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## Changing Skyline | Designs on the high life

Philadelphia goes vertical again with condos catering to the monied classes. That means taller, fatter skyscrapers, some stylish, others insipid.

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Something is happening to the low-rise city. Philadelphia, the preserve of the rowhouse, is going vertical at its core.

Hardly a month goes by that a developer isn't floating a plan to squeeze a 30- or 40-story residential tower into the tight blocks of Center City. Many of these proposals are pie in the sky, but at least eight projects are in serious motion, and they promise to remake more than the skyline.

Because the skyscraper is the most modern of buildings, the sprinkling of new towers is sure to add a potent dash of modernity to a city that holds dear its sober red-brick traditions. The new skyscrapers are taller and bulkier than the earlier generations of Philadelphia high-rises: Blame buyers' demands for soaring ceilings and on-site parking. No doubt, some Center City residents will view these colossi as big-footed intruders.

Philadelphia is hardly the only city marked by skyscraper cranes. For a host of demographic reasons, condo towers are rising in cities that have rarely seen tall apartment houses, from Nashville to San Diego. While Philadelphia is on track to gain a respectable 2,000 units, San Francisco may add as many as 7,400. Yet even Philadelphia's numbers are likely to accelerate a process that urban expert Alan Ehrenhalt calls *inversion*, where downtowns are populated predominantly by the rich and the poor are forced to the fringes.

The good news in Philadelphia is that the new skyscrapers are a largely stylish and urbane group - especially compared with designs in other downtowns. Despite some clumsy assemblages of historical parts, most have the virtue of clean, sleek lines. A few even aspire to artful design.

One reason for the improved designs is that today's tall buildings cater to monied buyers with cosmopolitan tastes, unlike the utilitarian towers built during Philadelphia's second wave of high-rise construction, from the late 1960s through the '80s. Those were seen as residences for people who ultimately would move to the 'burbs.

There is no doubt that the 45-story St. James, which opened last year overlooking Washington Square, set a high baseline for Philadelphia. An unabashedly modern skyscraper, the St. James' interiors have a loftlike feeling because of their high ceilings and big windows, which have become standard in today's condos.

The most exciting new design comes from the office of Richard Meier & Partners, of New York, which elevated the residential high-rise to a high art with its crisp glass towers on Perry Street in Manhattan. The firm, best known for the Getty Center in Los Angeles, was hired by a young developer, Charles X. Block, to design a Philadelphia version at 24th and Walnut Streets, on the parking lot of the former Rosenbluth Travel.

Block inherited that clumsily renovated midrise - and a chunk of money - after his family sold the company to American Express in 2003. It is a large site, with breathtaking views. Meier's design architect, Michael Palladino, who oversaw the Getty, took one look at the property and knew that a Perry Street clone wouldn't do.

Palladino is now at work on a thin slab, a vertical mille-feuille of concrete and glass that will hover like a spire over the Schuylkill River Park. Palladino is still tweaking models of the 41-story building, but even in its unfinished state it looks like Philadelphia's best high-rise. You can detect a bit of the PSFS tower in its ancestry, but there is nothing literal in those references - a sign of true creativity.

Unlike its neighbor, the generic 2400 Chestnut St., which turns a fat face to the river, Palladino's design would present its slim side to the water. In doing so, the luxury tower, which is to have full-floor units, would preserve public views of the river from Sansom Street. As proposed, the project makes other generous public gestures: Block says he plans to renovate the ugly exterior of the adjacent Rosenbluth building, install retail stores along Walnut Street, and open a Laurie Olin-landscaped rooftop restaurant. All the parking will go underground, Block says.

One big issue the designers must resolve is how the building will integrate with the river path. The other high-rise going up along the ribbon park, a 12-story building by Bower Lewis Thrower at 23d and Race Streets, foolishly ignores its water link.

BLT is responsible for the worst of the new skyscraper designs, Symphony House, which is already taking deposits for condos at Broad and Pine Streets. Set on a wide garage base, the 31-story tower has a nautical profile similar to BLT's Dockside on Columbus Boulevard, and portholes around the garage cornice. But the

confused tower is clownishly crowned by the roof of a French chateau, while the entrance is marked by vaguely classical arches. The only redeeming feature is that the base will provide space for the Philadelphia Theatre Company.

A new Rittenhouse Square tower by Robert A.M. Stern Architects, due to break ground at 18th and Sansom Streets in April, also is based on historical precedents, but at least the parts are gracefully composed. The 33-story brick high-rise uses the same deferential neo-Georgian style as many proper towers that went up in Philadelphia in the 1920s. They have a modesty that seems deeply Philadelphian. When you look at the first wave of residential towers - built before the 1929 stock market crash - it's hard to find more than a handful that dazzle. But none are awful, either.

Still, it's unfortunate that the Stern high-rise doesn't have a more contemporary appearance. One of the nice things about Rittenhouse Square is that its apartment towers are an encyclopedia of styles, one from every decade of the 20th century. This decade deserves an entry of its own time, too.

The proposal for a slim 31-story tower at 17th Street at Rittenhouse Square shows that there is a market for the urbanly modern. Designed by David Ertz of Cope Linder, it has a white geometric composition like the St. James, but with a more formal limestone base. It's a singleton version of the double tower Ertz designed at 15th and Chestnut, but benefits from having underground parking. Unfortunately, a blank vertical strip ruins its north facade.

Along with Ertz's two quiet designs, the problematic Residences at the Ritz-Carlton also has embraced a contemporary language. It's a bit too glassy and anonymous for condos - and its garage is an ugly monster. But, together with Palladino's waterfront building, it's a sign that Philadelphia's condo fever also has design ambitions.

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*Inga Saffron's column appears the first Sunday of the month in Currents. Other weeks, look for it in the Friday Home & Design section. Contact her at 215-854-2213 or [isaffron@phillynews.com](mailto:isaffron@phillynews.com). Read her recent work at <http://go.philly.com/ingasaffron>.*