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To: Cultural Heritage Commission, City of Los Angeles

Re: Westdale Village Courtyard Apartments

CPC CHC-2005-5158-HCM, CHC-2005-5217-HCM, CHC-2005-5219-HCM, CHC-2005-5220-HCM, CHC 2005-5221-HCM, CHC-2005-5222-HCM, CHC-2005-5223-HCM, CHC-2005-5224-HCM, CHC-2005-5225-HCM, CHC-2005-5226-HCM, CHC-2005-5227-HCM, CHC-2005-5228-HCM

To the Commission:

I am writing in further support of landmark status for the Westdale Village Courtyard Apartments, as stated in my letter of September 5. Since then I have reviewed the reports challenging its qualifications, and I have visited the site. As an architect, architectural historian, and author of a history of the Ranch house type and style (*The Ranch House*, Harry Abrams, Inc., 2005) as well as of eight other books related to Southern California architecture, I find that those negative evaluations do not accurately address the character of the architecture or the context of the planning of these buildings.

The mass-produced, commercial, and suburban character of much mid-century architecture, now becoming eligible for landmark consideration, requires a fresh examination of our assumptions. Mass production and development methods in the suburbs changed American cities in the 1950s as dramatically and significantly as the skyscraper's steel skeleton frame changed the look of the American center city in the 1890s. Each resulted in a distinctive and influential architecture representative of its times.

It is thus important to evaluate these buildings not simply as individual, isolated structures, but as integral elements in a larger suburban community concept. That unified concept has contributed to the quality and stability of the Westdale neighborhood for a half century. The loss of these buildings would substantially alter and damage that suburban fabric.

1. The reports do not accurately assess the role of the apartments in the larger Westdale development. These buildings represent an integral, intentional piece of a larger neighborhood design, instigated by developer Paul Trousdale.

The reports' narrow claim that there is "no evidence that [Trousdale] had anything to do with these properties" mistakes the broader nature of the development process in these new suburban areas.

While it is true that Trousdale sold these lots to Phillip Yousem (who built the structures), the evidence and the patterns of development indicate that

Trousdale's over-arching vision for the Westdale neighborhood was intentionally continued in Yousem's buildings. As the developer of the relatively expensive single family homes in the adjacent Westdale neighborhood, Trousdale had a vested interest in the quality of the "gateway" to his neighborhood along National.

Trousdale did legally bind Yousem to the CC&R restrictions on height and volume in order to continue the essential scale and open space dimensions of the single family neighborhood. In addition, the built evidence shows that Yousem made special efforts to blend his buildings with the neighboring single family home tract:

- 1) the architecture follows the Ranch style of the adjacent homes to create a visually unified neighborhood;
- 2) the apartments are designed to appear more as single family residences rather than as a collection of distinct bungalow apartments;
- 3) the apartments leave a generous amount of open space for lawn and landscaping, echoing the single family homes;
- 4) the apartments vary ornamental details (siding, rooflines, etc.) in order to echo the variety of the adjacent single family homes, rather than using the repetitive forms of identical apartment blocks.

These elements demonstrate that these apartments are part of an integrally designed community which would be damaged if the apartments are allowed to be demolished.

This is a significant point. With the Westdale Courtyard apartments we are not dealing with isolated buildings, but buildings conceived and planned as an integral part of a unified suburban vision. The fact that many mid-century suburban developments were planned as multi-faceted communities contradicts the widespread presumption today that 1950s suburbia was inchoate, unplanned sprawl.

2. The reports are contradictory in a fundamental finding. They state that the apartments "do not exemplify the qualities of Post WWII architectural design for residential buildings," and yet they also state that the apartments are equal to "hundreds of other developments from that period in the city's history." If there are indeed that many similar buildings, then these apartments are by definition exemplary of post-war housing.

"Common" does not necessarily mean "insignificant." Landmark status does not require a building to be singular. In fact, history is often best revealed in so-called ordinary modest buildings such as the Westdale Courtyard apartments.

3. The reports do not substantiate their claims that these apartments are similar to "hundreds" of other developments of the period. They do not offer a survey of this type in Los Angeles to document the number of examples. Even more to the point, they do not analyze the many varying

characteristics of multiple housing types. They only offer, without analytical description, eight photos of superficially similar structures.

Multiple housing types are indeed common. But there are many different types in this period alone, including the successful modern two-story “dingbat” apartment with single loaded open corridors, the Spanish-style courtyard apartment, the Modern two-story courtyard apartment with central pool, the garden apartment, the attached bungalow court, and numerous other one- and two-story variations. These types vary greatly in the amount of open space incorporated, in their relation to surrounding buildings, in their different construction techniques, their massing, and in their accommodation of the automobile. Also to be assessed are the contributions to apartment design by well known architects such as John Lautner, A. Quincy Jones, Raphael Soriano, and others. An accurate critique of the Westdale Courtyard apartments’ “similarity” requires an analysis of these distinctions.

4. The minor alterations to the original buildings do not, in my opinion, constitute a serious compromise of the architecture or plan. Most changes are reversible, and do not impinge on the original massing, open space, streetscape presentation, or style of the buildings. The adjacent single family home tract also substantially retains its original character as a unified Ranch house neighborhood, despite some noticeable exceptions. Indeed, the concept of the original tract design would be significantly eroded if the Westdale Courtyard apartments are demolished.

The plan to which these apartments contribute represents a significant quality-of-urban-life issue. Westdale’s unified community design has proven successful. The area is stable and well maintained, due in part to the quality of its original planning.

It is to the city’s, the property owners’, and the neighborhood’s long term advantage that this original stability be maintained, not dismembered. The proposed three-story apartments would diminish that substantially, as can be seen on the eastern edge of Westdale, where taller apartments are already built. The sense of the suburban ideal, of the spaciousness defined by a skyline of trees and blue sky, is compromised.

These apartments can be considered significant. They do represent the important social and architectural trends of America’s move to the suburbs. They are representative of the Ranch style. They are associated with a major developer’s vision. They contribute to an intentionally designed, unified neighborhood.

Thank you once again for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Alan Hess

