Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee Meeting

Meeting Summary

Meeting Date: Thursday, June 26, 2014

Members in Attendance: Barbara Albrecht, Rachel Belsky, Lynne Brown, Sewin Chan, Franklin Diaz, Anne Hearn, Michael Hengerer, Larry Maslon (chair), Allen Mincer, Beth Morningstar, Michael Patullo, Rosemary Scanlon, Eeno Simoncelli, Heather Skolnick

Members not in attendance: Jeff Goodwin, Angela Kamer, Julia O’Connor

1. Comments from the Chair

Chair Larry Maslon called the meeting to order and provided an overview of his 18-month participation on the USPWG and explained that this involvement was what led him to endorse this Coles building project and agree to become this Committee’s Chair. Larry reiterated that, throughout both his involvement in the USPWG and now on the SSAC, he has been committed to finding ways to take advantage of the planned changes on the Superblocks, improve the quality of life for residents, and better the University’s relationship with its neighbors.

2. Architect RFP

The latest draft of the architect RFP was discussed. Larry Maslon, along with three other Committee members who previously served on the University Space Priorities Working Group (USPWG), expressed concern that the RFP diverged from the USPWG report in several significant ways, particularly with the proposed Coles building’s square footage, which exceeded the USPWG recommendation. They stressed that they had not arrived at those numbers arbitrarily, but had considered them very carefully during their 18 months of service on the USPWG. They also questioned the inclusion of other spaces, including a supermarket and a cafeteria, which were not mentioned in the USPWG report, and the use of community space.

Lynne Brown, Senior Vice President for University Relations and Public Affairs, responded by explaining that the parameters for square footage cannot be fixed, as architects will require some flexibility in order to translate the USPWG-defined space program into the building envelope. She also indicated that, as architects engage with the building’s users, the plans may have to change based on their evolving needs and the inherent constraints. After hearing the comments of the members, Brown agreed
that the RFP should be amended to reflect the USPWG square footages and to more explicitly emphasize its programmatic recommendations.

Regarding the RFP’s inclusion of 7,500 square feet for community space, Brown explained that this is a mandatory requirement set forth by the ULURP. In addition, she posited that the inclusion of student housing means that a cafeteria or other common space for them should be strongly considered. She further explained that the community at large would likely not support any plan that did not include a grocery store to replace the Morton Williams store, and encouraged the Committee to strongly consider this. She indicated that the inclusion of a supermarket on the Coles site would be a topic of future discussion for the Committee.

It was agreed that a revised RFP would be circulated to the Committee and the timeline for release be extended by one week to reflect a new deadline of July 7 to allow for further comment and consideration. Brown agreed to bring to the next meeting material related to the community space requirement and proposed supermarket to give the Committee added history and context.

3. Ranking of Architectural Firms

Revisiting the discussion from the June 19 meeting, the Committee reviewed the ranking of architectural firms that provided responses to the earlier RFQ. Lynne Brown presented pertinent information related to specific firms as requested at the last meeting and the Committee offered its final recommendations regarding the selection of short-listed firms.

4. RFQ for Independent Consultant

After reviewing the draft language for the RFQ that will be sent to prospective independent consultant firms, the Committee emphasized the need for language that would require potential firms to disclose any previous or current relationship to NYU projects, and that the Committee’s desire for independence would be explicitly disclosed in the document. Kenny Lee noted that, pending that change, the RFQ would be released on July 7.

5. Presentation: Zoning and Regulatory Overview (Will Haas)

Will Haas, Sr. Director for Campus Planning, gave a presentation regarding zoning and other building requirements that came about as a result of the ULURP process. He noted that the majority of the Silver Towers block (both the buildings and the open spaces) had previous to the ULURP been designated a landmark site and is therefore subject to strict requirements and oversight by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. This designation requires approval for any changes (including to the landscaped areas).
Haas provided a detailed account of the City-approved plans for the site, as well as the zoning and regulatory constraints for the proposed Coles building. Given the defined envelope for the new building and the areas surrounding it, he emphasized, the architect will need work within the approved building envelope for the site. To help the Committee understand all of the requirements that have already been proscribed for this project, Haas presented a list of all of the mandatory elements that must be included in the final architectural plan. These requirements are: the maximum building envelope for the site; maximum building heights; setbacks and varying heights for the upper floors of the building; community space requirements; and transparency (usually glass) on 50-75% of the first floor. He also displayed a massing diagram for the proposed Coles building.

6. Open Space Oversight Organization

Alicia Hurley, Vice President for Government and Community Engagement, explained that the Open Space Oversight Organization (OSOO)—a non-profit organization mandated by the City as part of the Restrictive Declaration—is responsible for monitoring NYU’s compliance with open space maintenance agreements and for general improvement of relevant public open spaces on the superblocks. She noted that the OSOO has 5-members, with one member each from Community Board 2, the Manhattan Borough President’s Office, the local City Council Member’s office, the Department of Parks and Recreation, and NYU. NYU’s representative, Hurley noted, is Arthur Tannenbaum, Associate Curator in the Division of Libraries.

Tannenbaum, who was also present, explained that the OSOO has met several times so far and is considering conceptual designs for open space improvements along LaGuardia Place and seating additions along Bleecker Street (north of Silver Towers). Hurley displayed the draft designs for the Committee and encouraged them to submit feedback to Tannenbaum, as NYU’s representative, by August 1.

7. Next Committee Meeting

Larry Maslon announced that the next Committee meeting will be held on July 15, 2014.

8. Tour of the Superblocks

The Committee members, led by Alicia Hurley and Will Haas, went on a walking tour of the Superblocks site. The Committee discussed the proposed improvements under the purview of the OSOO, as well as raised a number of ongoing stewardship issues with Beth Morningstar and Franklin Diaz, the Committee’s representatives from the Division of Operations and the Office of Faculty Housing and Residential Services, respectively.