

The Essex at Lake Merritt Oakland, CA

The Essex is located between the west side of Lake Merritt and downtown Oakland in the Gold Coast neighborhood, home to some of Oakland's grand, classic residential manors including the historic Oakland Hotel adjacent to the site. This site was one of the last two remaining properties with frontage along Lake Merritt. As the master plan and concept design architect, Perkins +Will (formerly AI) was responsible for defining the project as part of the EIR and design approvals phase, and for supporting the client through the public presentations and community process. The project was approved unanimously by the City Council and entitled in 1999. Constructed as apartments (mapped as condominiums) and completed in 2001, The Essex was converted to condominiums in 2003.

The total project area of 454,000 gross square feet was established by the master plan. There are 270 market rate units (1, 2 and 3 bedrooms, with 10 loft units) and 325 cars (at a 1:1.2 parking ratio). Amenities include a 24-hour attended lobby, clubhouse, swimming pool and spa at the garden terrace level, a state of the art health facility, and a business center. The site is approximately one acre and zoning would permit approximately 500 units. There is no height limit on the site. The components are organized on the site to minimize the impact on the Lake Merritt Hotel and to fit harmoniously into the scale and ordering of the city fabric. In order not to overshadow the hotel, the low-rise eight-story piece is positioned adjacent to the hotel and the 20-story tower is located to the east side of the site. The height of the low-rise is approximately the same as the height of the adjacent hotel. Key horizontal datum lines carried through the new building in the form of cornice lines, trellises, changes in fenestration and changes in the exterior wall material, establishing a base zone.

The massing strategy also maximized solar access to the terrace by keeping building low on the south. The tower is thin in the east-west dimension, as it was proven to minimize the obstruction of views to the Lake from the existing residential buildings to the south. The site slopes diagonally about 14'-6" from south to north with the parking fully submerged on the high side. From the top of the podium, the garden terrace is positioned to mask the street below and engage peaceful views across the Lake. Sight line studies and extensive shadow studies were performed to establish the viability and character of this outdoor space. Balconies are carved into the building masses adding texture and depth through shade, shadow and scale add appropriate to the façade essential to distinguishing it as a residential place. The master plan defined a light colored palette of materials compatible with the surrounding buildings and in keeping with the regional Mediterranean character of the City of Oakland.

(Design scope included concept, entitlement and Schematic Design. The project was executed by others).



















