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## A round peg sometimes does fit in a square hole

Posted: Jan. 21, 2007

### Spaces



**Whitney Gould**

E-MAIL

Inserting a tall building into a neighborhood of mostly two- to six-s buildings is a recipe for conflict. Where some see revitalization and expanded tax base, others see architectural Armageddon: loss of h scale, more traffic and parking headaches, dark shadows on the sti

But what if the lanky newcomer is shapely, not hulking?

What if it re-energizes a sagging business district and contributes t long-term health of a neighborhood?

So goes the clash of values playing out in developer Boris Gokhman's plans to underwrite a for the troubled Downer Ave. shopping area with a condo and boutique hotel just behind it, Webster Place and N. Stowell Ave., replacing four deteriorated houses.

Gokhman acquired those properties, and most of the shopping district, last year from real e investor Dan Katz.



(Full disclosure: I live a block away, and I shop on Downer.)

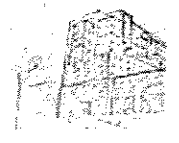
The plan by Gokhman's New Land Enterprises started out as an 11-story, 91-unit condo. Business leaders liked it, but many nearby residents didn't.

Too high, they complained; too much traffic.

Then the designers, Workshop Architects, reconfigured it for 84 units and again for 76. Still too tall, the critics groused. "No 11-story condo" signs sprouted like dandelions on front lawns.

But wait a minute. There's a 9-story apartment building nearby, on E. Bradford Ave., and just to the southeast, the new

Downer Pl



Photo/W A

Renderings show concept for a pr \$50 million hote

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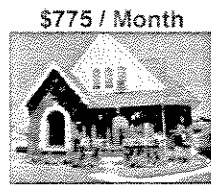
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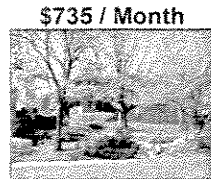
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Columbia St. Mary's hospital will be the equivalent of 15 stories.

If it's well-designed, with friendly gestures to the street, an occasional tall building in a low- to mid-rise neighborhood can actually enhance a sense of place, not hurt it.

A good example is the Lodgewood apartment building, 1121 N. Waverly Place - 13 stories of International Style buoyance from 1954 that helps us reapprciate the petite 19th century buildings nearby.

To my eye, some early versions of Gokhman's proposed condo building were actually quite engaging, with curves and sculptural setbacks.

The latest version, which Workshop drew up last week, is also appealing.

The curves are gone, but in response to the opponents' conce... architects have broken down the building's mass into a glassy story section at the corner and a narrower, 11-story portion to north, which would bridge an alley and extend over toward Dc but be set back from that street by about 64 feet.

Workshop's drawings are still just conceptual, but they show a interplay of glass, stone and reddish wood veneer; projecting irregular intervals set up a jazzy counterpoint to the flatter fac nearby.

All told, there would be 50 condos and 80 hotel rooms, with p... underground.

The revenue from the condo/hotel would help rejuvenate Dow shopping district, where deteriorating brick, peeling paint, wat damage, crumbling windows and other problems bespeak yea

neglect by Katz, and where competition from larger retailers and hipper shopping districts th the survival of several long-time businesses.

Traffic is not a problem here; if anything, the street needs *more* traffic - especially the pede... kind.

Among the planned improvements: planter beds, benches and additional streetscaping; face repairs; renovation of the long-vacant upper two floors of the Schwartz book store for medic offices; construction of a cosmetic surgery office at the corner of Downer and E. Park Place, an Associated Bank branch now sits; and relocation of the bank to a city-owned parking lot ; south, with the addition of more retail space there. Parking would all be internal.

Bob Greenstreet, the city planning director, calls the revised, \$50 million plan "a real step fo using very sound urban strategies."

If it fails, he says, "I'm afraid we're dangerously close to check-cashing stores and comic bo shops."

I agree. The default position here - a sterile obsession over building height, nostalgia for wh to be - is a formula for decay.

condo project o east side. The tr shows the proje Downer Ave., w condos rising at 2500 block of N Ave., next to Sc bookshop. The I view shows the as it might look Webster Place a Stowell Ave., w three-story port the corner and ; story section fai north.

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And while some of the criticism of the project has been constructive, some of it (including th retaliation against shop owners who support the plan) has been downright nasty, even thug-

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As for fears that the project will usher in a flood of high rises, I see no persuasive evidence. Mike D'Amato, who represents the area, notes that the city in recent years has actually incr the amount of single-family zoning on the east side.

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Gokhman deserves praise for the way he has integrated new construction with preservation, engaging some of the city's most innovative young architects.

Chief among them is Scott Kindness, who, like Gokhman, lives in the neighborhood and whc passion for urbane, thoughtful design is contagious.

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The city needs to reward that passion, not dull it and dumb it down.

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