

# History, density are uneasy neighbors in Pasadena

Residents say a pair of developments planned near Old Town threaten the district's character. City officials say they favor smart growth.

By TONY BARBOZA  
Times Staff Writer

Before Disney Hall and Segerstrom Hall, Ambassador Auditorium in Pasadena was renowned as one of the premier concert halls in Southern California.

Now it is at the center of tensions over the development of one of Old Town Pasadena's last relatively open spaces.

The 1,262-seat glass-and-concrete structure, surrounded by an elegant reflecting pool, opened in 1974 and is now owned by Harvest Rock Church, a non-denominational Christian congregation that draws about 1,000 worshipers each Sunday.

The auditorium is the cultural heart of the former Ambassador College campus, a 48-acre parcel that was owned by the Worldwide Church of God until 2004, when it began selling off the land in chunks to Harvest Rock, a school and two developers.

One of those developers, Pasadena-based Dorn Platz, plans to build more than 300 condos and apartments on 20 acres of the property. The bulk of Ambassador West, as the project is called, would be a six-story senior housing complex next to the auditorium. The plan has church officials feeling boxed in. Although they do not oppose the project, they say it will dwarf their worship space, which doubles as a concert venue for the California Philharmonic and other area orchestras.

"Why does it have to be so big?" asked Doug Huse, director of operations for the church. "It's too huge. It's too massive. It overpowers the neighborhood."

The project is one of two major housing complexes slated for the campus, where lush gardens with fountains and manicured lawns are dotted with well-kept period-revival mansions that used to be part of "Millionaires' Row" along Orange Grove Boulevard. Together, they will bring more than 1,000 new dwellings to Pasadena, a city of 141,000 that for decades has been described as built out.

"There are certainly no other



**TWO VIEWS:** A building on the former Ambassador College campus is reflected in a pool near Old Town Pasadena. Portions of the old campus have been sold to developers, a school and a church.

20-acre parcels sitting around," Mayor Bill Bogaard said.

The Pasadena City Council is expected to approve the new project, which has the support of historic preservationists and the West Pasadena Residents' Assn., on April 2.

In September, the City Council approved the development of an "urban village" of 820 residences and 22,000 square feet of commercial space, called Westgate, at the eastern end of the campus. It will be the largest housing development in the city's history and is expected to break ground this fall.

Those projects will complement Old Town's commercial space, placing consumers within walking distance of Colorado Boulevard's shops and restaurants, and giving them less reason to drive, said Mike Winter, a senior vice president of Sares-Regis, the developer of Westgate.

But some are concerned that the housing will further increase the density of the already traffic-congested downtown and change the character of a historic area. Pasadena has in re-

cent years embraced smart growth — building high-density condos and apartments near commercial areas and transit lines. The city's downtown development boom has taken place alongside criticism that its growth model is unrealistic and that the new condos and lofts detract from the city's stately past.

Chris Sutton, a land-use attorney who grew up in the neighborhood and has represented anti-development residents, called the promises of high-density growth "inconsistent" and "hypocritical."

"Wealthier people see their city becoming more congested and overbuilt, and poorer people see the city becoming too expensive to live in," he said.

Sutton also doubts that new residents will abandon their cars in favor of the nearby Gold Line. "The people who can afford that level of payment and rent are going to buy two Mercedes-Benz and drive to downtown L.A.," he said.

"The community has known for years that the property was going to be developed," said

