



May 20, 2021

Mr. Guido Periscone  
Community Development Department  
City of Los Altos  
One North San Antonio Road  
Los Altos, CA 94022

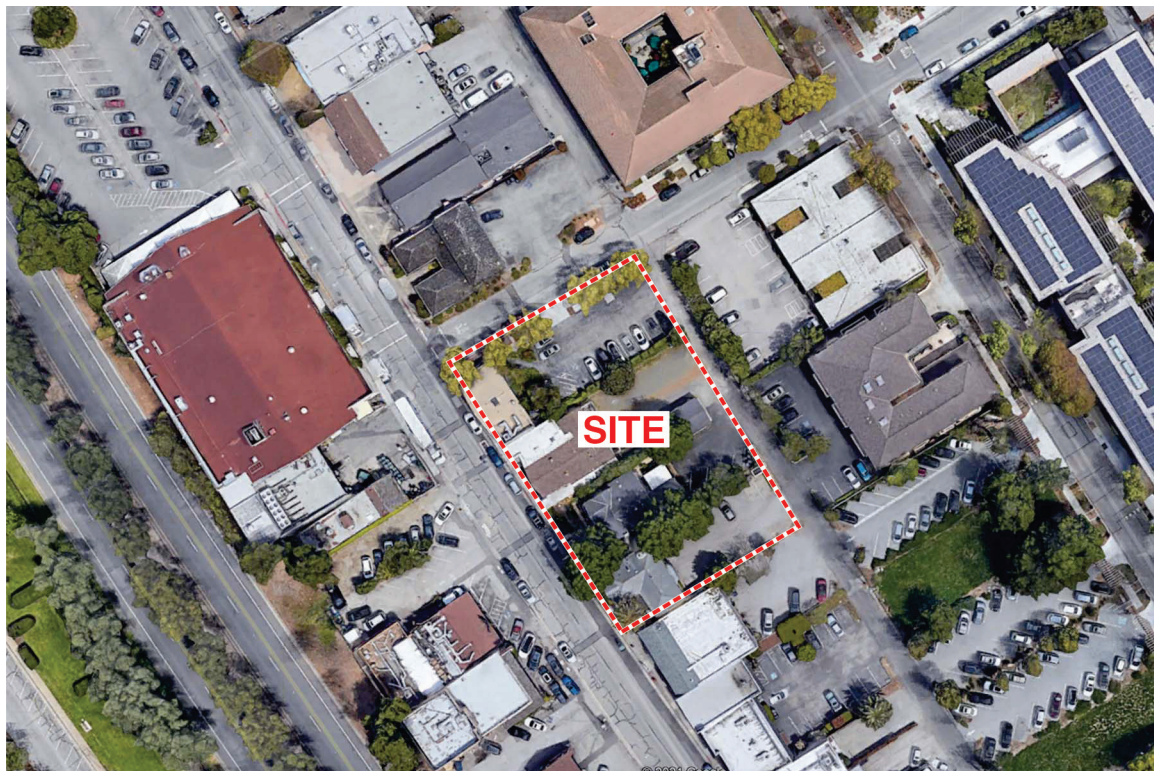
**RE: 355 FIRST STREET**

Dear Guido:

I reviewed the drawings and evaluated the site context. My comments and suggestions are as follows:

### **SITE CONTEXT**

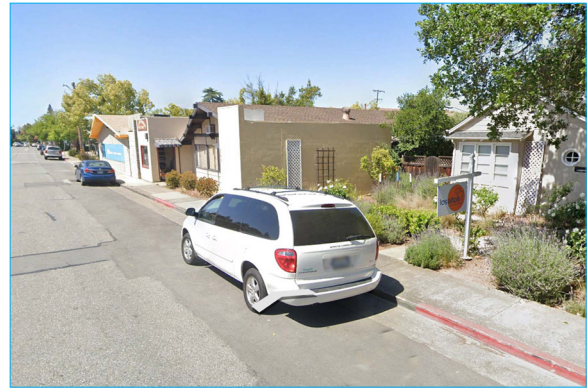
The site is located in the CD/R3 Downtown/Multiple Family District in an area characterized by older one and two-story commercial buildings. New development along First Street has started to occur in recent years. Four other multifamily developments have been recently approved along First Street. Photos of the site and immediate context are shown on the following page.



