

Changing Skyline: Taking on the cost of good design



The Sansom Street site in 1945. The Boyd Theater is at right. (Philadelphia City Archives)

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You don't need to know the details to guess how this particular urban ritual plays out: Developer proposes high-rise tower. Neighbors hate high-rise tower. Neighbors appeal to city regulatory agencies for design changes. But city officials, skittish about losing a big development, insist the project is fine and wave it through.

Cue the lawyers.

Until this week, that was the story line for a 27-story apartment tower on the site of the Boyd Theater. Despite a prime Sansom Street site, with views of Rittenhouse Square and historic buildings on every side, the project's developers seemed intent on erecting the equivalent of a college dorm, a generic slab slathered in a cheap red, white, and gray metal facade. Appalled, neighbors in the nearby condos donned their legal battle gear, determined to kill the project in court. Then they switched tactics.

Rather than pay lawyers to wage a protracted legal assault, the neighbors instead decided to offer their money to the developer, Pearl Properties - if it would agree to hire a new architect and redesign the project. While the two sides are still finishing the details in a formal agreement, it looks as though they're ready to give the unorthodox arrangement a go. The neighbors' preferred architect, Cecil Baker, said he met Thursday with Pearl's Reed J. Slogoff to begin hashing out a new approach.

The idea that a group of citizens would have to buy off a developer to produce an acceptable work of architecture is at once outrageous and intriguing. Their payment effectively shifts the financial burden for good design onto the public's shoulders.

And yet, in Philadelphia and elsewhere, it is sadly evident that the old models, which produced enduring buildings that filled us with civic pride, are broken. Most developers today are interested only in short-term results, and Philadelphia's leaders seem to care only about how many ribbon-cuttings they can pack into their schedules. In the absence of public officials willing to demand quality in this fast-buck real estate market, this approach at least offers a way to keep the skyline from being blighted by mediocrity.

The deal was the brainchild of Richard Gross, who owns an apartment on the same block of Chestnut Street as the Boyd. As a resident of a high-rise building, he wasn't bothered by the height of Pearl's tower - 341 feet. He even liked many aspects of Pearl's mixed-use project, which smartly hides its parking underground and calls for an extensive retail component on both Chestnut and Sansom Streets (including a TargetExpress).

What Gross hated was the slapdash architecture, so strikingly out of context with the neighborhood's fine mix of late 19th- and early 20th-century buildings. As soon as Gross saw the renderings that Pearl's designer, Eimer Architecture, submitted to the Historical Commission for review in May, he convened a meeting with representatives from four nearby condo towers, as well as Kate's Place, the subsidized apartment house at 20th and Sansom run by Project Home. They agreed to band together to fight for a better design.

"Instead of lawyering up," Gross told me, "we decided to architect up."

Pearl didn't immediately love the idea of redesigning its project, Gross conceded, especially as it was confident of receiving the commission's blessing. (Pearl's Slogoff did not return phone calls.) But Gross, a lawyer who works in real estate and who has helped finance several historic renovations in Washington, persuaded Pearl the development at 19th and Chestnut could not withstand a legal challenge if the neighbors appealed the commission's decision in court.

Normally, a mixed-use project in that location would be a by-right development, requiring only a building permit. But because Pearl's T-shaped assemblage of properties includes several historic buildings - the remains of the art deco Boyd among them - the entire design must pass muster with the commission. Pearl is also obliged to retain the Boyd's grand lobby, as well as a small office building at 19th Street. (It was constructed in 1934 by Raymond Pace Alexander, the first African American to graduate from the Wharton School, after he found no Center City landlord would lease him office space.)

Of course, just because the commission has the power to shape this design to a high standard doesn't mean it will. Under the Nutter administration, the Historical Commission has come to see its role as smoothing the way for development. Deputy Mayor Alan Greenberger, who oversees the Planning Commission, already has praised the project, declaring, "It's time to make something happen" on the Boyd site.

That bias toward developers was made clear again last Friday, when Pearl presented its plans to the commission. Instead of submitting the entire project for review, it sought approval only for the retail portion on Chestnut Street. Several members objected to the piecemeal approach, but the majority rubber-stamped Pearl's concept, 7-3.

The commission was so eager to fast-track the project that it also approved a new glass facade for the Boyd's storefront, even though Pearl had failed to submit a key drawing showing how it would be executed. Its rationale was that commission staff would handle the details. The glass wall badly compromises what remains of the Boyd.

It's that kind of behavior, Gross says, that convinced members of his group they couldn't count on the Nutter administration. As part of their private deal, he said, Pearl has agreed to work with Baker to come up with a better design, with the neighbors picking up the tab - expected to be in the low "five figures." While Pearl retains the right to reject the design, the neighbors retain the right to call in the lawyers.

In Gross' mind, the best outcome would be an integrated design that includes two or three mid-rise buildings, serving as foothills to a less slablike tower. The cladding would get an upgrade. After all, this is a tower that will be highly visible from one of the city's loveliest parks, Rittenhouse Square.

But even if Gross' group succeeds in improving Pearl's design, it's still a bittersweet victory when only those in Philadelphia with money and clout can count on getting good design.