

**Julianna Delgado, M.Arch, Ph.D, AICP**

Home Address: 982 N. Mentor Avenue, Pasadena CA 91104  
Telephone: 626-797-7716 Email: [julianna.delgado@sbcglobal.net](mailto:julianna.delgado@sbcglobal.net)

September 9, 2020

Members of the City of Pasadena Planning Commission

RE: Item #4A - Zoning Code Amendment: Single-Family Residential Development Standards

Dear Commissioners:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide some additional thoughts on *mansionization*, the process whereby single-family residential homes become out of scale and character with their surroundings, typically through incompatible enlargements, remodeling, or replacement. Absent adoption of form-based codes in Pasadena, preventing the approval of structures that are insensitive to their context and the character of the city's built environment from eroding further have been at issue at least since I first served on the Design Commission over a decade ago. Although I support generally all measures that improve the City's sense of place, reviewing the proposed changes to the Zoning Code in today's Staff Report, I find it difficult to imagine further mansionization can be prevented. Although the final stage of your process, the "Citywide" changes do not go far enough to ensure protection citywide. Furthermore, although there may be greater sensitivity to architectural styles in managing our overlay districts, despite statements in the Report to the contrary, districts have not been protected from development out of scale with the surrounding neighborhood character.

I would argue that a slowing of mansionization would require subjective review when needed by the City's 'experts,' i.e. its Design staff and members of its Design Commission, and a discretionary approval process. These would apply to development above 'certain thresholds,' a measure that still needs to be determined. Absent applying subjective standards (much like the 'appropriateness' test used for historic districts) and discretionary approval that fosters public participation if needed, the definitions of 'incompatible' and 'out of scale' are left to be determined if at all by a plan checker who is neither trained in nor sensitive to good design. We have all seen the results.

Staff bases the need for development standards and ministerial review on its discussion of SB330 ("The Housing Crisis Act of 2019"). This may be misguided with respect to existing single-family residential (SFR) homes. The intent of the law is to reduce the backlog of units California needs by streamlining approval of additional new housing units (plural). To encourage and streamline the remodeling, enlarging, or replacing of an existing SFR home flies in the face of the law's intent, which is to counteract the lack of housing supply affordable for very-low-, low-, and moderate-income residents. According to the law, the high cost of housing is a result in part not just from increased construction costs but also from the rise in property values. This is only exacerbated by enlarging single-family residential (SFR) homes affordable for and attractive to higher-income residents. SB330 defines *housing development projects* in Section 4 (h) of SB330 as any of the following:

(A) Residential units only.

(B) Mixed-use developments consisting of residential and nonresidential uses with at least two-thirds of the square footage designated for residential use.

(C) Transitional housing or supportive housing.

Nowhere does the law define a *housing development project* as the remodeling, enlarging, or replacing of an existing SFR unit that will remain one unit. It may be found that SB330 is applicable only to the construction of new additional units: SFRs, multi-family units, and ADUs, all addressed in the law as plurals. It may be argued that SB330 does not apply here, since no net new dwelling units are being proposed or constructed, hence remodeling, enlarging, or replacing in kind a single unit would not constitute a ‘project’ per the law’s definition nor meet the law’s intent. Thus, whether the ‘objective standards’ provision and reduction in discretionary review in conjunction with the Permit Streamlining Act applies to remodeling, enlarging, or replacing an existing SFR unit remains to be tested in the courts.

Assuming staff’s strict reading of SB330, the Staff Report recommends changes to the Zoning Code with respect to the “Main House” in four related categories: Neighborhood Consistency, Architectural Compatibility, Height, and Privacy. With respect to consistency in scale, the ‘new’ allowable, increased size of an existing SFR home would be determined as in Phases 1 and 3 by first calculating a ‘neighborhood average,’ the median size of homes within 500 feet of the subject property, and then allowing up to a 35% increase. Even if SB330 should apply, this method will fail to reduce Pasadena’s mansionization. Firstly, when used to determine compatibility, 500 feet from the subject site is an arbitrary distance, one that is typically used in public noticing requirements but has little bearing on design with respect to scale and character. What is most important is immediate context: the adjacent structures on neighboring properties. Please see the examples of incompatibility shown in Section B., “Bulk, Massing, Proportion, and Scale,” of the Draft Design Guidelines attached to the Report. These are examples of structures that are incompatible because they are placed next to each other, not blocks away from each other. However, a related dilemma facing cities concerned with the changing character of their built environment is addressing sites where the existing adjacent structures are ‘of poor design quality (ugly buildings)’ or are already out of scale with older homes in close proximity (see Arcadia, et al.). Should the replaced or remodeled home conform to those that have been ‘remodeled out of all stylistic recognition,’ what would be considered ‘non-conforming’ or ‘inappropriate’ if located in a historic district? What happens when adjacent homes are themselves incompatible in size and style (see the photo below)? How is compatible context or ‘neighborhood consistency’ even determined?



What is “neighborhood consistency” on East Villa Avenue with its non-compatible scales, styles, and materials?

