July 3, 2024

Noel Cross + Architects

Development Review Committee
Town of Los Gatos Development Dept.
110 East Main Street
Los Gatos, CA 95030

RE: Proposed Single Family Residence
200 Happy Acres Road, Los Gatos, CA

SUBJ: Project Description/Design Narrative

To Whom It May Concern,

The following letter serves to describe the above referenced project and illustrate how the proposed design falls within spirit of the Town of Los Gatos Residential Hillside Design Guidelines. The proposed high quality residence has been sensitively designed to fit carefully into the existing site topography, preserve the numerous mature oak trees and hillside landscape, and to be compatible with the existing neighborhood character, while taking advantage of the limited views and limited sun afforded by this steep wooded site. We are proposing a new two story Earthy Modern home with a below grade basement, accessed by the existing driveway off the planned cul-de-sac at the top of Happy Acres Road (private right of way). The proposed project also includes a new at grade swimming pool and rear terrace.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

The following discussion items address the specific Residential Hillside Development Standards and Guidelines, and per Town of Los Gatos Municipal Code Appendix A - "How to Read Your Neighborhood" and the Single Family Residential Design Guidelines Handbook dated October 6, 2008.

General Observations -

The parcel is zoned Single Family Hillside Residential HR-2½, so the project will be subject to the Hillside Development Standards and Guidelines. The site is not visible from any of the Town's viewing platforms, and not on a ridgeline, as demonstrated by the visibility study submitted with the design review package.

This 2.728-acre (net) site is characterized by steep slopes above and below a previously graded, relatively flat (and vacant) building site. The site is accessible via a recently approved re-graded and widened roadway that leads up to the existing flat building pad. The site is generally very steeply sloped, is heavily wooded with native oaks in many portions of the lot, and the lower portion of the lot also has an ephemeral (seasonal) drainage swale. Most of the utilities that serve the property are provided in a utility easement along the Western edge of the parcel.

Given these existing geographic features, the site is extremely constrained as to the available LRDA, such that much less than 20% of the site area is available for development. There are over 50 protected oak trees on the site, and roughly a dozen large oaks closely surrounding the existing home and building site, all of which have been documented in the attached Arborist Report. These mature trees provide for a generally secluded feel, relatively well screened and protected from views to and from the immediately adjacent neighbors. Several of the smaller volunteer oaks and two walnut trees are proposed to be removed by the planned home, as the flat portion is the only truly available building site. Over twenty replacement trees have been proposed per the landscape plans.

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Neighborhood Context -
Happy Acres Road includes nine existing neighbor's homes on similar sized lots, most of which are two story, with a range of eclectic styles. The nearest adjacent neighbor at is a two story contemporary Ranch Style home, set deeply into it's site across the cul-de-sac. See paragraphs below for more detailed discussion of architectural style. In the greater neighborhood context, there are at least two homes in the immediately surrounding neighborhood that have larger square footage than our proposed floor area. See attached comparison spreadsheet prepared by Jocelyn Shoopman at LGPD.

Vehicle Access/Fire Dept. Access -
As with most projects, all design studies must begin with vehicle access and fire safety. We have spent the last three years working closely with the Town Planning Dept., and County Fire Dept and have reached agreement on road improvements and a new cul-de-sac at the top of the shared driveway, per Los Gatos application **#PRJ-97-117.**

Architectural Styles -
Based on our survey of the neighborhood homes (on Happy Acres, Wooded View, & Hilltop), the neighboring architectural styles are a decidedly eclectic mix, including numerous Modern homes (numerous varieties), plus Ranch Style, Craftsmen/Shingle, Tudor, and Transitional/Traditional styles. All nine homes on Happy Acres are two story, and most roofs are medium pitch gable style, with one home having a flat modern roof. Almost all the homes have either stucco, wood, or shingle siding with predominately earth tone paint/stain finishes. Our approach is to fit right in with these varied homes, using a simple, discrete flat roof form with earthy materials/colors and articulated facades to gracefully keep the overall height in keeping with that of the adjacent homes. Please refer to our site cross sections and color board.

Great care was taken to design a home that also fit in with the secluded hillside setting, using building forms, fenestration, and proportions that nestle into this forest of mature oak trees. Further we incorporated parapets and limited overhangs to reduce pruning of branches and better resist wildfires. We think the design complements both the scale and character of the natural densely forested site and immediate neighborhood, and that contributes nicely to this eclectic and woodsy setting.

