

URBAN DESIGN PANEL MINUTE EXCERPT

DATE: Wednesday, September 21, 2016

TIME: 3:00 pm

PLACE: Town Hall Meeting Room, Vancouver City Hall

PRESENT: MEMBERS OF THE URBAN DESIGN PANEL:
Russell Acton
Neal Lamontagne
Meghan Cree-Smith
Stefan Aepli
James Cheng
Veronica Gillies
Karen Spoelstra

MEMBERS OF GHAPC:
Glenda Bartosh
Alan Davies
Michael Wiebe
Carol Sill
Glade Schoenfeld
Shelley Bruce

REGRETS: Ken Larsson
Muneesh Sharma
Roger Hughes
Kim Smith
Meredith Anderson
David Jerke

RECORDING SECRETARY: Camilla Lade

ITEMS REVIEWED AT THIS MEETING

5. Blood Alley Square

4. Address: Blood Alley Square
 DE: N/A
 Description: Blood Alley Square is an important, historic public square in the heart of Gastown, nationally designated historic district. The Downtown Eastside Plan identifies the redesign for Blood Alley Square and the adjacent Trounce Alley as a priority. The City has hired Enns Gauthier Landscape Architects, to lead a team of consultants to redesign Blood Alley Square / Trounce Alley public area in attempt to improve its functionality while preserving identified heritage values. The Statement of Significance was developed in 2010 and the Commission was involved in its processing. This document has now been used to assist in developing new design concepts and preserving key character-defining elements. The new design and cost estimate are expected to be completed by March 2017. Following that, staff will take a report to City Council for the approval of the redesign and funding request for construction of the project. The purpose of the meeting is to present the concept design for Blood Alley Square and Trounce Alley and to receive initial feedback.
- Zoning: HA-2
 Application Status: Workshop
 Review: First
 Architect: Enns Gauthier Landscape Architects (Bryce Gauthier)
 Owner: City of Vancouver
 Delegation: N/A
 Staff: Zlatan Jankovic, Tom Warren & Helen Ma

EVALUATION: NON-VOTING WORKSHOP

- **Introduction:** Tom Warren, Project Manager, Engineering and Helen Ma, Policy Planner, presented an update on work completed for Blood Alley Square, two concept designs, and gathered feedback from the panel and guests. The project included a detailed design and cost estimate of Blood Alley Square and Trounce Alley, a heritage conservation strategy, a stewardship strategy and a solid waste study. Enns Gauthier Landscape Architects was hired by the City to lead a team of consultants for the work.

The project started in May 2016 with kick-off public consultation events. The project is now in concept design and refinement stage. Detailed design is to be completed in January 2017, and staff will bring a report to Council for the approval of the detailed design and construction budget. Construction of the project is dependent on funding availability and City Council approval, and is estimated to be in March 2018.

The Council approved Downtown Eastside Plan directed Blood Alley Square and Trounce Alley to be rehabilitated in conjunction with an adjacent development as a “quick start” project in the Plan. The project also supports goals in the Council-approved Transportation 2040 and Healthy City Strategy.

The project site is on City-owned land and is located in Gastown, a designated historic area in Vancouver and a National Historic Site. Blood Alley Square provides much needed open space in Gastown. In recent years, new retail and restaurants have opened with access directly from Trounce Alley, which begin to bring more visitors and patrons to the square. The square is well used by the community who has hosted local and city-wide events.

Initial feedback indicates that the community feels strongly that the square remain a space where everyone is welcomed.

The square is in a state of disrepair: 16 dumpsters are located in the alley and the square. Brick and cobblestone pavements have been damaged and repaired with asphalt. Site furnishings, including bollards and globe lights have been damaged. Parking and loading activities are unregulated and chaotic.

The redesign is an opportunity to improve the place and reinforce its status as the “heart of Gastown”. The design intends to: increase safety and introduce programming, include opportunities for the low-income community, reinforce and enhance the heritage (1970s) character.

The Blood Alley Square statement of significance (SOS) was completed in 2010 and included historical context and character defining elements. The area is part of the traditional Coast Salish territory. While Trounce Alley was part of the 1870 town-site survey and has existed as a commercial alley since then, Blood Alley Square was created in the 1970s as part of the Gastown beautification project. Construction of the square was completed in 1973. The granite and brick paving, bollards, globe lights, granite planters and trees were installed in the 1973 improvements. The SOS included a list of character defining elements (CDEs). The concept design includes heritage conservation strategy to address the character defining elements.