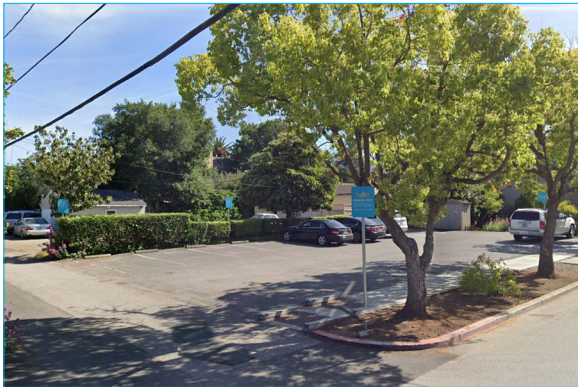




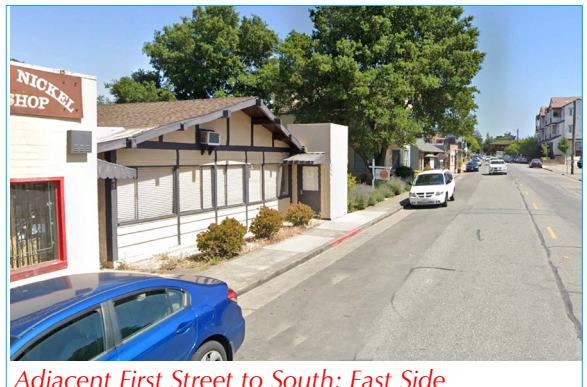
*THE SITE at Corner*



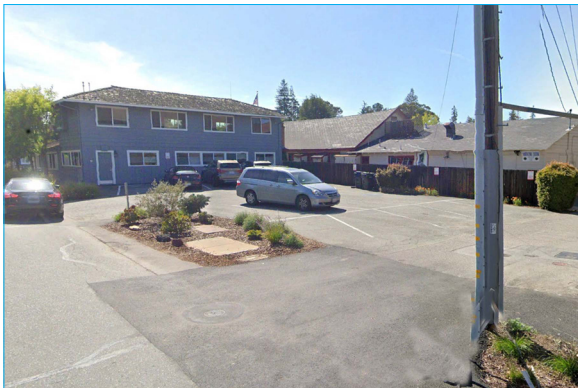
*THE SITE: First Street Frontage*



*THE SITE at Alley*



*Adjacent First Street to South: East Side*



*Parking lot immediately across Whitney Street*



*Parking lot immediately across Alley*



*Commercial building across First Street*



*Commercial building across Whitney Street*

## DESIGN REVIEW FRAMEWORK

The following applicable Zoning Code Sections, plans and guidelines apply to this review:

- Downtown Design Guidelines
- Commercial/Multi-Family Design Findings (Zoning Code Section 14.78.060)
- CD/R3 District Design Controls (Section 14.52.110)

The Commercial/Multi-Family Design Findings and the CD/R3 District Design Controls provide guidance for the development of this site, but are less specific than the Downtown Design Guidelines. The Downtown Design Guidelines include the identification of defining Village Character Elements and specific guidelines for the Downtown Core District, Mixed Commercial District, and First Street District. The First Street District design guidelines include some guidelines unique to the First Street District, but also contains the following introductory text.