Design Goals -
Based on our comprehensive site analysis and early conversations with staff at the Planning Dept., several goals emerged as prudent starting points for the design:

a. Design a home that is compatible with the eclectic neighborhood character
b. Preserve and protect the numerous large, mature oak trees
c. Minimize overall grading, especially outside the LRDA
d. Place the house to minimize bulk and mass by cutting the house into the slope keeping the house profile down when viewed from the neighbors
e. Maximize privacy to all the neighbors, even those on Suview

Minimize Grading/Respect Original Topography -
The proposed building site for the new living areas is already somewhat level, and we have placed the new finish floor about the average grade of the graded building site. With the exception of the driveway/motor court, a limited amount of grading is required at the proposed residence, to keep all adjacent yards roughly at or near existing grade. We have carefully designed all improvements to avoid any grading at steeply sloped areas of the site, avoiding any need for grading policy exceptions. The majority of the proposed grading volume is for the excavation of the below grade cellar/basement (and is required by the soils report), which is entirely underground/not counted as FAR.

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Architectural Forms Nestle into Building Site -
The grades at the existing building site are generally flat, and we have placed the finish floors near or below existing grade so as to limit unnecessary grading, conforming the house to the natural land forms. The same is true of the proposed roof forms, which also step down gently to remain below the 25' max. height limit per the LG Hillside Design Guidelines recommendations. Our site cross sections demonstrate that all of the proposed roofs conform to the Hillside Design guidelines height of <25' above grade, and in many locations the roof heights are well below the max.

Conserve/Protect Mature Trees -
We have gone to great lengths to preserve numerous large oak trees that surround the building site. The proposed house has been placed on the flattest part of the lot, all within the prescribed LRDA. Six smaller oaks at the downhill/north edge of the building site have been identified to be removed, as they further constrict the limited width of the building site. The proposed drainage infiltration structures have been located in areas as far from existing oak trees/steep slopes as possible, but still dispersing rainwater on site. Two walnut trees (poor health) are to be removed to allow this system.

We have procured a detailed arborist report, which evaluates all of the existing trees. While the report grades a few of the trees in fair to poor health, the owners wish is to preserve as many of the remaining trees as possible. The arborist has reviewed the design and concludes that the proposed improvements will properly preserve the long term health of the remaining trees. Of course, we will implement all of the construction mitigation measures and preservation recommendations, provide a tree protection plan, as well as ongoing arborist monitoring during construction, as outlined in the report.

The roadway widening/re-grading will remove eight trees , and the proposed house project will also remove eight trees (six small Coast Live Oaks #99 thru #104), and two Black Walnuts #92 and #94). The Landscape Planting Plan sheet L-3 proposed to plant twenty (20) replacement trees.

Maintain Neighbor Privacy -
Given the small remaining building envelope and the numerous larger oak trees around the available building site, not many options remained as to the placement of the new residence. Even with these limited options, we paid special attention to making sure the design of the main floor has most of the windows (and all of the decks/balconies) are facing the views to the West and South, purposely pointed away from all the nearby neighbors. The existing row of mature oak trees along the entire South and North sides of the home already screen the views of the uphill and downhill neighbors. We believe this design renders any privacy impacts to the neighbors as fairly negligible. Additional trees and landscape screening are being proposed between the proposed house and cul-de-sac to increase privacy to/from the closest neighbor at 333 Happy Acres Road.

When designing the proposed home, we carefully studied how it would relate to the homes with addresses on Suview, located up on the hillside to the East. We carefully analyzed, took numerous photos, and studied sight lines from these neighbors down to the proposed home. As the privacy of the neighbors was our utmost concern, we were careful to avoid any large windows facing to the East looking up the hill. At the proposed upper floor, note that the windows in the Office and Bedroom #3 have been cleverly designed to face only towards the South and Southeast, away from any neighbors above us on Suview. In addition, to further screen this glass from the neighbors, these two rooms have the windows deeply recessed into the wall by 18" therefore shading any views up the hill. Most of the façade visible from 15305 Suview Drive will have solid blank walls, and a solid wood garage door.

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Views from 333 Happy Acres have been protected, a photo from this neighbor verifies their view of the valley view has been maintained over the story poles of the proposed home. As mentioned earlier, we have proposed seven new replacement trees in the entry courtyard to screen views to and from 333 Happy Acres.

