The Observer & Eccentric® Newspapers

Building Scene

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Thursday, November 15, 1990 O&E

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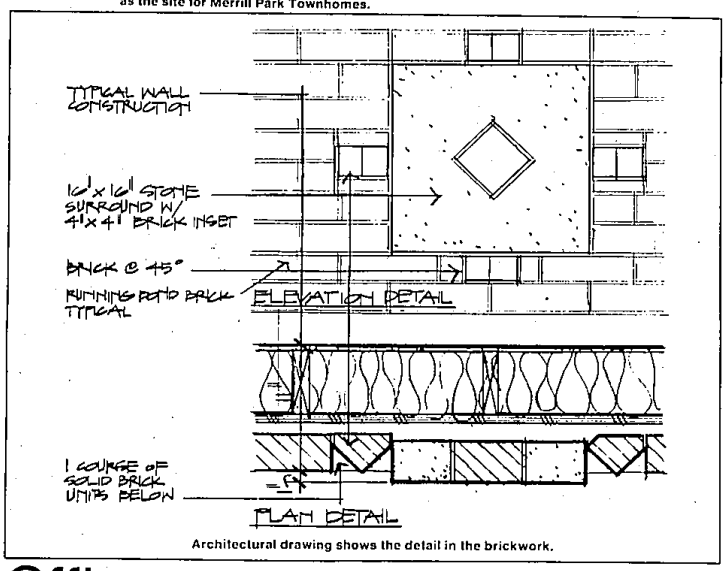

Architectural drawing shows the detail in the brickwork.

Back to the literary past with townhouses

By Dale Northup
special writer

Merrill Park Townhomes in Birmingham evoke architectural images from the novels, "Washington Square" by Henry James and "The House of Mirth" by Edith Wharton. Both 19th century authors used the townhouse as a backdrop for the development of their protagonists. This setting played a role in the early growth of Baltimore, Boston and New York and marked the formal street presence of these cities. The townhouse on the eastern seaboard was also a transplant from the London of Charles Dickens.

Now it is transplanted to Birmingham. After tearing down two houses on Merrill Street, architect Victor Sarocki, together with developer Brian Timlin, decided that the logical solution for the vacant 207-foot wide lot was a group of townhouses. With associate Greg Aerts, Sarocki scoured New York and Boston looking for examples of townhouses that they could adapt to the urbane fabric of downtown Birmingham. These dwellings have proven to be an answer to urban land use complemented by increased land values.

The seven three-story individual townhouses on Merrill comprise approximately 3,600 feet with 1,200 on each floor. Three are slightly smaller due to setbacks that contribute to the individuality and visual interest of the units. Aerts pointed out that the staggered arrangement is a compromise between consistency and diversity. The consistency is seen in the chimneys and gable end rooflines. The diversity is marked by individual polygonal and semicircular bay windows. Each of the front entrances have their own classically styled portico.

Assorted treatments of design are revealed in the stone and brick details. Vetter stone, which was quarried in Minnesota, is used in the course work around the second floor windows and in the block-like detail underneath. This same stone was used on the library and museum at Cranbrook. The density of the stone holds up well in an industrial climate. The brickwork is occasionally staggered at a 45-degree angle lending visual interest to the facade. Brick columns with iron gates wrought by a craftsman highlight the entrances to the townhouses.

Since the new, so-called "monster" houses of Birmingham have become a heated issue of domestic incongruity, perhaps the Merrill Street townhouses will serve as an answer to good street design. While serving as enclosure, they also satisfy a sense of direction that defines the street and urban matrix.

Chicago architect Bertrand Goldberg is an advocate of urban density. He believes that density represents the number of people who create human fission, which, in turn, establishes community. Rather than have houses that are reactive, perhaps the townhouse can be come proactive, further adding to the charm of downtown Birmingham. Earlier precedent was set with a group of townhouses on Brown Street by builder/developer Bill Mulloy who also did another grouping on Chester Street.