### *FIRST STREET DISTRICT*

***Owners of properties and businesses in this district should review the guidelines for the Downtown Core District. While projects in this district may be somewhat larger and less retail-oriented than those in the downtown core, they are still very much a part of the downtown village, and the village character and scale emphasis underlying those guidelines will be expected of new buildings and changes to existing properties in this district.***

### *INTENT*

*A. Promote the implementation of the Los Altos Downtown Design Plan.*

*B. Support and enhance the downtown Los Altos village atmosphere.*

*D. Respect the scale and character of the area immediately surrounding the existing downtown pedestrian district.*

Specific relevant design guidelines include the following:

### *5.2 ARCHITECTURE*

*Building uses and sizes will vary more in the First Street District than elsewhere in the downtown. The goal of these guidelines is to accommodate this wide diversity of size and use while maintaining a village scale and character that is complementary to the downtown core.*

#### *5.2.1 Design to a village scale and character*

*a) Avoid large box-like structures.*

*b) Break larger buildings into smaller scale elements.*

*c) Provide special design articulation and detail for building facades located adjacent to street frontages.*

*d) Keep focal point elements small in scale.*

*e) Utilize materials that are common in the downtown core.*

*f) Avoid designs that appear to seek to be prominently seen from Foothill Expressway and/or San Antonio Road in favor of designs that focus on First Street, and are a part of the village environment.*

*g) Provide substantial small scale details.*

*h) Integrate landscaping into building facades in a manner similar to the Downtown Core District.*

The following narrative text and guidelines on the next two pages from the Downtown Design Guidelines would seem to be relevant to this proposed project:



### **DOWNTOWN VILLAGE CHARACTER**

*Today, it is a closely knit series of subdistricts with slightly differing use emphases and design characteristics, held together by an overall village scale and character. That unique scale and character has been nurtured over the years, and has become even more of a community asset as many other downtowns in the Bay Area have grown ever larger and lost much of their earlier charm.*

### **ARCHITECTURAL STYLE**

*These guidelines are not intended to establish or dictate a specific style beyond the desire to maintain Downtown Los Altos' small town character and attention to human scale and detail. In general, diverse and traditional architectural styles that have stood the test of time are preferred.*

*Designs merely repeated from other cities or without thought to the special qualities of Los Altos are strongly discouraged, and unlikely to be accepted.*

*The following design guidelines are intended to reinforce that existing framework, scale and character.*

#### **3.2.1 Continue the pattern and scale established by existing buildings**

*a) Maintain and reinforce the underlying downtown 25-foot module along all street frontages. Some techniques for this emphasis include the following:*

- Changing roof parapet height and/or shape.*
- Utilizing different building heights, architectural styles, and forms.*
- Utilizing different awning forms and/or materials ... matching the predominant building module.*
- Changing storefront type and details.*
- Defining storefronts with projecting piers and emphasizing tenants' unique store personalities.*
- Reinforcing the module with second floor projections and details.*

*b) Break larger buildings up into smaller components.*

- Divide longer facades into individual smaller segments with individual design forms and architectural styles.*

*d) Utilize awnings and canopies at windows and entries.*

*e) Provide cornices and building tops consistent with the architectural style.*

- Avoid unfinished wall tops in favor of projecting cornice features or roof overhangs.*

*h) Utilize natural materials. Wood, stone, and brick can provide warmth at storefronts, and enhance the feeling of village scale and character.*

- Wood doors and window frames are strongly encouraged.*

*i) Enhance the pedestrian experience with interesting architectural details.*

- Individual trim elements should be scaled to be or resemble proportions that could be handled and installed by hand. Elements on any portion of the structure should not be inflated in size to respond strictly to building scale, but should also have a relationship with human scale.*

*j) Provide special storefront and facade lighting.*



**3.2.4 Design second floor facades to complement the streetscape and Village Character**

a) Provide second floor entries that are equal in quality and detail to storefront entries. Some techniques to accomplish this emphasis include:

- Special awning or roof element.
- Wrought iron gate.
- Decorative tile stair treads and risers.
- Special lights.

b) Relate second floor uses to the pedestrian environment on the street level.

Some methods of achieving this include the following:

- Second floor overhangs
- Bay windows
- Decks
- Balconies
- Planters.

c) Utilize operable windows in traditional styles.

