

Opinion

--- "Shut up, they explained." ---

Those Hollywoodland residents who did not attend the Design Review Board's March 8th hearing at the Village Coffee Shop, missed possibly one of the most marvelous evenings of Surreal Theater since Samuel Becket premiered "Waiting for Godot" 54 years ago in Paris.

Last night's performance by the DRB had a little of everything: Mystery, Melodrama, Comedy, Tragedy, Suspense - enough flim-flam for half-a-dozen sequels to 'The Music Man' - but mostly... Farce.

Synopsis: Two gentlemen - call them *The Applicants* - have applied for DRB approval of *The Project*, a McMansion they wish to build on two contiguous lots on Lugano Place (the cul-de-sac off Heather Drive). This, by the way, was *The Applicants* second bite at the apple; at a first DRB hearing they were asked to reduce the size of their proposed *McMansion* by 20% and re-submit revised plans and a 3D model for approval or disapproval.

The Applicants chose not to attend this soirée, which is their right, but were more than adequately represented by several employees (paid and unpaid). Call them *The Representatives*.

The other players: the aforementioned Design Review Board, comprised of five people (architects, mostly). Oops, make that four. About 20 minutes into the first act, one Board Member rose, gathered his belongings and, without a word of explanation, exited stage left. When asked, for the record, for the name of the departing Member and the reason for his leaving, the chairman apparently couldn't remember his name and gave no reason for his exit. The mystery remains.

The Board was led by a chairman who said more than once that *he* was chairing this meeting and thus *he* would decide what time limits to impose on any speaker. Fair enough.

In the interests of strict accuracy then, let us call him... *The Decider*.

The remaining players: Hollywoodland homeowners; a few supporting The Project; the vast majority, *opposed*.

Call them, pro or con, *The Speakers*.

Act One

"I've got a swell idea! Let's not hold the show right here!"

This curtain almost didn't go up. A boatload of written testimony had been submitted in advance of the hearing (via correct channels, pursuant to Brown Act, Sect. 54954.3 and c/o The City Planning Dept.) to be forwarded to the DRB for inclusion in their official deliberations.

Problem: the testimony was *not* forwarded to the DRB. Oddly (or perhaps not), The Applicants revised plans *had* reached the DRB, but *not* the voluminous correspondence in opposition.

Why not? The Decider smiled and shrugged. (Perhaps it's just this reviewer's imagination but smiling and shrugging seemed to be Thursday's Theme.)

"I've got another swell idea! Let's blame the messenger!"

We were told the DRB would not be held responsible for the City's failure to deliver the correspondence to each Member. Hmm... Okay, clearly the show can't go on - the players only have half the script. Re-schedule, give the audience a raincheck and send 'em home, right? Wrong.

And here it really starts to get interesting.
Follow this: Even though

1)legally-submitted testimony had not been forwarded, and although the Board was well aware of massive community opposition to this Project, evidently not one of them - not one - enquired of the City Planning Department if there was any written testimony to be read in preparation for this hearing. And,

2)by their own admission only one Board Member had in fact seriously reviewed The Applicant's revised plans (*The Decider* freely volunteered he hadn't had a chance to even look at them). And,

3)The Representatives now added to the mix the *diktat* that their clients, The Applicants *would not accept* a postponement but were demanding a vote to approve or disapprove The Project that night...

4)The sum product of the above facts rendered it impossible for any legislative body to arrive at any logical, *supportable* conclusion...

And yet, despite all this, *The Decider* called Places! The players took their seats and the hearing was called to order. As the curtain rose the adults in the audience looked at each other, completely and utterly mystified.

An aside: I love architects - I really do. There's a deliciously pure, almost crystalline arrogance about them which is completely unique to their trade. (Howard Roark lives!) But more about that in a minute...

(To read the rest of this Review, go to <http://www.beachwoodvoice.com>)

PART TWO

To begin, what's this melodrama about? Two men want to build a house; why not let them? They claim to love the Hollywoodland community, they used to live here. One of them, in fact, had served on the DRB.

(Apropos that, a Point of Order was raised asking Board Members who had served with *The Applicant* - there were two present - in order to avoid the appearance of favoritism, that they consider recusing themselves from this proceeding. This request was deemed 'not valid', no explanation given.)

Again: They want to build a *McMansion*, why not let them? Here's why: Construction in Hollywoodland is governed by a unique legal document called The Hollywoodland Specific Plan.

It states (Purpose) that the Plan's intent is in part:

"To protect against development of overly massive buildings which are out-of-scale with the existing buildings."

