Choosing a Skyline

How intelligently are we recognizing urban context as a feature of environmental responsibility?

Urban design disciplines, though highly practical, often raise disturbing philosophical questions. For example, what is genuine—as opposed to cosmetic or public-relations—environmentalism? How meaningful are words like *modern* and *postmodern*? Is *location* merely a commercial buzzword? Such probings can uncomfortably challenge real estate professionals. Yet, they are necessary if we are to get the buildings and cities we need, rather than only those we deserve. One way to pursue them is to compare a new building with its "shadow"—the design that did not get built.

In a Darwinian age, it is commonly supposed that what makes it to the finishing line automatically deserves to win: it survived, so it must be the fittest. It is generally assumed, for example, that if a building costs tens of millions of dollars and was created by an army of professionals, it must be good. A movie, however, can consume tens of millions of investors' dollars and still be seen as a disastrous failure. Are not buildings equally vunerable to folly? In appraising a movie, it can help to compare it with the book or play that inspired it, or with the script that the director wisely, or unwisely, abandoned. However, it may be even *more* appropriate to apply such comparative criticism to major buildings. After all, films can be ignored; buildings dominate public visual space. Should we not look, wherever possible, at what we might have gotten—but did not?

The National Association of Realtors' (NAR) new 93,000-square-foot flagship building on Capitol Hill, designed by Cambridge, Massachusetts–based Graham Gund Architects, raises intriguing questions when compared with the original design for the same site by WDG Architects of Washington, D.C., produced under the direction of developer (and NAR member) Jay Hellman. This addition to the national skyline, which opened in October 2004, illuminates an apparent paradox: ostensible ultramodernism may mask what is in reality a form of antiquarianism. At first glance, NAR's $46 million, 12-floor, glass-walled tower at 500 New Jersey Avenue seems to exalt the contemporary. Then one realizes it recalls 1930s science fiction magazines and the old black-and-white Fritz Lang movie *Metropolis*. It is nostalgic retrofuturism. This is not necessarily bad, provided people recognize it as a period piece. But how many do?

This rendering by the Washington, D.C.—based Weihe Design Group shows the building originally conceived for 500 New Jersey Avenue. The photo below shows the tower that was actually built on the site for the National Association of Realtors.

THE HELLMAN COMPANY, INC.

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NAR's building has been promoted as a model of environmentally advanced design and has received a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certificate from the U.S. Green Building Council. But can an environmental mark be meaningful if a building disregards a sense of place? Behind closed doors, the NAR design has been severely criticized as insensitive to its environment.

In May 2003, Donald R. Kennon, chief historian of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, wrote then NAR president Catherine B. Whatley that he was "troubled by the announced design." Kennon referred NAR to comments by Ronald Lee Fleming, which he said he fully endorsed. Fleming, author of the Pulitzer Prize–nominated *Power of Place* trilogy and president of the Cambridge, Massachusetts–based Townscape Institute, had written to Howard University professor Harry G. Robinson, who was assisting NAR, expressing concern about the NAR plan's suitability "from the point of view of contextual design and sustainability." Fleming argued that the design approved in 2001 by Washington, D.C.'s zoning adjustment board with the support of the local advisory neighborhood commission (ANC)—that is, Hellman's original design—was "clearly more historically contextual, sensitive to its culturally significant location, and appropriate from an urban planning standpoint."

He added that proceeding with this "more suitable plan, instead of seeking to replace it with a glass slab that could have been built anywhere in the country in the 1970s," would give NAR "an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the sensitivity to place with which the NAR, perhaps more than most organizations, should be publicly associated. Indeed, it seems extraordinary that this positive opportunity has not been eagerly seized by the organization. One would suspect this is a matter of ego rather than reflection on the particular character of a site." Organizations engaged in major development projects, Fleming continued, have "a corporate visual responsibility—an obligation to respect the cultural, historical, aesthetic, and other socially important dimensions of their visual impact on the neighborhood. It does not appear that the NAR is aware of this responsibility." NAR's 2004 president Walt McDonald called the replacement design for the building "a testament of NAR's commitment to this community," but records show the local ANC, which included several NAR members, strenuously objected to it.

