

Downtown's Facelift

A new plan uses common sense and existing commercial structures to revitalize downtown's tattered retail district.

by Edwin Slipek Jr.

President Bush has asked Americans to get back to work. And last Tuesday, Sept. 24, Richmond proved it was moving on. As our city's pooh-bahs gathered at the new Richmond Center, they were served Danish and scrambled eggs and bacon as the mayor, city manager and Gary A. Beller (a Chicago developer who vowed he'll buy a place here) announced plans for reconfiguring the tattered retail district and expanding the number of hotel rooms downtown.

For years, various ideas and plans had been run up the flagpole as to what to do with the area bounded by Broad, Fourth, Grace and Sixth streets. These plans were generally underwhelming at best, and they often ignored the sophisticated building fabric already existing in that area.

The plan announced last week is different, however. I'd call it exciting except for the fact that it contains so much common sense that let's say it just feels awfully right.

With the new convention center, the vicinity needs rooms, and for starters, Beller proposes a 209 room tower be added to the Marriott hotel. There is plenty of infrastructure and public space already in place there. This approach means we don't have to unnecessarily lose historic commercial structures that give downtown its special character.

The plan calls for saving the glorious

Miller & Rhoads building, an art deco gem on the Broad Street side and a more classically surfaced façade, with large windows, on its Grace and Fifth streets fronts. It will become a new luxury hotel on the upper floors, with the ground floor housing shops and restaurants that will open both onto the surrounding sidewalks and into an interior corridor. The Miller & Rhoads building will once again be an anchor of auxiliary retail development — particularly on architecturally stylish Grace.

The 6th Street Marketplace will be demolished (except for the food court) and vehicular traffic will once again be allowed to flow on Sixth between Marshall and Grace. The closing of streets downtown to vehicular traffic has reached epidemic proportions in recent years, and this will return at least two blocks to the circulatory system and re-establish critical sight lines.

Farewell to the Sixth Street bridge over Broad. While this midtown gazebo was attractive enough and an admirable symbol of racial healing, the greater good is to get people walking on sidewalks again.

Alas, the Woolworth's building will also be lost. What an underappreciated modernist gem! But much in life is a trade-off and it, too, will be sacrificed for the greater good.

The plan also calls for an open public

plaza facing Broad (and the new convention center) on the north side of the block bounded by Broad, Grace, Fourth and Fifth streets. This would require the demolition of stores on the block. This is the only highly questionable part of the plan. Shouldn't this block remain retail?

While the basic bones of the new plans are terrific, the devil will be in the details. One of the biggest challenges will be to create a sense of urban density at the corner of Fifth and Broad. With traffic flowing off of I-64 from the airport and points east, this is a primary gateway to downtown.

The existing building setbacks of the Marriott make that hotel extremely flimsy architecturally at the northeast corner of the intersection. The proposed motor court across the street at the new hotel would erase the solid building walls of that corner. If the plaza were built, that would make it three weak corners. Ideally, corners on city grids should be the spot where buildings are most aggressive and expressive. The corner, towered stair of the new convention center attempts to rise to the occasion, but can't hold things together by itself. But these are details.

Meanwhile, city officials, Richmond Renaissance and the developer are headed in a direction that makes tremendous good sense. So far, so good. Bravo. ■

The Miller & Rhoads building will become a luxury hotel according to the city's new plan.



SCOTT ELMQUIST