



TOWN OF ACTON  
DESIGN REVIEW BOARD  
Review Memorandum: Douglas & Gates Elementary School  
Room 9, Town Hall  
March 4, 2020

DRB Members in attendance: Holly Ben-Joseph (Chair), Peter Darlow (Assistant Chair), David Honn; Dean Charter, BoS liaison.

Proponents in attendance: Emily Grandstaff-Rice Architect, Arrowstreet; Jade Cummings Landscape Architect, Terralink.

Citizens in attendance: Mary Brolin, Chair AB school building committee; Chuck Adam OPM and Sovatuva Sar – OPM, Sanska USA; Peter Berry, BoS liaison to AB school building committee; Terra Friedrichs

Documents Reviewed:

Power Point presentation – Douglas & Gates Elementary Schools, made for the Design Review Board presentation, Dated March 4, 2020

Schematic Design Drawings, last revised date 08/09/2019.

Page titles:

Existing Conditions G0.01-02

Site Plan Overall L1.01

Site Plan Gates L1.02

Site Plan Douglas L1.03

Site Vehicular Layout C3.01-03

Septic Design Plan C5.00

Overall Plan Level 1,2,3 A1.01-03

Overall Plan Roof A1.04

Overall Exterior Elevations A3.01 These sheets are dated 04/30/20 and are labeled Design Development

Partial Exterior Elevations A4.0-04 These sheets are dated 04/30/20 and are labeled Design Development

This DRB review meeting was arranged to familiarize the Design Review Board with the progress and design for the Gates and Douglas School twin school project. The architect and landscape architect

presented the project and building committee members provided additional background information on how the design decisions were made and the AB School's priorities. Two representatives from Sanska (project managers) additionally provided information. The schematic design phase is complete and the next design submittals to Massachusetts State Building Authority will be at the 50% design development (DD) and 90% DD phase. The budget for the school has been approved at special town meeting.

The new school building will be housing three separate (administratively) schools in one facility – Douglas, Gates and the Town of Acton's Early Childhood Program, which is currently housed at the old Merriam school. The building is 174,000SF, three-stories tall and shaped in an L formation. The building is designed to be triple net-zero. The new site plan separates busses and passenger cars, with the busses entering from off of Arlington Street, and the parking lot accessed from Spruce street. The Douglas campus has additional parking and a new JV baseball field. The boardwalk between the two schools will be upgraded.

The main entry for the students (from bus drop-off) into the L shaped building is at the connection point of the L. All of the public amenities are located in the central core – the media center, the main steps and on the first floor a learning commons. These spaces face out toward the wetlands.

Level 1 has the administrative offices for the two schools and on the right side of the L the cafeteria, gym and wellness center. The left side of the L houses the preschool which has a separate entrance and play yard.

Level 2 houses Gates school, and Level 3 houses Douglas school. This is a different arrangement than that of the Twin school which has Merriam School on one side of the L and McCarthy Towne on the other.

The exterior of the building has a variety of finishes, from aluminum, corrugated metal, concrete, glazed brick and brick. These are designed to give each school a separate identity and to help identify the entry points. The overall design imagery is intended to invoke a mill building, and design details were taken from various historic precedents.

The landscape plan shows a linear plaza of mounds and depressions that tell for story of water, that extends toward the wetlands and ends in an overlook. There are two other play yards, one for grades 1-3 and one for 4-6.

The following are the DRB's comments on the site plan and design:

1. The DRB appreciates the design elements to make this a net-zero building including solar array, geo-thermal heating, pervious parking and supports the layout of the two campuses and boardwalk connection.
2. The DRB is concerned about the massive size of the building and number of students (990) for the two elementary schools and more for the preschool.
3. We questioned why the preschool is included in this project, and the answer was that is financially and administratively advantageous, and that resources can be shared. The question is if this is a good setting for our youngest students.
4. One DRB member noted that the building's L shape does not support the program of having the schools separated by floors, and instead suggests the schools should be divided with one school in each side of the L. (Like at the existing twin school).
5. The corridors are very long – 300' – the length of a football field with no windows to natural daylight. The DRB believes this is unfortunate, given the scale of the building. Clearly the

available site and budget are driving this decision. The DRB suggests to move the corridor's terminal stairways to either side to allow natural light in at the ends of the corridors.

6. The DRB finds the main entrance not well defined, and doesn't feel inviting. We suggest adding more elements to make it recognizable (using glazed tiles or bringing color into the entry). Something needs to be added to signify that it is the main entrance.
7. In addition, the DRB suggests adding more color and playfulness in the building exterior to make this building seem younger, it feels too mature.
8. The DRB understands the reason behind using all of the different surfacing materials to reduce the overall scale of the building, but perhaps fewer materials could be used as successfully by changing patterns.
9. The DRB supports using red glazing for the windows and feels it provides some playfulness to the building.
10. In general, the DRB finds the building design to be a bit too sober for an elementary school and would like to see more of the colorful aluminum and tiles in the façade at important locations.
11. In order to bring more natural light into the central core, we recommend relocating the music storage and kiln to the sides of the rooms and adding a window into the music and art rooms.
12. The landscape design is fine, but the DRB suggests that as much usable open space be provided along the wetlands side, and that the preschool yard is clearly separated from the elementary school's yards.

The DRB thanks Arrowstreet, Terralink, Sanska and the school building committee for taking the time to present this important project to our committee. We are very excited that the building will be triple net-zero, and that the building and site layout are integrated with the wonderful wetland resource that splits the site. As design refinement progresses, the DRB hopes that some of our comments will be incorporated into the designs. The committee looks forward to an opportunity to review the design at a future date.

Respectfully submitted,

The DRB