**3.2.7 Design larger structures to be sensitive to the unique scale and character of Downtown Los Altos**

b) Avoid architectural styles and monumental building elements that do not relate to the small human scale of Downtown Los Altos.

c) Provide special design treatment for visible sidewalls of structures that are taller than their immediate neighbors.

- Sidewall windows are encouraged where codes allow and adequate fire protection can be provided.
- Employ design techniques to relate the visible sidewalls to front facades. Some common techniques include the following:
  - \* Repeating front facade finished materials, decorative details and mouldings.
  - \* Carrying front facade cornices and wall top projections around all sides of the upper floor.
  - \* Providing varied parapet heights to avoid a box-like appearance.
  - \* Utilizing gable and hip roofs to vary the height and appearance of side walls.
  - \* Treating side walls with inset panels.
  - \* Integrating interesting architectural details.
  - \* Stepping back the front facade of upper floors to vary the side wall profile.

## PROPOSED PROJECT

The project consists of four floors of residential units over a subterranean garage.



*First Street / Whitney Street Intersection Facades*



*First Street Facade*



*Whitney Street Facade*



*Rear Alley Facade*

## PLANNING COMMISSION STUDY SESSION

(January 21, 2021)

The Planning Commission held a study session on the project on January 21, 2021. Major concerns and comments from that meeting include the following:

*Source: Planning Commission Minutes*

## PUBLIC COMMENTS

1. *The project is a massive cube and needs more articulation.*
2. *This is a missed opportunity, and this project belongs on El Camino Real.*
3. *The 15% affordable BMRs is too low, and should be at least 20%.*
4. *The fourth floor needs a setback.*
5. *Traffic concerns.*

## PLANNING COMMISSION CONCERNS

1. *This is a massive building.*
2. *The fourth floor could benefit from some setbacks and better articulation.*
3. *There are missed opportunities.*
4. *Building should incorporate a peaked roof along Whitney Street.*
5. *The 46-foot-tall architecture is not redeeming.*
6. *Does not know if the material mix works.*
7. *Could the project be toned down in some manner.*
8. *Design needs work.*



9. *Parking is good / appreciate that no lifts are used.*
10. *Impression that the project has been designed from the inside out.*
11. *The rear elevation has balconies, and is more successful than the front.*
12. *Could the units be made smaller to make them more affordable / fewer and smaller units would require less overall square footage.*
13. *Asked if a mixed use project has been considered.*
15. *Think about downtown walkability and pedestrian scale.*
16. *Good start, but more works needs to be done.*
17. *This is an opportunity to create a buffer zone at the sidewalk between the pedestrian zone and the building.*
18. *The middle light well creates a tunnel effect.*
19. *Agrees that this is a little too bulky for First Street.*
20. *The Objective Zoning Standards being considered by the City would require a different building with more step backs at the upper levels.*
21. *Appreciate the vision to group parcels.*
22. *Four stories is the future for the City.*
23. *The proposed design does not have a downtown pedestrian feel, and would be more appropriate for El Camino Real.*
24. *Suggested the architect pay attention to the Objective Zoning Standards being developed by the City.*
25. *The building needs more vertical and horizontal articulation.*
26. *The building reads as one larger expanse, and could be articulated better.*
27. *Recess the upper floors.*
28. *Have more than one entrance.*
29. *More landscaping would be better.*
30. *Needs a softer transition between the building and the back of the sidewalk.*
31. *The building could be warmed up with smaller bays, and different use of materials.*
32. *Concerns with privacy related to the window placement and style.*
33. *Needs a more residential feel.*
34. *More thought and detail need to be given to the balconies.*
35. *Roof deck needs to insulate noise and light to neighbors.*
36. *Back alley widening is a plus and needed.*
37. *The City should take time to revisit the parking space widths to get more spaces as the applicant suggested.*
38. *Agreed that the building would be more appropriate to El Camino Real.*
39. *Less bulk and mass would be better.*
40. *Need more space for children and families.*
41. *Project could use more affordable units.*
42. *Project does not appear as a "residential" development.*
43. *Design is lacking, and does not fit into our downtown.*
44. *Building is the same horizontally and vertically.*
45. *Review the corners.*
46. *Too heavy a form at the top of the building.*
47. *May be too dense.*
48. *Project lacks Village Character.*
49. *Lacks a mix of heights.*
50. *Materials need more work because the building looks heavy and has too much similarity.*
51. *The entry is underwhelming for a 50-unit building.*
52. *The interior courtyard square footage could be used in a better way.*
53. *The design does not go beyond what is required.*
54. *Consider how this building will relate to pedestrians and the community.*

