

## ARCHITECTURE

# Urban renewal and the soul index

Make downtown vital, not sterile

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If you love cities and their endless array of flavors, both culinary and architectural, then last week was a lousy week.

The Cambridge House, the no-nonsense Greek-owned diner off North Michigan Avenue, closed Monday. The Berghoff, the elegant old German restaurant in the Loop, shut down Tuesday. Two hits against old Chicago. The end for two locally owned and operated restaurants that ran against the tide of look-alike franchise eateries and coffee bars.

With them go decades of history and memories, as well as treasured gathering places for their neighborhood and their city. Hello progress. Goodbye soul. Their loss hurts, even to the architect who designed the sleek, 26-story condo tower that will rise where the Cambridge House once stood.

"We've had these old friends," said David Brininstool of the Chicago firm Brininstool & Lynch. "We're losing them and there's always that sense of loss. Until you find something else to fill your life, like that grandfather that just left your life, you have this sense of, 'What's going on?' You don't know what's going to make your life pleasurable and comfortable."

Eloquently put, but I squirmed when Brininstool opined that a new version of the work-a-day Cambridge House would be as out of place in his high-design high-rise as white tennis shoes on a man decked out in black tie.

"It's really a building driven by design -- what we could normally do for a custom home client," he said. "The gentleman from Cambridge House actually voiced interest in looking at it at a later date. Maybe we'd want

to tutor him or coach him. ... He might want to change his concept. A little more upscale presentation."

Losing diversity, vitality

Ugh! There, in a nutshell, is the conflict that is wracking downtown Chicago: Call it gentrification, yuppification, corporatization, whatever. But the problem -- and, admittedly, it is the right problem to have, compared to downtown Detroit and other struggling Midwestern urban centers -- is this:

Now that we've figured out how to get people to invest in downtown, how do we maintain its diversity and vitality so it doesn't become a sterile home for the super-rich? At issue is the survival of texture -- the urban texture that makes cities endlessly fascinating, quirky, exotic and even a little wicked.

You can see it along Ohio Street in an old narrow, four-story building wedged between the Michigan Avenue Gap store and the soon-to-be-demolished parking garage where Cambridge House occupied the ground floor, its green awning distracting the eye from the ugly garage.

The little four-story building, which has a handsome facade of brick and stone ornament, packs more character than an entire vertical mall. First floor: an Armenian restaurant called Sayat Nova. Second floor: a dimly-lit gay bar. Third floor: an astrologer/psychic/tarot card reader, advertised by red neon signs and blue awnings. Fourth floor: an apartment occupied by the restaurant owner's son.

There's even good design inside Sayat Nova: Restaurant booths with domed ceilings, curving plaster walls and delicate geometric patterns. At night especially, when hanging lights make the underside of the domes sparkle with intricate patterns, the place feels wonderfully mysterious, almost conspiratorial.

Blessedly, it's staying put, at least for now.

"They try to buy me out," said the building and restaurant's owner, 73-year-old Arsen

Demirdjian, adding that he declined a \$2 million offer from the developers of the planned condo tower. Demirdjian, a Lebanon native who has run the restaurant from this spot for 36 years, sees no reason to sell. He finds the place entertaining, especially when the Tribune's foreign editors come by and talk politics. And it offers a good living, even if isn't making him rich.

"Like they say in the Old Country," he said, referring to his income stream, "it's not flowing; it's dripping."

Based on the large number of e-mails I've been getting in response to recent stories in the Tribune's Tempo section about stylish shortcuts through downtown buildings, I can say that the sentiment in favor of preserving such places runs deep.

#### Full of life

People are deeply attached to these arcades and corridors, such as the elegant Art Deco passageway through the LaSalle Bank Building at 135 S. LaSalle St. or the neo-Gothic rotunda inside the Pittsfield Building at 55 E. Washington St. Why? It's not just because the shortcuts get you out of the cold and the rain. It's because they're beautiful and they're crammed with life -- restaurants, bars, shops, "shoe hospitals," all the little things that make a city livable.

Yet as I discovered when I gave a walking tour to a group of visiting architecture students last week, some of the new shortcut spaces offer architectural vitality without urban vitality. One example: The blocklong passageway through the UBS Tower at 1 N. Wacker Drive, which flaunts thrillingly transparent glass walls supported by a tennis racketlike network of cables. A restaurant and bank branch add some life tucked to the tower's base. But the shortcut itself is a drop-dead, ice-queen space.

"The reason we go to cities is for the ever-changing theater of the city. In a way, it's absent from those spaces. It's a corporate void," said Minneapolis architect Julie Snow, who brought her Harvard Graduate School of Design students to Chicago for an exercise in designing an urban hotel.

Don't blame these eye-popping but sterile spaces on the architects.

They love the old shortcuts and the way they incorporate the identities of individual retailers into a dominant architectural framework. But today's national retailers "have a strong image that they want to project," said Jim Goettsch, the architect of the UBS Tower. And that conflicts with office building developers who want to wow prospective tenants with soaring, dignified lobbies.

What self-respecting law firm wants the themed, old-timey look of a Potbelly Sandwich Works just off its crisply modern grand entrance? Even the name sounds funny.

#### Urban character

Resolving messy urban vitality and architectural grandeur is an eternal challenge. By rewarding developers with extra floor area in exchange for ground-level retail space and other public amenities, as Brininstool suggested, Chicago's new zoning law is likely to encourage urban character.

But in the end, character can't be manufactured or legislated or drawn up in some architectural recipe book. It comes from a long-simmering intermingling between a building and the human activity that goes on inside it. That was true even at Cambridge House, where the architecture was really non-architecture -- a simple, unpretentious space of counters, stools and tables that had no theme.

It is what it is.

Or rather, it was what it was.

A real place.

After last week's blows, we need more of them.

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