

SAN FRANCISCO HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

DRAFT Meeting Minutes

Commission Chambers, Room 400
City Hall, 1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102-4689

Wednesday, December 4, 2013
11:30 a.m.

ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW COMMITTEE Regular Meeting

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Hyland, Pearlman, Wolfram

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER BY COMMISSIONER WOLFRAM AT 11:39 a.m.

STAFF IN ATTENDANCE: John Rahaim – Planning Director, Pilar LaValley, Tim Frye - Preservation Coordinator, and Jonas P. Ionin - Commission Secretary.

SPEAKER KEY:

- + indicates a speaker in support of an item;
- indicates a speaker in opposition to an item; and
- = indicates a neutral speaker or a speaker who did not indicate support or opposition.

really not much we can say to improve the design as it is, but I do have some concerns about how the criterion which the design was evolved from. I think the height for the corners is too low. When we look at the historic block, both the Saks Fifth building originally was a much bigger building. The original building, the Hotel Plaza was much bigger than it currently is and this current design is lower than the Levi building and it has no relation to the other buildings on that corner - the Nike Store and the one diagonal. Even the renderings show that you are not looking at this from the intersection. The analysis that was done on the façade, I just don't think it holds, unfortunately. I think the point that it needed all these red lines on the façade itself kind of shows that it is false. When we look at the Biers Building, it doesn't need any diagramming. I find that concerning. The glass and the transparency, even in James' presentation, he talked about it is a building that will dissolved. The notion of having the base and the body and the capital and the capital is really, I'm glad you brought the model, because it's an optical illusion in the diagram to have a cap, the cap of the building doesn't really exist. In conclusion, I would say that I have several questions, but we can get to that. Unfortunately, it's a great design, and if the design standards and Exhibit E had been used as a criteria, I think it could have been equally wonderful. I don't see it, and I don't know where it goes at this point.

Commissioner Pearlman:

- It's a real privilege to be part of being able to even comment on this in this particular role. I agree with Commission Hyland that this is a spectacular design. I struggle with it because I have similar concerns as Commissioner Hyland has mentioned, that even the renderings, the only time you see the lines that are described as a tripartite composition is only when you are dead-on, straight-on. As soon as you go either way, in a slight angle, it reads like a big rectangle, that a piece of glass with as you said a proscenium arch, which is an apt description of this. But whether that fits into the District or not is the question. We will go through all the questions to describe that. I really struggle with this. Also, the Plaza. I grew up in the New York area and I know the Pali Park and I have also recently been to the Dow Museum of Art. The photographs that you have in the package, the fountain there against the Indiana limestone wall, I totally get that. I don't know about it competing, why you need another fountain when you have a fountain there. I assume the water wall would be a lot louder than the Asawa Fountain. But a beautiful space and clearly a very substantial improvement to what's there now. I appreciate that, but I really struggle with this excellent building in the wrong location.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- It brings up a lot about what the character of Union Square is and what this building's impact will be on Union Square, especially in the night views. I just returned from Hong Kong and Shanghai and when you are there, there are so many buildings that are all lit up and the thing is, it's all

lit up. You get this overwhelming kind of spectacular and magical effect of all these incredibly lit up buildings and the concern I have in the night view is like suddenly this building on the north side of the Square is all lit up and so vibrant, so exciting, is it going to make everything else feel pretty pedestrian and dull. Lit it's almost under-lit, like it is so...I mean in those night views, the other building façade are lit but they are not like this glowing, shining thing, is this going to be in Union Square at night? Is this going to be the only thing you can look at? Your eyes will be kind of have to keep coming back to it because everything else feel so pedestrian. There is a big question about that. I would say in my overall comments, I agree with both Commissioners that it is an elegant building. I think some of the things written about the compatibility were a bit of a stretch, like the glass fins. We know that you need the glass fins because the glass has to be supported and if you want it to be scale dividing features you would have put them on the outside, then they actually provide the scale. But the glass is going to be reflective in the day-time, especially with the coating, you are not really going to see the fins, just going to see the sheet glass wall. The question is that maybe it's okay. It's one thing to say we are going to buy that and it's fine to have this super crisp building, but it's another thing to say these glass fins are just like these scale dividing devices. It's just a bit of a stretch, I think, a lot of the compatibility argument. We try to figure out how much can we stretch, one hand we are trying to meet these standards and we think it's a great building, but a lot of things written are a bit of a stretch. They don't feel true, they are written like...we can start writing anything about anything at this point. That's sort of my overall feeling.

