



Meeting Date: Thursday, September 23, 2021

Planning Design Review Sub-Committee Memo

Robertson Lane: Mixed-Use Project

Planning Commission Design Sub-Committee Members:

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Rogerio Carneiro
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City of West Hollywood Staff:

City Architect: Ric. Abramson, FAIA (Manager, Urban Design & Architecture Studio)
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Planning Manager: Jennifer Alkire, (Current & Historic Preservation Planning)
Project Planner: Antonio Castillo, (Current & Historic Preservation Planning)
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Applicant's Primary Design Team:

Architect on Record:

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Property Owner/Developer:

Robertson Court
659 N. Robertson Blvd.
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Applicant Contact: Jake Stevens

Site Address: 45 - 681 N Robertson Blvd. & 648 – 654 La Peer Drive
Site Area: 84,504 sf (1.94 acres).
Zoning District: Robertson Lane Specific Plan

Project Summary:

The project site consists of six parcels. The combined site area is 84,504 sf. This proposal seeks to amend an a previously approved entitlement on 6/4/18. A detailed summary of the original application and the amended application in terms of its use, height and areas is detailed in the amendment application for Robertson Lane – attachment A. The project now contains two components, the previous approved hotel/mixed use project and a new commercial corner called “The Treehouse” containing multiple small restaurants on two levels and a night club and storage over two sub-terranean floor levels.

Briefly in summary the size of the building FAR has been reduced by 18,562 sf. However, when non-FAR space is included, the overall project size has increased by approximately 30,000 sf. Hotel rooms are reduced from 237 to 109. Restaurant and outdoor dining has been reduced to 12,090 sf. from 22,717 sf. Retail space stays approximately the same at 25,386 sf. The nightclub and meeting/banquet rooms are approximately the same while the hotel gym/fitness center is now 12,498 sf. up from 5,039 sf. The greatest increase consists of an adding 35,744 sf. of office and an increase in showroom space

from 21,758 sf. to 41,773 sf. Parking has remained at 750 stalls. It should be noted that the Treehouse adjacent and to the north will have its parking located in this structure. Code requirements are for 400 stalls.

Height is being increased towards the western side from 103 feet plus rooftop structures to 126 feet plus roof top structures. Height along Robertson Boulevard is being preserved at 51 feet. See plans for details.

It should be noted that The Factory, a place of significance in West Hollywood, is being preserved and integrated into this project and will be located for its full length along Robertson Boulevard. Adjacent sites to the north and to the south and across the streets are mostly one and two story structures.

The site spans between La Peer Drive and Robertson Boulevard. It is located just south of Santa Monica Blvd. and is just south of the Treehouse project which is being processed at the same time as this project.

Below is a summary of the proposed amendments:

- **Development Permit Amendment (DVPA)** to allow development of the Modified Project, a multi-story approximately 238,016 square-foot building with varied building heights including four levels of offices uses, a hotel with 109 guestrooms, associated meeting rooms, retail, restaurant, and nightclub, and 750 parking spaces with a revised configuration with the following minor changes:
 - Relocation and reconfiguration of some of the allowed uses and the replacement of hotel uses with office uses on four floors as shown on the accompanying drawings resulting in:
 - a net decrease of 18,562 FAR square feet (resulting in a total of 238,016 FAR square feet);
 - Decrease of 128 guestrooms, from 237 guestrooms to 109 guestrooms;
 - Addition of 35,744 FAR square feet of office uses;
 - Increase of 12 program-related parking spaces from 280 parking spaces to 292 parking spaces for the Modified Project plus 108 parking spaces for the adjoining Treehouse project for total program need of 400 parking spaces while continuing to provide 750 required parking spaces per the Robertson Specific Plan area.
- **Conditional Use Permit Amendment (CUPA)** to decrease the number of guestrooms by 128 guestrooms for a total of 109 guestrooms and to allow hotel operations to include sale of alcohol for off-site consumption from an approximately 133 square foot space on Level 1 of the hotel, adjacent to service lobby and hotel office space.
- **Minor Conditional Use Permit Amendment (MCUPA)** to revise the configurations and areas allowed to have alcohol sales and service for on-site consumption;
- **Administrative Permit Amendment (APA)** to revise the configurations and areas of outdoor dining;

- **Certificate of Appropriateness Amendment (COAA)** to approve modified structures adjacent to the Factory Building with no changes to the preservation, relocation, reorientation, and rehabilitation of the Factory Building as previously approved in 2019 with the Approved Project; and
- **Vesting Tentative Tract Map Amendment (TTMA)** to merge and re-subdivide the site for commercial condominium purposes to reflect the Modified Project's proposed configuration.

As noted this project was submitted and previously approved on June 4, 2018. There have been numerous design iterations and meetings with staff and design consultant subsequently. The program has changed in significant ways and along with it the architectural design. In general, at the Robertson Lane portion of the project, this has led to an improved and more activated pedestrian experience in most cases. The Treehouse corner is less resolved and from

an urban design perspective less refined as it could be on such an important corner. As a substantial project in a significant location along Robertson Boulevard, it is consequently of great significance to the city and its residents. Staff has provided feedback in previous discussions or meetings. Most of the comments below have been shared with the applicant team in the past.

