

CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL STRUCTURE

ARCHITECTS • ENGINEERS • CONTRACTORS

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October 10, 1987

To: Task force and city staff.
From: Christopher Alexander.
Re: Draft of Multi-family zoning Ordinance.

We are pleased to submit a complete first draft of the multi family housing ordinance for your review. The work presented has been done jointly by The Center for Environmental Structure and Daniel Solomon and Associates. It contains two components. Component 1 is a draft of the complete ordinance prepared by CES. Component 2 is a draft of the design standards prepared by DS. The ordinance document also contains a CES draft of the standards as chapter 3. This may be compared with the DS version of the standards. There are various minor points of disagreement between the two versions of the standards.

I shall make my comments on the material we have presented to you, under two main headings: Standards and Ordinance.

1. STANDARDS

The two drafts of the standards have a great deal in common. Perhaps most significant of all, we have reached a very close agreement about the issue of density.

Both drafts contain an almost identical set of tables in which we express the densities permissible under various conditions of lot size, parking type, parking ratio, driveway condition, and surrounding context. We also agree that the city should keep its present designations of RM16, RM32, and RM48, and should make all modifications within the framework of these designations.

We also agree in our general approach to the environment, in which we recognise that Pasadena will be best served by an emphasis on courtyards and gardens. We agree that density must be a function of context, and that attention to the context must play an important role in the applications process. We have agreed to give a density bonus for shared driveways. We agree on the idea of a set of application forms, which embody and simplify the application and checking procedure, thus making passage through the planning department easy and smooth.

We are agreed, I think, that complicated rules like the present modulation rule, tend to make design more difficult. Instead we have placed the emphasis on standards which go only to essential features of the environment. We are agreed about the need for attention to entrances and porches; we are agreed about the restrictions to be placed on building height.

All in all, therefore, the collaboration which you have asked us to undertake, has already resulted in many significant agreements, and our recommendations on many aspects of the ordinance standards are identical or nearly identical.

There are also a number of disagreements about specific standards. The biggest of these concerns open space. We have standards for gardens and total open space which are very much higher than Dan's -- sometimes by a ratio of 2:1. This is an essential issue.

I believe that the idea of Pasadena as a city of gardens is more clearly embodied in our version of this standard. Our standards also make it feasible to reach higher densities than present densities, even while providing large gardens, by controlling parking, construction over parking, and setbacks in a way to release the necessary space.

There are other minor disagreements. Our proposed densities are also higher in a few significant cases, especially when parking is underground. The CES version makes it highly desirable for surface parking to be placed under apartments, since this saves space: the DS version permits surface parking in carports, without, in my opinion, sufficient penalty. The DS version emphasises 2:1 parking, while the CES version emphasises parking at 1.5:1. The CES version encourages naturally ventilated half-underground garages towards the back of the lot. The DS version allows parking near the street provided that it is shielded, while the CES version requires parking in the rear half of the lots.

All these points are important, and need to be resolved. With guidance from you, they are certainly resolvable.

2. ORDINANCE

On the issue of the ordinance itself, we need approval of format from the Task Force.

As you see, CES has prepared a long document, which emphasises intent and process. Chapter 1 describes the intent of the ordinance at great length. Chapter 2 defines an application procedure in minute detail: it includes a step by step system of application forms, which allow an applicant or a planning official to check incoming projects for compliance easily and systematically. It also includes a layout process which makes it clear how to produce plans that meet the standards of the ordinance.

The machinery of chapter 2, all follows necessarily from the detailed description of neighborhood coherence which is given in chapter 1. Finally, the ordinance standards (chapter 3 in the CES formulation) are numerically coded to correspond to the steps in the application procedure, and the steps in the layout process.

Thus the document forms a coherent and unbroken whole. For reasons which are stated within the document itself, it is necessary that chapters 1 and 2 and 3 (intent, process and standards) be contained as part of the ordinance itself, and that they have the sequence given, since it is the unfolding of the argument which makes the legal position clear, and which provides a legal basis for interpretations once the standards are in use. It is also necessary that these materials be included in the ordinance in this order, so that the members of the public who will use the ordinance, are able to understand exactly what the standards of the ordinance really imply.

We should like the task force to give us a definite approval, approving both the overall format of the ordinance as we have presented it, and the detailed format and contents of chapters 1 and 2. Once we have this approval, we shall then be able to continue our work with DS, on detailed preparation and negotiation of the materials for the standards. It is necessary for us to have this approval as soon as possible, so that Dan and I can then continue the work of detailed negotiation on the standards which comprise chapter 3.

My staff and I are are willing to make ourselves available, at your convenience, to go over format, contents and editing of chapters 1 and 2, so that these can be prepared for final publication.

Once we have this approval, Dan and I can then begin the painstaking work of negotiation on the standards which comprise chapter 3. It will take some time to go over all the detailed differences one by one, first with the task force, and then in-house, until we have a final and definitive set of standards which we can all stand behind. Since this will involve a considerable amount of time in itself, it is particularly important to have your approval of the main format of the ordinance document, and approval of chapters 1 and 2, as soon as possible.

From time to time, Dan has proposed the idea that the standards alone should form the ordinance. He mentions the idea again in his letter. This idea is completely unacceptable to me.

