

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW REPORT

Design Guidelines for
Commercial Districts & Multi-Unit Residential Projects
for the City of Pasadena

3 September 2008

I. Stakeholder Interview Issues and Questions.

On Friday, August 29, City staff and Moule & Polyzoides interviewed various architects, developers, realtors, historic preservation specialists, and members of several neighborhood associations to receive input in regards to the development of guidelines for neighborhood commercial and multi-family residential areas. Following are the comments received:

1. Compatibility and Context

- A. Pasadena has a strong sense of place that makes it unique from 95% of other places in Southern California. An important component of this sense of place is Pasadena's long tradition of architectural and design excellence – an excellence has been compromised by many of the projects that have been built in the past ten years.
- B. New buildings should be appropriate to their context and respond to the existing character and scale of the neighborhood. The first 15 – 25 feet of lot depth (setbacks, frontage, height, massing, and scale) is particularly important.
- C. The interface between higher density and lower density zones should be considered to insure that the transition between new buildings in the higher density zone is appropriate and not a visual nuisance to existing, smaller scale buildings. When new multi-family projects back up to single-family residences, the design aesthetics should require that the new project be compatible with the surrounding neighborhood. In addition, second and third floor setbacks would help ease the transition further.
- D. Adjacency to a historic resource should be considered to insure that new buildings are complimentary to the historic resource.
- E. Continuity of Streetscape. A continuous and consistent streetscape can help unify a street and override the individual design of buildings.
- F. Consideration should be made in terms of 1-lot, 2-lot, and 3-lot, and 4-lot projects – especially in neighborhoods where the existing fabric is comprised primarily of 1-lot parcels.
- G. In terms of massing and elevation design, the grouping of units in twos, threes, fours, etc. instead of repeating one unit ad infinitum should be encouraged. This helps break the scale of large buildings down to a more human-scale – a strategy that is particularly important in finer grain residential neighborhoods.

2. Style

- A. Pasadena is an eclectic place and, as such, the proposed guidelines should not limit what styles are used.
- B. Guidelines should provide enough freedom to foster creativity, allowing buildings to be innovative so that interesting designs can occur.
- C. Proposed buildings should not be required to look like their neighbor.
- D. If a proposed building design chooses to reference a particular style, it should be faithful to that style (there is nothing worse than a poorly-designed modern building than a poorly designed traditional building). When styles are used, guidelines should be provided to define the characteristics of a particular style in order to provide ways for decision makers to judge the appropriateness and merit of a proposed design (which raises the question, what are Pasadena's styles?).
- E. How should the proposed guidelines deal with the character of different areas? Are there certain areas within the City that may be more appropriate for certain styles? Should a modern building be placed in a traditional neighborhood? Are modern buildings more appropriate along major corridors?

- F. What are the characteristics of a Pasadena building (particularly those designed in the modern style)? New buildings should acknowledge Pasadena's Mediterranean climate and landscape through climate responsive building and site design (such as the use of shading devices, usable and occupiable outdoor spaces, and a meaningful relationship between outdoor and indoor spaces).
- G. Building color should not be regulated.
- H. Signage: many well-designed buildings are compromised by poorly proportioned or incompatible signage.

3. Incentives for Good Design. Good design should be encouraged and rewarded through the implementation of incentives such as:

- A. A more streamlined approval process for well-designed projects (coupled with a slower process for projects of mediocre design). Poorly designed projects should be rejected outright.
- B. Verbal variance for well-designed projects. Should the City be able to add or remove entitlement for the purpose of making a better building or a building that better fits into its neighborhood context?
- C. Assign Architecturally Significant Designation for well-designed projects.
- D. Issue awards for well-designed projects.
- E. Provide financial incentives such as a tax break or a reduction in the amount of exactions.
- F. Allow additional occupiable square footage.

4. Process

- A. Guidelines should give interested parties (the commission, city staff, developers, designers, and the community) a menu to work with that will help alleviate differences between the interested parties. The guidelines should include a checklist that describes the City's design expectations that can be used by the commission, city staff, developers, architects, and the community during the design and review process. Such guidelines would give both city staff and the commission a powerful tool to better judge a proposed project. If a proposed project includes sufficient items on the checklist, the review process should proceed faster and easier.
- B. Preliminary Review. This allows a proposed design to be presented and reviewed very early in the process (before a lot of money has been spent on design). The preliminary review would provide an opportunity to insure that a proposed project fits into its context. As part of the review process, applicants should give reasons for the design decisions they are making. Possible components of Preliminary Review include:
 - i. Participants:
 - a. Assign a higher-level staff member (that is capable of making decisions) to review projects at the very beginning of design process.
 - b. And/or empower staff members to make decisions regarding a proposed project that is being reviewed.
 - c. And/or include one design commissioner in Preliminary Review process.
 - d. The community would like input into the Preliminary Review process (perhaps applications could be posted on the City's website and the community could provide input via email?)
 - ii. Pre-Submittal Meeting. To review the project and its assumptions and give staff an opportunity to brief the applicant on how similar projects have proceeded and what the applicant should expect.

iii. Submittal Package:

- a. Site Plan with context
- b. Massing model with context
- c. One street-facing elevation or perspective
- d. Design narrative (describing how building relates to neighbors, why a certain style has been chosen, etc.)

C. Community Input.

- i. Should there be a threshold square footage whereby community input is required?

D. Enforcement of buildings that are under construction. There is a need to introduce enforcement measures to insure that buildings are constructed according to how they were designed and approved. Suggestions included:

- i. Institute project walk-throughs at important construction milestones (such as framing, application of finishes, etc. or on a quarterly basis).
- ii. Require the architect to sign off to confirm construction is consistent with approved design and construction documents
- iii. Provide conditions of approval in regards to how certain details/finishes should be executed.
- iv. Encourage use of architect for construction administration.
- v. Engage in more stringent enforcement during Plan Check to insure that construction documents comply with previously approved designs.
- vi. Require a mock-up of selected finishes and details.
- vii. Require payment of a design bond.

5. Private Open Space

- A. Usable private open space should be strongly encouraged, especially considering Pasadena's hospitable climate.

- B. Encourage roof decks, particularly for projects with substandard private open space.

6. Cost

- A. Encourage good design without significantly raising construction costs. There are many poorly designed buildings that were not necessarily less expensive to build. Often buildings are over-designed.

- B. Consider delicate balance between affordable housing and non-affordable housing.

- C. Poorly designed buildings can lower neighborhood values and damage the prestige of the City.