique triangular site, which present challenges but, more importantly, opens up a series of provocative site possibilities based upon its unusual geometry; and 3) the presence of the live oak tree, which creates an interesting conjunction of human-made and natural site conditions. Unfortunately, none of these three significant site issues are acknowledged in the design; in fact, all three issues are treated as impediments and are not developed in the design as presented. Brook Road is awkwardly demarcated in the pavement, mostly filled with a raised planting bed, and blocked by a granite seat wall at the south end of the site. The unique triangular site, instead of becoming a springboard for the design of the space, is ignored and an awkward spiraling ovoid paving pattern is incompletely imposed over the site. Finally, the live oak tree, while certainly a significant design challenge, is simply removed from the site. We believe that these three site qualities provide inspiration for the proposed Maggie Walker Memorial Plaza. The design should be of its place and work within, or at the very least with, these design constraints, not remove them to create something that does not reflect or reinforce the unique site on which it is built.

Conclusion

We believe that a more successful path towards sustained cultural development in the City of Richmond begins by reinforcing the existing historic street network and preserving historic buildings, while developing vacant lots in ways that emphasize the historic character of the neighborhood. Neighborhood density, compatible design, access, and parking are all critical issues to be addressed. Downtown Richmond has always been an active urban environment. New development should respond to our city's unique history, respect its grid and scale, and protect the historic character of the surrounding historic district.

The Commission of Architectural Review strongly supports the establishment of a memorial to Maggie Walker, but recommends that development plans include adequate measures to identify and protect the project site's significant historic and natural resources. We believe that such a mindful approach is in the best interest of Richmond residents.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'B', 'C', and 'G' in a stylized, cursive font, followed by a horizontal line.

Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D.
Chair, Commission of Architectural review