Commissioner Pearlman:

- Essentially the argument about the vertical actually diminishes the argument about the tripartite, breaking up of the vertical is diminished by the fact that you have these vertical lines, which don't carry the weight that a masonry building would. Especially at night, it will disappear, because as black with this light and glass from any angle it will look like a massive rectangular hole as opposed to all the little punched openings of all the classical buildings on the Square.

Commissioner Hyland:

- We are kind of left in an awkward place. The refinements to the design that we, that I could offer, I agree the fins on the outside might get closer to that, but does that really help the design? I don't know. The base - the door being on the center limits the base. If the door is off-center, or maybe there were two entrances so that one could be at grade and the other could be at steps would increase the base. I think the base is just left over.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- I would like to say that when I saw the diagram with the red lines I said that looks better. Having those strong lines suddenly feel like, I have to say when I opened up this package I kind of went like “Hah” it’s just like a big glass volume. It doesn’t feel like it has any sense of scale despite there are all these small details in terms of where you’re standing at Union Square looking at this all glass façade. I think those things pretty much disappear. And when there are those red lines, then suddenly it felt like there was some scale. I wish there’s a bit more scale to that all glass façade. It’s very evident that the objective here is to highlight Apple’s product, the excitement of being an Apple store, it is very successful with that. Whether it is successful being a building as one of many buildings in Union Square and not over shadowing the other parts of Union Square that would be the concern.

Commissioner Pearlman:

- One of the comparisons, I was thinking about the Cube in New York City at 59th Street. The difference there is that it’s a sculptural object in a big plaza. You have there a fountain on the opposite side in-front of the Plaza Hotel. You’ve got the frame that’s holding this beautiful object. But this doesn’t do that. This has to hold the corner and has to be part of the District and define the corner of Union Square. It has a completely different kind of objective. Also, I’ve seen so many of the Apple stores around the world in my travels. There is another store in New York, down at the Meat Packing District, is in a historic building. I would never presume to talk about the design from the standpoint that I’m not going to critique the design of Sir Norman Foster, but it seems for an architect from that caliber to address somehow either making a frame, somehow and then putting the glass box in it so there’ll be something to grab on to, to relate to the District. I don’t want to...it’s not a design exercise and that’s the challenge I think we have.

Director Rahaim:

- I appreciate your comments. What the Department is struggling with and I think what you are hearing is whether there is room in Union Square for a kind of simple volume like this for a building that actually, in my view, relatively small to meet the guideline and whether or not you believe they meet the guideline. I appreciate those comments. But whether it is conceivable that they meet the guidelines in a non-conventional way that they are proposing. It’s kind of, I think of this not dis-similar, I recognized the Bier’s Building is a different type of building but in some way it is not dis-similar from the discussion that we had over that project. One of the things for us is it comes down to the scale of the building. Is there room in the District like this, which is in the heart of the retail district, to have small buildings that are very unconventional in the way they approach the District, the way they approach the retail environment. My attitude about it has been that there should be room for this kind of, for lack of a better term, small jewel box in the district. For no other reason than to

accentuate their distinction from the truly wonderful historic buildings in the District. So that's the way we have been approaching it, while trying to meet some of the basic urban design parameters, like the windows on Stockton and Plaza and some other things. I just throw that out as a consideration because it's clearly not a building that proposes to meet the Secretary Standards in a tradition way, but the question is because of its size, I would agree it's relatively modest, and can it kind of meet those standards in a different way.

Commissioner Wolfram

- I think that's what we are all struggling with. For me the issue is the question of scale. I think about the SOM Manufactures Hanover Building in New York 5th Avenue - that's all glass cube that have broke the whole mold of the very solid building, but it had a much more curtain wall. It is much more defined. It had that sort of scale. For me, it would be improved if there is more sense of a scale, if, e.g., the fins is perhaps on the outside. It is just more of a sheet glass.

Director Rahaim:

- Just to ask to clarify the question. It sounds like you are not questioning the basic parameter and form of the building. Is that a fair statement?

