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# Architectural Review Board Report

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**Architectural Review Board Meeting: December 16, 2019**

**Agenda Item: 7.5**

To: Architectural Review Board

From: Scott Albright, Senior Planner

Cc: Stephanie Reich, AIA, LEED AP, Design & Historic Preservation Planner  
James Combs, ARB Liaison  
Russell Bunim, AICP, ARB Liaison

Subject: 19ARB-0457 to approve the building design, colors, materials, and landscape plans for a new three-story, 47,661 square-foot, mixed-use building with 46 residential units and approximately 13,735 square feet of ground floor commercial space, and a two-level subterranean parking garage.

Address: 2906-2918 Santa Monica Boulevard  
Applicant: DFH Architects

## **Recommended Action**

It is recommended that the Architectural Review Board approve application 19ARB-0457 based upon the findings and subject to the conditions contained within this report.

## **Executive Summary**

The proposed project is a three-story, mixed-use residential and commercial building containing 49,518 square feet of floor area. The project consists of 46 residential units, 12,080 square feet of commercial space, and a two level subterranean parking garage. Building and landscape design and material, as described in this report, are of high quality and comply with the design review findings. The project design has been revised in response to input received from the Architectural Review Board, Planning Commission, and City staff. Staff recommends approval of the building design and landscape plans.



Project Rendering as preliminarily reviewed by the ARB on March 4, 2019 – Santa Monica Boulevard elevation

## **Background**

### Preliminary Design Review

The proposed project was presented to the Architectural Review Board (ARB) on March 4, 2019 for a preliminary conceptual review. The general reaction to the design of the project was mixed. There was some support for the overall scale of the building mass and the upper level floating above the transparent ground floor to activate the pedestrian realm. Boardmembers also thought that the inclusion of residential units at the pedestrian level added interest and variety to Yale Street, and the patio spaces for the rear-oriented units increased their livability. To the contrary, Boardmembers commented that there was a disconnect between the overall design expression of the project and the inspirational imagery used to develop the design. Boardmembers had some issues with the material choices, particularly the brick where it was thought not to be well integrated or consistently utilized throughout the project, and the use of lpe wood.

In addition, while some Boardmembers appreciated the softening effect the use of living walls had on building massing, they believed caution must be exercised as these building elements demand consistent upkeep and attention, and their placement should be practical for maintenance purposes. The Board also suggested incorporating greenwall into the courtyard elevations if they are to be included for a stronger concept. Boardmembers also recommended consideration of greater differentiation based on solar orientation and other environmental considerations. Additionally, there was specific mention that the upper floor massing breaks along Santa Monica Boulevard could be combined into a larger singular, more meaningful break. The Board generally noted that the courtyard design, landscaping, and building configuration should be reconsidered to maximize its usability and improve the residential quality of life.

### Planning Commission review and approval

On September 4, 2019, the Planning Commission conducted a public hearing to consider the Development Review Permit and Vesting Tentative Tract Map for the mixed-use project, as rendered below. The project design had been partially modified in response to prior ARB feedback with the most significant being cosmetic alterations to the appearance of the ground floor level, expanded use of brickwork, a change to the overall ground floor fenestration to be more compatible with the upper stories, and incorporating more landscaping along the street.



Project Rendering as reviewed by Planning Commission on September 4, 2019 – Santa Monica Boulevard elevation

In general, the Commission had an overall positive reaction to the project and unanimously approved the requested Development Review Permit and Tentative Tract Map. Although the Commission complemented the project's overall scale and components of its massing, Commissioners identified design elements that were of concern and should be strongly considered by the Architectural Review Board during its review, specifically:

- The pedestrian orientation of the project along Santa Monica Boulevard;
- The upper story massing and massing breaks to maximize availability of natural light and air flow into the interior portions of the project and the courtyard;
- The upper story articulation along Santa Monica Boulevard and assuring that the angling of the center mass is meaningful, apparent, and deliberate;
- The design, layout, and amenities provided within the proposed courtyard;

- The integration of the proposed spiral staircases into the project design; and
- The design and materiality of the patio walls and landscaping buffer associated with the ground floor rear units adjacent to Santa Monica Place South alley.

