

October 15, 2018

RE: Otte Testimony to Portland City Council about Design Review

Greetings Mayor and Commissioners,

My name is Dave Otte, and I am wearing three hats today. First, representing the Urban Design Panel, a multidisciplinary team of local architects, planners, and landscape architects from the AIA, APA, and ASLA that assist the City in maintaining high standards of urban design by reviewing projects and policies related to our built environment. Second, representing my company Holst Architecture, a firm of 40 designers in the Central Eastside that have been helping make Portland special since 1992. Third, I am representing myself as a citizen and resident that fell in love with this city the first time I stepped off the MAX in Pioneer Square 20 years ago. Thank you for allowing me to speak remotely today.

The Urban Design Panel has been closely collaborating with BPS and design review staff on the Design Overlay Zone Analysis, or DOZA process since its inception. In fact, early workshops and outreach facilitated by the Urban Design Panel helped identify the need for DOZA in the first place. While the process has been lengthy, its initial results have been extremely successful. Ask any architect that has been navigating design review over the past few years, and they will tell you that the process today is more efficient, more consistent, and more productive towards creating better buildings and places than in recent history. Positive change is happening.

Now, the next steps for DOZA are critical: crafting new guidelines and standards that will define what kind of city we want to be. So far, we like what we see. Keeping things simple with a version of the *Ten Commandments of Urban Design* my friend and mentor Paddy Tillett recommended, the new guidelines are clear and focused on the right priorities. We strongly urge total support from City Council for BPS to work hand-in-hand with Kara, Tim, and their team at design review to realize these new guidelines and standards that have been needed for a long time to ensure decisions about our city are well-considered and built on sound urban design principles.

At Holst Architecture, we have navigated every aspect of design review in recent years, including type II procedures with staff-level decisions, type III procedures with the Design Commission, as well as Historic Resource Reviews with the Landmarks Commission. We have navigated these processes with a diverse range of project types; from thousands of units of market-rate housing, to hundreds of units of affordable housing, to community health and cultural centers, to tiny commercial storefronts. With this experience, there are two observations we wanted to share with you for future planning: one, discretionary, guideline-based processes are vital to fostering design excellence. And two, Design Advice Requests, or DAR's for short, help create a discretionary process that provides the right balance of flexibility with confidence.

We do work in many jurisdictions, and far-and-away the best results come from places that allow for design flexibility with discretionary review. Portland led the way a generation ago to create a discretionary process that fosters creativity with results that speak for themselves when you walk down our streets. There is a reason that cities like Seattle, Austin, and Boise look to Portland for our urban design playbook, and it's because our discretionary process is central to our success.

A newer aspect of our city's process is the DAR. The Design Advice Request is a voluntary process that was initially intended to create a venue for design teams and owners to get initial feedback before going too deep into a project with potentially flawed assumptions. What has evolved is a process that is seen by the best design firms and owners in the city as an elemental step to an efficient process with an appropriate amount of certainty. Holst has used the DAR process on both public and private projects, large and small, to get on the same page with the City early in our design process to ultimately save time and money in the long run. Most recently, my deeply affordable modular co-housing design for Transition Projects in Kenton, called LISAH, went through a voluntary DAR (with the fees thoughtfully waived by the City). Because our design was atypical, we found the DAR process to be invaluable to discuss different solutions that better meet the intent of guidelines in a public forum that provided both flexibility and confidence for my client moving forward. Again, I want you to hear that the DAR for this project saved us time and money and aligned perfectly with our schedule. The process is not broken. The process works.

Finally, as a citizen and resident, I wanted to finish with why I love this city. I love Portland because it breaks the rules. From that first decision in 1845 to create tiny, ever-walkable 200-foot city blocks, to 2015 when we opened a bridge for every conceivable mode of transit *other* than the car, Portland does things differently in ways that improve the built environment and enrich the human experience. Turn a parking lot into a piazza and tear up a highway to make way for a waterfront park. These are bold ideas that come from thinking creatively together for the common good. I would venture to say nothing great about Portland's design ever came from a checklist, or a prescriptive set of rules that have a lowest common denominator. Yes, you need to have a baseline of what is deemed acceptable, but we love our city partly because of A+ design. We don't want to be like Houston and barely pass with a D. Design Review's discretionary process is decidedly a Portland way of doing things that encourages each of us to do better, and I urge you to give Design Review all your support and help us continue to create a City that we will love for generations to come.

Thank you,

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