

## ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

**Lessons for Block 37, from our neighbors to the north**

By Blair Kamin, Tribune architecture critic

MADISON, Wis. — Ah, Madison in summer.

Inline skaters roll along the State Street pedestrian mall. Tourists gaze up at the freshly restored dome inside the State Capitol. No one seems in a hurry to leave the cafes. The mood is relaxed, a college town/state capital reveling in the languid rhythms of July.

But look to the block just southeast of the towering Capitol and your heart may beat faster, especially if you're from Chicago and you care about the future of Block 37, the long-vacant lot near the heart of the North Loop.

On the Madison parcel, Chicago architect Joe Valerio has teamed up with two developers to shape a nearly \$100 million office and retail project that saves old buildings and carefully inserts new ones that are respectful of their surroundings, but bracingly inventive.

Valerio's design marries sensitive urban planning with strongly sculptural architecture, like a playful Walgreen's that offers a wonderful twist on the traditional mansard roof. The project offers lessons for cities nationwide, among them Chicago, which is now making its latest push to get something going on bedeviled Block 37.

Lesson one is that it is possible to do assertive architecture on a prominent site that might cow some designers into putting up boring "background" buildings. In this case, the site sits high on the isthmus that overlooks Lakes Mendota and Monona, and fronts directly on Capitol Square, the public green space that surrounds Wisconsin's imposing State Capitol.

True, the plot isn't exactly like Block 37, which is far more dense and urban. But the strong presence of shops, like those Block 37 needs on State Street, and restaurants, like those with which Block 37 could enliven the Randolph Street theater district, makes for a strong similarity. So does the parcel's location next to a major civic space that is comparable to Chicago's Daley Plaza.



Joe DeMaio/DeMaio Photography

Seen under construction (below), Block 89 sits just southeast of Madison's imposing State Capitol and the Capitol Square. Facing Capitol Square, new storefronts (above) create a lively mix with existing buildings.



Skot Wiedemann/Weidemann Photography

## Local leadership

Lesson two is that it is essential to start with enlightened developers, like Brad Binkowski and Tom Neujahr of Urban Land Interests in Madison. They are local guys who have to live with what they build, not big-city suits who simply want to get in and get out with as much profit as possible. In contrast, Chicago officials last month overlooked several local firms and selected the Mills Corp., an Arlington, Va.-based retail real estate investment firm trust, as its latest lead developer for Block 37.

Over roughly a decade, Binkowski and Neujahr assembled land on the Madison plot, which is called Block 89 — that being the number it was assigned in the original city grid.

Once, the blocks around the Capitol were Madison's undisputed retail hub, but suburban malls destroyed that preeminence. As recently as a decade ago, Block 89 was a frumpy assortment of old buildings and an ugly surface parking lot. It all but screamed out: "Hey, Mr. Urban Planner! Clear out all my buildings! Renew me!"

That leads to lesson three, which is that the best tool for bringing cities back to life is a scalpel, not a meat cleaver. Meat cleavers give us cities that are as sterile as meat lockers. Near-empty Block 37 is one case in point. Another is Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's nine-story First Wisconsin Plaza of 1974, an elegant, tiered glass structure that fronts an adjoining side of Capitol Square and is about as warm and fuzzy as an ice cube.

Valerio complains that First Wisconsin is a corporate palace that brazenly challenges the Capitol, a people's palace. His clients aren't very fond of First Wisconsin, either, so when they hired the edgy yet affable architect in 1995, they told him they wanted to complement rather than compete with the Main Street feel of the buildings ringing Capitol Square.

Now here's where the story gets complicated. For even as the developers sought to blend in with the old Madison, they had very modern functional needs. They wanted lots of underground parking because Madison has a height limit and an above-ground parking deck would limit the amount of money-making office space.

## Maximizing the space

They also wanted to extend office floors from two buildings on the site, the five-story JC Penney Building and the seven-story National Mutual Benefit Insurance Building, into new structures, maximizing floor sizes and, thus, tenants' flexibility.