Secondly, if “Neighborhood Average” were to be used as a measure of consistency in terms of appropriate scale then it should be used city-wide, including for historic districts. In the past, staff has used an arbitrary method to justify enlarging homes in historic districts. A recent case in point involved the Historic Preservation Commission’s approval—over the protests of the Neighborhood Association and the district’s Commission representative—to ‘remodel’ a modest, one-story 1,800 sq. ft. home at 1167 N. Catalina in Bungalow Heaven. It had become ‘non-contributing’ as a result of ‘inappropriate’ changes over the years (enclosure of the front porch; installing 50’s ranch-style siding; attic finishing). The shape, massing, and proportion, however, had remained intact. Nonetheless, instead of supporting restoration so the bungalow would become a ‘contributor,’ again, to the district, the Commission approved (not unanimously) an increase in size to 4,000 square feet with a full second story in a pseudo-Craftsman style. This necessarily involved demolishing all of the historic fabric to the point that only the original footprint remained. The justification to meet the applicant’s desire for mansionization was based on staff’s review of homes several blocks away that were out of scale with the single-story smaller homes abutting and in more immediate proximity to the subject site (see photos below). Given the proposed ‘median’ average size test of homes within a 500-foot radius and allowing even the maximum 35% increase in size, the so-called ‘remodel’ in a historic district would have not met the ‘objective standards’ test. Absent any test, staff’s determination and recommendation were based on subjective and poor judgement, which ignored context, and may have set a precedent for mansionization of ‘non-contributors.’ Thus, any proposed language in the Code that exempts overlay districts should be struck.



Mansionization in Bungalow Heaven - House on right (before) (During construction today)

However, the more difficult question to resolve 'objectively' seems to be how to determine if a proposed architectural style is compatible. Even within historic districts there are stylistic conflicts that only grow over time. An example is Hillmont, a regal approx. 4,500 sf two-story Victorian-style mansion built in the 1880s on the corner of Hill Street and Mountain Avenue, which originally sat on about 100 acres. After the property was subdivided at the turn of the last century, modest Craftsman and other style single-story bungalows were built on the smaller lots; post WWI, the Colonial revival style became popular; and after WWII, the post-war 'cracker box' homes appeared on vacant or further subdivided lots, which are not considered 'contributors to the district' but have been there for over 50 years. While at one time Hillmont was the standard, the later homes were of a style clearly incompatible in size and style. Likewise, Pasadena's Beaux Arts-style Civic Center replaced an older Victorian residential neighborhood. Each era has its style with structures that are 'of their time,' and not necessarily compatible with precedent ones. (For a definitive discussion of this, see former Calif. Historical Society president Prof. Merry Ovnick's book, *Los Angeles: The End of the Rainbow*).

In abandoning all subjective determination with respect to architectural compatibility, the Staff Report recommends only two arbitrary standards: precluding facades of raw concrete and architectural foam details. Disallowing these two does little to prevent stylistic conflicts in shape, bulk, and massing. Banning raw, un-tinted/painted concrete would have also precluded from building in Pasadena Frank Lloyd Wright's concrete block Millard House and studio (1923-26), a historic landmark. Likewise, with respect to privacy, not allowing second story windows to line up with those of a neighboring structure--the sole recommended standard--does little to prevent the loss of privacy, as well as sunlight and views, for adjacent properties, especially those with single-story homes.

Concerning "Accessory Structures," SB330 does apply in SFR zones with respect to ADUs, since these are additional new units. I agree with the Report's recommendation that consideration of roof pitch should not be considered if not visible from the public right of way. In the case of ADUs, an argument could be made, however, that requiring similar rooflines, even if visible, would disallow installing many of the prefabricated housing units now available on the market and be shown as a deterrent to increasing needed additional dwelling units.

In closing, it seems that the tough questions still remain if mansionization is to be slowed or halted:

- What is the objective standard for review of "additions of a certain size"? What defines 'certain size'? What is the square footage or percentage increase threshold and what justification is that based on objectively to prevent mansionization?
- Who should decide whether a new, replacement structure or a significant remodel is compatible with the neighborhood, especially if structures in the neighborhood are of an array of architectural styles from different periods? What criteria could be used to determine architectural compatibility if subjective ones cannot be used?
- If approvals are ministerial, how can State-mandated public participation in all aspects of the planning process be upheld?

- How can issues of loss of privacy, sunlight, and scenic views be addressed as a result of adding a second story or remodeling a home? How could this be addressed to maintain the enjoyment and value of adjacent properties?
- Since there is evidence of mansionization in overlay districts, to prevent future mistakes should 'Citywide,' Phase 2 measures be indeed applicable citywide in addition to the Hillside Overlay and Hastings Ranch phases?
- Since the SFR Design Guidelines are not standards, what weight could they have, should the 'objective standards' requirement per SB330 prevail? Is it prudent to spend resources developing these if they are largely subjective and unenforceable?

Absent answers to the above and given the few potential changes proposed to the Zoning Code, if approved more mansionization is inevitable. In a positive light, this is a boon for individual taste, desires, and initiative, for private interests over community ones. In that case, the character of the streetscape based on consistent front yard setbacks, a robust street tree program, design of the parkways, appropriate lighting, and utility undergrounding become all that more important in maintaining a cohesive and communal sense of place.

Sincerely,



President, Southern California Planning Congress  
Professor Emerita, Dept. of Urban and Regional Planning, Cal Poly Pomona  
Founder and Co-Director, California Center for Land and Water Stewardship

Past President (three terms), Bungalow Heaven Neighborhood Association  
Past Bungalow Heaven Representative, City of Pasadena Historic Preservation Commission  
Past Chair, City of Pasadena Design Commission  
Past Chair, City of Pasadena General Plan Update Advisory Committee