



## What's the scale of our ambition?

**In the developing city, two new projects could raise standards with a little more daring**

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Projects: For 'really cool' design, rules can be waived

Two fascinating projects began their journey through the city approval process last week. One would dramatically expand downtown's revitalization toward the southwest, planting a flag for renewal between the Pearl District and Goose Hollow. The other could forever change some of the last empty acreage on downtown's waterfront.

Both could set standards for generations to come, and scale will be the key to success to both projects. One needs to rise to the occasion. The other probably needs to shrink. But the scale we're talking about is less about style than about ambition.

On the odd-shaped block surrounded by West Burnside and Southwest 19th and Morrison streets, the Portland Housing Authority is partnering with developer Gerding/Edlen to redevelop the Civic Apartments. Two new buildings will rise on the site: a five-story courtyard scheme of 145 low-income apartments and a 16-story condo tower with a pedestrian street and plaza in between.

With PGE Park across the street and dozens of early and mid-century apartment buildings nearby, this is one of the densest, liveliest areas of the city. Yet there are scarcely any condos available for purchase, little shopping beyond Walgreen's and Fred Meyer, and only a smattering of restaurants and bars.

SERA Architects and Mayer/Reed landscape architects have come up with a plan that looks likely to provide great housing and shopping and a cool new urban amenity (the internal plaza and pedestrian street). But the design still doesn't quite rise to the more expansive possibilities at hand.

Low-income housing has long been a territory for architectural experimentation -- but never in Portland. And surrounded by nothing more precious than the poured-in-place concrete stadium and the car wash across the street, the project won't have neighborhood advocates carping about how the architecture needs to "fit" into some mythical notion of historical context.

We shouldn't turn poor people into lab rats or build something that will look dated in five years. But with a public agency and one of the city's most respected and talented development/architecture teams working on one of the complex and interesting gateway sites in the city, the time has come for something truly challenging: an iconic tower that marks the western gateway to downtown and a plaza that connects the disparate pieces of this neighborhood into a muscular ensemble. **The four towers**

Just north of the Broadway Bridge and Albers Mill, the H. Naito Corp. has about four acres of waterfront land. They've hooked up with the Vancouver, B.C.-based team of Pemcor Development Corp. and Soren Rasmussen Architects to build 440 condominiums in a four-tower scheme, the likes of which Portland has never seen.

They propose two-faced buildings, looking at the river with prow-shaped curtain walls of reflective glass and back at the Pearl District with a more conventional facade. They would blast through the city's current requirement that all buildings along this stretch of waterfront step back at a 45-degree angle once they rise over 35 feet.

What's more, architect Rasmussen's current concept has the buildings sitting on an underground parking garage topped with a water feature. The architecture would, in effect, float on a pond separated from the river by a 10-foot grade and a jetty-like 25-foot-wide extension of the Willamette Greenway.

The Design Commission has to approve the extra height. At an Aug. 19 "design advice request" in which developers and architects get early feedback, commissioners said they would happily consider an exception to the height -- but only for an exceptional set of buildings.

Commission member Jeff Stuhr called Pemcor's current proposal "a little Disneyland." Likening the scheme to Donald Trump's proposal for similarly repetitive towers on Manhattan's western shore, commissioner Francesca Gambetti pointed out the scheme would stretch 850 feet along Northwest Naito Parkway without a single access point to the river. Commission chairman Mike McCulloch argued that repeating "the same building four times in a row equals one big thing."

But echoing his colleagues, McCulloch added, "If something is really cool, we'll waive the regulations."

Neither Rasmussen nor the project's local architect, Otak, previously has designed anything to suggest they might rise to the occasion. But they and the developers clearly have big ambitions. The proposed condos, the developers assert, would be aimed at a luxury market even better heeled than that filling the condos in the adjacent Pearl District. That could mean a better-than-average budget for architecture. It could mean a bold environmental statement about architecture and the river. But so far it also seems to mean a quasi-gated community in the form of "four towers in a castle moat," as design commissioner Stuhr wryly put it.

If Pemcor continues to push for extra height, the Design Commission could leverage some of that budget to the public good with a wider greenway and graceful connections between every building to it. Any development on the river should, at minimum, equal or exceed the environmental principles of projects already under way in South Waterfront.

But an equally likely outcome could resemble the project rising just down the road to the north where developer Tim Ralston is building 113 town houses in a scheme airdropped from the suburbs.

But don't blame the developers. The fault lies with the city and the Portland Development Commission. Recall that the famed River District Plan focused acutely on the development deals while purposely leaving the vision for what they might build blurry.

As design commissioner Stuhr bluntly put it, "This area has been left off the planning maps."

Stay tuned. Maybe Naito, Pemcor, et al., will come up with a design worthy of the scale they want and of the river we like to imagine is aspiring to a renaissance. Or maybe they will contribute to the urban design disaster in the making on the northern edge of the River District.

### **Quick notes**

Centennial Mill isn't the only industrial heritage building the Pearl District is about to lose. On view 24 hours a day at the PDX Window Project (612 N.W. 12th Ave.) is artist Vanessa Renwick's "Lovejoy Lost," a documentary film installation on the Lovejoy art columns.

Covered in classically inflected graffiti by railroad worker Tom Stefopoulos during the '40s, the columns once supported the old Lovejoy viaduct. They were saved by the Portland Bureau of Transportation and have been stored by developer Hoyt Street Properties for the past five years. The Pearl District Neighborhood Association wants them reinstalled as sculptures somewhere in the district. But despite aggressive lobbying efforts by artist James Harrison, the PDC and the Regional Arts & Culture Council have shown less-than-tepid support.

The columns now sit stripped of their coverings by homeless people looking for tent fabric. Developer John Carroll says he's "exploring some ideas" for incorporating them into one of his projects. But time for the columns -- and these final remnants of the Pearl District's soulful heritage -- is running out.

Curious about the history of the urban renewal in Portland? Well, in what some urban activists might describe as the coyote celebrating the potluck at the henhouse, the PDC is offering its version of events, at 5:30-8:30 p.m. in the AIA Gallery, 315 S.W. Fourth Ave.

For a taste of success, look for such great projects as Tom McCall Waterfront Park, Pioneer Courthouse Square and the Classical Chinese Garden. But for a test of depth and candor, let's see how they tell the tales of South Auditorium and Memorial Coliseum.

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