

Tower designs take emerging district in different direction

As South Waterfront rises, SERA and GBD challenge sea of similarity with materials

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Both proposed South Waterfront projects the Portland Design Commission saw Thursday are towers on podiums – but building type aside, the two hit different design goals.

SERA Architects' 250-foot tower, planned for Block 43, puts 22 stories of ivory brick atop a four-story chocolate brick podium.

"This is actually a reaction to the amount of glazing that exists in South Waterfront," architect Paul Jeffreys said. "We wanted a less commotional look."

It's a different materials reaction, Commissioner Andrew Jansky said during the design advice session, and one that may mark the beginning of a shift for South Waterfront.

"As the district develops, people's attitudes change," Jansky said.

"And five years from now, people will say, 'We don't want it to look like this. We want to do something new.'"

Tower, podium and ground floor are conceived as distinct elements, with the vertical "stagger" of the tower window and balcony patterning playing against the horizontal "stagger" of the base, and a transparent ground floor pushing activity at the street level.

"Our direction is to really improve the streetscape, define the streetscape more clearly, and create a more iconic form for that base," Jeffreys said.

On a neighboring South Waterfront block, GBD Architects' designs for another 250-foot tower-and-podium building are also redefining the streetscape. The tower, with three subtly stepped levels of metal and glass, sits at mid-block. A collection of podiums of different heights edges the site to the east and west, creating small courtyard spaces to the north and south.

"Shifting the levels was a brilliant move," Commissioner Lloyd Lindley said. "It added more corners, and an offset in there."

The tower is primarily glass – the same, or perhaps a little lighter, as used in the district's Meriwether condominium towers – and the podiums are planned as white panels.

"What we want to do is make a nice transition, in a different way, to the other side of South Waterfront," architect Steve Domreis said.

The two buildings are the latest in a wave of South Waterfront work that's appeared before commissioners recently. Ankrom Moisan's designs for retirement community Mirabella and a two-building apartment project on Block 46 arrived in July and August, respectively. The Alexan, a 22-story apartment building, is under-construction on the site bordering the SERA-designed Block 43.

Contextually, both design teams said, South Waterfront is ever-shifting.

"It's really a guessing game of what things are going on around you," SERA's Jeffreys said.

"Every time back, we have more context to design to," GBD's Domreis said.

SERA and GBD are both moving in the right direction with their designs, commissioners said.

And both designs, they said, try something different – massing and podium treatment for GBD, materials and streetscape activity for SERA – in a sea of similarity.

"My personal feeling is that a lot of these buildings are starting to look the same," Jansky said.