GENERAL DESIGN COMMENTARY

This analysis has been prepared for the Design Review Sub-Committee and public to solicit design-driven feedback prior to this project proceeding to a full public hearing at the Planning Commission. Urban Design & Architecture Studio Staff has met with the applicant team over several calls to discuss design comments and suggestions provided to them during previous submittals. With each submittal, the project's design has improved and grown in greater alignment with city goals and policies.

In addition to the **building design** proposal itself, the Urban Design & Architecture Studio shapes its review and commentary on three specific points of emphasis based on adopted City plans, policies, programs, and initiatives:

- a. Activated **urban context with urban programming and site design** that emphasizes strong pedestrian-oriented design and that accommodates neighborhood-serving smaller businesses where possible.
- b. Heightened **building performance** that uses creative design, materials, and systems to tailor Green Building Code responses as site specific performance-based strategies.
- c. Elevated **environmental responsiveness** that uses thoughtful site planning and orientation to employ passive design principles, lower energy consumption, enhance thermal comfort, foster natural habitats through integrated green spaces, and promote greater health and wellness through multiple dwelling unit and commercial space exposures to natural ventilation.

The following design-related observations are provided for the Sub-Committee and members of the public to consider and discuss as part of their informal feedback and suggestions prior to the project design being finalized and brought forward for consideration during a formal public hearing before the City Planning Commission.

I. Building Design: Massing, Scale, Formal Composition, & Amenities

From a building design perspective, the revised program for this project is unique and remains specific to its site. The Lane, as an urban promenade, comprises the key organizational site device that links La Peer to the west through to Robertson Boulevard and WeHo Park beyond. Ultimately, should a connection from La Peer to Almont be realized in the future, the city could realize a true walking district in the Melrose Triangle area. From an urban design standpoint, the outdoor laneway functions as a core spine that is inherently pedestrian in its nature. Any architectural, wayfinding, material patterning or landscaping elements that can enhance walkability are to be commended. By its nature as an open unsecured promenade, the laneway itself functions like a privately-owned public space (POPS). However, to the extent that it could be made into a truly public engaging environment (through programming, events, urban design features, etc.) it would be an even-greater asset to the community and to the project as a whole. Additionally, this project seeks to realign and integrate The Factory, an existing structure and place of significance to the community. Finally, the project contains programs that speak to the creative and entertainment-oriented nature of the city. Large assembly-driven entertainment, dining, offices, and hospitality uses are both an asset and a burden as such uses bring an intensification to this area. Great care should be taken to mitigate and enhance higher-intensity aspects of the project.

With respect to overall massing, formally opening the north hotel block into two pieces instead of a single-block mass previously proposed is a strong move. It will greatly reduce the impact and appearance of the large hotel forms from Santa Monica Blvd and allow for greater thermal performance at the individual building skins. Beyond the massing, staff encourages even more extensive shading strategies and window operability to achieve the highest performance possible.

At the urban scape, ideally the West Hollywood Park across the street from the Lane on Robertson should be tapped into and embraced more aggressively into the project. This might include strategic elevated observation point, paving and raised street crosswalks that create continuity as well as with emphasis by use of landscaping and other hardscape elements.

The applicant represents that the public will not be entering the subterranean parking. Parking staging will occur at curbside around the block perimeter with private attendants required to take cars down and retrieve them. Given the size of this project, curbside service is something that would have to be studied carefully and vetted fully. Level B3 seems a particular challenge, even for valets as triple tandem stalls are being staged in primary circulation drive aisles which would not be acceptable. Adequate back up zones, valet staging areas, and attendant program spaces should be integrated into the design. More information is needed on the proposed loading zone area as it is unclear whether or not adequate turning radii and back up space are being provided. Finally, large amounts of “unprogrammed” space or storage space in the subterranean levels seems excessive for a project like this. Given that there are no substantive planted areas on the property that are founded on native soil, this unused space could be put to fare greater benefits to the environment and the community.

II. Urban Context, Program Activation & Site Design:

All of the landscaping is accommodated superficially employing decorative strategies in planters resting on concrete slabs. It is desirable that selected garden areas are more than decorative planting zones, that they are predominantly permeable, and landscaped as active pedestrian-engaging spaces with public-oriented amenities. Robertson Lane is a missed opportunity for specimen trees especially at the easterly end. It is understood the parking is of crucial importance, however, this could be a moment when a substantial tree could be placed to make a mark, but is instead dedicated to an access hatch to the transformer. Even providing a substantial depth in a tree well such as the full 15 feet could be transformative. The landscape design team is strongly encouraged to reconsider this approach and provide more restorative strategies that reflect some of the city's goals for the environment.

The applicant team is also encouraged to work with staff to ensure safe crossings strategies at Robertson Blvd, especially to mitigate jay walking to the Abbey or WeHo Park.

