

# CAPITOL

NEIGHBORHOODS, INC.  
MADISON, WISCONSIN

January 22, 2009

Mr. Brad Murphy  
City of Madison  
Planning Department  
215 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
Madison, WI 53703

Re: Acacia  
222 Langdon St. & 229 W. Lakelawn

CNI Development Review Oversight Committee Review

Dear Mr. Murphy,

Capitol Neighborhood's Development Review Oversight Committee has had the opportunity to consider the proposal brought forth by the Alexander Company for the subject property. This committee has reviewed the several iterations of this proposal and provided input to both the UDC and Plan Commission. We offer here our consideration of the most recent submission dated January 14, 2009.

The proposal is located within Downtown Design Zone 4. The Zoning Ordinance states that the Design Criteria are to be used to determine if specific criteria are met, including;

- Are the character and intensity compatible with the physical nature of the site and would it produce an attractive environment of sustained aesthetic desirability
- Are there adequate provisions for improvement and continuing preservation of attractive open space

We believe it is critical for the Commissioners to assess this proposal in light of the Design Criteria to meet the standards for their review and to establish a rigorous standard of review as the baseline for consideration of future proposals within the Downtown Design Zones.

The Design Criteria were established to articulate community design principles. The consensus of our review is that there are a number of Design Criteria where this proposal does not rise to the level meeting the requirements as set forth in the Zoning Ordinance. Our assessment of the proposal is presented following the format of the Design Criteria.

Massing:

The scale of buildings should be compatible with other buildings in the vicinity. Transitions and architectural components can be used in designs to keep a larger building in scale with its surroundings. New buildings should not dominate or detract from the surrounding area.

The proportions of the building present a large and massive façade with limited transitions or other architectural elements to break up the mass of the structure. While the overall height of the building may be similar to some of the surrounding structures the overall presentation is out of scale with the adjacent buildings. The building fronts two quite narrow streets ( W. Lakelawn Pl. and Lakelawn Pl.) which accentuates the imposing nature of this design.

The north elevation along Lakelawn Pl. is a flat and minimally detailed façade that does not interact with the surrounding buildings. A series of similar designs along Lakelawn Pl. would create an imposing monolith detracting from the various styles and scales of existing buildings.

It is also important to consider that just as other buildings which do not meet the criteria are being used as a justification for this building, this building will be used as a justification for further lack of adherence to the criteria.

Orientation:

Buildings should engage the street and respect the orientation of surrounding buildings, pedestrian paths and sidewalks.

The building abuts two streets but the façades do not 'engage the street ... or respect the orientation of existing buildings or pedestrian paths'. Lakelawn Pl. is the front yard for all of the buildings located along this street. This building treats Lakelawn Pl. as a rear yard starting with the setback and continuing by paving over virtually all of this yard for bicycle and moped parking and a driveway.

An active pedestrian pathway extends from Howard Pl. thru the arch of the Villa Maria building directly to the northwest corner of this site. The expression of the building from this vantage point will be a massive flat façade with limited articulation or pedestrian engagement. The building will be overpowering and does not reflect the more active character of its neighbors.

Articulation:

Articulation should add architectural interest to help break up the mass of the building and long monotonous facades. Even with the modifications that have been made to the

proposal the articulation is very limited contributing to the concerns with massing and presentation of the building towards its neighbors.

The north elevation is a full 5 stories tall with vertical band of windows set back only 8" and notches for the decks at the fifth floor. This elevation faces Lakelawn place and is effectively a front façade in relation to its neighbors.

The only articulation along 108' long east façade are two vertical shifts in the building of 9". The building's presentation to the east is an overpowering monolithic mass which will be out of scale with any structure that might be built on this site other than a similarly massive structure. The result will be a dark narrow corridor that will not contribute to the character or safety of the neighborhood.