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Office growth expected to stagnate for rest of century

By Ralph R. Echtinaw
staff writer

Blame it on the baby boom, technology, early retirees and pregnant women.

A newly issued report from the National Association of Industrial & Office Parks says the office building boom has ended, citing the four things above as causes.

Worse yet, the NAIOP report says the reduction in office-space need is no temporary phenomenon, but rather a change that will persist beyond the turn of the century.

"Unlike past downturns, there is no boom around the corner to pull the market out of its doldrums," the report says.

In the Detroit market, office employment is 379,642 this year, having grown by 84,950 people since 1980. But NAIOP expects the metro Detroit area to add only 7,558 office workers in the next 10 years.

The overall office vacancy rate in the metro area is 20.3 percent, according to Cushman & Wakefield of Michigan, a Southfield-based commercial real estate firm. The NAIOP report estimates at least 10 years must pass for the metro Detroit vacancy rate to drop to 6 percent.

TO UNDERSTAND why the office boom has ended, you must first know what caused it. The report analyzes this in depth.

The baby boom, brought on by the Great Depression and World War II, injected a lot of new people into the U.S. population in a short period of time, creating a tidal wave of humanity that changed everything around it and entered the work force in the '70s and '80s.

Concomittantly, most of the boomers landed in white collar jobs.

"Almost 45 million jobs have been added to the economy since 1967, a 68 percent gain, and not one of these jobs has been in manufacturing," the report says. "The war babies clearly have sought white-collar work and found it."

Technology, in the form of jet engines, computers, satellites, fiber-optics, and so on, made possible the rapid birth and growth of many companies, companies that dealt primarily with information and needed bouncup office space.

As international trade expanded after 1945 to the extent that the U.S. is now the world's largest exporter of goods and services, foreign traders needing bases in this country added to the demand for office space.

These stimuli led to the massive office-building extravaganza.

"By 1960 we had still built only about one-quarter (27 percent) of the office space existing today," the report says. "Said another way, 43 percent of all office space ever built in the United States was built in the past 10 years and about 60 percent has been built in the past 20 years."

COMING FULL circle, the forces that caused the office boom in turn helped bring about its demise, according to the NAIOP.

As the last of the baby boomers entered the work force, a sharp decline in employable bodies hit the job market. In addition, the so-called baby boom "echo" never materialized to the extent predicted.

"As a consequence, the number of new entrants to the work force will fall sharply during the next 10 years," the report says.

To make matters worse, the group expected to grow fastest between now and 2000 are the 45- to 60-year-olds, many of whom are retiring at unprecedentedly early ages.

The report calculates the overall growth of the labor force will drop from 2.4 percent per year in the '70s to 1.1 percent in the '90s.

"In short, in the 1990s we will be having a severe labor force shortage of a sort we have not experienced in recent memory," states the report.

Even pregnant women are to blame, in part, for the labor shortage, the report says. While women bolstered the earlier labor boom by entering the job market in significant numbers, many of them are now dropping out of the work force to raise children, the report says. Ergo, the sharp rise in the female labor force participation rate is expected to level off.

TECHNOLOGY IS also to blame for the office-building dirge.

"Productivity is finally reaching into the service sector," the report says. "Computers, telecommunications and related devices are eliminating millions of clerical and middle-management jobs in the service sectors, and the trend will only accelerate in the 1990s."

Keith Sant of Cushman & Wakefield agrees the office-building boom is over, but questions the NAIOP reasons. He places the blame mostly on a growing reluctance on the part of investors to put their money in real estate.

In metro Detroit communities, the vacancy rate has declined two-tenths of a percent since Cushman & Wakefield's second-quarter report. The third-quarter report predicts the vacancy rate will continue to fall throughout 1990.

But Sant and the NAIOP agree on one point. There's been a fundamental change in the office-building environment and the downturn in construction will last a long time.