And the Design Review Board's responsibility is to implement the Plan. A slam-dunk no-brainer, right? This *McMansion* application should've been laughed out the door, no? Sure. Read on...

Almost at the start of this - I dunno - kangaroo court(?), there was a glimmer of hope that commonsense might prevail. The only female Board Member pointed out that since *The Applicants* had been officially asked at the February 8th hearing to reduce their Project by 20%, but were now re-submitting plans reduced by only 10%, the Board had 'just cause' to vote for disapproval and to wish The Applicants bon voyage on their promised journey through the lengthy appeals process.

It would be nice to report that this suggestion was discussed, or even that arguments were offered pro and con; but, sad to say, no discussion, no vote, no politeness even; the lady was simply ignored.

Light-bulb time: It was now suddenly clear to this observer that the last thing *The Decider* would permit was the defeat of this particular Project. (Perhaps it was just my fevered imagination, but I'd swear I heard the sound of steel ball-bearings 'click-clicking' in someone's sweaty palm.)

Act Two

Scoundrel Time

[In the interests of transparency and brevity, an interruption is defined as a spontaneous challenge to the Speaker. Requests for clarification - of which there were many - are not included.]

The Representatives spoke first: *The Architectural Representative* spoke for about 10 minutes, *The Landscaper*, for 14+ minutes. They were both permitted to speak uninterrupted and unchallenged.

A diverting *entr'acte*: A charming little full-color artist's rendering of the proposed house was unveiled. A pretty painting, no question, any Disney illustrator would be happy sign it; personally, I found it very attractive; or would have, if my name had been Hansel or Gretel.

To his credit, *The Representative* admitted the painting was not accurate as an architectural rendering; elevations had been adjusted, features repositioned, garages moved; 'artistic license', the reason given. One wonders who exactly this piece of fictive folk-art was aimed at? Naïve homeowners who might be persuaded by shiny, colored objects to act against their own best interests? Hmm, flashback from Hollywoodland 2007 to Manhattan Island 1626?

The Decider then invited a Main Speaker for the opposition and allowed that Speaker about a quarter of the time given to *The Representatives*. After less than 8 minutes (less than 7 if one deducts the minute of interruptions and challenges from *The Representatives*), *The Decider* informed the Speaker his 10 minutes were almost up. (What 10 minutes?)

To allow the main opposition Speaker to finish his presentation, others offered to donate their time; *The Decider* refused to permit that: his hearing, his rules. All additional opposition Speakers would be limited to two minutes. So much for balance and even-handedness.

In the final analysis, what was said by any of the Speakers pro or con is largely irrelevant. What *is* relevant was expressed best by an attorney: To demand of a Speaker who has delivered a painstakingly-written 30-page brief that he summarize those pages in two minutes is ridiculous on its face. Though it may be oxymoronic, the gentleman made an irrefutable case that he was being denied due process, and that this entire hearing was a staged mockery of the very concept of participatory democracy.

Unconvinced? Try this: Five consecutive Speakers against The Project were interrupted during their statements by none other than... *The Decider*. There followed three Speakers in support of The Project who shared a common theme: building this McMansion would increase Property Values all round. These three were allowed to speak without a single interruption. Coincidence?

The very next Speaker against The Project was interrupted continually by *The Decider*. He then permitted another Board Member to further interrupt her train of thought, which interruption quickly developed into a condescending lecture. Next he permitted *The Representatives* to interrupt her, and to launch into a lengthy rebuttal of her statement before she had even finished making it. Do we detect a pattern here?

The only person who spoke uninterrupted against The Project was another legal mind - one of three distinguished Jurists present who spoke in opposition to The Project. Surprisingly, but thankfully, in what seemed a sudden attack of commonsense, *The Decider* decided it was probably best not to interrupt the most intelligent man in the room.

No such courtesy however, was extended to the last female Speaker, the editor of this newspaper. Her statement was more of an uphill struggle to get *The Decider* to shut up long enough for her to get a word in edgewise.

The colloquy ended, the Board's summations loomed. (In a moment.)

First, a general question. What conclusion is to be drawn from the conduct of the chairman of this hearing, *The Decider*? Bear in mind on two occasions there were attempts by opposition Speakers to correct factual misstatements during *The Representatives'* presentation these attempts were immediately silenced by *The Decider* (which, under Roberts' Rules of Order he has a perfect right to do).

