Orchard Park Visioning - Summary of Workshop #1

A workshop was held with students and staff on June 23, 2016. The workshop was led by a consultant team from Mithun and began with a walking tour through the Orchard Park and Solano Park campuses followed by an exercise formatted as a game called “Amenitize” to gather information on the importance of specific potential design amenities for a new campus community at Orchard Park. Overall approximately 20 people participated in the tour and the exercise. We received detailed written comments from the tour from 5 students and 6 staff, and we noted 4 students about a dozen staff participating in the “Amenitize” game.

Walking Tour Observations

Students and staff were given worksheets to record their observations of the campus design and were prompted with images to comment on the following issues: Building Scale, Building Character, Building Details, Open Space, Play Space, Social Space, and the layout of the 2-Bedroom Unit. Participants were also asked for general responses to what they like best, what they like least and what “big ideas” they have for the new development. All responses have been recorded and documented and are available for review, and key takeaways from students and staff have been identified. Key themes have emerged around affordability, community character, and open space, and specific issues relating to each of those are highlighted below. While many of the responses were aligned between students and staff, the differences of perspective are interesting and have been noted.

Affordability

Affordability is of paramount concern to students. The input received demonstrated that students have an understanding of the drivers of cost, and are realistic in their expectations. For example, numerous comments were made about density and the willingness to increase density as a strategy to reduce costs. In particular, students are supportive of increased building height and saw opportunities to organize buildings of varying heights around open spaces of varying scales, as long as at least one larger open space was available for shared use. A few students noted that locating families on floors one through three, and non-families on floors “four and above” would be a good strategy to consider. Staff were noticeably more reserved about building height and density than students. Participants also understand that some uniformity and simplicity of building types increases affordability. Staff were more critical of the aesthetics of simple “barracks like” buildings, however students commented that affordability is of such importance that simple modest buildings are desired, and suggested staggering buildings and using color and landscaping to provide visual interest to avoid a sterile or institutional look. Students also like the “informal” environment of Orchard Park and Solano Park and contrasted that with West Village which they see as “sterile” and “too orderly.”

Community Character

Clear input was also received on how the organization of buildings and open space can help support community. Student comments reflect the value they place on shared social spaces including the community room and playgrounds, however a big theme was the preference for designs that enable them to “opt in” to their community experiences. The use of shared courtyards as a “semi-private” community space is not desired as it forces relationships with an artificially defined community. Instead, students would rather have more clear delineation between public and private, with private patios for
families and then larger shared spaces that are available for gathering. Another related detail is that proximity between the community rooms and the green space / playground is desired, but not direct adjacency as this allows for both public and private use of the community room. For example birthday parties are a group event but generally not open to all. Finally, preference was also expressed for a single more centralized playground (with defined areas for large and small children) and community open space rather than multiple distributed gathering spaces.

Open Space Character

The main attraction of both Orchard Park and Solano Park is the green ‘park like’ setting, with easy access from living spaces to green spaces. The responses showed a strong preference for perimeter parking, with many commenting that road access and paved areas are not desired within the residential campus environment. Bike routes should be accommodated throughout and carefully planned to avoid conflicts with pedestrians. Green spaces should be diverse with lots of trees for shade, and student gardening space would be a plus. Paved areas should be kept to a minimum and seating should be movable with multiple options available for gathering, outdoor dining or grilling. Personal patio space is highly desirable and upper level patios are also desirable if they can function as defined outdoor gathering space and not just circulation.

“Amenitize” Game

The “Amenitize” Game asks participants to identify their preferred design elements within a limited budget, thus enabling a discussion of preferences while remaining mindful of the realities of cost. While the sample of students was small, with just four students participating together with about a dozen staff, the results point to a fairly consistent set of interests. The results are organized below around living unit and community space preferences, with a number following each amenity to show how many times it was selected.

Living Unit Preferences

The preferences within the living unit focused on the realities of living in a compact apartment to accommodate academic and family needs. The most desired amenity by a wide margin was Closet Storage (8), followed by Laundry in the Unit (5), a Larger Living Room (4) and a Balcony (4). It is worth noting that the preference for a Study Alcove (2) may support the consideration of a Larger Living Room as it would likely be located in that space. Common “market-rate” amenities were less of a focus as the Kitchen Upgrade (3) got selected just three times and the Additional Bathroom (1) was selected once. A Dedicated Parking Space was not selected by any of the participants.

Community Space Preferences

The preferences for community spaces were even more consistent than the living unit preferences as half of them were not selected by any of the teams. The most desired amenity was Outdoor Social Space (5), followed by the Social Lounge (4), and a Garden (3). The theme of prioritizing green space is seen here as in addition to those already stated – Outdoor Social Space and a Garden – the Playground (2) and More Green Space (2) were each selected twice. Built amenities such as a Fitness Room (1), and a Study Room (1) were each selected just one time. Finally car share (1) was also selected one time. The list of amenities not selected includes the following: Community Kitchen, Food Emporium, Bicycle Shop, Barbeque Pit, Community Art Venue, Food Co-op, Indoor Play Space, and Music Practice Room.