The westerly end of the Lane at La Peer has been vastly improved by removal of the on-site driveway for pickup and drop-off. The pedestrian quality of the sidewalk has been greatly enhanced. Now vehicles enter the building through a 90° driveway. The exit driveway should be reduced to the minimum feasible width. The entry driveway should be reconsidered. This is a three-lane driveway. One of the lanes appears to be a drop off zone but servicing only one vehicle. This does not seem to be very effective. Reducing into two lanes would be desirable. Otherwise provide a pedestrian refuge.

The Lane has become more effective by creating a full width pedestrian way without the center landscape strip. The applicant is encouraged to continue to treat this space has a major pedestrian highway with blade signs and wayfinding elements at each end. Ideally, storefronts should not be greater than 25 to 50 feet.

The proposed design indicates valet and ride share along La Peer and Robertson. The applicant should ensure that these varying uses are coordinated to effectively work. In particular, the applicant should understand how high usage periods such as events would be handled. Is there sufficient curb space for valet parking as well as for rideshare?

III. Building Performance & Materials:

Energy efficiency and resource conservation strategies are a substantive part of the City's climate action and green building objectives. Thoughtful orientation of buildings, integration of building systems, and use of high-performing, natural or recycled materials are encouraged.

Overall, the project overall proposes high-performing, more durable and eco-friendly primary materials. The Lane buildings will be clad with glass and metal to maximize natural light, and utilizes large glass panels to achieve a frameless look. Limestone colored plaster and warm dark metals are integrated throughout the development.

IV. Environmental Responsiveness:

Environmental responsiveness plays a big part of climate action, sustainability, and resiliency planning. It includes understanding each site's unique eco-system and elevating the built environment and building interiors through integrating passive design principles, emphasizing biodiversity, combating heat island, encouraging flora/fauna, emphasizing natural light and air, conserving energy by filtering nature's forces (sun, wind, rain, etc.), and accepting a stewardship role with respect to the use of low carbon materials, etc.

Given the size of the site, the absence of any portions with native soil and true canopy trees and associated eco-system is a serious concern in today's understanding of climate. Planted roof decks helps address heat island but does little to help with wildlife propagation, soil based eco-systems, aquafer health etc.

Another consideration is related to the exposure of the Lane to the elements. Similarly configured projects are oftentimes lined by colonnades, integrate arcades, overhead skylights, or wide bridges that allow for coverage or protection during inclement weather. While rainfall is not a large problem in this climate, those days where there is rain coupled with those days that have direct afternoon sun exposure do suggest that some sort of device(s) are worth exploring for comfort of the visitors/patrons.

Treehouse Component

A two-story indoor-outdoor restaurant driven design at the corner is a very appropriate use for this location. However, the architectural resolution as proposed does not reach the level of thought and quality found at the Lane adjacent. Proportionally the Restaurant/Kitchen space constitutes 35% of the total. 65% is allocated for night club and unprogrammed space for which the intensity is difficult to analyze without more information. Concerns about queuing on the stair down to the nightclub have been expressed and remain. The applicant is encouraged to create program space (i.e. a lounge type of space) that could provide a safe and comfortable space while waiting for entry into the club.

The Treehouse portion of the project is less successful than the Lane from a quality material standpoint. All exterior or roof top mechanical equipment should be shielded or otherwise protected from direct exposure to the sun.

There is no public-oriented, welcoming entry access from the parking to the restaurant and dining on grade. This seems like a missed opportunity to funnel patrons into the food court to the detriment of the restaurant tenants. The applicant is encouraged to explore alternatives. Furthermore, the absence of public access to the roof top or a second floor overlook oriented towards the WeHo Park from an elevated point of view is a missed opportunity from an urban design perspective.

The project's narrative suggests a height of 65 feet for the tree component. Base height limits can be exceeded up to 12 feet for performance based architectural projections that have specific functional purposes. A tree sculpture would not constitute a functional architectural projection. The applicant is encouraged to reduce the height or confer with the Planning Department regarding alternatives or requests that might be requested.

The tree itself is largely obscured at its base on the ground level as the seating and umbrellas engulf it and the second level bar and canopy encases and obscures it. The narrative refers to the intent of the corner is to create an iconic landmark. From an architectural and urban design legibility standpoint, it misses the mark. There are multiple moves competing for the eye and a formal and material language that seems to compete with itself. There is no singular urban image that is clear and unadulterated as is normally present in signature or iconic urban moments. If the intent is to become an icon, the applicant is encouraged to search for what that signature might be and situate it in a manner that it is fully legible and that extracts undeniable recognition for what it is intended to be.

Conclusion:

From a design and urban programming perspective, the Lane portion of the amended project is very well thought out and of high-quality. The overall design of the building is well-crafted with elegant and refined detailing. The project aspires to create an urban center than accommodates density sustainably. Numerous strong ideas have been thoughtfully integrated. Yet the treehouse portion still could use more development. Staff very much appreciates the applicant team's engagement with the city's analyses, questions, suggestions, and its willingness to rethink certain design strategies. The proposed design solution has been heightened at each submittal. The Subcommittee is encouraged to solicit public input and provide design-related feedback to the applicant team regarding next steps in the design review process.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Current Plans, 645 N. Robertson Boulevard (Robertson Lane Mixed-Use Project)
- B. Current Plans, 8954 Santa Monica Boulevard (Treehouse)