And yet, and yet, a careful review of the video recording of this hearing not only reveals that *The Decider* personally interrupted virtually *all* of the opposition Speakers, it also fails to reveal a single instance - not one - in which *The Decider* protected any opposition Speaker from any and all interruptions - whatever the source.

At this point it's fair to suggest that some people might be forgiven for suspecting *The Decider* was slightly biased. Frankly, to this observer's eye, the bias could not have been more obvious if he was wearing an Applicants team jersey. (Are you reading this, Tom LaBonge?)

Act Three

"The McMansions are Coming, The McMansions are Coming!"

To recap, they want to build a *McMansion*, why not let them? Everyone knows they will build a beautiful house; everyone knows they have great taste; we'd be lucky to have them back in the canyon; why are they being made an example...? Wait a second, I've seen this play before!

That dialog sounds very familiar. I know why!
One Speaker supporting *The Applicants* used almost those exact words. Is this scary? I've heard those exact words from a dozen different mouths. Damn, I've said them myself! It's becoming an unconscious mantra, pervading the very air we breathe! Yikes! If I didn't know better, I'd suspect it was a talking-points memo from someone's desk.
(Is Karl Rove is moving to Hollywoodland?)

Seriously, who are *The Applicants*? Some years ago they bought a house at Heather and Ledgewood, restored it, sold it at a *serious* profit and left the Canyon. Now they're back, they've bought the two adjacent lots and want to build a bigger house. They insist they're not speculators, they insist they love Hollywoodland. Who are we to doubt them? Well, in truth, the signs are not encouraging. They admit, to their credit, they've made mistakes; like the decision to *obliterate* the entire delicate ecosystem of that hillside? At least six giant, oxygen-producing ancient trees were chopped to kindling and who knows how many nesting songbirds paid what price?
(When *was* the last time you read Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring"?)

Without getting too 'tree-hugger-y', the issue still remains: if *just one project is rewarded* for this sort of rapacious rape of the canyon environment, then someone had better drop a dime to the EPA and get the Feds involved or Hollywoodland is truly doomed.

**"There are three types of lies: Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics."
(Benjamin Disraeli)**

For months now, statistics and counter-statistics have been hurtling back and forth faster than Tommy Haas returning a Roger Federer serve. Please. Let's all take a breath; let us be generous for a moment. Although the DRB is obliged to consider the total square footage of a Project (in this case the total covered area is 6398 sq ft.), let us accept the lowest number offered by The Applicants: 4911 sq. ft. of 'habitable space'. Okay, 4911 square feet it is.

Again, the language of the Specific Plan (Purpose) above:
"To protect against development of overly massive buildings which are out-of-scale with the existing buildings."

Ah, there's the problem: the *existing buildings*. According to official records, the 44 houses which immediately surround the proposed *McMansion* site, have an average of 2427 square feet of habitable space.

The comparable numbers then, are 4911 sq.ft. versus 2427 sq.ft. (Average). Surely one doesn't need a calculator to recognize that the first number is MORE THAN TWICE AS BIG as the second. So they want to build a house MORE THAN TWICE AS BIG as the surrounding houses.

(Actually, the two houses bordering the proposed site to the East: 3279 Ledgewood & 3301 Ledgewood are officially listed at 1450 & 1378 sq.ft. respectively; so the proposed *McMansion* would in fact be MORE THAN THREE TIMES AS BIG as the two houses immediately adjacent.)

Fortunately the Specific Plan - in plain, elegant language - prohibits that.

**"Mommy, Mommy! There's a dead elephant in the living room!"
"Walk around it, sweetheart, let's pretend it's not there."**

It was mildly entertaining, if not completely captivating to observe certain Board Members who, plainly unwilling to accept the Plan's clear language, twisted themselves into *Cirque du Soleil* contortions to insist the simple phrase "out-of-scale with..." means something else.

Having failed, as they inevitably must, the fallback position emerged: to *ignore* the language and to behave as if that provision of the Specific Plan simply doesn't exist. Sorry, but their legal and moral obligation prohibits that. (Again, are you reading this, Tom LaBonge?)

If there is a message to be gleaned from this quirky little drama, it is this: *The Applicants* are demanding special dispensation; since they have two contiguous lots, they insist they're entitled to build a house twice as big as surrounding houses. By that logic, if they bought ten contiguous lots on Ledgewood, would they be entitled to build a 50,000 square feet *palazzo*?

Of course not, the idea is preposterous. Equally preposterous is their demand to build their *McMansion*. They may not like the language of the Hollywoodland Specific Plan, but it's there for the express purpose of protecting the community they *claim* to love.

