

October 1, 2009

**To: Chair Robert Allen, and Members of the Design Review Committee
Chair Deborah Matthews and Members of the Zoning Adjustments
Board**

From: Mark Rhoades, AICP, Citycentric

Re: Response to Design Review Committee comments of August 20, 2009

Dear Members of the Zoning Adjustments Board and Design Review Committee,

We thank you for your time, and the professionalism with which you review in fill housing development projects that are improving our Berkeley community. We are proud of our proposal for an appropriately scaled, sustainable infill development project that will set new standards for Berkeley for years to come. We had an opportunity to present the proposal for Parker Place to the Design Review Committee on August 20, 2009. The DRC provided our design team with an abundance of comments, as is to be expected with a large project. In the following summary we have responded to each of the DRC's comments,.

While we were disappointed by some of the more stridently negative commentary at the DRC we are confident that we can work with the ZAB and the DRC to create a bold architectural and design program that does not try to hide within an underdeveloped and blighted context (Valiyee and other nearby properties). Instead, we hope to create a new vision of urban living for future residents that enlivens the street and provides walkable, interesting destinations for the surrounding community. For this and other reasons our team intends to retain the horizontal concept of the proposed design.

The Parker Place project site is already developed in a horizontal manner that incorporates the length of the Shattuck Avenue block face. A vertical approach or a "traditional" architectural approach is not appropriate for this site. A vertical approach to the façade would accentuate the height of the upper stories instead of harmonizing the upper stories with the existing, handsome, horizontally-oriented retail base.

We are proud to put forward an environmentally sustainable project that will help the city achieve its critical need for new market rate and affordable housing while addressing some of the goals in Berkeley's adopted Climate Action Plan. We look forward to our preview with the ZAB on October 8, and to our next meeting with the DRC.

August 20, 2009 – DRC Summary

2600 SHATTUCK AVENUE [at Parker] (DR#08-30000090): Preview of a mixed-use development comprised of 2 5-story buildings and one 3-story building, totaling 157 dwelling units, 31 affordable units, 22,484 sq. ft. of net

ground floor commercial space, and 158 parking spaces; one building to incorporate existing one-story retail building at 2600 Shattuck; second building to be built on parking lot at 2598 Shattuck.

Advisory comments follow:

BUILDING FORM & MASSING, SITE PLAN & PARKING

Sunlight & Views:

- 1) *Streetscape design, as well as retail and restaurant storefront design should take advantage of the sunny spots on the site.*

Response: The retail and/or café storefront designs will include folding storefront walls at the south corners of 2600 and 2598 with tables and chairs or product displays in outdoor spaces, and the potential for bulb outs at street crossings. 2598 is already setback to allow for outdoor public space at the southeast corner.

- 2) *Second floor units facing the streets will be looking into a 4' high wall. These residents will only have a view of the sky when seated.*

Response: A view of the actual street with cars driving by is not a desirable view at the lowest residential level. The slightly higher wall is better at this level both from the standpoint of guarding the balcony user from the cars driving by and by affording greater privacy at the lowest residential level. The balcony rails on the upper floors are purposefully set slightly lower at code required height because they are not as directly impacted by the street activity.

Building Massing:

- 3) *Shattuck is a large, wide street and this building height appears to be in scale with it.*

Response: Yes

- 4) *Transition to the neighborhood is commendable.*

Response: Yes

- 5) *The large cubes sitting on a platform do not provide an adequate sense of scale, nor do they enhance the street or skyline.*

Response: The existing Honda Building and the new floors above the street really provide two separate scales. The first is the pedestrian experience that mainly experiences the grand Honda façade at ground level and the greatly enhanced streetscape improvements including landscaping and street furniture. Therefore, we've articulated the Honda Façade with new street trees and plantings, new signage, new street furniture, a plaza with grand stair, and new pedestrian scaled lighting.

The other scale is at that of someone moving through the Shattuck Avenue corridor. The new floors with their indentations respond with larger bold moves appropriate to someone moving through space at greater speeds such as in a car.

- 6) *Proportions of the upper facades to the base are too similar. There is a base, and a shrunken main body, but no top.*

Response: The striking aspects of this scheme are its horizontality. We don't dispute that it does not resemble a vertical column which is characterized by a base middle top relationship. The relationship we hope to achieve is one distinguishing gracefully between the old building and the new building. We achieve this by pulling back the second level so that the third through fifth levels are distinctly contemporary while the second level moderates between the old and new buildings.

