

Commentary: FBI building — A bold challenge for the development community

By Gregory Hoss March 25, 2013

The FBI's J. Edgar Hoover Building may be the District's most universally reviled landmark. Designed in the 1960s and built in the 1970s, it's a standout example of why Brutalist architecture came and went with such speed and abandon — a prototypical “design by committee” that was valiantly battled over and rendered, not so much by architects Charles F. Murphy, as by the warring ambitions and demands of Washington bureaucrats.

Here on what may just be the country's best site for redevelopment and almost guaranteed financial success, however, is a chance to seize one of the few times when government has yielded to the private sector. It has handed architects and developers an extraordinary opportunity to replace a pockmark on the District landscape with something truly thoughtful, useful and timeless. Instead of a monolith that has no connection to the cityscape, no rapport with people in and around it, and no relationship to its place on that grandest of all American boulevards, Pennsylvania Avenue, we can exercise an almost unheard-of prerogative to create something worthy of respect for generations to come.

By pre-soliciting developer interest toward relocating the FBI, the General Services Administration and the District have done something unheard of in Washington. They've gotten out of the way. As a result, developers and designers have the chance to create a new landmark — vital, vibrant and economically satisfying. But to do that, we'll need to brush the cobwebs off our collective imagination.

The biggest barrier to good design these days may not be economics. And in this case, it's certainly not government restraint. It's a professional conservatism in which almost every building design seemingly tries only to meet or skim past the latest trend or fad. Need proof? Look no further than the indistinguishable curtains of glass and steel that have come to line K Street in the past 10 years.

From the proposed development of the Interstate 395 air rights land to CityCenterDC, planners and architects in the District have taken promising steps toward repairing the fractures of previous shortsighted development. At the Hoover building site, we'll have to acknowledge more challenges, including the monumental aspect of any building or buildings that brush against the parade route of presidents. We'll need to restore the neighborhood fabric and reverse the obliteration of dozens of small retail businesses — knitting back the neighborhood fabric and recreating a place suited for people to live, work and be entertained. And, no getting around this, we'll have to address 21st century security concerns in a long-term and sensible fashion.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the architects and developers chosen for this project could give us buildings that future generations will want to keep and reuse? We need such abiding testaments to design excellence as the Hecht Co. building that was recently restored as office over retail, the F Street Riggs Bank building that is now a Courtyard Marriott, and the storied Willard Hotel. The GSA needs to demand a developer/architect vision that cements such extraordinary — and lasting — additions to the cityscape.

For our part, in a time of legislative gridlock and governmental uncertainty, the private sector needs to take advantage of some rare governmental wisdom to let us take the lead and seize this window of opportunity.

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