M.D. = Me, Doctor! A.I.A. = Architect, I AM!

Architects, ya gotta love 'em. Seriously, it's one of the toughest gigs around. Brilliant men and women can go *years* between commissions. You must admire the gut-wrenching dedication it takes to survive fiscally and psychologically. And if that requisite *sui generis* self-reassurance occasionally morphs into arrogance, who are we to carp? And even if sometimes personal integrity must be sacrificed to put bread on the table, simple human decency demands that allowances must be made, slack must be cut. But, and it's a big 'but', if certain Board Members feel compelled by circumstance to make such sacrifices, surely it is preferable not to make them on their own doorsteps?

Can We Wrap This? Alex Is Waiting To Lock Up

If there was a signal flaw in this rather depressing theatrical piece, it was that the performers - the Board Members - lost touch with their audience before the houselights even dimmed, and never really reconnected.

The final summations given were predictably paternalistic and condescending. (If I'd heard one more "It's a hard thing for *lay* people to understand..." somebody was going to get *smacked*.)

The outcome/verdict was easily-foreseen: No change. A vote to disapprove resulted in a 2 to 2 split. Despite their demand of an up or down vote - or else - and their threat never to darken this door etc., *The Applicants* were essentially offered a third bite of the apple: reduce the Project Plans substantially and show us a 3D model. Buh-bye.

At this moment, *The Applicants'* plans are unknown. They may too get a sudden attack of commonsense, re-size, re-tool, re-apply to the DRB and take a slightly smaller, more reasonable bite at this thrice-proffered apple, or simply bag it and head downtown to the real courts of appeal.

Curtain Call

A final word to the Emeritus Professor, the wisest person in the room (that's different from the most intelligent person in the room; those who don't understand the distinction needn't worry, they'll never be either):

"None of you seem to understand the difference between size and scale..."?? 100 years ago, Professor, someone might've struck you in the face with a glove for that insult. Even today its a tad more than condescending, its downright foolhardy. With respect, sir, have you forgotten where you live? This is Hollywoodland, remember, a haven for people who make their livings in the Arts? The point?

It's possible to know less than squat about load and stress and still have a passionate appreciation of the Art of Architecture, not to mention a passing familiarity with English syntax.

European Villages? Some of us were *born* in European Villages. Some of us were educated in systems where by age ten you were expected to know the difference between *Romanesque* and *Perpendicular* and be able to name at least three buildings by Christopher Wren. You learned that the best examples of *Beaux-Arts*, *Nouveau*, *Deco*, or *Moderne* are not just to be found in Paris - they're also in Brussels and Budapest. You learn that at his Glasgow Art School, Charles Rennie Mackintosh didn't have the budget for twelve by twelve beams so he nailed twelve by ones into a four-sided box.

Some of us lived in New York through the 60s and 70s (Remember the 70s? The decade that taste forgot?). When all those glass office blocks marched up Sixth Avenue, opening at a pace - it seemed - of about one a month; each dreadful building looking like the box the previous building came in? (Landmark? Ptooeey! Lever House has a lot to answer for!)

Some of us - who know nothing about 'scale' - are capable of standing speechless at the absolute *rightness* of I. M. Pei's *Louvre Pyramide*; are able to stand weeping for joy at the lop-sided perfection of Chartres, and in grief at that other hideous tragedy of 9/11, the destruction of Minoru Yamasaki's once-in-a-millennium masterpiece, the Twin Towers.

The trouble with didacticism, sir, is that it forestalls two-way traffic; we teach but we don't learn. "Out-of-scale with..." isn't that difficult a concept to embrace. Several dictionaries later (OED included), it boils down to a mean average definition: "of disproportionate size"; "incongruous".

Perhaps the missing word in this equation is *context*. Every great architectural achievement on Planet Earth can only be great *in context*.

I have seen this Project's West Elevation. It is, to my *layman's* eye, quite alarmingly *massive*. It lacks delicacy, subtlety or *context*; frankly I would not have been surprised had the drawing been signed by Albert Speer.

However this one shakes out, Professor, we all know this is not a one-time event. The barbarians are at the Hollywoodland gates. Not to flatter, but to remind, I repeat: You were the wisest man at the last hearing, and no doubt will be again at the next; this community desperately needs men and women of wisdom, decency and courage.

Hollywoodland is counting on you, sir.
Please don't let us down.

Robert T. Megginson
March 9th 2007