### COMPARISON WITH RECENTLY APPROVED MULTIFAMILY DEVELOPMENTS ON FIRST STREET

Four multifamily projects have been recently reviewed and approved - see illustrations below.



The projects at 389, 425, and 440 First Street have three stories of residential units above grade while 450 First Street and this project at 355 have four stories above grade. A comparison of the projects' First Street facades are shown below at a matching scale.





## DESIGN EVALUATION

The proposed design is well done, and in some other location outside of Downtown Los Altos, might be welcomed. However, the community expectations for development within Downtown Los Altos, as expressed in the city's *Downtown Vision Plan* and *Downtown Design Guidelines*, asks for much more than would perhaps be expected in another city or even for another location within Los Altos.

*The vision plan states that Los Altos is committed to a community-focused, economically viable, and village-scaled Downtown through:*

- *Maintaining the village character unique to Los Altos while also allowing small, incremental change through implementation of complementary land use and parking policies.*

*Likewise, the Downtown Design Guidelines clearly states that development within the First Street District is expected to feature Village Scale and Character design forms and details.*

Satisfying these community expectations requires a seriously focused design effort, but is especially challenging for larger developments such as 355 First Street. The recommendations in this letter focus on addressing the commissioners' concerns, and modifying the proposed design to better address the issue of Village Scale and Character. Recommended changes will focus on the following:

- **Enhancing the Village Scale and Character of the development.**
- **Enhancing the residential character of the development.**
- **Reducing the visual mass and bulk of the structure.**
- **Reducing the perceived height of the structure.**
- **Enhancing the pedestrian experience.**
- **Softening the design with materials, colors and details.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The illustrative First Street elevation shown below is one way to incorporate the design goals into future design modifications. Other approaches that adhere to the design goals are, of course, possible, and design refinements to the elevation shown would be expected in any case. The basic floor plans, floor heights and windows have not been changed in the illustrative recommendations to minimize potential conflicts with the building's functioning, and to allow an apples-to-apples comparison. When I review the design of challenging developments like this one, I first identify the issues, and then look through the thousands of project examples in my files to find ones where similar conditions have been successfully addressed. In this review, the recommended approach draws heavily from projects which have successfully applied building forms and details to reduce visual mass and height while adding details that would be complementary to the community's expectation of a project design with Village Scale and Character as a primary goal.

The recommendations below draw on several successful projects, but the basic forms and concepts are drawn from a somewhat more urban context in Vancouver, B.C. where a four-story residential development has been designed to fit comfortably with smaller scale nearby residential neighborhoods - see photo below.



