Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee
Meeting Summary

Meeting Date: Tuesday December 8, 2015

Meeting Location: Tisch Dean's Conference Room (1260), 725 Broadway, 12th Floor
Members in attendance: Barbara Albrecht, Heather Banoub, Rachel Belsky, Dawn Brekke, Lynne Brown, Jeff Goodwin, Anne Hearn, Michael Hengerer, Neal Herman, Angela Kamer, Larry Maslon, Allen Mincer, Arvind Rajagopal, Rosemary Scanlon, Erica Silverman, Eero Simoncelli,

Members Not in Attendance: Ezra Sacks

Invited Guest: Rene Burillo, Kenny Lee, and representatives from the 181 Mercer Architecture Team

1. Comments from the Chair:

Chair Larry Maslon, welcomed Committee members complimented their extraordinary work in putting together the Quality of Life report.

2. “Embracing a better Quality of Life” Report Discussion and Vote

Maslon asked if there were any questions or comments on the report, which was circulated to Committee members to review. It was suggested that a recommendation be added to the open space section of the report whereby a hedge or low fence be added to the perimeter of the Oak Grove on the diagonal walkway. Lynne Brown, Senior Vice President of University Relations and Public Affairs, said adding a hedge or fence may require approval from the Landmarks Preservation Commission, but that the recommendation could be added to the report with that understanding. It was also noted that the fence around the Mercer Playground (“LMNOP”) was a privately funded gift, which should be taken under consideration if the changes to the fence recommended in the report are carried out.

A motion was made to accept the report as written, with the addition of the discussed edits. The motion was carried. Maslon said the report would be submitted to University leadership.

Brown thanked everyone for their attendance, particularly the students during finals. Brown announced that Alison Leary, Executive Vice President for Operations, had submitted her resignation from NYU; having met several of her personal goals while at the University including the building of the cogeneration plant and the successful launch of planning and design for 181 Mercer. Leary will be at the University through March 2016 and has agreed to assemble her team to engage in discussions about the operational implementation of the Committee’s report.
Maslon asked if the SSAC will be involved in the appointment of Leary’s replacement and offered their support in that capacity. Brown relayed that Alison’s role had a much larger portfolio than the redevelopment project, but would relay the interest of the committee.

3. Architect Presentation

Brown reintroduced the architectural team and provided some background on the work which the architects have been engaged since their last presentation to the SSAC in July. The architects have been meeting with groups of end users, particularly in the performing arts (Tisch and Steinhardt), athletics, faculty housing and student affairs, to understand their programmatic needs within the new building. Brown reported the building’s end users are pleased with the architects’ progress, but noted the architects are still in the schematic design phase where they place the different programs into an organizational framework for the building. Brown reminded the Committee that Turner Construction had been selected to manage the project and noted that a public announcement about the building is expected in the spring. Brown said the architects have continued using the Committee’s project goals and principles through the schematic design phase and that design excellence has remained a priority. Before inviting the architects to begin their presentation, Brown announced that the project has been renamed “181 Mercer,” which is the actual address of the building.

The architects began their presentation with a comparative overview of how the space in the building was allocated by the University Spaces Priorities Working Group moving to the architects’ early allocation from their July presentation and finally to the current allocation. It was noted that the presentation would not use square footage measurements to describe space allocation, but volume since many of the programs in the new building (i.e. performing arts theaters and athletic courts) require spaces that rise higher than one-story. Highlighted space allocation and design changes since July include the removal of the lowest below-grade level, which was deemed prohibitive in terms of cost, additional required time for demolition and complications due to the proximity of the subway. Other changes include the number of seats in the proscenium theater, the height of one of the building’s towers, and the removal of a traditional sit-down dining hall, in favor of larger grab-and-go cafes. The architects reiterated that they are still working with end users to finalize details, including the number of acting studios and number of classrooms.

The architects then provided a visual presentation on the volumetric and adjacency design of the building. Key points were areas of egress; north entrances geared for students, south entrance geared for faculty housing, west side of the building activated by the Greene Street Walkway, and the east side designed with loading docks and building services in mind. The below-grade floors are designed for athletics and include four regulation size basketball courts, which can also accommodate sports like tennis and squash. The courts can also be set up for convocation or be used in an emergency. The new pool will have more lanes than the pool at Coles (making a total of 8) and the design includes an indoor track.
The ground floor includes space that is open to the public, designated space for use by both NYU and the community, and a café, as well as an entrance to the Proscenium Theater and an entrance to faculty housing to the south. The heart of building is the second floor with a “Commons” area with a larger café, active study space, classrooms and a theater. The architects designed the perimeter of the building for passage around and between each floor via stairs (to reduce reliance on elevators); which also brings light into the center of the building.

Classrooms were designed to be flexible spaces that can be modified as teaching pedagogies develop in the future. It was noted that the number and size of classrooms allocated within the building was filling the need identified by the provosts’ office in a recent campus-wide classroom study. The teaching acting studios were also noted as meeting an important need, since Tisch currently leases space to accommodate the program.

The flexibility of classrooms will also serve to accommodate student club and activity space in the evenings. The student Committee members expressed concern about the dual-use of classrooms for student space in the evenings, since clubs are often scheduled-out of classrooms. It was recommended that classroom maintenance be better managed by cleaning these spaces early in the morning to increase the number of hours a student group can book the spaces. The student Committee members also asked about specified under/graduate study spaces. The architects pointed out designed spaces and explained that they would be designing smaller independent study spaces throughout the buildings’ shared spaces. Brown noted the Hayden renovation created a commuter commons, which relieves the building of filling that need and agreed that the architects should work to design spaces within the building where students can naturally sit and study. The Stern study booths were mentioned as extremely popular and the architects said they would visit to see the design.

The architects explained that they were able to fit the student and faculty housing into 3 of the 4 towers approved in the University’s design parameters from the City and thus, were able to reduce the size of the fourth tower dramatically; bringing more light to the remaining towers and increasing the distance between faculty and student housing. The design allows the roof of the short tower to be used as a music rehearsal space with an outdoor landscaped area. There was some discussion about the prominence of that space and how a recital/rehearsal room might not take full advantage of the special location. The architects are also looking to find design features that can make the space safe. It was noted that the ULURP specified the height of the towers to not exceed that of Silver Towers and Washington Square Village.

After the presentation Committee members posed questions about the lack of light on the Greene Street Walkway, parking for the new faculty housing units, and if materials were chosen for the façade of the building. The architects responded that the Greene Street Walkway would get western sun and they would be designing to keep that space from becoming dark and cold. The University’s approved designed did not include an underground parking garage as the City is looking to reduce car traffic. Brown said the University may consider nearby, off-site parking
garages. The architects reiterated that the schematic design phase of the building does not yet include design features and façade materials and finishes have not been selected. With no further questions, Maslon thanked the architects for their presentation.

4. Spring Meeting Availability

Planning grid schedules were distributed to coordinate a day and time for the spring meeting schedule.