We put the design forward because it retains similar mass and proportion (such as the original storefront being of similar proportion to the new patios) without trying to simply mimic architectural cues which can often times look fake. A vertically proportioned upper structure is not the appropriate design solution for this existing structure or neighborhood context. This site is horizontally oriented as reflected in the existing Honda building. Vertical orientation places emphasis on the height of the structure and creates an irresolvable architectural conflict with the horizontally proportioned base.

Parker Place is a contemporary project. Imposing the "base, middle, and top" proportionality of traditional architectural schemes it is not necessarily appropriate for more contemporary architectural approaches. Parker Place will be a building of its time. The imposition of a more traditionally proportioned "top" or "middle" reduces the elegance of the proposed scheme to a vernacular of an earlier time.

- 7) *The open strip between the base and the upper building is not successful and weakens the facade.*

Response: Part of the elegance of this design is that it in fact appears to float over the old building with a top that disappears at the skyline. The design team intends to pursue this scheme. The second level creates an elegant horizontal reveal which distinguishes the old architecture from the new.

- 8) *Massing step down at the neighbor's edge is good, but it still doesn't add any amenities for those still with a blank wall.*

Response: The direct neighbors of this building have lived next to a 25 foot high blank wall for almost 90 years. Parker Place proposes to change and improve this relationship significantly. First, the project will cut the back wall down by more than five feet. This not only significantly reduces the actual and apparent mass of the building, but it also significantly

improves solar and air access. In addition, the project proposes to provide a planted edge along the west parapet. This planting edge will provide hanging vines and plantings that will “spill” over the wall’s edge to create visual play and interest, and further soften the wall’s massing. This planting strip will also deter Parker Place residents from overlooking the current neighbors’ private spaces. Finally, the project will paint the wall with an appropriate color and material so that adjacent residents are not just looking at a 25 foot high raw concrete wall as they have for the last 90 years.

Relationship to Surroundings / Neighborhood Pattern:

- 9) *There was some question as to the value in keeping the existing building, but others thought it made sense to keep the existing Plachek building.*

Response: The reason for retaining the existing structure is two-fold. First, it is the most environmentally sustainable option available. This project will combine transit-oriented density with adaptive reuse of an existing building. Reusing the building provides substantial savings in the need to use new materials (concrete, wood, steel) as well as the energy and land filling that would be required to demolish and haul away the existing structure.

Secondly, the existing building provides an excellent retail “storefront” in the traditional sense. It provides a high storefront with large windows, and a regimented and rhythmic base. Both are extremely conducive to enlivening the pedestrian experience and for retailing.

We plan to keep the original integrity of the original building façade with the exception of lowering the west wall to allow for more sun on the neighbor’s property, pulling back the building to create a “front yard” at the northwest corner, and cut open the building at mid block to create a pedestrian plaza. We think this sufficiently retains the character while making the building much more neighborhood friendly.

- 10) *Landmark Analysis needs a more critical review. LPC should look at this project.*

Response: A noted and abundantly qualified architectural historian has researched the building and concluded that it is an unremarkable and utilitarian building designed by noted local architect, James Plachek. Plachek’s work is notable in many regards. He designed and built many of the buildings that we Berkeleyans hold so dear, including the Main Library, and City Hall. Many of his architectural works are included on local, state, and national historic registers. Even though this building is unremarkable and not a landmark in itself, we are proposing to keep it, and reuse it without compromising the qualities that continue to make it a useful building today.

- 11) *Project should do a better job of relating to the existing building.*

Design Strategy: The relationship of the new building to the existing building is provided in its horizontal orientation. In addition, the new portions will relate to the existing building in proportion, materials and color choices.

- 12) *One drawback with the existing building remaining is that the existing wall on the west property line remains instead of a decent landscaped transition.*

Response: The unfortunate relationship between the existing building and adjacent neighbors has existed for nearly 90 years. A careful review of the project drawings shows the significant steps that are being taken to change and improve this relationship. Please see the response to #8, above.

