

CHANDLER: Bell could set tone for lower downtown

By Mary Voelz Chandler

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Until the idea of putting a tower on lower downtown's Bell Park surfaced almost three years ago, I doubt many people knew about the site with the grungy parking lot and mysterious bronze bell.

But they soon found out, as developer Buzz Geller and his Paradise Land Co. hired architect David Owen Tryba to design a slim, airy and nearly translucent residential tower several times taller than the historic district's height limits allowed.

The controversial proposal led to more than a year of meetings on what kind of structures should be built along the prominent edge created by Speer Boulevard and Cherry Creek in that historic part of town. After all, Denver's first City Hall was on the land that is now Bell Park, and the old building's bell qualifies as an artifact.

In the often contentious discussions on Bell Park, the word "iconic" was used, but so was "sliver."

By the summer of 2008, slim and airy and nearly translucent are out, and so is Tryba. And forget any sense of a "sliver" building. The new project designers, Fentress Architects, propose a somewhat torqued building clad in green and clear glass and marked by huge balconies off of giant living spaces. The tower has a rakish personality that requires more than a minor suspension of disbelief to envision it on this site.

That's because that slim, airy and nearly translucent tower we heard about months ago still is stuck in so many minds (including mine). But, as they say, get over it: Fentress' Bell Tower still needs to be trimmed and slimmed, its different facades made to cohere. There needs to be as much heat as light here. And its schizophrenic companion building requires an infusion of rationality before it fulfills its goal to link the tower and the rest of lower downtown.

But the renderings and model presented June 19 to the Lower Downtown Design Review Board were more polished than what that body received in early March. And the site plan is better thought out and more welcoming.

The two buildings - tall tower and much lower retail/office structure - sit on opposite sides of Cherry Creek. Open space dominates and is both private and public, but allows access to the creek. A car entry ramp that acted like a giant trough, ready to swallow pedestrians, has been reconfigured. The tower meets the ground in a more confident way and the top of the tower is cleaner and less aggressive (the March 6 version had a big prow on it; we have enough prows).

The companion building is still problematic. As part of the agreement that created a fourth special review district in lower downtown, the city allows two buildings on the small Bell Park site.

The smaller of the two Fentress designs at first showed one side clad in glass, facing the tower, and the other clad in red brick, in a design reminiscent of the mercantile buildings that lend character to the historic district. The more recent design is less glass and more stone, in a design that recalls neo-classical architecture not found in lower downtown. It comes off as forced post-modernism, historicism with no history.

But about that word "iconic." Design principal Curt Fentress is not shy about using it, and did so when he spoke about the design of the new Colorado Convention Center (remember: Sydney Opera House). He began an interview this week regarding Bell Tower by offering to lend Charles Jencks' engrossing book, *Iconic Building*, as food for thought. Having read that book, I can say that was an interesting gesture on Fentress' part.

Cities all over the world are now engaged in procuring buildings they can call iconic, whether it is a Santiago Calatrava "spire" in Chicago, numerous new residential towers in New York, the plethora of sparkling new buildings in Dubai and Kuwait (Fentress is working on several in the latter), or the athletic facilities popping up in Beijing to service the Summer Olympics and dazzle the Western eye.

Denver already has a few buildings I'd call iconic, from the curve-topped Philip Johnson/John Burgee "cash-register" building to the components of the Denver Art Museum: Gio Ponti's castle-like tower and Daniel Libeskind's explosion of shards.

In a thoughtful trip around the world, Jencks explores the reality of standing out from the crowd, breaking away from context, action and reaction in terms of public response, and the power of stylistic fashion.

He writes: "We might distinguish the few superlative creations from the more numerous failures, for the best work, like all good architecture, shows the basic temper of the times and, as (critic John) Ruskin said, judges its character. The iconic building, when successful, puts architecture on a par with the best contemporary art to explore freely the possibilities of open-ended creativity."

And that is true here, with a caveat: No one likes a showoff, though they're happy to look and talk about one, and it is hard to reconcile the contemporary desire for the new and exciting from a belief in context.

That needs to be done, though. Bell Tower has promise and potential, but it needs refinement and further work before it earns the right to wear the word *iconic* or walk in the path of contemporary art.

Yet it also offers residents a chance to talk about what they value, how they see their city, what lens history can provide, and what future they want. Talk is not cheap if it can lead the way to a better city, and putting the new and different on the site of an old City Hall has a certain ring to it.

Bell Tower

* **What:** A proposed 400-foot residential tower, clad in clear and green glass, and a smaller, companion retail building on the edge of lower downtown

* **Where:** Bounded by Speer Boulevard and Larimer, 14th and Walnut streets

* **Architect:** Fentress Architects, for developer Paradise Land Co.

* **Cost:** \$300 million

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