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# Changing Skyline: Old City plan deserves praise, not opposition

## BUILDING CONTEXT MODEL



Plans for the Brown/Hill apartment house at Second and Race. At 197 feet, it suits the site, but the Old City Civic Association contends it's too tall. (Peter Gluck and Partners)

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By Inga Saffron, Inquirer Architecture Critic  
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Forget the government's economic indicators. You know that Philadelphia's real-estate market is coming out of the doldrums when an old-time, bare-knuckle skyscraper fight breaks out in Old City.

The scene is a familiar one: a surface lot at Second and Race Streets, hard by the Ben Franklin Bridge and the ramp to I-95. Back in the heat of the condo boom, Brown/Hill Development tried to transform the site into real-estate gold by hiring a big-name New York firm, SHoP Architects. They produced one of the city's best designs of the period, an accommodating 110-foot-high midrise. The Old City Civic Association loved it, but the market collapsed before it was built.

Now Brown/Hill is back with another big-name New York architect, Peter Gluck and Partners, and another fine design. This time, it's a rental building, soaring 197 feet, and the Old City Civic Association hates it. Its members intend to make their feelings known when Brown/Hill goes before the city Planning Commission Tuesday to seek its blessing for a package of zoning variances, says the association's zoning chairman, Rich Thom.

We've had this conversation before - many times. We're told that Old City is a special place, an ensemble of low-rise, early-19th-century buildings, punctuated only by the occasional church steeple. Gluck's 16-story tower, the argument goes, would disrupt its unique skyline and set a dangerous precedent.

"It isn't even the height, it's the overbuild," Thom argues. He says the new building should be a 100-foot midrise, like Brown/Hill's earlier project.

The civic association has fought high-rise developments in the past, and it's nearly always been on the right side of the issue. This situation is different.

In its hard-line opposition to Gluck's design, the group misses some obvious details about the site - starting with the difficult location next to the bridge and the highway ramps. This is not a beanstalk tower poking up from a pristine hedge of low-rise buildings in the heart of Old City. It's an edge building, on the fringe of the neighborhood.

The bridge has always marked the unofficial boundary of Old City. While some interesting stretches exist north of Paul Cret's great span, Brown/Hill's Race Street corner is effectively a cut-off point, where Old City begins to fade out into a tattered,

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underpopulated zone of surface lots and one-story place-holder buildings. That frontier location calls out for a tall building that can establish a population outpost.

What happens at this site is important for the city because of the activity cluster forming nearby on Columbus Boulevard. The arrival of the Race Street Pier, a new headquarters for Live Arts/Philly Fringe and the proposed Marina View apartments are transforming the sleepy Delaware waterfront. Brown/Hill's tower will tie those developments back to Center City.

It is true, as the association argues, that the tower is taller and denser than the site's zoning allows. (The application was filed before the new zoning code went into effect Aug. 22.) But it is not out of context with its surroundings: The bridge's stone abutment is 190 feet. Across the street, an unattractive three-sided billboard stands on a 150-foot column. Is the civic association really suggesting that this building should be shorter than a billboard?

While developers aren't supposed to receive variances for architectural merit, it's worth noting that Brown/Hill has nevertheless offered up an unusually thoughtful, high-quality building.

Gluck, who designed the widely praised East Harlem School in Manhattan, shaped the high-rise so that it responds to its context, and yet still presents a fresh take on the humble apartment house.

At first glance, Gluck follows a well-worn massing strategy: He stacks a tower on top of a podium. The Buck Co. building, now going up at 23d and Chestnut Streets, takes an identical approach. But Gluck makes his version interesting by pinching and angling the facade to preserve views and offer perspectives on the surroundings.

Take the podium. At 56 feet high, its roof would be at the level of a typical Old City building. To make the long frontage more interesting, Gluck weaves the facade in and out on Race Street - a modern take on the bay window. The ground-floor shops would be tucked slightly under the eave. The Race Street corner would extend like a prow, toward the well-known Mr. Barstool store. This a building that wants to be part of the neighborhood.

Instead of growing the tower out of the podium, Gluck levitates it. A section has been cut away to reveal a covered terrace. The indentation, set back 14 feet, serves to reduce the tower's bulk, making it feel lighter.

Gluck pulls off a couple of other visual tricks to lighten things. In keeping with the neighborhood, the podium will be faced in a red masonry material, probably terra-cotta panels, with traditional windows punched into the facade. As the tower rises, the proportion of masonry to glass decreases, and the facade evolves into a smooth glass curtain wall. From a distance, the masonry panels will look like confetti falling down the glass.

The tower also does the twist, pivoting slightly, about seven degrees, so that people coming down Race Street will still get views of the bridge's suspension tower.

Many of these design moves are the developer's way of making the best of a bad site. By choosing the tower form, Brown/Hill cuts down on the number of apartments that will have to face the noisy bridge, and ensures that most of the 128 units will be marketable.

Brown/Hill's ability to put forward a good design in these economic times also puts the lie to claims by Marina View's developer that quality is unaffordable.

Located two blocks west of the substandard Marina View, Brown/Hill's project devotes its entire ground floor to retail. The developer can do that because it is not making a fetish out of parking. Its plan calls for 35 spaces because that's all that can fit in the basement. The civic association wants more, but acceding to that demand would ruin the design, and is unnecessary.

In an indication of how things have changed since the boom days, Brown/Hill is pressing its case online, with its own website, www.205race.com, and not just with the civic association. The approach, like the design, is a good way to kick off a new building boom.

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