- 13) *Design is jarring. Project should fit better into its context.*

Response: This comment conflicts with comment 4 stating that our “transition to the neighborhood is commendable,” and comment 3 that states “Shattuck is a large, wide street and this building height appears to be in scale with it.” These two comments validate the success of the design in transitioning from a very wide boulevard to a finely scaled residential neighborhood. The Shattuck Avenue context, which may be the source of the comment, is characterized by low scale, underutilized and vacant properties. A new project cannot help but distinguish itself from those qualities with an architecturally interesting and appropriately scaled building. The project provides a new pedestrian oriented and lively home for new residents, and a retail activity node for surrounding neighbors.

- 14) *Look at reducing the height to the west wall as much as possible, and adding plants which hang down to soften it and relate better to the adjacent backyards.*

Response: We have lowered the existing west wall of the Honda Building by approximately 5 feet, and we will certainly look at lowering the wall more, if possible. We will, however modulate the wall with plantings that follow the perimeter.

- 15) *This site is close enough to the Downtown to look at the Downtown Design Guidelines.*

Response: The Parker Place project site is more than six blocks south of the 1990 Downtown Plan Area that those design guidelines were prepared for. The proposed project is located on a section of Shattuck Avenue that has a completely different character and intensity of use than the Downtown. In addition, projects in one zoning district cannot be held to the standards of some different zoning district.

Public Open Spaces / Landscape Concept:

- 16) *Consider big landscape gestures wherever possible. Increase scale and value of vegetation proposed to create a Gateway/Boulevard statement.*

Response: We will increase the volume of street tree, and propose more planting at the key public areas. IN addition, we are looking at “bulbing” the corners to provide more pedestrian space and tree plantings.

- 17) *Alley between the two buildings on the north side of Parker is a nice gesture, but should be more thought out for safety issues. It also needs a visual terminus.*

Response: We will add a transparent gate at this mews and create a visual terminus with a sculpture or denser planting at the end of the mews for a visual terminus.

- 18) *Wrap open space around the corners as much as possible.*

Please see Item 1.

- 19) *Look at a pocket park or at least space for benches as a transition to the neighborhood.*

Response: The landscape area south of the macro cottages is intended for just this purpose. We will add benches for public use at entrance to 2598 along the Parker Street frontage.

- 20) *Behind public open spaces, provide views into private open spaces as much as possible for more transparency.*

Response: We will make the private open spaces that affront the public right of way as transparent as possible.

- 21) *Consider adding plant material at the podium level on the street elevations to extend the landscape further up and give a gift back to the City.*

Response: we will look to add new planting at the podium area that can be shared with the street at areas that are accessible to maintenance workers. Most podium decks are private open spaces, and we feel will not be as well maintained or consistent if we were to plant in these areas.

- 22) *Consider working with Public Works to remove several parking spaces on Shattuck and increase the public realm in front of the project.*

Response: OK

Parking & Driveways:

- 23) *Look carefully at where van-accessible vehicles will drop residents off at the north building.*

Response: We have engaged with public works to have a number of the public parking spaces striped for accessibility on the Shattuck Avenue side of 2598. We will also provide awnings from the accessible spaces at the street to the building pending the approval of Public Works on the recommendations of Design Review and the ZAB.

Pedestrian Circulation:

24) *There are safety concerns with disabled residents going from one building to the other for parking.*

Response: Van and accessible parking for 2598 residents with disabilities will not be located in the basement of 2600 Shattuck. Instead, we will work with public works to have two or three of the public parking spaces striped for accessibility in front of the 2598 Shattuck building, and curb space for four or five vehicles along the north side of the Parker Street frontage. We will also propose awnings from the accessible spaces at the street and over the sidewalks to the building.

Schematic Building Design:

25) *Design should be softer and more inviting – not so jarring.*

Response: The proposed architectural program will be a beacon of excellent contemporary architecture in Berkeley. Please see comments to 5, 6, 9, and 13, above.

26) *Need a dignified way to address the street.*

Response: This comment is vague. Does the comment relate to Carleton Street, Parker Street, or Shattuck Avenue? If by “dignified” the comment means: “Stateliness and formality in manner and appearance,” we’ve created a clear formal pathway that subdivides the building and creates a grand entrance sequence at Shattuck that is quite dignified. In addition, the retention of the Plachek structure achieves this goal. It is nothing if not a dignified retail frontage with its grand storefront glass and wide bays, presented in a stately early 1900’s utilitarian gesture.

