

Park Fifth development to fill in missing piece in downtown L.A.



The asphalt-covered Park Fifth site at 5th and Olive streets once held Philharmonic Auditorium. (Bryan Chan / Los Angeles Times)

By **ROGER VINCENT**

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One of the most prominent lots in Los Angeles, vacant for nearly three decades, is getting a new occupant.

A San Francisco development firm has filed plans to build a high-rise apartment building facing historic Pershing Square in the heart of downtown Los Angeles.

The long-anticipated Park Fifth development would fill in a big missing piece on the checkerboard of downtown's renaissance and may lead to changes in the public square, which dates to the 1800s and was once known as Central Park.

The asphalt-covered Park Fifth site at 5th and Olive streets formerly held Philharmonic Auditorium, one of the city's most prestigious performing-arts venues and home of the L.A.

Philharmonic orchestra for more than four decades.

The building, which opened in 1906, was demolished in 1985 to make way for an office and hotel complex that was never built. A more recent plan called for construction of a gigantic \$1-billion hotel and condominium complex, but that proposal withered during the last economic downturn as money for real estate development dried up.

San Francisco real estate investment firm MacFarlane Partners bought the 99,000-square-foot parcel in June after announcing that it wanted to build a slimmed-down version of the original Park Fifth plan. The new \$300-million development scheduled to get underway next year would be about half the size at 650 units, but still a substantial addition to the urban neighborhood.

The blocks around Pershing Square, which include the landmark Millennium Biltmore Hotel, have seen a burst of activity in recent years with the creation of new apartments and the renovation of old office buildings that appeal to firms in creative businesses.

Cater-corner to Pershing Square is the gleaming Gas Co. Tower office skyscraper. On another corner is a 1920s office tower where a popular bar and restaurant were recently built on the roof.

The old Philharmonic site has become an arresting eyesore in the now busy neighborhood filled daily with pedestrians. The timing is right for development, MacFarlane Partners Chairman Victor MacFarlane said.

"We think it's a key downtown urban location," he said. "The fact that we're filling in a hole in the doughnut just makes the location even better."

MacFarlane has city approval for his plan, but has made some changes that he thinks will improve it.

"We think we came up with a better design with more open space," he said.

Plans call for a long podium structure of two stories holding a mid-rise tower of seven stories and a high-rise tower of 24 stories. Shops and restaurants would line the sidewalks of 5th and Hill streets.

The ample rooftop of the podium would be fitted out as recreation and lounging space for the tenants, with a swimming pool, Jacuzzi-type spa, an outdoor movie theater, barbecues and a dining area. An indoor-outdoor gym would open onto a courtyard.

The roof of the mid-rise would have a lounge with more barbecues and a fireplace. On top of the high-rise would be another swimming pool, spa, dining area and indoor-outdoor gym.

Behind the complex at ground level would be an outdoor paseo running between the new complex and the 1920s-era former Subway Terminal Building to the north that is now the Metro 417 apartments.

"That will create another outdoor space with tables chairs and festoon lighting," said Matt Cindrich, project manager for architecture firm Ankrom Moisan.

The Portland, Ore., firm faced a challenge designing a project on the rising slope of Bunker Hill. It also had to make the complex look compatible with nearby buildings from an earlier era, including the Art Deco-style Title Guarantee building at 5th and Hill streets that the new development will wrap around.

"We are maximizing our glazing and trying to get transparent corners," said architect Dave Heater, managing principal of Ankrom Moisan. He said Park Fifth would be similar in feel to the Luma and Elleven condominium buildings the firm designed that are a few blocks way near Staples Center

"These are good contemporary buildings with good outdoor spaces" and busy sidewalks, Heater said.

Park Fifth would look down on Pershing Square, but MacFarlane is not pleased with what that view would now entail. He has been working with city leaders on a plan to overhaul the five-acre plaza that critics call sterile and difficult to enter and exit.

"It's a hard-scape design, barrier-type park that really doesn't make any kind of sense," MacFarlane said.

A makeover that includes more grass could make Pershing Square more inviting to both people who work downtown and the thousands of new residents who are looking for spaces to relax after hours and on weekends, he said.

Not everyone is in favor of redoing the park, which has seen multiple changes in its history, including the creation of an underground garage in the 1950s. Developer Nelson Rising was instrumental in the last makeover of the 1990s when his then-firm Maguire Thomas Partners was trying to lure the Southern California Gas Co. to what would become its headquarters.

Gas Co. leaders wanted a better park and Rising was part of a \$14.5-million renovation designed by architect Ricardo Legorreta of Mexico and U.S. landscape architect Laurie Olin. The design by the prestigious pair is solid, he said, and just needs to spruced up.

Years ago, "the colors were rally vivid. The purple was really purple and the pink was really pink."

The square could use a few improvements, Rising said, but "if it was brought back to its original beauty with its colors and a genuflection to a great Mexican artist, no one would be talking the way they are talking."

Rising, who operates the PacMutal office building overlooking the square with his son, Christopher Rising, said he is "extremely supportive" of the Park Fifth development.

"The transformation happening downtown is so extraordinary," he said "it's going to be one of the grand cities in the country."

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