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Vocal Locals

Standard Pacific plans to build new homes in Pasadena, Calif., around historic mansions and formal gardens.

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By Teresa Burney

You'd almost have to be a reality TV writer in nearby Hollywood to come up with a plot line for a development challenge as extreme as the former Ambassador College site in Pasadena, Calif.

The scene: A 17-acre site along Pasadena's famed Millionaire's Row, replete with eight historic mansions, elaborate gardens, and 650 majestic trees.

The cast: Developer Dorn Platz, Standard Pacific Homes, Sunrise Senior Living, and nearly a dozen groups of Pasadena residents who could easily be described as hyper-activists, super vigilant to change.

The challenge: Find a way to profitably develop the land while preserving the site's historic features and pacifying the locals.

The solution (pending city approval): Carefully shoehorn 70 high-end town-homes and condominiums, as well as 200 condos for seniors attached to a 44-bed assisted living facility set among the trees and around the gardens and mansions, and make everything blend as seamlessly as possible.

Dorn Platz, in partnership with Standard Pacific and Sunrise Senior Living, saw value, aesthetically, historically, and politically, in treading lightly on the property. "It's one of the most beautiful sites in the San Gabriel Valley," says Kevin Maguire of Dorn Platz. "It's got beautiful open spaces, 100-year-old trees, mansions on the property that are significant. ... The challenges are, how do you pay for the site and how do you make the site work?"

Not to mention how do you get the famously change-averse local activists to buy into your development plan? An earlier developer who planned to scrap the site and start new, moved on after running into a buzz saw of opposition.

So it was clear from the beginning to Dorn Platz and its partners that they would need to include local activists in the planning processes from the start to have any chance at success.



THIS OLD HOUSE: The Merritt Mansion is one of five that would be preserved under the proposed plan to redevelop the former Ambassador College site.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

“We have been working with all the stakeholders of the project to ensure that each entity's interests are taken into consideration,” says Steve Ross, director of planning for Standard Pacific's Los Angeles division. The developers even hired a community outreach consultant, long-time Pasadena resident Margaret McAustin, to help work with the locals.

“For a year and a half, we have convened neighborhood meetings every month with community stakeholders,” McAustin says. “We have discussed the project in greater detail than you would get from reading the paper. They have been able to influence the design and react to the location of buildings.”

As a result, the developers are not expecting any surprise objections in early fall when city hearings begin on their development plans. “The response that we have had so far [from the public] has been favorable, and they definitely appreciate the extent to which companies, such as Standard Pacific, have allowed participation in the process,” McAustin says.

Figuring out how to build new buildings while preserving as many of the mansions and gardens as possible has been tedious, to say the least, developers say. It took at least a year just to get the building footprints figured out. “But we have been able to lay in those things [new buildings], and it made economic sense while leaving large parts of the site untouched,” Maguire says.

“There are numerous constraints,” says Ross. “Not the least of which, the site is populated with over 650 mature trees, many which are protected under the city tree ordinance.”

Dorn Platz submitted a 6-inch-thick environmental impact report on the proposed development over the summer. “And the one on the trees is probably 8- or 9-inches [thick],” says Maguire.

Standard Pacific is planning to build 70 condominiums, with an average size of 2,800 square feet and price tag of about \$1.5 million, on four parcels totaling four acres on the campus. Each buildings will be designed to take on the architectural character of the historic buildings that surround them.

“Ideally, the goal is if you were walking through the campus, you would get the sense that the new buildings were always part of the setting,” says Ross.

Sunrise, too, took its time figuring out how to fit 200 condominiums for seniors connected to an assisted-living component on the land. “We have done some squeezing, especially around the trees,” says Wayne Sant, senior vice president of development for Sunrise Senior Living.

HISTORIC TIES

The development will maintain existing gardens around the new buildings and plans to connect the buildings to the existing Merritt Mansion, which was built in the early 1900s by Hulett Merritt of U.S. Steel fame. Sant says it will be used for receptions and small group activities.

The interiors of the site's eight mansions were altered by Ambassador College for dormitories and offices. In all, Dorn Platz is proposing to save five of the eight former mansions. Three are too rundown to be rehabilitated, the developers say.

One mansion, Terrace Villa, is expected to be sold as a single-family home. Two others, one built in the Tudor-style and the other with the look of an English cottage, will likely become part of Maranatha High School, which is adjacent to the property. The fifth is being used by Dorn Platz for an office, says Ross.

Maguire thinks the Dorn Platz development plans have turned into a win-win situation for the city, as well as the developers and builders. "The city is going to have an amazing site," he says. "The key historical structures are staying, and we are going to make a little money, even though that wasn't the motivation at the end of the day."

Property Lifeline

- **1885–1930s:** Mansions (winter homes) built for wealthy industrialists on Pasadena's Millionaire's Row.
- **1947–1990:** Ambassador College, a mission of the Worldwide Church of God, operates on the site.
- **1999:** Legacy Partners propose to redevelop the college campus for residential use.
- **2002:** Legacy Partners withdraws its plans.
- **2002:** Worldwide Church of God with Shea Homes submits plans to redevelop the site.
- **2004:** Worldwide Church of God and Shea Homes withdraws plans.
- **2004:** A portion of the site is bought by Maranatha High School as a new location for the Christian preparatory school.
- **2005:** A development team led by Dorn Platz is assembled for the rest of the site.
- **2006:** Public hearings are scheduled to begin on rezoning the land.

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