



Night light by Alison Ryan
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Although more eyes are likely to land on the new Pearl District Safeway during daylight hours, the Portland Design Commission is far more concerned about how the building's going to look in the dark.

The commission on Aug. 3 approved designs for both blocks of the two-block development known as the Lovejoy Blocks, bounded by Northwest Lovejoy and Marshall streets and Northwest 12th and 14th avenues.

The lantern-like design is LRS Architects' new take on the planned nine-story grocery, parking and office block originally designed by GGLO of Seattle. Parking is hidden behind a translucent fiberglass panel system. During the day, light reaches in to the parking levels. At night, light from the parking levels reaches out into the neighborhood.

"We're trying to achieve an overall illumination that's different than what you'd normally see in a garage," said Michael Jones, LRS associate and project architect.

The design for the Safeway block - although heralded as much-improved over the original - had the commission asking to see more. The building that design Commissioner Tim Eddy called "basically a giant light fixture" will undergo a lighting study to determine visual impact when night falls in the Pearl.

New team, 'superior' design

LRS started work on Block One in May, after the project's rocky first appearance before commissioners.

"We got beat up pretty badly at the May Design Commission meeting," said Greg Van Patten, manager of multifamily investments for developer Unico Properties. "We made the decision after that to wipe the slate clean and start over with a new design team."

GGLO remained the architect for Block Two, a planned 16-story retail and apartment building.

The first Block One design's problem - and the new design's solution - centers on the above-ground parking on floors three through six. Supporting the large grocery store use meant incorporating far more parking than traditionally seen in the Pearl District, Van Patten said. And pairing parking with a building that also fit into the neighborhood context, Jones said, was the challenge.

"We just have to get everyone comfortable with the idea that we're going to have something in there that won't look like parking," Jones said. "It'll look like something different."

That something different is where the light fixture comparison comes in. LRS is working on a strategy for developing a large-scale light study. A lighting engineer will join the team, and potential light sources will be tested in panel-manufacturer Kalwall's Vancouver showroom.

"The challenge is going to be finding a light fixture that will work in all applications," Jones said.

Ebony brick, gray limestone composite panels, precast concrete, green glass and black window and storefront systems make up the rest of the materials palette.

"Clearly, at the end of the day, we've got a building design that's superior to what it was before," Van Patten said.

Superior - and, he said, much more expensive. Based on preliminary numbers, Van Patten said, building the new Block One would cost 15 percent more. But as long-term owners of the property, he said, Unico and fellow developer MarPark are committed to creating a better building.

"It's important to have a project that we're going to be proud to walk by everyday," he said.

The design was overhauled for the better by working with the neighborhood, developer Al Solheim told the Design Commission.

"We're really proud of the process that we've been involved with," he said.

The Pearl District Neighborhood Association voted "flat-out" in support of the project, said Patricia Gardner, chairwoman of the PDNA planning, transportation and design review committee.

"This is clearly a case where the process worked," she said. "We're getting a better building out of it."