As noted above, during the preliminary design review there was discussion concerning the practicality and viability of including “living walls” in the project design. At that time there was some disagreement about their use and effectiveness. However, during its review, the Commission took a strong stance on the matter and conditioned their inclusion in the project design, with their placement, use, and functionality subject to approval by the ARB.

Additionally, the Planning Commission provided direction to the ARB to pay particular to other project components that are outside of the Board’s purview or generally consist of details that will need to be included on final permit plans. They are as follows:

- The relocation of the trash room away from the ground floor residential units
- The location and placement of the EV charger stub-outs within the subterranean garage;
- The placement and location of any additional bicycle parking to be provided;
- The design of the retail/residential corridor on the ground floor to minimize disruption to the residential units;
- The depth of all landscape planters to ensure they are sufficient to support larger plants and should be a minimum of 36-inches;
- Work with appropriate City staff to reconsider the placement of palm trees along Santa Monica Boulevard.

In response to the feedback and direction given by the Planning Commission, the applicant has responded with the following:

- Elimination of the living walls from the building’s exterior street facing elevations and including their use on portions of the upper floor courtyard elevations (in the vicinity of the opening to Yale Street). This was originally suggested by the Board during preliminary review. The two proposed living walls will be sited to be more easily accessed which should provide more assurance of proper maintenance. Staff’s concern is the limited application of the living walls as it may not serve to enhance an architectural or landscape concept. Additionally, the amount of space devoted to this treatment is significantly reduced from what was presented to the Planning Commission in its review.
- A plan for the design of the courtyard amenity is included on LP-2 which indicates the space will include semi-active, passive, and circulation-related spaces. The

most active of the spaces, which includes a food prep area with communal table seating and a fire-pit with seating, are located on the western edge of the project where natural light and air-flow would be most abundant. Much of the passive space will help to buffer and screen the private outdoor patios from the activity of the courtyard.

- Swapping the location of the Trash and Recycle room with the Gas room providing a more protective distance and buffer for the adjacent ground floor residential unit.

The design of the units on the top floor level includes spiral staircase access to their private rooftop open spaces. The Commission was concerned that the circular design of these staircases is unusual given the overall orthogonal composition of the building’s design. The Commission’s direction for the Board was to contemplate a better integration of these features into the overall project design. Staff believes that, aside from relocating these to the interior of each unit, their integration could prove to be challenging resulting in a diminished transparency and design concept.

The Commission also directed the Board to strongly consider the juxtaposition and angling of the upper story massing along Santa Monica Boulevard to assure it is meaningful, apparent, and deliberate. Staff believes that the angling of the massing as presented will be apparent, but this condition may not be fully expressed in the rendered drawings of the project. If it believes otherwise, the Board may also suggest other considerations, such as lighting, materials, or color changes, if they would make the juxtaposition more apparent.

The Commission suggested working with appropriate City staff to reconsider the placement of palm trees along Santa Monica Boulevard. The Urban Forest Master Plan, indicates that for the segment of Santa Monica Boulevard between 26<sup>th</sup> Street and the eastern city limits, Mexican Fan Palms (*Washingtonia robusta*) will be the primary street tree planted within the right-of-way. Any change to this plan will require an amendment to the Urban Forest Master Plan.

**Project / Site Information**

The subject site is located on the southeast corner of Santa Monica Boulevard at Yale Street. Santa Monica Place South service alley forms the southern border of the subject property.