**ILLUSTRATIVE ELEVATION RECOMMENDATION**



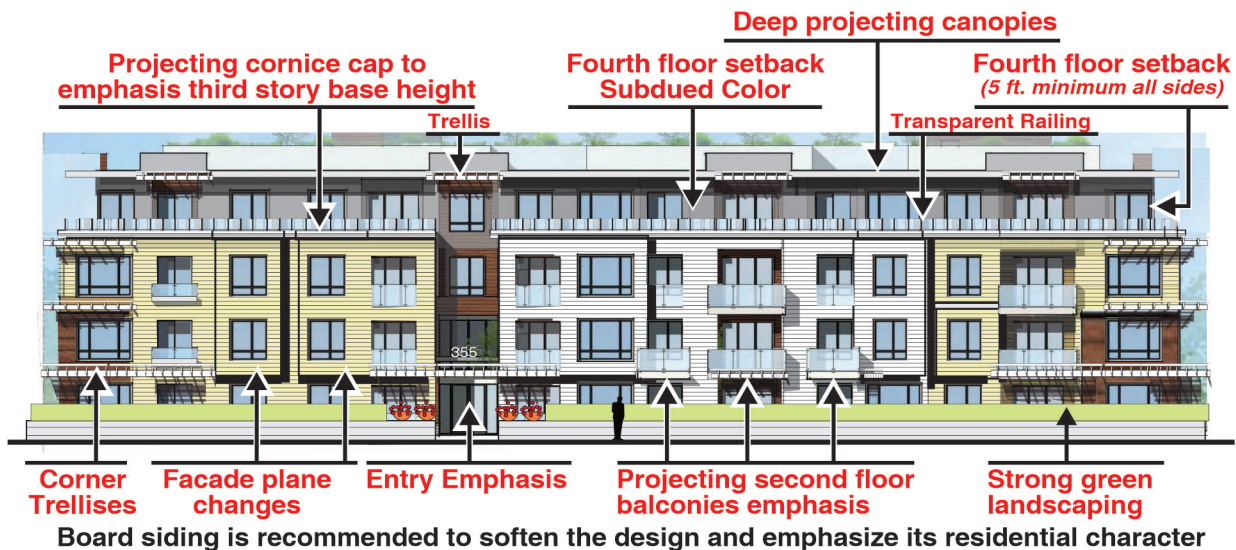
CURRENTLY PROPOSED FIRST STREET ELEVATION



RECOMMENDED FIRST STREET ELEVATION

**RECOMMENDED DESIGN TECHNIQUES**

1. Strong ground floor focus on the pedestrian experience and first floor residential units livability.
2. Small scale architectural detail at the second floor level to stress pedestrian scale and strengthen residential character with balcony activity close to pedestrian level.
3. Entry emphasis with architectural detail and landscaping.
4. Significant setback of fourth floor, and muted color and detailing to visually subordinate the upper floor.
5. Building corner architectural detailing.
6. Break up of large building facades with color, facade and/or material changes.
7. Facade articulation through recessed windows and balconies.





## RECOMMENDATIONS COMMENTARY AND EXAMPLES

### OVERALL BUILDING FORM AND ARTICULATION

Some of the basic principles one might draw from the Vancouver example are shown on the photos below.



These principles have been incorporated into the recommended First Street elevation above. One other successful approach is shown in the San Mateo Metropolitan Apartments project below. That approach provides additional facade step backs beyond those shown on the recommended elevation.





## GROUND FLOOR TREATMENT

There are two challenges that need to be addressed. The first is to enrich the pedestrian experience, and mitigate higher density development constructed near bounding property lines. The second, for projects that include residential units on the ground floor adjacent to pedestrian ways, is enhancing the living environment for the ground floor units and providing privacy to each unit. The currently proposed design, shown in illustration below, fails to address either of these issues.



The recently approved four-story multifamily project at 450 First Street is the one most closely resembling 355 First Street. The sketch below shows the First Street frontage landscaping approved for that project.

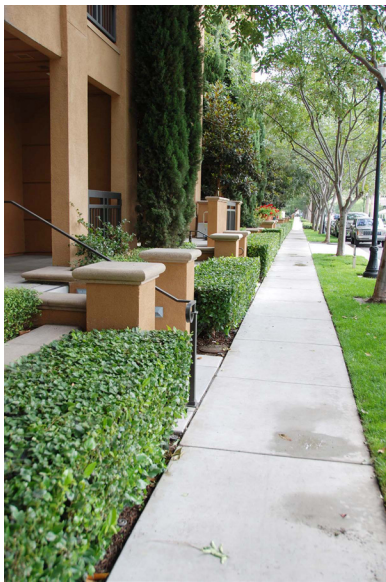




Another approach, used for the Vancouver example described above, is to totally shield units adjacent to sidewalks with usable patios and tall buffer landscaping - see photo below.

