



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

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Community Development

DESIGN REVIEW REPORT TO THE PLANNING BOARD

Date of Report: December 10, 2013

Project: SP# 286 Address: 75 New Street

Proponent: Abodez & Acorn

The proponent describes this project as a second phase of the residential project that they initiated next door on New Street; the first phase did not require a special permit, and was thus not subject to review by the Board. While that project seems rather isolated at present, this new neighbor will help make a stronger residential presence on the street, and will bring more round-the-clock residents who will watch over Danehy Park across the street.

As is the case for a number of similar recently proposals in western Cambridge, it is difficult to create the feeling of a neighborhood when the site is long and narrow, paralleling a rail line or a highway, and having parking under the building with a high water table to address. However, at the site planning and urban design level, the project has made a number of positive moves. The parking is better screened than was possible on other projects with higher water tables. It is good that the roofline has some variation in height, and the use of roof decks with trellises to enliven the top of the complex is a worthwhile strategy. Breaking the project into two volumes is a good idea, with the lobby at the knuckle that connects the two. (Perhaps more could be done to make the lobby and stairs more inviting and spatially interesting features of the interior.) Creating a landscaped front setback that focuses on the entry is also a reasonable way to mitigate the length of the building.

At the architectural level, one is faced with the same set of issues that all of these rather low, very long projects present. How to prevent a monotonous, bland, or homogenous feeling? How to accentuate the positive, and create the best project possible, given the problematic building type? Color is one of the key variables. The architect, who has a record of bringing color into his projects, has tried to deal with this issue by indicating a color scheme that alternates a greenish tone with a white tone to reinforce the sense that one big building has been broken down into a series of volumes. Balconies are also useful to enliven the façade and encourage “eyes on the street.”

Another key variable is the choice of materials. Here, the architect’s strategy, as on some of his other projects in the area, is to rely upon fiber cement clapboards, which do easily allow for a range of colors. But one wonders if this would be a bit monotonous on this approximately 340-foot long building. More significant changes of materials and texture could help keep the project from seeming too monolithic, and perhaps read more like two buildings. One strategy could be a smaller scale fiber cement panel. A systematic approach to placement of any exhaust vents or other mechanical features that will show on the façade is also important.