Zoning District / Design Guidelines:	MUBL – Mixed-Use Boulevard Low
Parcel Area (SF):	28,309 sq. ft.
Parcel Dimensions:	146’ x 194’

Existing On-Site Improvements (Year Built):	2906 Santa Monica Boulevard: Existing commercial building (Coogie’s Cafe) (1969).  2918 Santa Monica Boulevard: Existing two-story commercial/office building (1965) with rear surface parking lot.  All buildings and improvements were reviewed by the Landmarks Commission on October 8, 2018 and received the necessary clearances for demolition.
Historic Resource Inventory Status	2906 and 2918 Santa Monica Boulevard are not listed on the Historic Resources Inventory.
CEQA	Exempt pursuant to Section 21155.1 as a Transit Priority Project
Adjacent Zoning & Use:	North MUBL– one-story commercial retail. South R2 – privately owned community garden. East MUBL – one-story commercial retail/office building West MUBL – one-story commercial retail (Yale Center)

**Analysis**

Building Design/Architectural Concept

The proposal appears from the street as a series of two-story volumes over a transparent base punctuated with brick columns and pilasters. At Santa Monica Boulevard, the central mass is cantilevered over the storefront and canted back to further activate the street frontage. The building’s ground floor setback provides a protected gathering area as public seating or private outdoor dining. Along Yale Street, ground floor residential units interact with the street by having their primary access directly from the sidewalk.

On the upper floors, the rectilinear design continues and is expressed with large transparent surface areas (both glazed and open air) that are framed by narrower solid surfaces or broken by larger solid areas, providing a two-story reading for the upper volumes, which seems appropriate for the scale and size of the project.

Site Planning

The ground floor is programmed to contain commercial space, eight ground floor units, lobby areas, and appurtenant equipment rooms. The massing of the ground floor is setback up to 12 feet along the Santa Monica Boulevard frontage allowing seating and pedestrian amenities to enhance the streetscape. This condition wraps the corner onto Yale Street. Four of the ground floor units are sited in the rear of the project, adjacent to the service alley (Santa Monica Place South). Each of these units includes large private open spaces, and a landscaped planting strip to provide some protective buffering to the adjacent service alley, where access to the subterranean garage is provided.

### Building Mass and Scale

The upper portions of the building form fronting along Santa Monica Boulevard is angled, creating three-dimensional interest on the façade. At the corner, the massing straightens out as it wraps onto Yale Street. The angle also creates an interesting design opportunity at the courtyard.

### Landscape Design

Landscaping has been fully integrated in the project design, providing appropriate screening and softening at the building perimeter, and adding color and texture in the courtyard and the planters along the building edges, and the upper level community open spaces. On the ground floor, 24-inch box Coral Bark Japanese Maples (*Acer palmatum*) will be located in on-site planters along Santa Monica Boulevard. Movable low-scale walls containing potted succulents will be used to define the public seating areas and Texas Rangers (*Leucophyllum frutescens*) will delineate the private open spaces for the residential units fronting Yale Street. Within the upper story courtyard, 24-inch box Honey Locusts (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) and Fruitless Olive trees (*Olea europaea*) will provide filtered shade and will be primarily used in areas intended for passive seating. 15-gallon Alphonse Karr Bamboo (*Bambusa multiplex*) will be used as a screen along the second floor level along Santa Monica Place south service alley. Throughout the site a variety of drought-tolerant shrubs and ground covers such will add color and texture to this project.

The plans indicate the use of inset lighting throughout the site which should minimize impacts to adjacent properties. Ambient LED strip lighting will be used in the courtyard seating to provide a sense of warmth and depth to the space.

### Design and Detailing

The material sheet indicates a variety of cladding materials including standing seam metal siding, brick veneer cladding, and four-inch vertical wood siding wood (thermally treated). The storefront system consists of steel-framed glazing. The standing seam cladding and rails will have gray color tones. The transparent areas on the upper floors consist of steel framed coplanar windows and deeply inset balconies.

<b>DESIGN ELEMENTS</b>	<b>PROPOSED EXTERIOR MATERIAL, FINISH AND COLOR</b>
Façade	Standing sea metal siding (silver and graphite color) Brick 1 X 4 Thermory wood siding
Windows	Storefront with steel mullions
Doors	Storefront with steel frames
Balcony railings	Steel rail, painted black
Roof	unknown
Refuse Screening	Roll-down door
Lighting	Recessed soffit can lights; LED strip lighting

### Impact on Historic Resources

The subject property is not listed on the City's Historic Resources Inventory.