Sustainability -
As much as the site orientation of the building allows, we have maximized the building design, window locations, and overhangs to take advantage of passive solar heating, and natural ventilation. Much of the basement is tucked into the hillside, thus reducing it's heat loss through exterior walls, and increasing interior mass that will aid greatly in making the home energy efficient. The upper floor will have numerous high transom windows to allow natural light and create the chimney effect that allows passive cooling and ventilation to reduce cooling costs in summer months.

The building envelope will use rigid foam insulation at the exterior walls and slab foundations, high performance dual glazed low e windows and doors, and spray foam roof insulation, thereby creating a state of the art building envelope that will easily exceed California Title 24 Energy Code standards. Generous high wall glazing and a central skylight will help with natural day-lighting, keeping the need for artificial lighting and therefore energy costs down. The home will be fossil fuel free (no gas meter) per the Los Gatos Reach Code, with electric heat pumps for HVAC and water heating. All lighting will be LED high efficacy, with smart control systems to maximize energy efficiency and conservation.

As the goal is a net zero home, an array of roof mounted PV solar panels will reduce the electricity needs, and thermal solar panels for the pool will also reduce the energy use from the grid. Of course the structure will utilize engineered lumber, fly ash/low carbon concrete in a pier and grade beam foundation, recycled content steel, low/no VOC adhesives and paints, and formaldehyde free finish materials.

Native/Drought Tolerant Landscaping -
The proposed plant palette for this site has been split into 3 zones: ornamental planting adjacent to the residence, erosion-controlling planting/trees along the hillside, and no plantings within the ephemeral stream buffer zone. The ornamental plantings are to be a mixture of native and ornamental low water plants. They are to be located within contained planters, which have been integrally designed with the architecture, and are located well within a 30' buffer around the residence. The ornamental planting zone is the only zone which is to receive long-term irrigation on the property.

Beyond the proposed site development area, a majority of the site contains existing native oaks trees. These trees are to be preserved, and as such, we are proposing minimal plantings throughout the rest of the site. Areas under the canopies of existing mature trees are to be treated with a layer of mulch to protect the root zones to the greatest extent possible, and to maintain vertical clearance in the creation of defensible spaces, which prevents the spread of wildfire. Minimal portions of the hillside that are beyond the drip-line of existing trees will receive native, erosion-controlling vegetation. This vegetation will require temporary irrigation to establish but will be non-irrigated after the establishment period of the new plantings.

The uphill planting zone proposes a dozen low water use Olive Trees, which will also help with stabilization of this steep hillside above the home. Two Magnolia trees and six Gingko Biloba trees are proposed in the front courtyard to screen the home from the immediate neighbor at 333 Happy Acres, and are medium water use species.

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Overall, the proposed planting scheme will be in conformance with hillside design guidelines. We intend to preserve the native hillside character to the greatest extent possible. Further, our planting scheme will meet or exceed state required MWELO standards.

Fire Safety -
In addition to the fire truck turnaround, the entire structure will be fire-sprinklered throughout, and will have a Class A roof. The structure has been designed to meet the 2022 California Building Code Chapter 7A for structures located within the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) High Severity Fire Zone. As such, the exterior walls and eaves are all one hour rated, the exterior glazing is all tempered, there will be no exterior attic or foundation vents, and the gutters will be protected from leaf debris accumulation with screens. Again, the predominately parapet roof design is the most effective at resisting ignition by wildfire, and limited overhangs facing East and West will protect the glass from excessive solar gain/glare.

Neighbor Interaction -
Our clients have met several times with the immediate neighbors and have shared these proposed house plans with them. The neighbors are Mark Shindel at 333 Happy Acres Rd., the neighbor who will be the most impacted by the proposed residence, and Albert Kurkchubasche at 165 Happy Acres Rd, just down the hill to the North. The Toofans have also shared our plans with Peter Donnelly who live up the hill to the East at 15305 Suview Drive. We expect nothing but the highest level of cooperation and support as the design process moves forward, the neighbor relationships have been ongoing and cordial.

Conclusion -
After working closely with our clients and the Town Planning Staff, we feel we have designed a home that integrates quite well with the site, preserves the natural features of the site, and complements the neighborhood. As stated previously, we feel the project meets with the purpose, spirit, and intent of the Los Gatos Zoning Ordinance, Hillside Design Guidelines and Standards, and the Single Family Residential Design Guidelines, and we request that the TRC/DRC approve the design as proposed.

If you have any questions or need for further clarification please feel free to give our office a call.

Sincerely,

Noel F. Cross
Architect AIA

cc: Fred & Fereshteh Toofan, Owners
Christopher Yates, Field Landscape Architects