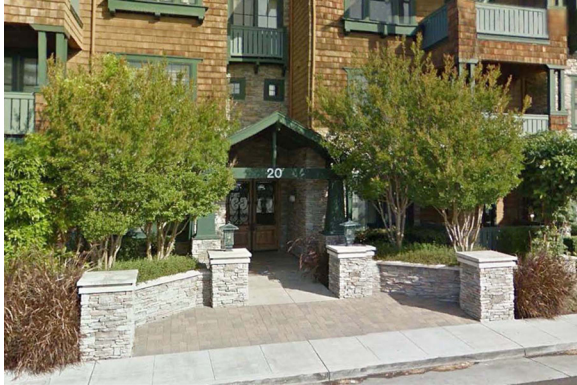


A few other common setback buffer examples are shown below.



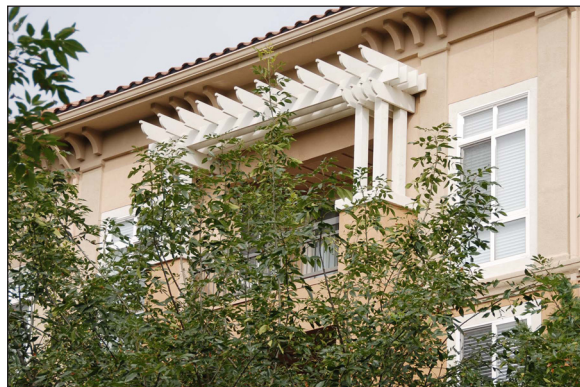
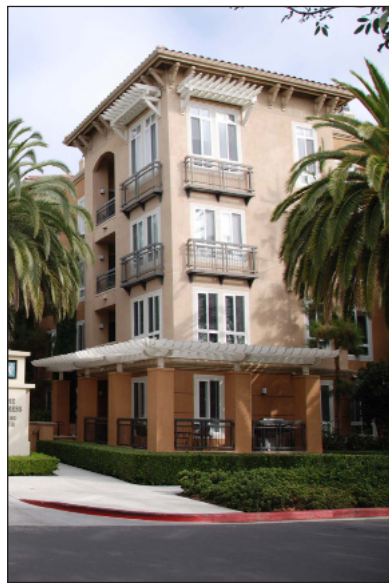


The building entry is an integral part of the ground floor treatment. To respect the village scale and character intent, it should not be large or formal. Treating it as a part of the landscaping, as shown on the recommended elevation, would be an appropriate approach. The photos below show a couple of examples.



### **CORNERS AND TRELLISES**

Trellises are a useful element in adding architectural detail to a multifamily residential facade - both as corner elements and as accent to individual windows and balconies. Its repetition across a facade can provide a visually unifying design element - see examples below.



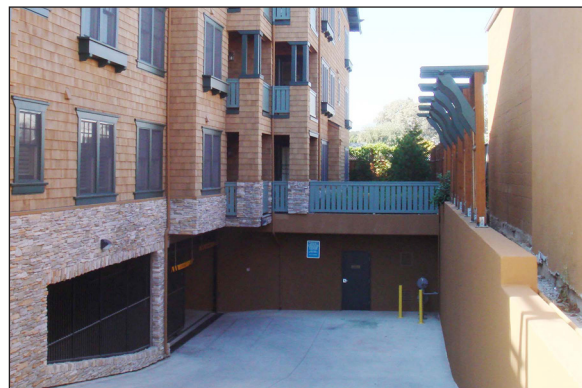
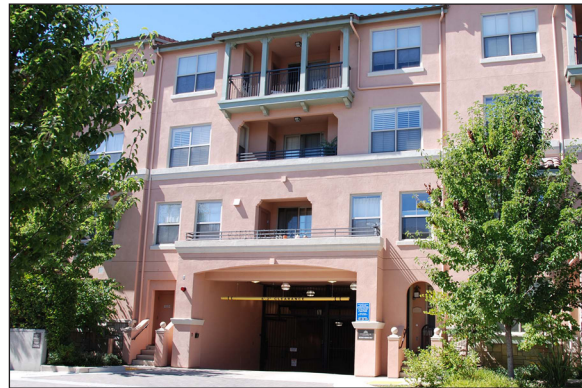
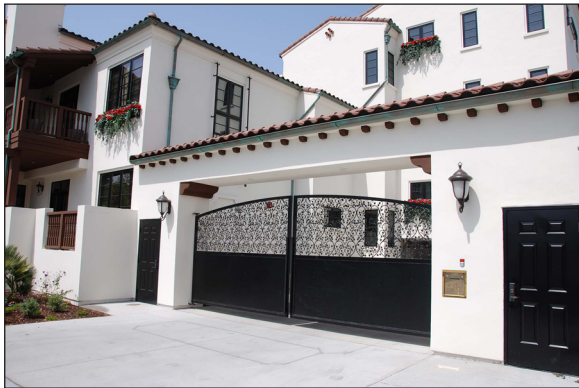