## **Code Compliance**

In the processing of the project's development review permit, staff conducted extensive preliminary review for compliance with the Zoning Code, including the base district's development standards, mixed-use design standards and Tier 2 requirements. There do not appear to be outstanding issues that could potentially affect the plans and result in significant changes to the project's design. A complete Code-compliance review will occur when the application is submitted for plan check. Any significant changes to the design subsequent to any ARB approval will require Board approval.

## **CEQA Status**

The Planning Commission determined that this project is exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to Section 21155.1 of the CEQA Guidelines, which exempts a special class of Transit Priority Project (TPP) determined to be a Sustainable Communities Project (SCP) by the local jurisdiction. The proposed project meets all of the necessary requirements set forth in Section 21155.1 as a Sustainable Communities Project and, therefore, is exempt from CEQA.

## **Summary**

The project design has been modified in response to preliminary review by the Board and based on comments from the Planning Commission. The design is more cohesive in design and clearer in concept and creates a project with enhanced livability that is created with its upper-story courtyard. The proposed design is recommended for approval based on the findings below, and subject to the conditions outlined, including the submittal of more complete project detailing.

## **FINDINGS:**

- A. The plan for the proposed building or structure is expressive of good taste, good design, and in general contributes to the image of Santa Monica as a place of beauty, creativity and individuality in that its design is a clear architectural concept reinforced by a variety of quality materials, and pedestrian-oriented ground floor commercial space. The design employs a palette of high quality materials and varying forms that are appropriate for the mix of commercial and residential uses.
- B. The proposed building or structure is not of inferior quality such as to cause the nature of the local neighborhood or environment to materially depreciate in appearance and value in that the building will use high quality material such as broad board concrete, planters, dual pane insulated glass, a combination of decorative metal materials, and outdoor living area that exceeds requirements, as detailed in the application submittal and as presented to the Architectural Review Board.
- C. The proposed design of the building or structure is compatible with developments on land in the general area in that it is similar in height and massing to other area developments along Wilshire Boulevard and within its context adjacent to a lower density residential neighborhood. The building is consistent with the design and use objectives articulated in the Land Use & Circulation Element (LUCE) for the Mixed-Use Boulevard Low district in which it is located.

- D. The proposed development conforms to the effective guidelines and standards adopted pursuant to Chapter 9.55 – *Architectural Review Board*, and all other applicable ordinances insofar as the location and appearance of the buildings and structures are involved. Specifically, the location and appearance of the buildings and structures comply with required findings set forth in Chapter 9.55, as documented by the Architectural Review Board, and as conditioned, the plans will fully comply with all applicable regulations prior to the issuance of a building permit.

**CONDITIONS:**

1. This approval shall expire when the administrative or discretionary entitlements, not including any Subdivision Map approvals, previously granted for the project have lapsed. If no such entitlements have been granted, this approval shall expire 24 months from its effective date.
2. Prior to the issuance of a building permit, the applicant shall demonstrate landscape and irrigation plan compliance with the City’s Green Building Ordinance standards (SMMC 8.108) subject to staff approval. Modifications to the landscape plan that effect less than 150 square feet of area may be reviewed and approved by the Staff Liaison to the Board.
3. Prior to the issuance of a building permit, the applicant shall demonstrate that the plans comply with all applicable provisions of the Zoning Ordinance. Significant changes to a project’s design shall require review and approval of the Architectural Review Board. Minor changes may be approved administratively pursuant to all applicable guidelines.

The Architectural Review Board’s approval, conditions of approval, or denial of this application may be appealed to the Planning Commission if the appeal is filed with the Zoning Administrator within ten consecutive days following the date of the Architectural Review Board’s determination in the manner provided in SMMC 9.61.100.

**Attachments**

- A. Applicant’s Submittal Material

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