



First United Church - Design Rationale – September 21, 2020

Preamble

First United Church Community Ministry Society is an inner-city ministry of the United Church of Canada located on the unceded, traditional and ancestral lands of the Səlilwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh), Xʷməθkʷəy̍əm (Musqueam), & Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) peoples. First United is committed at its heart to the struggle for social justice, offering programs of advocacy, housing and healing in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). First United strives to be a respectful resource to the DTES and to those who are most in need of a welcoming place to be, to find support, and to feel safe. They have been operating in the DTES for 135 years, and plan to redevelop their site and to reopen their doors to the neighbourhood as the same First United working towards a neighbourhood where every person's worth is celebrated and all people thrive, with the community they serve continuing to find sanctuary and connection.

First United has undertaken extensive community consultation over the last several years to arrive at the proposed services they plan to offer and the type of building that they and the community needs. The community feedback has affirmed the value of First United's role in the community and provided them with the confidence to move forward with their redevelopment plans. This consultation is ongoing. The site is located at 320 East Hastings Street in Vancouver, BC. A church has been on this corner of East Hastings and Gore since 1892. The existing building on the site was built in 1965. First United has evolved from a worshipping congregation to operating community ministry programs and social services offering a range of structured and unstructured services for the benefit to the DTES community.

The proposed project consists of an 11-story building with one level of underground parking and service spaces. The first four floors of the building will be comprised of the First United's program space including a drop-in space, a large dining room, a commercial kitchen, multipurpose spaces, a day sleeping area, a Sanctuary, and administrative spaces. The upper seven floors include 105 affordable housing units ranging from studios to one-bedroom units plus ancillary support services (laundry and amenity). The residential component will be operated by Lu'ma Native Housing Society.

Site

The site is located at the corner of East Hastings and Gore. It is bounded by Hasting Street to the north, a two-story mixed-use building to the east, a lane and mixed-use building to the south and Gore Street on the west.

The site is 1362 square metres (14,660 square feet). It slopes down from the east to the west with the highest elevation being in the lane at the southeast corner. The site is roughly square but also is affected by the angle of Gore Avenue on the west side.

Planning

The First United component has a complex programme with specific requirements for adjacencies and uses. In order to provide maximum visibility to the community, First United wants their entrance at the corner of Gore and East Hastings. Active uses (dining room, entry hall, community help desk, first aid room and day use drop-in) have been placed at street level. Above the second level the building is essentially an "L" shape which creates a large deck on the second floor while maximizing the frontage available for the residential units.

The planning also required the resolution of two grids - the orthogonal city grid and the angle of Gore Street. This created a unique opportunity to respond to both in plan and section. The entrance and vertical circulation for the residential component has been located at the south west corner of the site on Gore so that it maximizes the available contiguous area for the First United components.

Form and Character

The design of the First United redevelopment offered a complex and engaging architectural problem informed not only by its programme but by its context in the DEOD and unceded indigenous territory.

The existing church building with its unique roof expressions is an iconic building in the DTES. First United wants to ensure that its uniqueness is not lost in the new building. The task as we see it is to respond both to the uniqueness of First United and the existing streetscape and character of the DTES. We are proposing a modern urban building that avoids overt historicism but along Hastings responds to its location with the use of appropriate materials and proportion. Along Gore, a more contemporary panel clad expression has been developed that incorporates not only a more eclectic form for First United, references to indigenous culture, but also a more aggressive climate response with the introduction of solar shading devices.

As architects we have strived for an honest, simple, expression that is aware of its contemporary circumstance and its heritage context. To address the goals of developing a welcoming building, transparency is maximized along the street allowing both views into the project's public spaces and views out to the activity on the street. The feature stair connecting the four floors of First United program spaces is also expressed and highly visible along Hastings Street. A large four-storey feature glass wall is placed at the entrance at the corner of Hastings and Gore. This window area connects to the two-storey spaces of the Entry Hall and to the Sanctuary. We intend to work with an artist to develop a design that reflects many of the themes of First United; hope, reconciliation, cultural connection, history in the community.

Although the building is for everyone, we cannot ignore that it is located on the unceded, traditional and ancestral Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh territories and that a significant percentage of the community served by First United are indigenous. It is important to First United that the design incorporate indigenous cultural elements in a culturally respectful and appropriate way, and after consultation with Skwxwu7mesh and Henqeminem speakers as the linguistic consultants. We want any response to be authentic and architecturally coherent. To help guide us, Luugigyoo Dr Patrick Stewart, Nisga'a architect, and Chief Ian Campbell of the Squamish Nation are consultants to provide additional cultural input into the design. Some measures proposed are:

- The sloping wall of the First United component on Gore has been developed as "copper" wall laid up in horizontal pattern to allude to the traditional plank houses of the West Coast. Copper is an important material to the north west indigenous culture.
- We have added cultural references around the entrance to the indigenous housing. The current design shows concrete and steel pictographs / petroglyphs panels wrapping the base of the building.
- Two Welcome Figures have been placed at the main entrance to the building
- Vertical sunscreens have been added to our west elevation. These would be custom fabricated panels with indigenous images laser cut into them.
- Colours of the building have been chosen in consultation with our indigenous consultants;

Sustainability

The United Church of Canada are climate leaders within the landscape of Canadian churches and denominations. Beyond its obvious contribution to social sustainability, the project is designed to high environmental standards. Beginning with highly insulated building envelope, we are proposing high efficiency mechanical and electrical systems to meet the City of Vancouver requirements and the 2019 BC Housing Design Guidelines.

Heritage

The existing church, although an iconic structure in the DTES, is not on the Heritage Registry. However, the history of First United is critical to its future. The existing Vancouver Heritage Foundation memorial plaque on the building will be integrated into the new structure and we are currently investigating the respectful re-use of the existing unique stone tile cladding in the interior of the building.

The proposal reflects and incorporates the four goals of the new "Vancouver Heritage Program – March 2020"

Requested Relaxations from ODP

Frontage

In the DEOD the maximum frontage is 30.5 metres. The site is 38.14 metres along Hastings. We request that this frontage requirement be relaxed as per 4.5.3 all of the units are social housing.

Height

The maximum height on a corner site in Sub-Area 1 is 30.5 metres at the discretion of the Development Permit Board. Due to the sloping site and the desire to articulate the parapets at the corner of Gore and Hastings, we request a height variance beyond that.

Retail Continuity

Article 4.4. requires retail and other similar uses at the ground floor. We request a relaxation of this requirement as per 4.4A. We have placed all active uses (dining, entry hall and drop in centre along the street frontages.

Parking

We are proposing a single underground structure for the building. The proposed parking is for twelve (12) vehicles which meets the needs of First United and Lu'ma Housing as no residents will have cars due to the homeless and homeless-at-risk population.

Loading

We are proposing to provide one (1) class B loading bay with reduced height of 3.5 metres.

Bicycle Parking

We are proposing a reduced number of bicycle parking for the residents as not all residents will be able to afford them and those that can will store them in their units.