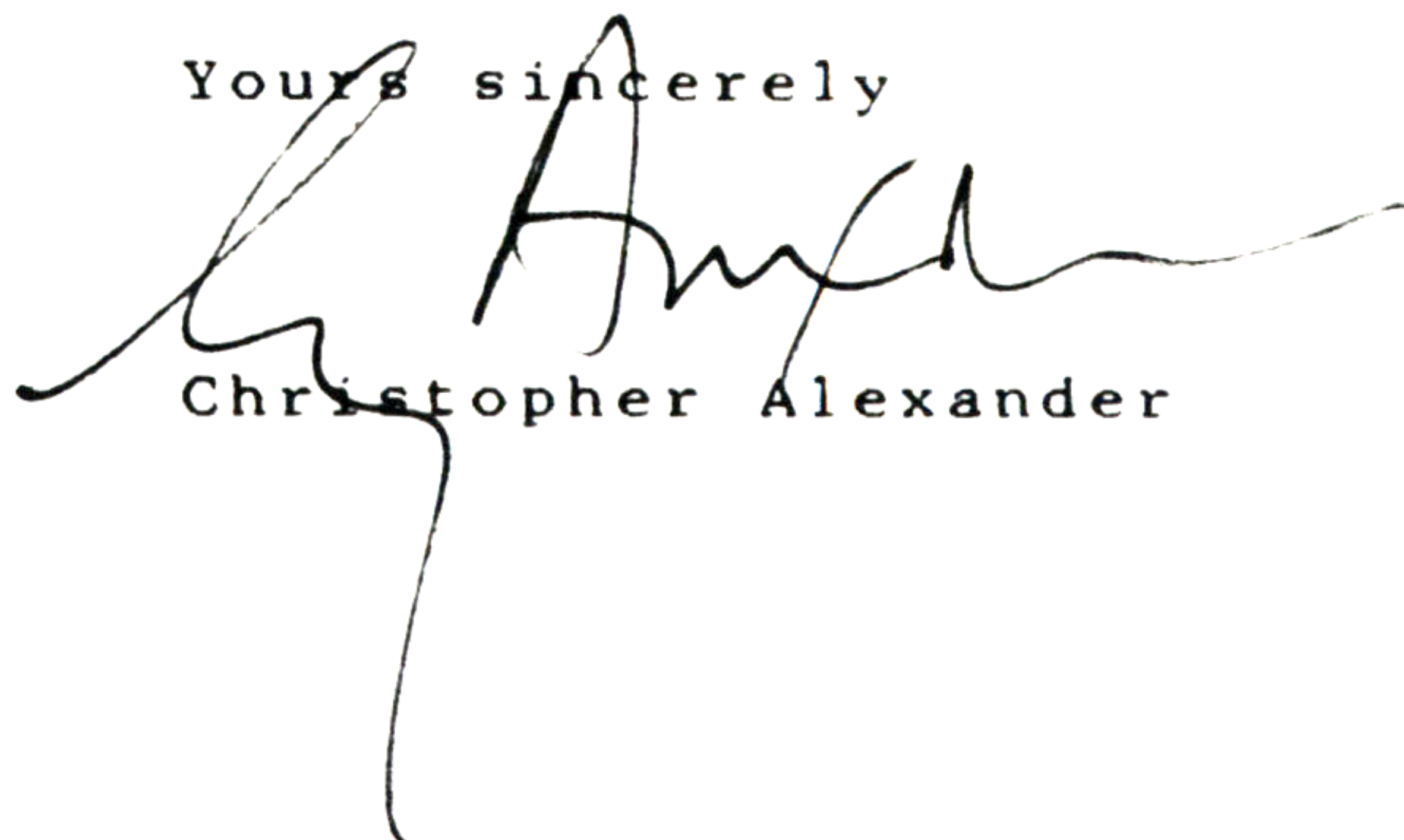
Dan believes -- as far as I can see -- that the matters contained in chapters 1, 2 and 4 are supplementary -- not part of the real substance of the ordinance. I, on the other hand, believe that this document will not be understood, unless it is clearly presented as a single unified whole in which the intent and welfare of the neighborhoods, as expressed in chapters 1 and 2, is what drives the engine of the standards set out in chapter 3.

The essential disagreement here, is that I believe that the ideas expressed in our chapters 1 and 2 are the actual stuff out of which the ordinance is made. It is this common understanding, firmly embedded in the ordinance, which will enable developers and builders to help make a better city. And it is this material which provides the standards with a secure legal basis when and if they need to be interpreted.

If these items were relegated to the status of commentary as Dan proposes, the document would communicate a clear message that these things are interesting, but not essential. A developer would in that case feel free to ignore the meaning and intent of chapters 1 and 2, and would merely try to follow the standards blindly, with a less comprehensive understanding. This is bound to happen, unless chapters 1, 2 and 4 are themselves an integral part of the ordinance itself.

For all these reasons, it is absolutely necessary that the work be completed within the ordinance format which we have prepared. It will be impossible for us to go forward without a clear agreement on this point.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Alexander", with a long vertical line extending downwards from the end of the signature.

Christopher Alexander