



Editorial columnists

David Brussat: Angeleno inspiration for Providence

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Two proposed skyscrapers designed by celebrity architect Frank "O!" Gehry for downtown Los Angeles were announced the same day as two other proposed downtown-L.A. skyscrapers. Gehry's towers, of 47 and 25 stories, got the lion's share of media coverage, of course, but the two designed by architect Richardson Robertson III for developer Rodmark would be even taller. City House and the Olympic would soar 60 and 49 stories, respectively, into the sky above the City of Angels.

But although one of the two would be the tallest residential tower in America, height isn't their most interesting feature. Rather, it is that they would both be unapologetically classical in style. If built, City House and the Olympic would have no peers.

Perhaps the closest to classical among the tallest buildings erected over the past half-century is the late Philip Johnson's AT&T Building (1984), in New York. Modernists claim they hate its boffo Chippendale roof, which is postmodern, but even more they hate the sleek, rhythmic, yet unadorned pilasters and slender mullions of its more arguably classical facades, which beat modernism at its own game.

In 2002, a dozen towers of a more overtly classical style, ranging up to 50 stories, were proposed for the World Trade Center site, in Lower Manhattan, by Franck Lohsen McCrery Architects. Unveiled in the Fall 2001 City Journal, the proposal was blocked by the criteria adopted for the WTC design competition, which was rigged to admit only modernist designs to the final round. The firm also entered an inspired classical plan in another competition, to rebuild a 60-block site on New York's West Side.

Robert A.M. Stern has designed a mid-size classical tower on Berkeley Street, in Boston. I'm especially fond of his Brooklyn Law School tower. And his condo tower in Manhattan, the 31-story Chatham, may come closest to being a classical skyscraper. It has several taller rivals in New York, but they, along with a few candidates in other cities, hover even closer to postmodernism than the AT&T, with the massing of classic skyscraper form but not the detailing.

So the history of the postwar classical skyscraper is meager indeed. Rick Robertson's two L.A. towers, if built, would almost be Chapter One.

To gaze upon the computer renderings of the Robertson proposal for Los Angeles (see www.robertsonpartners.net) is to conceive a civic America far lovelier, far more urbane, far more humane and even far more practical than what passes for architecture today. Let readers substitute, in their minds, buildings of this enchanting sort for the ugly (and increasingly loopy) skyscrapers that mar their skylines today. They will see, in their imagination, an American civitas not only different from but perhaps even better than the European cities to which we all travel to find the beauty so lacking here.

Despite the stirring example of its prewar classical skyscrapers, Providence has now decided to step away from the easy, logical path that could have led to its being unarguably the most beautiful city in America. In Capital Center, sanity ruled for a decade: With the Westin Hotel (1994), Providence Place (1999) and the Marriott Courtyard Hotel (2000), the city looked forward with hope to beauty; but in 2004, the Capital Center Commission snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

The latest proposals before the commission -- the Westin addition now in construction and the Carpionato Properties hotel proposal recently unveiled before the commission's design panel -- are classically inspired, but are under attack.

During the process leading to the approval of the Westin addition's design, the panel accepted the removal of a rooftop cupola and a shift in the massing of the addition's major and minor wings. The panel is likely to accept more recently proposed reductions in the quality of the addition's design, including the removal of half of the upper and all of the lower gabled roofs, by which the addition maintains its identification with the original hotel tower, and a squaring off of the addition's elegantly curved condo balconies.

Thankfully, Carpionato Properties has not yet gotten with the new program at Capital Center. It refuses to be ugly. It has proposed an imperfect and yet largely attractive hotel for Parcel 12 -- the triangular Bad Sculpture Park, at the northeastern corner of Kennedy Plaza. Members of the design panel attacked its French Renaissance design as insufficiently coherent -- a judgment with which, having now seen detailed drawings up close, I would disagree. Architect James Wurst should stand fast. Let him get in the panel's face by increasing the level of detail that informs his classical design. The panel may grumble but it is unlikely to block a proposal on those grounds.

Things look bleak, but architects here at least now have another source of inspiration. To be sure, it's way on the other side of the country, but even as a mere proposal it towers over the landscape, easily visible from Providence.

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