

Looking to the past for apartment design

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*By Fred Leeson
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As architect Kurt Schultz studied Northwest Portland for design ideas for a new apartment building, his eyes kept landing on buildings dating to the teens and 1920s.

Campbell Court. St. Francis. Biltmore. Alexandra Court. Trinity Place.

He liked the tug and pull of bay windows and balconies. He liked the bracketed cornices and the bricks and stucco. Most of all, perhaps, he liked the recessed-entry courtyards, usually landscaped with comforting greenery.

“What’s exciting to us is it’s a building type you don’t see much in Portland today,” says Schultz, a principal with Portland’s SERA Architects. “It’s great for pedestrians, and it’s great for the street. It’s also great for residents who live there. There’s a sense of calm and peace as you go in the main entry.”

Many of the ideas have surfaced in preliminary plans for the Couch Park Apartments, which would look west from a half-block site on Northwest 19th Avenue between Glisan and Hoyt streets. Opus Northwest, a major real estate developer, hopes to build a six-story building with about 96 market-rate units, ground-floor retail spaces and one level of basement parking.

But it’s sensitive turf. The site faces Couch Park and sits kitty-corner from Temple Beth Israel, the domed synagogue Schultz calls “probably the finest piece of architecture in the city.”

It also sits in Portland’s densest neighborhood and in the Alphabet Historic District, where residents scrutinize new projects. In the past couple of years, Northwest residents helped shoot down plans for a new Apple electronics store, stalled a proposed parking garage and narrowly lost a City Council fight over a condo tower.

Schultz started meeting with the Northwest District Association’s planning committee before putting pen to paper. After three meetings, “it’s not yet quite perfect,” says Mark Sieber, a Northwest representative. The committee would like to see a deeper courtyard, now proposed at 50 feet wide and 20 feet deep.

Dr. Anna Karlsson, who lives behind the site of the proposed building, worries that the 65 parking spaces won't be enough. She'd like more parking or fewer units. "Only those of us who live in the neighborhood understand the congestion," she says.

Jessica Richmond, who also lives nearby, thinks the building is too tall and blocky. "This is basically a chunk with a small courtyard," she says. "The building is getting better with time, but there are still basic problems with it."

But if the building does come to pass, it is likely to be at the size proposed. "We need to get the square footage to make the project pencil out," says Brian Bennett, an Opus senior manager.

To get to 94,000 square feet as proposed, Opus must purchase about 35,000 square feet of unused development rights from some nearby historic building. Talks with one historic property failed, but Bennett says Opus has "multiple people who are interested."

Then the apartment design would face scrutiny from the Portland Historic Landmarks Commission and possibly the City Council.

Bennett thinks the building would improve Couch Park safety by putting more eyes on it. He says he wants the building to blend into the neighborhood fabric.

Schultz thinks the key lies in using elements that made models from the teens and '20s successful.

"We want a building that is timeless and enduring," he says, "not a trendy design that says this year only."

Portland News: 503-221-8199; portland@news.oregonian.com