For many architects, the conflicting directives would have produced a Disneyesque stage set — a row of facades that look like several buildings but actually are a single, monolithic structure. Think of the 700 block of North Michigan

Avenue, where Tiffany, Pottery Barn, Banana Republic and Ralph Lauren masquerade as different buildings at the base of the clunky Peninsula Hotel. There are, in truth, stage setlike aspects to the Block 89 design, which was worked out by Valerio and his fellow principal at Valerio Dewalt Train, David Jennerjahn.

The small-scale facades mask huge blocks of office space that run uninterrupted from one building to another. But with the exception of the Burrows Block, a Madison sandstone storefront from 1856 that was torn down and re-created as part of the project, Block 89 seems real and, more important, just right for its site.

Here are three reasons why:

- Valerio based his building designs on the module of Madison's 22-foot-wide lots, giving the project the right scale rather than making it seem like it parachuted in from outer space.
- Old buildings were saved and brought into the mix, so Block 89 has layers of history instead of being tabula rasa, which, except for a lone Com Ed substation that couldn't be torn down, is unfortunately the case on Block 37.

The biggest part of the Block 89 project in Madison is the Ten East Doty Street tower, which complements older buildings and forges a new identity.



Barbara Karant/Karant + Associates

- Because the small Madison office market cannot absorb huge blocks of office space, the block was divided into parcels, which were developed and designed in sequence, not all at once. That adds to the feeling that the block has been designed by different architects at different times. It seems particularly apt for Block 37, where the failure of parts of previous development plans — most recently, a high-rise condominium — have helped lead the entire project to collapse.

Here in Madison, the result is a group of buildings arranged like a chair, with a new 10-story office building called Ten East Doty Street forming the chair's "back" and smaller buildings along side streets comprising the chair's "arms."

The chair's "front" includes new and existing buildings along Capitol Square. They perform the significant role of creating a wall-like enclosure that shapes the public space along the square. The last piece of the puzzle, a stunningly transparent cube of an office building, is likely to rise next year on a now-vacant parcel that's also on the square.

### **A complex process**

All this surely sounds complicated, but good cities, by their very nature, are complex — more like living organisms than dramatic, easy-to-comprehend architectural models that look great in boardrooms but prove to be flops in real life. The right way to develop parcels like Block 89, as Valerio nicely observes, is not "one block and one idea."

In that spirit, it is appropriate that he places the most massive part of Block 89, the office building, away from the Capitol, thus assuring its visual dominance. At the same time, smaller storefronts go along the square, where their modest scale plainly echoes the narrow, Victorian buildings that also face the Capitol.

But if Valerio's urban design correctly defers to the Capitol and its square, he cannot be accused of handing Madison a bunch of architectural wallflowers. Take the Walgreen's, which, with its torquing roof of stainless steel, suggests a mansard roof on LSD.

The design is at once playful and respectful, and it goes smartly with Valerio's bowing, sculptural extension of the Penney's building just down the street. These forms are assertive, but not overly so. Their varying heights and widths, plus their well-handled proportions and materials, make them a sophisticated exercise that joins 19th Century scale with 21st Century dynamism. All stage sets should be so inventive.

### **Working his magic**

Valerio has worked with similar skill on the side streets, where he broke down the massiveness of the old Penney's building with an exquisitely delicate aluminum facade for a now-closed restaurant.

But the big move is the Ten East Doty Street tower, which squeezes as much sculpture as possible out of the typical office block with its bending columns, bowing corner, waterfall-like curtain wall and brow-like glass crown.

"This is the real shining brow," Neujahr jokes, in an aside to Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin compound in Spring Green, Wis.

The office building comes close to being visually hyperactive, but ultimately it strikes the right balance between being responding to its older neighbors and forging a new identity.

Much the same could be said for the entire Block 89 project. With its respect for the traditional urbanism of streets and squares, its bold new architecture, and its gradual, piece-by-piece approach, it forms a model for reconstituting and reinterpreting the traditional city.

Chicago should do so well on Block 37.

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