

Pittsburgh building projects make strides

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Stephanie Strasburg | Tribune-Review

The Hilton Garden Inn Hotel rises behind the restaurants of Market Square in Downtown as photographed on Friday, July 1, 2016.

Some bits and pieces about spaces and places in the city:

GARDENS AT MARKET SQUARE

Millcraft Investments and their architects, Arquitectonica, took a big chance architecturally in putting up what has been known as the Gardens at Market Square in the 200 block of Forbes Avenue, just above the square.

It was not so much a worry that their 18-story building would overpower Market Square — it is set back far enough among low-rise buildings. The worry was that a building functionally separated into three cubical masses — a hotel cube at one end, an above-ground parking garage cube at the other end, and a 7-story office cube set atop the parking garage — would look ungainly.

This worry persisted even though Arquitectonica, headquartered in Miami, has a worldwide reputation for quality buildings.

Now that the building is finished and operational, it can be said that they brought it off well. It took a couple of redesigns, though. The first published design was so clumsy that even the architects declined to defend it when asked. Their second effort was better, and what is now the third and final effort has come off smoothly as built. The parking block is screened and well-integrated with the other parts of the building so that it is not obtrusive.

The overall effect of the finished building is somewhat blander than the second scheme, but it is persuasively sleek. It more than meets that old medical dictum (which architects obviously should also embrace): “First, do no harm!”

Additional advantages of the building will become apparent in use. The hotel part of the building, a Hilton Garden Inn that opened in March, overlooks Market Square. Hotel rooms are often lit at night — lending an air of activity to the square's surroundings, which otherwise are mainly office buildings dark after the end of the business day. Also, PNC's new headquarters tower is just one block up the street, and Point Park University's new Playhouse is being built on Forbes just beyond that. Ultimately, this whole corridor of Forbes will be lively with pedestrian traffic into and out of the square both day and night.

JAUNTING IN PITTSBURGH

This note is for mobile phone users — all those young folks who already are users and all those older folks who really ought to be. On your phone, look up Apple's App Store or Google's Google Play. Then search out and download a free new app called “Jaunt Pittsburgh.”

What you'll get is a delightful mobile guide to the best architecture of Pittsburgh, both the old and the new. It includes 105 buildings and bridges that can be accessed three ways — through an ingenious grid of iconic drawings, through a list of sites by name and through a map. You can open it up in front of a major building in many parts of the city and it will tell you what you are looking at, with a photograph and a crisp written explanation of the building, its dates, its architects and its significance.

Jaunt Pittsburgh was created by the Over,under design studio in Boston — the same group that brought us the long-running historical examination of the Pittsburgh Renaissance that just closed at the Heinz Architectural Center. They worked in partnership

with the Carnegie Mellon University architectural archivist Martin Aurand and CMU students. Rami el Samahay, a member of the CMU faculty, also is a principal of Over,under. Funding was through CMU.

ALLEGHENY LANDING

Allegheny Landing — a waterfront park on the North Shore between the Sixth and Seventh street bridges (the Clemente and Warhol bridges) was one of the first improvements to an area that has since blossomed with new development and become one of the finest riverside experiences in the United States.

Built in 1984, it was envisioned as a tribute to the city's industrial and labor history. But over some 30 years, elaborate mosaics that were a feature of the park broke apart, sculptures deteriorated, puddles and mud accumulated after rains, and the whole area took on a totally neglected feel. Ironically, it acquired this devastated feel just as the remnants of most of our heavy industries were being demolished.

Now, Riverlife, the Carnegie Museum of Art (<http://cmoa.org/>), the city and a volunteer citizen group are bringing the park back to life. They've relocated and restored the valuable and fascinating mosaics, restored sculptures and renovated the boat dock. This summer, the park's lower trail will be rebuilt and a rain garden will be added. It is once again worth visiting.

ONE MORE FOR MELLON SQUARE

Ever since it was built in the mid-1950s, Downtown's Mellon Square Park has won design awards and honors. Now, just this past week, Docomomo US, which promotes the conservation of worthy structures and sites, cited it for "greatness restored." They gave it their award of excellence for the recent restoration carried out by the city and Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy.

John Conti is a former news reporter who has written extensively over the years about architecture, planning and historic-preservation issues.