



October 25, 2016

Subject: PLN16-117 - -1433 Webster St.

Dear Members of the Design Review Committee and Bureau of Planning staff,

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this project, located in the 15th Street Area of Secondary Importance (ASI), and facing important historic buildings—the White Building and the historic Oakland landmark Julia Morgan YWCA, built in 1915, which is also on the [National Register of Historic Places](#) (September 20, 1984, #84000755).

We support the staff's design comments, and particularly in recommending a significant setback along 15th Street, better treating the blank walls, improving the color, and redesigning the top of the building. The lower floors should reflect their context by using masonry surfaces that blend in better with the surface treatments of neighboring historic buildings. The Julia Morgan YWCA building at 15th and Webster is a highly important historic resource, in addition to the 15th Street ASI. This building is clad in light-colored brick. Opposite the east facade, the diminutive White Building and the brick building facing it again partake of a generally light and warm-colored palette. Deeply punched windows, light-colored masonry buildings, and terra cotta ornamentation are common elements found in the neighborhood. The top of the building as designed would be clunky, much too heavy and large in scale.

With regard to its siting and massing, we urge that the building be studied for its impact upon key views from Lake Merritt, particularly from the E. 18th Street Pier, an important public park vantage point (see attached photo), so that the view of City Hall will be retained. We believe that the building as designed will block this view. The project massing should be modified and repositioned, if necessary, to preserve this view.

We question the request for added height. It is not clear why the portion of the building within Height Area 2 needs such a major exception to the Area 2 height limit of 85' to allow a height of 353.5' to accommodate the 30 additional units resulting from the density bonus. Can further explanation be provided? We ask whether it is worthwhile to pursue a density bonus for only 8 units of affordable housing. Is the city implementing the density and height regulations in a sensible way? Might we rather have impact fees, more compatibly sized buildings, and be able to produce additional affordable units off site? Are 8 units enough to gain for increasing height from 85 feet to 353 feet?

We urge greater study of how the building fits in to its historic surroundings. Below are the Design Review findings for projects in ASIs within the Central Business District (Section 17.136.050B.3 of the Zoning Regulations). The findings are not included in the staff report, but should be included and discussed going forward. How this building relates to the YWCA building is of critical importance. One cannot overstate the importance of this corner landmark.

Overall, we feel that this proposal is not ready to go forward to the Planning Commission. As designed, we do not believe that the project conforms with Findings a., b., or c. below, and therefore must either be redesigned or referred to the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board as required by Finding d. Probably it should be redesigned and then brought back to the Design Review Committee.


Here are the Design Review findings for projects in ASIs within the Central Business District:

Approval of an application for a project that requires Regular Design Review Approval involving a DHP or PDHP outside of an API may be granted only upon determination that the proposal conforms to any applicable criteria in Chapter 17.136 and either meets each criteria (a), (b), and (c), or only (d), below:

- a. Any proposed new construction is compatible with the existing district and/or building in terms of massing, siting, rhythm, composition, patterns of openings, quality of material, and intensity of detailing;
- b. The proposal reflects the quality and visual interest of the building and/or ASI, or otherwise enhances the visual interest of the building or ASI;
- c. The proposal does not disqualify an ASI as an ASI; and
- d. If a project does not meet either finding (a), (b), or (c), above, approval of applications for projects may still be granted, but only after a hearing in front of the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board for its recommendations and determination that the proposal meets the following criteria: The proposal will result in a signature building within the neighborhood, City, or region based on qualities including, but not necessarily limited to, exterior visual quality, craftsmanship, detailing, and high quality and durable materials.

Thank you for the important work you are doing. Please contact our office at 763-9218 or Naomi Schiff at 835-1819 if you would like to discuss these comments.

Sincerely,



Alison Finlay
President