## GARAGE ENTRIES

The currently proposed facades related to the garage entry would benefit from some additional design attention - see facade segments below.



Designing the garage entry to better integrate it into the overall building facade would result in its blending into the design rather than standing out as a focal point. A couple of examples are shown below that are integral to the overall design,



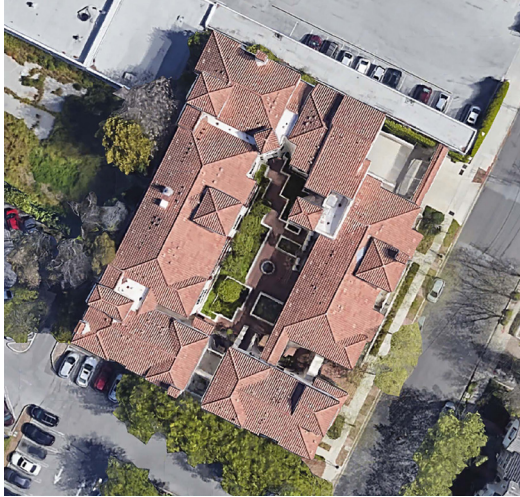
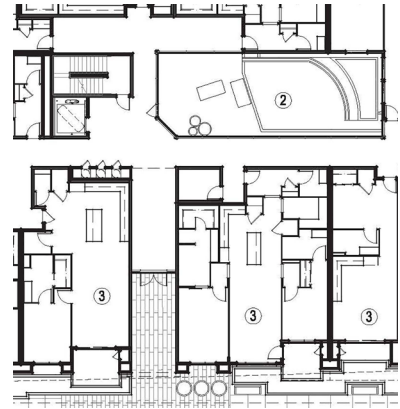
*Note that the garage entrance here is more than a concrete box. Side wall materials and heights seek to improve its visual appearance.*

**INTERIOR COURTYARD ATRIUM**

The proposed entry courtyard atrium seems like a lost opportunity. It appears to be surrounded by glazing at the first floors and all floors above grade.

There may be some special code provisions that are driving this design, but I've seen other open air atria in multifamily housing that seem more human and visually pleasant.

The courtyard atrium in a Mountain View multifamily project shown below is similar in size, but has a more open feeling.



Landscaping within these courtyards provides another special challenge since they are located on top of the below-grade garage parking enclosure.

The simplest approach is to place landscaping in

raise planters, as shown in the photo to the to the right. While that can allow some mature plantings, it can in some cases feel a bit like a mouse maze, Planting beds can be brought nearer to the floor level, but require special structural accommodation in the garage structure. Potted plants can also provide greenery without the continuous walls of the raised planters. Also, the courtyard atria can have other special landscaping features. The fountains below are both within small courtyards over parking structures.



Steve, please let me know if you need anything further.

Sincerely,

CANNON DESIGN GROUP

Handwritten signature of Larry L. Cannon in black ink.

Larry L. Cannon