Two rounds of public consultation were completed. 187 people completed a questionnaire about the 2 concept designs. Additional meetings were held with stakeholder groups and advisory committees. Initial feedback confirmed that the public valued the retention of trees and the character of the square. The top amenity chosen by respondents was more seating. There was a desire to include restaurant patios to activate the square. Some respondents also felt it is important that the square remains a public place where people do not need to spend money to enjoy the space. This feedback was incorporated into the concept design options.

The concept designs were informed by site analysis of heritage character, circulation, tree retention and integration with the adjacent development at 33 W Cordova. Concept design 1 features a large, open square. This design emphasizes the heritage qualities and retains the original outline of the square. Concept design 2 features a multi-leveled square. This design emphasizes the long-term health of trees with expanded planters. The square is divided into two zones for passive seating and larger events. Both designs include 3 loading bays, one class B and two class A's to act as drop-off/pick-up areas for people with disabilities, reuse of brick and cobblestone paving materials, replacement of the 3 locust currently trees in poor health with 1 healthy mature tree, and raising a portion of Trounce Alley to create a “speed table” to emphasize it as a pedestrian oriented space.

An arborist completed a report on the health of the 9 trees on site. The report indicated that the 3 locust trees are in poor health and are unlikely to survive re-development. The strategy is to replace them with 1 large mature tree that is shade tolerant. 1 small pine tree is proposed to be removed due to its poor health and sub-optimal location within the square. The 5 tulip trees are in good condition and every effort will be made to retain and improve their health.

The next steps include selection of preferred concept design, advancing to detailed design, completing a waste management strategy and completing a stewardship strategy. The project will be brought back to the panel and committee for further comments in the future.

- **Applicant's Introductory Comments:** The applicant team declined to give a presentation on the application.
- **Panel's Consensus on Key Aspects Needing Improvement:**
 - N/A
- **Related Commentary:** The panel and visiting GHAPC members asked questions and gave feedback to city staff. Most panel members mentioned that the sequence should have instead been for the workshop to follow the design proposal of the site building. The interface of the development and the relationship with the development is required to understand the proposal. Another panel member mentioned there were 'constraints' that made it difficult make a better solution for the site design.

Public access to 33 West Cordova is still unknown going forward, but the intention of Planning is to retain pedestrian access. Panel members recommended leveling off the courtyard grades and re-configuring the planters. A panel member mentioned the mismatch of the seating area and the garbage that appear too independent of one another.

John Atkins was mentioned as the heritage consultant on the project. He is planning the re-habilitation and re-design. One GHAPC member inquired about the technical knowledge of the consultancy, and stated that there needs to be two Statements of Significance (SOS) that should be included, the one for the local area as well as the SOS for Gastown as a National Historic Site. One UDP member requested further documentation included in presentation materials that clarifies the national heritage elements at the site as well as the design elements.

A GHAPC member inquired of city staff how the two SOS have informed the character and urban response to the two proposals. City staff responded that not only the SOS but public engagement informed the design response. For example, the retention of the materials is planned in both concept renderings, and the SOS informed how to re-use the materials and upgrade them. Through public engagement, the staff found that the public wanted the materials to be re-used.

A GHAPC member expressed that the Standards and Guidelines used for the SoS were outdated, from the year 2004, and requested the newer version be used to inform the SOS.

A UDP member clarified that the alley materials were all installed in 1973. Paul Cheng Development Planner, clarified that the grade will be raised in the new designs, in the new designs and expressed that the design for 33 W Cordova would 'make up the difference' between its ground floor and the new grade set at the property line. Furthermore, some of the current grades are incorporated in the design.

A GHAPC member was concerned that the visual renderings had context in terms of the interface of the buildings. Engineering staff noted that 33 W Cordova is 'a blank slate' currently. The east and west facades are currently blank on the renderings. A GHAPC member wanted to clarify how much of the square was public and if there would be gates implemented to block public access. The City consultant responded that the space would remain public and following policy guidelines. However, there will be loading spaces required by the private development.

The planter sizes are planned to be expanded to allow for tree retention.

A GHAPC member expressed concern about the lack of expressed pedestrian interface on 33 W Cordova and the square, and city staff said that it would be integrated further going forward.

A UDP member questioned whether the character defining elements from the 1970s had been identified as successful or not, because some might not be worth maintaining. City staff mentioned that the elements are used in a better way than before. Another UDP member questioned the value of 'imposing' 1970s character on the site.

