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Urban Confluence

By Charles Rosenblum

Last year, just before contractors demolished the public-housing high-rise straddling Penn Avenue in East Liberty, crowds gathered to celebrate, cheering and lobbing paint-filled balloons at the doomed modernistic slab. Notable for slicing East Liberty in two, as well as for providing unpleasant and inadequate housing conditions, this building apparently generated a happy consensus only at the party for its destruction. It was a divider, not a unifier.

In the Urban Renewal '60s and '70s, boards and commissions constructed acres of demoralizing housing units as if by fiat. But now, Pittsburgh enjoys an era in which neighborhood nonprofits can work with architects and developers on buildings in which bringing people together is important in both process and end result. The recently completed Fairmont Apartments, by Rothschild Doyno Architects, is one such project.

On the site where the building now stands, on Penn Avenue near the corner of Negley, a chain restaurant had closed its doors, creating yet another challenge to neighborhood revitalization. The Bloomfield-Garfield Corp. and Friendship Development Associates both wanted to redevelop, but Bloomfield-Garfield wanted senior housing to replace units lost nearby (when yet another lousy high-rise came down), while Friendship Development wanted loft-style housing, offices



and ground-level retail. "We were hired to bring these two groups together," states principal architect Dan Rothschild.

His firm's working method is especially user-friendly. Numerous inclusive community meetings insure that as many voices as possible contribute to an understanding of what the building could and should be. Also, Rothschild and Doyno use highly descriptive and accessible sketchbook drawings (see website link) to explain what influences the neighborhood architecture and their thinking about it.

The site is important because it's in a transitional area, dividing the contrasting characters of Garfield and Friendship while forming a

corridor leading to East Liberty's business district. A gap here would have been harmful to all those neighborhoods. "That's why this kind of density was sorely needed," says Rothschild.

Master-planning sessions determined that the interests of both organizations could fit into a single building complex, while the architects' analysis of the architectural qualities of nearby spaces and structures began to suggest the building's character - storefronts along Penn Avenue, with some street-level access for residents as well. A Boston company, Affirmative Investments, became the developer for the building, which became an \$8 million structure with 60 units of

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housing and 7,500 square feet of retail along the street.

Significantly, for a company that had built mostly traditional-looking buildings, Rothschild Doyno designed a contemporary structure. It has corrugated metal panels, rhythmic sections of brick and an especially syncopated wall of irregularly checkered panels above the driveway opening.

Yet these elements distinguish themselves from the modernist experimentation of earlier eras. They all earned community approval in numerous meetings, mostly because they derive from precise understanding of the neighborhood's formal rhythms,

materials and dimensions. That corrugated metal matches sections found at the nearby Pittsburgh Glass Center. The building height, at 52 feet, mirrors two historic apartment buildings across the street, to make the streetscape read more like a composed space. Brick facade widths pick up the rhythm of nearby houses. Especially important, the building has a front porch, albeit a slightly modern one.

The irregular checkerboard bridge doesn't really derive from anything old. Rather, it symbolizes the new: not two elements made into one, but a collection of contrasting elements, squares,

coexisting harmoniously.

This project is not completely inhabited and rented yet, so some of its potential success remains to be seen. Significantly, it recently won American Institute of Architects awards for both urban design and architectural design. The final test will be when the storefronts are rented and residents in adjacent units spend time relaxing on the front porch. Those activities will revitalize the street much more than a drive-in restaurant ever could. Says Rothschild, they "will go a long way to bringing these communities together.