



December 22, 2020

City of Pasadena Design Commission  
Attn: Michi Takeda  
Hale Building  
175 N. Garfield Ave., 2nd Floor  
Pasadena, CA 91101

**Re: Projects by Onyx Architects at 139 & 150 S. Oak Knoll Ave. and 350 Cordova St.**

Dear Members of the Design Commission:

Pasadena Heritage has reviewed the three projects by Onyx Architects that are before the Design Commission this evening, and finds all three in need of improvement. In our view, all three are unnecessarily complicated, even convoluted, and generally come across as a combination of boxy forms, fins, materials, and colors that make the exteriors busy and unrefined.

We ask that the Design Commission challenge the architects to return with simpler, cleaner designs that better reflect the immediate contexts of each project and the greater context of Pasadena. We are choosing not to provide more detailed comments on the proposals, but want to suggest some frameworks for their reorganization. Notably, we are not objecting the height or massing at this point, because we believe the design needs to be reworked before height and massing can be evaluated.

The two buildings on Oak Knoll Avenue are quintessential four-story apartment buildings. They have underground parking and an elevator, but they are not that different from the four-story walk-up buildings built across the US in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. There is an excellent example of a brick walk-up apartment just a few blocks south, the Casa del Mar, at El Molino Ave. and Del Mar Blvd. West of these proposed buildings is the historic Mira Monte Hotel. Standing at three-stories, but with high ceilings, it is also comparable in size to the proposed buildings, and yet its simple forms and finishes contribute to a timeless look. Also nearby is the PUSD headquarters building at Hudson and Del Mar which is a refined, timeless building that makes an elegant statement. Although one of the projects, 139 S. Oak Knoll Ave., exhibits some classical design elements, they are not integrated into the overall building and appear more as add-ons than organic parts of the overall building.

For these two buildings, we ask that the masses be simplified. Both projects could adopt a T-shaped or barbell-shaped site plan, tried and true approaches for mid-rise apartments. The various boxes, balconies, and stepped volumes shown should be simplified and made more uniform. There needs to be a decision made as to the building cladding. Is it brick, plaster, or even board-formed concrete? All would be appropriate, but that cladding choice should cover a large portion of the primary façades.

There are two elements of the projects that could become more meaningful if developed further. The glass-enclosed staircase on the 150 S. Oak Knoll project can serve as a light-well to help

illuminate the street, increasing public safety. Architects on the East Coast and in Europe, where these mid-rise apartments are common, have used illuminated stairwells to good effect. The project at 139 S Oak Knoll shows the beginnings of a north-facing porches/patios, but they are not removed enough from sidewalk level for them to feel secure and inhabitable. We suggest they be reconsidered, removed or simplified.

The project at 350 Cordova St. presents different issues than the Oak Knoll projects. Cordova Street has mixed architectural character, including an interesting collection of Modern resources: the Whispering Waters apartments, the Corporate Center Pasadena (a.k.a. Pasarroyo), and the O.K. Earl corporate headquarters. Cordova is a street where good Modern architectural statements could add nicely to the streetscape.

For the Cordova project, we suggest that the design lean more intentionally into a Modern aesthetic, as opposed to the contemporary pastiche that is proposed. Simplified masses, textures, and palette could provide a more elegant solution, instead of breaking up the building into a composition of masses which we find unsuccessful and distracting. The site is large enough to allow three or four buildings that are in harmony with each other. The buildings have a favorable solar configuration, slender with a north-south orientation, so there is no need to divide up these buildings with randomly placed vertical masses. Instead, it would seem more natural to embrace the horizontality of the site. There are fewer case studies that we can point to influence this design, but we suggest looking at Whispering Waters in particular. There is also a modest four-story Modern apartment building at 601 E. Del Mar Blvd., just east of the site, that could inform the design. Finally, we suggest that for any design to be successful, the balconies need to be better integrated. They currently appear as stuck on appurtenances and should be better integrated to work with modulation in the façades and create sheltered places.

We hope that the Design Commission will provide direction and specific comments that improve these projects by simplifying and reorganizing them. We are, as always, open to working with the architect and developers to offer our input if they so choose. These projects will collectively add a lot of new units to Pasadena, but will also greatly change the southern portion of the Central District, so we maintain that the designs must be compatible and respectful of Pasadena.

Sincerely,



Susan N. Mossman  
*Executive Director*



Andrew Salimian  
*Preservation Director*