A UDP member suggested a public art strategy be integrated into the proposal. City staff mentioned both designs would have a metal band along both sides of the alley to place historic names or places of historical significance. On the east and west facades, there might be projections lit onto the blank facades for special events. The industrial artifact in the middle of the square was noted as possible public art. Signage, wayfinding, will be implemented at the site.

A GHAPC member mentioned the timing of the proposal should be clarified. City staff mentioned the design could be moving forward despite the lack of a finalized design for 33 W Cordova. City Staff Paul Cheng expressed the hope that both design processes would inform one another as they are both developed in an iterative process. Furthermore, any use of public space for private use would require a permit.

A UDP member inquired as to why the design was being implemented at this point in time. City planner Helen Ma said that it was a 'Quickstep' from the DTES Plan put into place in 2014 and meeting the main objectives from the 'Quickstep'. A UDP member also wanted to clarify how the planning staff would continue to keep the space 'open' and 'welcoming' to all members of the public. In response, Planning completed a social impact assessment to manage change in the area, and the objectives informed the design concepts. The quality of the public realm material was cited as an important piece of the design because of how much the site is used as a 'living room' for the community.

Development Planner Paul Cheng responded by presenting three main areas of concern for urban design:

1. The retention of as many trees as possible.
2. The desire to raise the grade of Blood Alley Square so that it does not 'dip down' as it does now
3. To implement 2 class as an initial loading requirement, which has since evolved into 1 class B and 2 class B spaces

The UDP panel Chair encouraged GHAPC members to give their opinion on what needed to be protected in terms of heritage. A GHAPC member replied by stating that the SOS document needs to be re-considered because it is not describing specific heritage value of design elements in the proposal in a more current version. A GHAPC member mentioned the 'arbitrary' diagonals in the plaza that need to be researched. The SOS from 2010 was also mentioned as outdated. Planning staff Helen Ma clarified that there might be an opportunity to re-interpret other layers of history at the site. A GHAPC member iterated that the community should identify the heritage values at the site.

A GHAPC member expressed desire for the commercial laneway to be retained. The area should not become sanitized, and should retain the 'grit' of Gastown. Trees should be retained as much as possible, and the space should be retained as public to all types of community members. The garbage 'problem' should also be fixed.

One UDP member suggested there were 4 major components to consider:

1. The practical engineering side
2. The social side through policy direction
3. Urban design
4. Historical value

Another UDP member suggested there should be a 'light' touch to the space with a 'clear' urban design response. The uniqueness of the historic space should be considered, and even though it is only 1970s, it is still part of the 'genealogy' of the space, but the era does not need to drive the historical context of the design.

One UDP member supported two SOS going forward, in order to conceive a new design. Character elements of Gastown should be more considered than 1970s design. Also, the grade should be re-considered, and the 'gentle' grading in Concept 2 is preferred. Finally, because the city is a living fabric that develops over time, there should be a new design that compliments the historic design, which is also reflected in Concept 2.

A GHAPC member stressed the importance of the main pedestrian interface on Carrall Street and to integrate the pedestrians and cyclists into Carrall Street. The critical historic spaces on 33 W Cordova should be planned so the square elements can re-inforce the design. Night use lighting should be historical, authentic and welcoming as well as 'gritty'.

A UDP member stressed that without knowing the design of the building proposal the square design would not fit, and could be a 'dangerous' proposition for specific safety elements. The mews is disconnected. Concept 2 is a better and more contemporary interpretation.

A GHAPC member applauded the workshop and thanked staff for their efforts. Furthermore, the original design intent should inform the re-design of the square.

A UDP panel member believes there is too much in the design of the square. Also, that Blood Alley is not the 'heart' of Gastown. The space should have a few things done well, not 'a little bit of everything'.

A GHAPC member stated that the lackluster design elements of the 1970s do not need to be retained. Both UDP and GHAPC members mentioned that not all the trees need to be retained.

A UDP member stated that if the grade does not change, there is no point in planning the square. A few members pointed out that the waste management should be combined with the design and planning stages of the square and developed further early on.

There should not be too many loading zones because it is a pedestrian area. The connectivity with pedestrian movement is very important.

- **Applicant's Response:** The applicant thanked the staff for the workshop. With gentrification concern in the area, the question is the purpose of re-design. If it is to retain the functionality of the square, then it is a matter of fixing problems and intervention should be limited. If it is to boldly remake the square, then it is an opportunity for something creative and whimsical to be implemented. Contemporary design can exist with heritage retention. The mandate of the design should not be too muddled and the hope is for a bolder, more creative proposal and a public art strategy going forward.

Adjournment

There being no further business the meeting adjourned at 8:30 p.m.