

North | South Portal Design Letter
April 20, 2010

Guillermo Romano, Executive Director
Mary Johnston, Chair
Seattle Design Commission
600 4th Avenue - Boards & Commissions Room L2-80
Seattle, WA 98104

Subject: Portal area Urban Design and Operations Buildings
Dear Mr. Romano & Ms. Johnston:

Allied Arts has a history of arts and urban design advocacy that spans over fifty years. Our accomplishments helped preserve Pioneer Square, save the Pike Place Market and allocate public money to civic arts projects. This advocacy has been present on the Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement Project since the Nisqually Earthquake in 2001. Through vocal leadership and grassroots mobility, Allied Arts was integral to shifting the civic dialogue from “how should we replace this freeway?” to “how will we repair and improve the urban fabric when we remove the freeway from the waterfront?” thereby fostering a more livable and walkable downtown, and reconnecting our center city to our natural place as a port city.

As we move into the design phase of this project, it is imperative to remember this mantra of repairing and improving the urban fabric and setting priorities for pedestrian comfort and safety while maintaining functional roads and access points to buildings and facilities. In a lively urban environment, the two should not be mutually exclusive.

With that in mind, we offer a number of comments, kudos and concerns in reference to the North and South portal Urban Design Strategy and Operations Building design thus far.

South Portal Urban Design: Design Concept

SUPPORT: Allied Arts supports the subdued portal design concept, utilizing the infrastructure of the “little h” overpass as a gateway device allowing the city skyline be the main architectural attraction. The gateway overpass structure should receive an architectural treatment so that it is recognized as such, and not just another concrete overpass. Large highway structures present challenges on many scales and levels. The massiveness and dominance of overhead structures creates unpleasant and unusable spaces underneath and beside the structures. The pedestrian environment is undesirable and becomes a very low quality space. The graphics presented to us show a graceful overpass spanning over two hefty, yet crafted column supports. This treatment in concept is appealing because it expresses the civil infrastructure with an honest expression yet subtly, almost second handedly creates a welcoming gateway. It is hopeful that this space is programmed to avoid the risk of becoming a left over space as a result of these types of structures. We also support the idea that the portal is a transition point between two scales of speed. The freeway and city street system meet here and overlap. Street trees are introduced at the ramps which help signal this transition into the city, as a key to slow down. We wonder if the same treatment is appropriate for the on-ramps (leaving the city) as the off-ramps (entering the city) as the two experiences are quite different.

COMMENT: We feel that the triangle of land positioned just north of the portal entry and between the city streets leading to/from the on/off ramps is not going to be a place for people and unless a compelling argument can be made for its use, it should be designed in a way to be looked upon, but probably not inhabited. This will require a durable landscape plan that is attractive to people, but not attracting to mischief.

Two Design Options for the South Portal location:

In our opinion, the South Portal option showing both Dearborn and Charles Streets is preferred. This option provides a consistent and concise portal edge at Charles Street and a welcoming experience entering the City while easing the transition between freeway and city street for a full block before entering the more pedestrian areas along the waterfront. We realize that the additional cost of this option may be a factor in the decision; however, we feel that if this option greatly improves the mobility and function of the area, the money should be made available. However, we do not feel that vital funds for urban design improvements in other areas should be redistributed in order to make this transportation improvement.

Railroad Avenue:

Allied Arts feels strongly that Railroad Avenue is a vital pedestrian link between the waterfront and the stadium district. The design of the South Tunnel Portal Operations Building needs to address this street in an active and interesting way, which is contradictory to the function of this building.

SUPPORT: We support that the design of Railroad Avenue allows minimal traffic / parking, only enough to accommodate existing and proposed uses. We also are encouraged that Railroad Avenue will be considered a “woonerf” or pedestrian only street that allows only limited local traffic.

COMMENT: At this moment, we feel the use of this plaza is undefined and therefore the success of the proposed urban design strategy is likewise ambiguous. We recognize the limited scope of the current design effort and applaud the teams involved for looking at various concepts and material / planting patterns for the space. However, the space must accommodate a purpose (or multiple purposes) and use(s), that will help define the patterns of movement or stasis within. We feel the future detailed design effort needs to begin with a study of how various uses may affect the patterns of this space, which uses may not be appropriate and discover what will make Railroad Avenue a unique urban gem.

We also feel that the South Operations buildings’ parking garage for utility vehicles negatively affects this space. The design team proposes to showcase the vehicles in a fire station like series of garage doors. While this feature has a charm reminiscent of small town America, and even some of the better fire stations in Seattle’s urban core, it misses the vitality of these institutions where the doors sit open, and firemen mill around inside tending to vehicles, coil hoses, wave at passing kids, etc. These doors will presumably remain shut and we doubt contribute to the activity of the space. We urge the design team to find an alternate, detached location for this parking facility, and use the land for activating uses which will support Railroad Avenue, perhaps even a small retail establishment. This use must however reflect and support the intended character and use of the space.

**North Portal Urban Design:
Design Concept**

SUPPORT: Allied Arts supports the patience and effort of both the client and design team to try to make this portal something special. The metaphor of river stream and upland conditions could be very successful to mask the presence of the freeway. We applaud that this portal is unique in its design as are the conditions to which it responds.

Two Design Options for 6th Avenue:

COMMENT: Allied Arts feels neither the Straight Sixth Avenue, nor the curved Sixth Avenue solutions are strong urban design improvements. However, with the added left turn movements the straight 6th Avenue offers and the spacing and signaling of the intersection, we perceive a better pedestrian environment on both sides of the new Mercer St west of the SR-99 overpass. We feel strongly that pedestrians be allowed on either side of Mercer street, not relegated all to the north side.

New Aurora Avenue:

Allied Arts would like further study of the new Aurora Avenue surface street. This street will be the transition zone from the freeway to downtown Seattle, as well as a new link between two neighborhoods that SR-99 previously bisected. Therefore it becomes an incredibly important street in the entry sequence to the city as well as transitional sequence from neighborhood to neighborhood.

Operations Buildings:

SUPPORT: Allied Arts supports the design team's direction towards an "honest" expression of the building functions for these two new structures. As the design team has stressed, the location of the structures makes them landmarks for vehicles entering the city but it is important that they remain pedestrian friendly within the urban fabric.

COMMENT: Both buildings are located in areas of transition. The South building borders the SODO industrial neighborhood and Pioneer Square Historic neighborhood, while the north is situated in a light industrial neighborhood that is rapidly becoming a residential and commercial hub. We feel that the use of a "common" language between these two buildings is appropriate, but both should also reflect the uniqueness of their site and context. This may mean introducing a unique façade treatment using a common palette of materials, or introducing a unique material which relates to context.

There is concern about how best to marry the raw industrial program with a new pedestrian oriented street system. Both of these buildings are nearly a full half block development, with significant frontage onto pedestrian oriented streets. At this time, we feel both building concepts have been developed to respond to the auto-oriented axis of the portal areas, and we applaud the effort to showcase the fans in such dramatic fashion. Due to the limited scope of the design effort we realize the team can only further the design to a "big picture" concept that will inform a future RFQ for design development. Future design work must study how to make this building seem tangibly comfortable and human scaled to the pedestrian passerby. We encourage that the design team keep both pedestrian and vehicular perceptions of this building in mind as the design progresses.

Sincerely,

Brian Steinburg, Chair
Waterfront Task Force

Jeff Pelletier, Chair
The Public Square Chapter

Laine Ross, Chair
Statewide Board