Commissioner Pearlman:

- I have a question about that. My feeling is that I agree with Director Rahaim about the jewel box building and then they set off other buildings, but I think the problem with this one is that at the corner. We emphasize, in our Code, that corner buildings will always be bigger in the neighborhood, and here obviously, and the fact that this is so diminished as a form, it almost disappear. In a sense, looking at this aerial view the building doesn't hold the corner at all because the stainless steel, kind of disappears and the glass disappears and there is no mass at the corner at all. Even here, when you see it against some kind of back at school models, it is so light and delicate and elegant. I don't think that it actually holds the corner. One other thing, Macy's and the De Beers stores are both so clearly tripartite divisions with punched openings behind the glass curtain wall. So that's a 21st century view of putting a glass curtain wall, but still relating to the character defining features of the Conservation District. I think that's the difference. I agree that the jewel building if it's off the corner or in the middle directly opposite the hotel, the Westin Hotel, on the opposite side, as a beacon, as axial as the park is. I think there would be a lot more power to it.

Commissioner Hyland:

- I think the criterion, which the design was developed on, may have not considered a few things. I would suggest a seven-story building, similar to the other two buildings at the corner would hold the corner better. I

would propose that Foster and Partners are creative enough to deliver a product just as wonderful. I do know that, I did a...we talked about the legislation that is before the Board of Supervisors. My understanding is that you can at least go up to the existing footage. I was going to suggest that, there is no reason, if we are going through the legislation, we couldn't take it back to seven stories.

Director Rahaim:

- I think there's a challenge there. The reason for the legislation is because this building sits in the same parcel as part of the hotel development. That development as a whole exceeds the current FAR limits in the Code. Once you tear down a portion of that building, the way the Code works, is you should become more conforming to the Code if you are tearing down the building. What happens there is you can't build additional square footage because you are...the point of the legislation is to say if you're building less than the current square footage, it's acceptable. That's the idea.

Commissioner Hyland:

- I think that might be one idea, but if we are going through legislation we could very easily say this corner, this building, is significant enough to allow a seven-story building on this end of the parcel.

Director Rahaim:

- That could be a real challenge in terms of Planning Code, because suddenly you are saying to build more FAR than existed today, but way beyond existing.

Commissioner Hyland:

- Even with this we are exceeding it.

Director Rahaim:

- No, but I'm saying total will be less than what is existing today.

Commissioner Hyland:

- At least go up to that current total.

Director Rahaim:

- That is not a seven-story building.

Planner LaValley:

- I just want to interject quickly that while not typical on Union Square, the District has a wide variety of building heights and there are a number of buildings that are one or 2-story and there are those that don't have as strong a tripartite - base, shaft and capital - expression as you do with the taller buildings. So, just to keep that in mind, obviously the way it's

written in Article 11, it talks about having that composition but there are examples within the District where that composition is less evident for smaller shorter building.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- We should get back to the questions and why don't we start with the easiest ones, which are the last two - number eight and nine - Does the proposed approach to relocating the fountain appear appropriate? Do the overall proposed form and finishes for the Plaza appear compatible with the District? The existing plaza is terrible and I think the Plaza is a vast improvement. I'm so happy with the plaza, it's extremely successful. The materials, in terms of the stone and metal cladding, are fine, the biggest concern I have is the glass.

Commissioner Pearlman:

- I have one comment about putting stone as your proscenium arch. I understand your diagram shows it as the big chunky thing. I think the east wing of the National Gallery by IM Pei there is an edge that's 17 degree angle that you can cut your hand on, that's made of granite. So, it's certainly possible to achieve your vocabulary in stone. I don't have a problem with the color-wise and the material-wise, but it just seems like an ingenuous argument that we could figure out all these incredibly challenging things, but couldn't get the stone to work for us.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- Those are no. five and six. I don't have a problem with the fact that it's a modern building. It's more about some of the specific elements about the scale. Going back to the beginning. I think all of us, at least Commissioner Hyland and I, wish it could be taller. I think there's an FAR issue.

Commissioner Hyland:

- If it is a multi-tenant building, would be looking at a different design and this jewel box could be a multi-tenant building.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- So, in terms of the fact that they are maxing out the FAR. Given the FAR issues, I think the massing is appropriate on the site. The way it's pulled to the front and there's a plaza in the back.

Commissioner Pearlman:

- I think Union Square is a pedestrian experience. We are looking at this from an aerial view. From a pedestrian experience I think the massing and the height are OK. I agree that having more mass there would be useful, beneficial, but from the pedestrian point of view it's a much bigger building than I am. So, I think it fits that way.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- The question two, about the multi-part vertical composition, what are your thoughts there.

