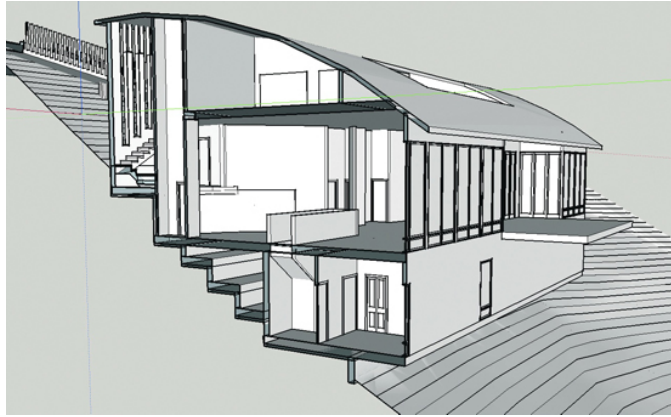


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Planning Commission Approves Creative Home on Hillside

By Sophie Braccini



Graphic provided

4,270 square foot single-family residence would step down the hillside with access via a driveway bridge with parking on the upper level, approximately 13 feet below Donald Drive. The upper level would include two single-car garages and entry halls for stairways and an elevator. The 2,647 square-foot middle level, or mezzanine, would include the main living area and a cantilevered back deck. The 1,278 square-foot lower level would include two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and 718 square feet of shell space. The circular bridge driveway off of Donald Drive would lead directly to the garages, and a guest parking area, on the top level.

Everyone who spoke, even some of those opposing the project, declared that they found the design very appealing. "I love this house, I wish I'd live in such a home one day," said Donald Drive resident Lynda Deschambault, after stating that this was the wrong place for the house because the slope is too steep and its mass too big compared to the surrounding neighborhood.

The owner of the house directly below the new home also asked the commission to deny the permits, invoking safety concerns in a seismic area, drainage concerns, and adding that the house does not comply with the spirit of the General Plan that seeks to limit developments on hillsides.

Commissioner Teresa Onoda said that she had lived in Montclair for many years and that this type of home on a steep hill with a garage above it was commonplace; her concerns were the house was three stories and did not fit in with the neighborhood, and that it would sit on too steep a slope.

All of the commissioners praised Wright for the ingenious design that requires very little grading and is conceived to hide the home in the woods. They were concerned with structure's potential visual impact at night-the front of the house is all glass-but the issue was not serious enough to cause them to withhold their support.

The vote was unanimous to move the project along. Brekke-Read asked that the developer get an additional conformity stamp from the Design Review Board when all plans are final.

Neighbors have 10 calendar days, from April 15, to file an appeal of the decision.

After the meeting, Wright indicated that the owner of the parcel does not intend to build the house himself, but intends to sell the property with its approved plan. He hopes that the new owner will want to work with him to finalize the plans and build the home.

The Moraga Planning Commission decided on April 15 to grant conditional use and hillside development permits to the house proposed by architect James Wright on a hillside with a 52 percent slope at 1800 Donald Dr. in Moraga. Despite opposition from some of the neighbors, the commission determined that the three-level, two-story futuristic building would be concealed in the existing vegetation and anchored in bedrock.

"I am concerned that this development could create a precedent," said commission chair Frank Comprelli. The undeveloped lot on which the home is proposed was created in the '60s; planning director Shawna Brekke-Read confirmed that such a lot would be considered non-conforming today and would not be approved, mostly because of the slope. Developments are not permitted in Moraga on slopes that are more than 20 percent, unless a hillside development permit is granted; the commission found Wright's design elegant and safe enough to approve the special permit.

Town staff also supported the application and gave a detailed description of the unusual project: the proposed

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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