

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY
MAJOR INSTITUTIONS MASTER PLAN
IMPLEMENTATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Nov 25, 2025

Carly Guillory
Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections
P.O. Box 34019
Seattle, WA, 98124-4019

Lara Branigan,
Director
901 12th Avenue, Seattle, WA 98122-1090

RE: Seattle University Major Institution Master Plan Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC) Comments and Recommendations Concerning the proposed Seattle University Art Museum (SUMA)

Dear Ms. Guillory and Ms. Branigan,

In accordance with Seattle Municipal Code 23.69.032, the Seattle Central College Major Institutions Master Plan Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC or committee) submits the following comments on the proposed Seattle University Art Museum (SUMA) project.

The IAC is excited about the Seattle University Art Museum, and we look forward to its opening and contributing to the neighborhood and the City of Seattle by allowing us all to fully enjoy its collection. To ensure that the SUMA project is fully aligned with the goals of the Major Institution Master Plan (MIMP), we offer the following commentary. We hope the IAC and Seattle University can work together and move forward in a positive direction that benefits the community, the university, and is fully aligned with the MIMP.

The IAC focused its efforts on how SU's proposed Seattle University Art Museum (SUMA) would impact the neighborhood. We believe it is our role to try to balance the needs and desires of the University with the long-term compatibility with the surrounding neighborhoods. To that end we offer this comment letter for your consideration.

For the Committee,

John Feit,
(Committee Chair)

Follow-up Comments following the September 24 Seattle University IAC Meeting

SUMA represents an opportunity to increase pedestrian activation along 12th Avenue significantly. As beloved as The Lee Center is, the Center and Gallery are not particularly inviting to neighbors and others who pass by. To take full advantage of the opportunity presented by SUMA, and to abide by the MIMP and City Council design guidelines, the committee seeks consideration on the following:

The Covered Plaza

1. Soffit

- There are deep concerns about the proposal to create a “canvas for light, art, projection”. The reliance on technology and the transient, changing nature of this proposal introduces the opportunity for the soffit to simply be blank, cold and monotonous. Has the potential of the soffit being a permanent art piece been explored? This part of the design has great potential to be a distinguishing feature and could also hint at the museum’s collection.
- SU provided images of the Boston Institute for Contemporary Art that uses wood as the soffit material—introduction of a warmer material as the basis of the soffit expression is more pleasing and does not totally rely on the light, art or projection to provide a pleasing surface for this important element. Other approaches to introducing wood or materials besides wood could be considered, although the metal soffit shown on the example of the Audain Art Museum at Whistler is perhaps too cold and the reflective nature would likely be at odds with the design concept and other materials being proposed (ie: terracotta, brick, etc.).

2. Ground plane

- Could an extension of the cafe out onto the plaza (e.g. outdoor seating, additional cafe<>plaza entrance) help to draw consistent activity in addition to scheduled plaza gatherings?
- Could the new sidewalk along 12th Avenue and Marion be treated in a manner that the plaza is seen as extending to the curbline of the sidewalk, through coloring, color, texture, etc.

3. CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design)

- Avoid areas that are screened from view from the street are preferred; for example, Option 1 contains elements that are hidden from view from the public way.
- Avoid large flat surfaces to minimize the opportunity for people to use those surfaces for sleeping, lying down, etc.
- Schemes that provide level access from 12 th Avenue are more favorable than those that have multiple steps.

The Street-facing elements

Activation remains an issue. Although SU provided multiple examples of how the plaza could be used for university or community events, the fact remains that these events are transitory and will only occur at specific times. The surface materials selected, the way the surface is sculpted, art installations at the ground plane and lighting will be key elements that will help to invite use when events are not taking place. Continue the development of the design to avoid making the plaza passive.

- a) The concept of moving the gallery entrance to the street may help in activating 12 th Avenue, as would active retail and food/coffee service. A street entry should be balanced with a plaza entry (should both entries remain), so that one does not appear to be an afterthought.
- b) Pedestrian entrance at grade-level on 12th Ave — IAC 4, pgs. 19 and 38 indicate a single entrance, leading to the café
 - Will this be the only entrance to the SUMA building on 12th Ave?
 - Is it at grade level?
 - Will it be obvious and welcoming to those passing by? Per the MIMP, this should not seem like a side/back entrance.
 - If the entrance is predominantly a cafe entrance, will the entrance be accessible during all building hours, or only during cafe hours?
- c) Opaque facade on 12th Ave - IAC 4, pg. 18 shows 38% opaque façade
 - Per the Land Use Code, is there an opportunity to reduce this percentage further to increase visible activity?
- d) Sensitivity to grain and scale of existing surrounding development on 12th Avenue (MIMP, City Council Condition #1.A.18).
 - Proposed grain/scale matches emerging, large-scale developments, but the guideline could be interpreted as matching the character of the existing businesses on 12th Ave (either across 12th, or further north on 12th from SUMA) — could renderings be provided of the cafe/lobby at pedestrian level as compared to other 12th Ave storefronts (e.g. Anchorhead, Mari Pili, etc.)?