Studying the NAR building alongside the unbuilt original design compels us to reexamine our idea of modernism. The stark sleekness of the smooth glass tower versus Hellman's soft classical lines, balconies, and operable windows suggests a contrast between modern internationalism and traditional forms. However, a background check reveals that it is not that simple. Hellman, it turns out, is not an advocate of traditional design or even a design school graduate. He is a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)–trained engineer specializing in the urban impacts of computers. He predicts the Internet will change our world physically and culturally, as railroads altered it in the 19th century and automobiles, aircraft, telephones, and television did in the 20th. Anticipating the invention of personal computers, he began researching their real estate implications before they came on the market. He uses technological research to assess the development potential of brownfields.

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Hellman identified the potential of the 500 New Jersey Avenue site in 1985. Skeptics dismissed the relatively tiny (8,284 square feet), narrow, unusual-shaped location as undevelopable. Hellman's technology studies convinced him otherwise. He assembled the parcel, forming an expert team to prove the viability of a landmark office tower there. Records show he proposed it to NAR in 1994, urging construction of a building of "a distinctly Washington character." NAR declined, but Hellman proceeded, winning unprecedented zoning modifications for the site in July 2001. That November, Hellman says, he presented a comprehensive file on the site, including a copy of the ANC-supported architectural design, to NAR consultant Richard Harps. By December, Hellman sold the site to developer Lawrence Brandt, who shortly afterward sold it to NAR. "I offered NAR my technologically inspired design, but they preferred to go their own way," Hellman recalls.

If he is a technology maven, why is his design so apparently traditional compared with NAR's flat-walled tower? Hellman's reply: "People have a cartoon idea of technology, associating it with uniformity. The latest teletechnologies do not imply that. Quite the opposite. People who think it is contemporary to put up generic sheets of glass that could be in any city anywhere do not understand technology," he says. "In fact, they are living in the past, with a concept of technology that dates back to the first half of the 20th century. The enlightened use of contemporary technology emphasizes a sense of distinctive place. Old-fashioned modernism saw expanses of glass as chic and contemporary. Today, to be contemporary no longer means being overawed by the shininess of a lot of plate glass. It means understanding fiber optics, which free designers to respect the uniqueness of their building's context."

His initiative to develop the site arose, Hellman explains, when he realized the Internet is changing the uses and economics of office buildings. "Instead of having to contain numerous people to process information," he asserts, "office buildings are evolving into corporate clubhouses where people will meet for specific, strategic relationship purposes. The rest of the time they'll telework and desktop videoconference." These conclusions coincide with those of management scholar Charles Handy, fellow of the London Business School and author of *The Age of Unreason* and *The Age of Paradox*. "If there is an office in the future," Handy says, "it will be more like a clubhouse: a place for meeting, eating, and greeting, with rooms reserved for activities, not for particular people." This trend, Hellman maintains, "means smaller total office space needed, which, in turn, means higher rents are affordable at better addresses—a more symbolic role for corporate offices, with heavier focus on

uniquely significant location. A Catholic newspaper whose corporate office, though small, looks out on the pontiff's balcony on St. Peter's Square in Rome would obviously have secured a coup."

The original New Jersey Avenue design's classical features, therefore, do not reflect traditional preferences. They just acknowledge the character of Washington's monumental core, dominated by the presence of the U.S. Capitol. "The Capitol is one of the most prestigious, iconic views in the world," Hellman points out. "For a corporate building lucky enough to be so close to it, it made sense to emphasize this proximity by linking the two buildings visually, with balconies and operable windows to constantly remind the tower's occupants and VIP guests that their neighbor was Congress. In its wisdom, NAR abandoned these benefits, opting for a sealed tower: no balconies, inoperable windows."