#### Entry Treatment:

Entries should be oriented to the street, contribute to the definition of the building and promote a strong pedestrian feel along the street. The primary entrance to the building is tucked into the SW corner of the structure behind the Acacia building. This entry does not prominently address the main street frontage along W. Lakelawn Pl. The applicant has stated that this location is important since it addresses Langdon St. even though the building does not front on Langdon St. and only a glimpse of the entry might be visible when passing along Langdon St.

The north elevation along Lakelawn Pl. might traditionally be considered the front façade as it is for other buildings along this street and will be for future structures on the adjacent vacant lots. Here the entry is diminutive and at least partially concealed behind the large paved surface with bicycle and moped parking. This entry does not contribute to a pedestrian friendly street face.

#### Terminal Views and Highly Visible Corners:

Particular attention should be paid to views from these locations and the structures should be treated as focal points with a higher degree of architectural embellishment. The north elevation of this building is located on a three way intersection and is approached from the NW along the pedestrian pathway from Howard Pl. through the arch at the Villa Maria.

The north elevation is a particularly blank presentation devoid of significant architectural embellishment and fronted by a bicycle and moped parking lot. The current iteration of the proposal has incorporated a vertical band of windows at the stairwell. While windows can add architectural interest to a façade it is also important to consider what this will present to the passerby. Both day and night the stairs and the landings directly against the windows will be the visible presentation to the street. This is an interior space that is often forgotten and neglected. There are any number of examples from the 1970's & 80's which illustrate that this feature does not enhance the appearance of the neighborhood. Likewise the full glass overhead door to the parking area will provide a fulltime view of this blank concrete interior.

Semi-Public Spaces:

These important transition areas should incorporate a variety of textures in ground treatment with elements such as raised planters, street furniture, lighting and landscaping.

On the three main faces of the building the semi-public spaces are largely uniformly paved over. Most of this area is dedicated to bicycle, moped and trash storage. There are very limited enhancements to these areas to provide a pedestrian friendly environment. Properly designed these areas could significantly contribute useable open space which is sorely lacking in this proposal

Usable Open Space:

"Project designs should provide attractive, safe and creatively designed yards, courtyards plazas, sitting areas or other similar spaces for building residents."

For this new building the open space is limited to the small paved areas at the building entrances that is not taken up by bicycle or moped parking. These areas fall short of providing the usable open space described by the design criteria. Three of the apartment units have outdoor decks which will provide those tenants with some open space. The small 'decks' at 3 bedroom units at the center of the west elevation are too shallow to provide usable space and are accessed from a bedroom.

Evaluation of this proposal in terms of the Design Criteria is complicated by the fact that the applicant has chosen to put two buildings on a single site. This effectively put what has been treated as the rear of the building abutting Lakelawn Pl. rather than in a more typical rear yard setting.

Another factor driving the design is the number of units proposed for the building. The original density exceeded the recommendation for this district. During the various iterations of this proposal two units were added which further constrained the design and limited the options for providing space for bicycle and moped parking as well as providing usable open space.

There is no doubt that the basic design of the building has improved thru the changes made during the review process. However, the question still remains is this the right building for this site and does it sufficiently meet the Design Criteria to warrant approval.

The fact that the applicant has returned numerous times to the commissions with revisions is not in and of itself a rationale for approving an 'improved design'. In fact the design zone ordinance has a requirement to try to avoid this very situation. The applicant is required to bring a Concept Presentation for an informational presentation to UDC prior to submitting a formal proposal. In this situation the formal application was submitted to the City October 15, 2008 followed by an informational presentation of that full proposal to UDC on November 19, 2008.

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This proposal is located in a very unique and distinct section of the city. This enclave of university housing is defined by the short and narrow streets, pedestrian oriented spaces and interesting mix of architectural styles. New development in this area should enhance these attributes and its sense of being on campus.

We urge the commissioners to carefully consider the proposal in relation to the Design Zone Criteria to determine if it meets the ordinance requirement that it be "... consistent with the spirit and intent of this ordinance and has the potential for producing significant community benefits in terms of environmental and aesthetic design."

Thank you for your consideration,

Peter Ostlind  
Chair Development Review Oversight Committee  
Capitol Neighborhoods