West-facing components

The last presentation did not adequately address the westernmost façade and the juxtaposition of that with the vehicle access to the parking lot off Marion Street, and further development is needed.

- a) The west entrance of the present feels secondary and overly complex. The grade transitions, ramping, and landscape features ought to be more graceful and better integrated with the 12th Avenue side.
- b) Consider an interesting, pedestrian-friendly paving treatment where the vehicles will transit through. This should not be asphalt and should feel more like a forecourt.

- c) Consider how glazing at ground level will engage visually with the Campus Walk and the Thinking Field to the west.

Questions about the role of the IAC and the standards by which the proposal are to be evaluated

It is the role of the Director of DCI to make a decision on the permit applications of the Institution. The Committee has been wrestling with understanding more precisely its role and questions remain. As noted in a discussion at the July 30 meeting, the Land Use Code states that, when there is a development proposal, the Committee shall have "an opportunity to review and comment on the applications"

However, the City Council, in enacting this MIMP went beyond the mere "opportunity to comment" and stated that the Committee (known as the SAC at the time of the adoption of the MIMP) shall use the Design Guidelines of the MIMP for "evaluation of all planned and potential projects outlined in the Master Plan." (Major Institution Master Plan, City Council Condition #1.C.40)

The City Council has endowed the Committee with the role of evaluating the applications, but an open question is --- what happens if the Director disagrees with the Committee's evaluation? The Committee has requested that a knowledgeable spokesperson from DCI address this at the next committee meeting.

How to interpret the Design Guidelines

The point has been made by representatives of the City and the Institution that the Committee is not the same as a Design Review Board. While the design-related directives in the MIMP are called "design guidelines" they are different from the design guidelines used by the City in reviewing certain commercial and mixed-use projects. Those design guidelines are more general and are intended to be flexible enough to apply across a broad range of projects. The design guidelines in a MIMP are much more direct. They are arrived at through a lengthy series of meetings and negotiations which have in mind a specific location. In essence, the Institution receives permission to develop in a way that the underlying zoning would not allow and, in return, the institution is bound to follow the guidelines, some of which were agreed before the final City Council decision, and some of which were imposed by the City Council.

The design guidelines of the MIMP are similar to the obligations that binds a developer who receives a contract rezone, or a developer who achieves a vacation of a public alley or street and in return is obligated to provide specific public benefits and there are guidelines that must be followed. The guidelines that are particularly applicable to the proposed SUMA development include:

- Guideline 11: "New designs should demonstrate sensitivity to the grain and scale of the existing surrounding development."
- Guideline 12: " ... special provisions to activate the streetscape along 12th Avenue, Madison and Broadway through transparency, visible activity, small pedestrian plazas , and defined entries at grade level height, and should include recognition that 12th Avenue and Broadway in particular have a different character than the other streets in the neighborhood."

- Rezone condition 3. " Along 12th Avenue, non-street-activating uses shall be limited to no more than 20% of the 12th Avenue street front facade so as not to dominate any block."

Amendment of Master Plan

Although it was stated in an informal, unsigned note, it appears that the preliminary opinion of DCI is that the proposed change to the Master Plan does not constitute a Major Amendment of the MIMP as the Land Use Code defines it. The proposed razing of the Lee Center is said by the University to be related to the acquisition of other theater and drama-related space formerly owned by Cornish. With the acquisition of Cornish by the university the existing MIMP lacks any plan for this new, significant portion of its campus. It appears that the Land Use Code would require the University to prepare a new MIMP.

- Does the Code allow the University to proceed with the demolition of the Lee Center and building a major new building before the adoption of a new MIMP?
- The Land Use Code, 23.69.023 says that "(1) Major Institution may acquire, merge with, or otherwise consolidate with, another Major Institution."
- The Land Use Code definition of a "major institution" includes an educational institution whose site is at least 60,000 square feet and whose buildings include at least 300,000 square feet. Published information suggests that the former Cornish site is 174,000 square feet and the Cornish buildings include over 360,000 square feet so it's a major institution as defined by the Code.
- The Code states that, within ten days of a merger or acquisition, the institution shall notify the Director of DCI who shall then adjust the MIO map if the two institutions are contiguous.
- The Code is unclear as to what is to happen when the two are not contiguous, as is the merger between Seattle University and Cornish (SMC 23.69.023 C). Will the present and future development of the acquired part of the Seattle U campus take place without a Master Plan? It would be good for the Committee to get the Director's position.