

## **Bush**

construction in 2018

image credit: Alan Tse

Located in the Nob Hill district of San Francisco, with neighboring buildings reaching only 5 stories tall, this was a valuable opportunity for my first signature 11 story high rise condominium building.

The FAR restrictions on the site inspired several slices and shifts to sculptural form of the building. The masses shifted, extracted, and contracted around the central transparent spline of the building. The spline is dressed in a minimalistic curtain wall, animated with sliding glass doors, detailed with refined edges of steel members. Instead of punching out openings to create windows, the mass of the building stretches itself to generate openings. This design process generated a pristine, modern sculpture for the neighborhood. The short-lived ego boost from this building design was eventually shattered by all 7 Planning Commissioners.

Comments from my very first Planning Commission Hearing in my professional career are still ringing in mind. The design is not contextual to the historic characteristics of Nob Hill. The facade design lacked depth and details. The building design did not address residential scale. The sculptural silhouette is unprecedented in this context. Massing development had no relationship to the vision of urban design for this region of the city. The floor plans created inappropriate bedroom conditions that do support the favorable housing types for the neighborhood. The most memorable comment was their questioning of my experience in building design, not to mention an 11-story building structure. The comments heard from the Commission Hearing had challenged all design methodologies and ideologies that I was familiar with. Worst of all, client was lost in words in expressing their disappointment in my design skills, knowledge in building design, and capability in the entitlement process.

The conversation with the client right after was brief - I had exactly 2 weeks to redesign this 11-story building in order to get on the calendar for the next Commission Hearing date. I had to unlearn every bit of modern design in order to understand that the city's design criteria and contextual settings were the objectives I had to meet. I had to learn, very quickly, what facade design is. I learned about richness on building facades by consulting with one Commissioner over phone, and another one in person. I learned that building facade does not actually equate to the development of architectural form. I was told i need to develop various layers on facade with positioning of the window planes relative to facade details. I had to learn how to address residential scale, and even draw a window system for a residential building for the very first time. After getting a crash course in building design, I had to learn all the building code requirements and infrastructural needs for a high-rise building in order to re-design the floor plans. I had to achieve a balance between FAR restrictions, feasible unit combinations for the development, architectural design of the units, and Planning code requirements for the bedroom configurations that the Commission voiced against. I had to address the requests from various neighborhood groups to regain their support on the new design. These 336 hours of learning was intense because that was the only chance I had to re-establish the trust I lost in midst of the developer's disappointment.

The revised design achieved much higher level of richness by latticing 4 layers of components on the facade alone. A gridded exoskeleton frames created the silhouette of this modern tower, gradually flip flops its way down to create openings for the residential scale windows. The vertically orientated awning windows were organized to echo this same animation. The edges of the floor slabs and edges of the walls protrude beyond the building to accentuate the frame, chamfered at their ends to enhance their dimensionality. The frame then stretched vertically into a double story dimension against the collection of single story units. This staggered pattern wraps around the corner into the property line walls to complete the 3-dimensionality of the facade. This proposal was approved exactly 672 hours since the last upsetting Commission Hearing with an 7-0 unanimous approval.

672 hours later, i transformed from a egotistic architectural designer who was hungry for his first signature high-rise into a humble minded individual getting a career long lesson on how to properly design a building and practice in the Architecture profession. I learned how to evaluate my design ambition over the developer's company's pipeline projections. The critics of my design is now far beyond my computer screen, I have to satisfy the criteria from my clients, city officials, and even the contextual setting itself. My attitude towards entitlement has changed also. I realized the importance of being positively receptive to criticisms from experienced Planning staff as they are also supportive of good design. As long as we keep the communication open with the officials, the dialogue can be fruitful as long as we continue to exercise our creativity in responding to their critique.