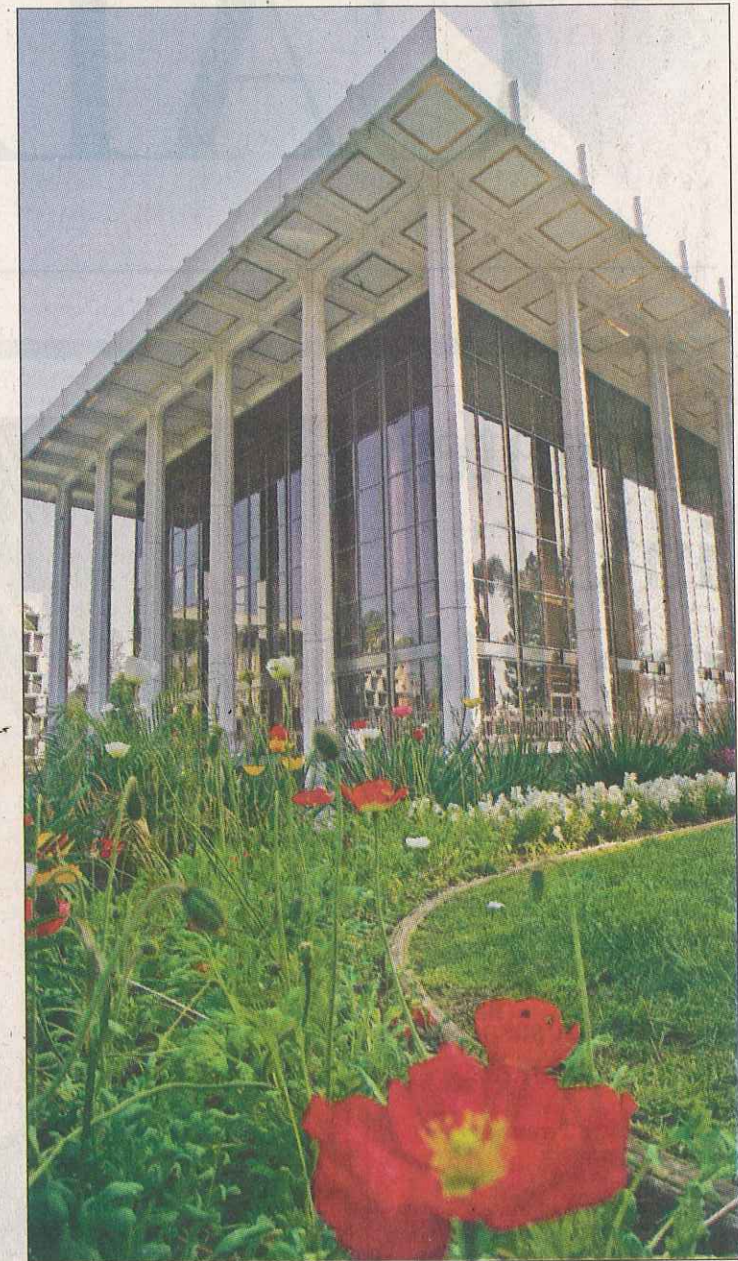
Greg Galletly, president of Dorn Platz. "The plan that we've brought forward fit within the community's expectations."

A General Plan allowing higher-density, mixed-use development, adopted in the mid-1990s, was the harbinger of the move toward smart growth in Pasadena, Bogaard said. The intention, he said, was "to reduce dependence on the automobile. The hope is that our downtown will be vital and exciting."

Since then, there has been a surge of mixed-use, high-density development centered around the city's Old Town district along Colorado Boulevard. Among the projects is Del Mar Transit Village, a now-completed housing complex built around a Gold Line station a few blocks east of Ambassador West.

Critics say the city has gone overboard.

Sue Mossman, executive director of Pasadena Heritage, a historical preservation group, said she supports the Ambassador West plan because no historic buildings will be demolished but remains concerned



Photographs by MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

**HALL:** A six-story senior housing complex is being planned next to Ambassador Auditorium, above, where church services are held.

about the effect it will have on the city's character.

"The lesson is that we are victims of our own success," she said. "Forty years ago, you couldn't get people to build new housing in Pasadena. Now that the community is recognized as a beautiful, economically vibrant and historic place to live, suddenly its popularity has risen astronomically. The development pressure here is tremendous."

Galletly defended Ambassador West as a modest development. Seniors, who will occupy most of the new condos, drive less and have less of an impact on traffic and noise, he said.

He also said the plan leaves

72% of the open space on the former campus intact and preserves historic mansions built near the turn of the 20th century that sit on the property.

Preservationists and neighborhood groups were satisfied with the latest development plans, which are far less ambitious than previous proposals that called for as many as 2,000 units.

Fred Zepeda, president of the West Pasadena Residents' Assn., said the effect will be minimal. "I don't know how it gets much better than this while still having development."

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