

November 4, 2015

With a Strong Community-Input Process, a North Side Residential Project Moves Forward

Garden Block plans have frequently changed based on concerns and objections

By Charles Rosenblum



Project rendering for TREK Development's proposed residential building on North Street at Federal.
Courtesy of Rothschild Doyno Collaborative

Architectural renderings are meant to convey a sense of permanence. This is what the building will look like in real bricks and mortar for decades to come, so you know what you are going to get. If we are lucky, though, such images are really about change. The issue becomes whether you like what you see, and what you might want to be different. That is certainly the case with the Rothschild Doyno Collaborative's architectural renderings for the Garden Block residential project, on the North Side, for TREK Development. After dozens of community meetings, and in the midst of a number of board hearings, the design is in flux — closer than ever to being finalized, but still not done.

It's remarkable that there is a real proposal at all. The multi-parcel development plot, containing several historic properties, is at the corner of West North Avenue and Federal Street, adjacent to remains of the Garden Theater, which Pittsburgh-based TREK might yet secure for redevelopment.

The recent failure of Philadelphia-based developer Wayne Zukin to build on the site underscored the difficulty. Meanwhile, one of the site's historic properties, 2 Allegheny West, "succumbed to gravity," laments architect Ken Doyno, principal of Rothschild Doyno. Now comes TREK Development with a new proposal for a mixed-use development of 72 residential units with ground-floor retail. TREK has

promised to preserve as much as possible of the historic structures, a remarkable agreement given those structures' very precarious condition. "Preservation is one of our core values," explains TREK's Bill Gatti. "Its value outweighs the financial hurdles."

TREK and Rothschild Doyno have assiduously pursued community meetings — "around 30 of them," says Ken Doyno — with a wide variety of community groups, including the Mexican War Streets Association, Young Preservationists and Allegheny City Central Association, among others, as well as the city's Urban Redevelopment Authority and the City of Pittsburgh's Contextual Design Advisory Panel.

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But, just having community meetings doesn't necessarily make them good. If city government or the property-owner bargains away too much to an unsympathetic developer before asking individuals and organizations for input, then all the meetings in the world won't really help. But TREK and Rothschild Doyno seem to have found a sweet spot of genuinely responsive attitude and the well-documented professionalism to back it up.

The renderings are the proof. They keep changing, and they are not done yet. Don't like the big cornice? That can change. Would you prefer rooftop balconies to cantilevered porches? Those can change too. What about a more contextual response to the existing building height along Federal Street? "It's been kind of a fun process," says Rothschild Doyno project architect Robert Tuñón.

A bit too much preservationist lockstep among North Side groups vetoed some potentially exciting yet suitable modern curtain walls,

but numerous other palpable improvements emerged. "All design is about compromise," says Doyno. The process is truly admirable, and no one runs or documents such things better than Rothschild Doyno.

So the project as presented in August easily secured Zoning Board approval in October for its requested variances on the basis of lengthy testimony from developers, architects, engineers and URA officials. It received permission to use an existing adjacent structure for parking, instead of a new one. More notably, the building is allowed greater height (and accompanying profitability) than zoning normally stipulates because the effort to preserve historic structures on West North and Federal presents what regulations term "significant financial hardship."

Many neighborhood and civic organizations have supported the project, and just a couple have simply abstained from comment. Among a handful of opponents,

the most vocal has been North Side resident David Demko, who threatens to appeal the zoning variances, delaying the project for months. "I disagree with the decision made by the zoning board," he says. In August, Demko testified that the building would block views on the North Side, though he abandoned that argument after the architects' testimony in response to his complaints. (The building will block views only toward the apartments at Allegheny Center). "It's really just too many units for the area," he said to *CP*, without stipulating how many would be suitable.

Developer Gatti is undaunted. "Even if an appeal comes, we are going to see it through." Meanwhile, with the basic building profile established, the architects are still asking for feedback on issues of color and detail that can still be up for discussion — a reminder that a well-designed process is as important as a well-designed building.