Commissioner Hyland:

- I don't see it.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- But is it necessary?

Commissioner Hyland:

- I think there are ways to achieve it and still deliver the design aesthetic of Apple and Foster.

Commissioner Pearlman:

- I think the answer is that, personally, I don't think the design is compatible with the District and that's a major design exercise. Then you get into what would make it compatible with the District and that's a major design exercise. We are not here to do. But the answer to the question for me is a beautiful building in the wrong location. I don't think this fits with the definition of this District.

Commissioner Hyland:

- We lose the corner. It doesn't bring that corner back.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- Then the question about the scale, No. three: Will the propose glass fins break up the glazing and No. four: The proposed glazed bay on Stockton Street breaks up the scale of the wall.

Commissioner Pearlman:

- I have a question. This rendering is at night, this one from Stockton Street in the night view. I think it's a little disconcerting because...I know the whole issue of the original design that it's all solid...the element...but, I grew up in New York City, so I look at that and I see a blank wall in an area where every other façade is all windows everywhere. So it feels a little dicey to me. I know Union Square isn't that dangerous a neighborhood, but that is what it looks like to me when I see the scale of the pedestrian next to the big blank wall. I don't know if, again, this is a design thing, but even little slot windows, something like that, I could even look in and light would come out. It doesn't break up the mass, that chunk of the wall of your proscenium still feels extremely solid, but somehow piercing it in a way that light would come out and then I could see in and know what's going to happen when I turn the corner. Because if I'm coming down the street and I don't know it's there yet...if I'm a visitor and I'm staying at the Hyatt and I walk down the street at night, I don't know what's going to

happen when I turn that corner, so that's going to make me nervous as a pedestrian in a new city. So the smallest little piercing could do something to, at least let me know there is activity. That just seems like a minor thing, but...

Commissioner Hyland:

- I have one minor question, but don't know it's necessary. Does this building have life after Apple? When we look at buildings in our context that should have a 100 year lifespan.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- The other part of the question is "do the fins adequately break up the glazing and contribute to the composition's vertical expression in a manner that is compatible with the District". I wish there were more scale dividing features in the front façade.

Commissioner Pearlman:

- That's like saying is there life after Levis Store. After Apple, who knows?

Commissioner Wolfram:

- I wish there were more scale providing features on that front façade, some sense of texture. I'm concerned with the glass with a low E coating; there is often quite a bit of reflection in low sun angle, then that would just be this, you won't see the glass fins at all, because the glass will reflect a little bit, it's not going to be as clear as those renderings are going to be and it's not going to have any texture on that façade. I wish it had more scale, more texture. I liked it better when the red lines are shown.

Commissioner Hyland:

- If the fins are outside, you would have the sense of the scale and texture of being broken up. It is a great design and if we mess with it, it is going to be diminished.

James McGraffe:

- Partly with the reflective quality of the glass it is very true. But it is also the balancing of light. Part of the reason of having the illuminated ceiling panels, when you have it on during the day, when you have light. Partly have the view through. If you get light through it you actually penetrate the glass visually. We have had this problem in the past, and it ended up being darker and solid. We discover when you can see through them, then you'll see daylight through the other side and that they become far less reflective than if you'd actually penetrate visually into them. The aluminum ceiling panels will also help with that. We built a mock-up of this. It's in your report as well. We tested the glazing coatings to get the balance and it really is the lighting issues that really help that. It helps see the glaze fins.

Commissioner Pearlman:

- What happens on a raking angle? If you are over towards the west of the Union Square and you're looking across, you are seeing that façade at raking angle, it's going to look much more solid.

James McGraffe:

- I think the internal light helps. Glass will reflect something.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- Commissioner Pearlman didn't think it's compatible with the district.

Commissioner Hyland:

- Then lays the question does it need to be. I would rather be more honest with the building and say that it doesn't and try to justify why it doesn't need to than to say that it does.

Commissioner Wolfram:

- I'm a little bit on the defense. I feel that, agreeing with Director Rahaim, I think there could be jewel box buildings that are of small scale in the District. My sense is, if you do that, there needs to be more scale providing features to this one.

COMMENT LETTER: L-0025

ADJOURNMENT: 12:39 PM