27) *Design needs to be refined. Look carefully at the materials, colors, scale, textures, and how the project meets the street and the existing Plachek building.*

Response: The design team looks forward to refining this current design concept with the DRC. In addition, please see our responses to comments to 5, 6, 9, and 13, above.

28) *Model has a softer visual impact. The color perspectives are more jarring with their dark and light contrasts, and don’t show as much relief of horizontal planes as the model does.*

Response: We intend to refine this. See item 27 for more.

29) *Look at any design changes that can encourage street activity.*

Response: The proposed project incorporates the most significant components of private/public interface improvements of any infill project Berkeley has considered in the last 12 years. This stretch of mid-Shattuck Avenue is currently characterized by underutilized and unremarkable single and two-story buildings. The two blocks across the street are almost completely vacant and blighted. Those blocks provide no pedestrian amenity, relief, or activity. The Parker Place site itself is an auto dealership that provides no real pedestrian experience and has an auto-oriented use that plagues the neighborhood with test driving and morning and afternoon traffic on Parker Street.

The Parker Place project places its emphasis on enlivening street activity and the pedestrian experience. It will provide destinations on three corners, a mid-block plaza. It proposes a “mews” on the north side of Parker Street, and a generous residential entry experience on the south side of Parker Street.

The retention of the Plachek retail building and strong, visually permeable retail orientation at 2598 will create a new pedestrian node of activity and neighborhood destination. The placement of café sidewalk seating and folding store front glass will bring the outside in, and the inside out along the sidewalks. Finally, boldly executed landscape architecture and public right of way improvements will create a parkway setting that exists nowhere else along the Shattuck Avenue corridor.

BUILDING DESIGN

Articulation :

30) *This location requires a facade with rhythm, depth and handsome detailing.*

Response: We agree, and believe this will be beautifully executed by adding appropriate signage, window treatment, and store front detailing.

Window & Door Treatment:

31) *Fenestration on ‘rear cottages’ should be carefully reviewed for privacy of neighbors.*

Response: The cottages are provided 15’ deep setbacks at the podium level. This, coupled with the proposed planters at the podium’s edge will modulate between the cottages and the existing homes. This treatment will preclude new residents from easily overlooking the neighbors but still be able to retain their views beyond to the bay.

Building Entrances:

32) *Steps as a part of the street are good. Monumental stairs on Shattuck could be even more monumental.*

Response: We are looking to making the stair even friendlier to the public.

33) *Develop ground floor lobbies so they are more inviting.*

Response: the 2598 and 2600 Shattuck lobbies are intended to be an oasis with a “hidden garden” at each location. We’ve provided floor to ceiling glass looking into each of these gardens from both the lobbies and the common rooms. The entries facing the street will be distinguished by signage and lighting, so as not to be missed, however, our public face are really at the mid block plaza at 2600 Shattuck and at the southern corner of 2598 Shattuck.

Building Materials and Colors:

34) *Colors should be more subdued, at least on the public faces. Brighter colors inside are fine. Retail signage will add some color and interest on the street frontages.*

Response: The design team will propose revised color palette options for the DRC.

35) *Brown wall color proposed is too dark.*

Response: The design team will propose revised color palette options for the DRC.

Building Design / Details:

36) *Hardiboard battens do not provide a handsomely detailed street front.*

Response: The battens were intended to provide a vertical visual break from the greater horizontal expanse. We agree that they actually detract from the sophistication of the horizontal approach, and will be removed from the design.

LANDSCAPE, OPEN SPACE, & CIRCULATION

Public/Common Open Space Areas / Materials / Plantings:

37) *Big trees are important for residents in the building as well as creating a Boulevard.*

Response: The landscape program will be revised to include more large trees. We are also exploring with Public Works the idea of bulbing the three corners, and increasing the street tree plantings in those locations.

38) *Water retention recharge areas in the landscape plan are a good direction.*

Response: Water retention and recharge is an important component of the sustainable aspects of this project. The design team will look for more opportunities to do so. It should be noted that many of the streetscape design amenities that are proposed (mainly the recharge and collection areas along the sidewalks) will be new ground to cover (pun intended) for the City’s Public Works Department. We will likely need the advocacy of

the ZAB and Design Review to help affect a more sustainable landscape design program.