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Hellman's research suggests that paying more attention to urban context ultimately benefits the bottom line. For example, he calculated and reported to NAR in 2002 that including balconies and French doors would boost the building's value by at least $10 million, based on a projected 10 percent premium on rent per square foot. This finding was independently confirmed. The Trammell Crow real estate company reported to NAR that the absence of balconies and French doors would be "a serious failure to take advantage of what truly makes this building and this site unique," adding that the 10 percent rental premium estimate was "quite conservative." This is due, Hellman declares, to the well-known real estate principle that view is valuable. "Seeing the ocean or the Capitol through a window is one thing," he says. "Stepping out on a balcony to experience it is being there."

Hellman contends that his finding is supported by the NAR tower's leasing performance. Citing information compiled by CoStar, a Bethesda, Maryland–based real estate transaction survey firm, he says 51 percent occupancy by the third and fourth quarters of 2005 shows that "a price is being paid for design choices." With balconies and French doors, he argues, "occupancy would have been at or near 100 percent after all this time—more than a year since the building was delivered." But Richard C. Tonner, an agent with Washington, D.C.–based Cassidy & Pinkard, the company handling the leasing, counters that the structure is "a striking landmark." He adds that his firm currently has leases and proposals out on most of the office and retail space "to users attracted to the building's trophy quality and location," and notes that in Washington, D.C., "buildings with operable windows are not considered first class."

Hellman's reasoning nevertheless ties into a surprising aspect of our growing understanding of information technology's impacts: a renewed awareness of the experience of place. Urban scholars are finding that instead of marginalizing cities by dispersing work globally, telecommunication technology reinforces socioeconomic pressure for the large-scale connectivity concentrations that cities have always embodied and still do.

Although geography is irrelevant to the Internet per se, its support resources coalesce in cities, whose international competitiveness is now increasingly linked to teletechnology capacity. A virtual economy requires (and nourishes) strongly defined physical places.

In his study "Megacities, World Cities, and Global Cities," Peter Hall, a professor at London's Bartlett School of Planning, confirms that while people assume teletechnology replaces personal travel and face-to-face meetings, they are actually complementary. Data from France, he reports, show that over a long period, telecommunications traffic and personal travel have risen in parallel. "I have no doubt that the evidence from every other country would be identical," he says, citing the growth of international business air travel, major international hotel chains, and the convention business. Generally, Hall adds, convention centers emerge in the hearts of major cities, amid concentrations of business hotels, restaurants, and associated nightlife, forming "a very significant part of the phenomenon of business tourism, one of the fastest-growing sectors in the global cities today, and one that is highly synergistic with the other growth sectors."

Hall's study agrees with Toronto University scholars Maryann Feldman and Roger Martin, who have found that the prosperity of organizations, industries, and regions is linked to the ability of cities to project highly distinctive identities anchored in particular activities.

WHICH OF THE TWO HISTORICALLY REFERENTIAL CAPITOL HILL DESIGNS IS MORE AUTHENTICALLY "CONTEMPORARY"— NAR'S INTERNATIONALLY GENERIC BUILDING OR HELLMAN'S CONTEXT-SPECIFIC DESIGN?

These considerations raise a compelling question: which of the two historically referential Capitol Hill designs is more authentically "contemporary" — NAR's internationally generic building or Hellman's context-specific design?

According to NAR, the building's environmental accomplishments include efficient use of water and energy; abundant natural daylight; native plant species to reduce the need for irrigation; capture of rainwater; efficient heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems; a high-performance glass curtain wall to reduce energy use significantly; zero use of chlorofluorocarbon refrigerants; use of a high level of recycled building materials; smoking prohibitions throughout the office space; and a carbon dioxide monitoring system to introduce fresh air in areas of increased occupancy.

These features may or may not be sufficient, by themselves, to qualify the building as environmentally appropriate and effective.

Either way, this new presence on Capitol Hill may make its most noteworthy contribution by encouraging us to reconsider what it really means to be contemporary, the significance of location, and how intelligently, if at all, we are recognizing urban context as a feature of environmental responsibility.

Perhaps we also need to think again about the National Institute of Standards and Technology 2002 report on LEED, which concluded that while its eco-labeling system is successful in some areas, such as marketing, "LEED alone does not provide an environmental assessment tool that the building industry can rely on. For that, a much greater effort must be expended by many stakeholders in the built environment."