

# MILWAUKEE

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SECTION B

### Spaces



Whitney Gould

## Jazzy renovation works in Madison

Any architect would kill for this job: the chance to make over an entire square block in downtown Madison.

But look more closely and the potential headaches start to multiply. The site, on Capitol Square, is studded with historic buildings; it's halfway between two prominent landmarks, the Statehouse and a new convention center, Monona Terrace, which bears Frank Lloyd Wright's imprint; design,

zoning and parking restrictions abound.

Still, Chicago architect Joe Valerio and his team at Valerio Dewalt Train not only coaxed coherence out of this jumble; they made it into something memorable - a jazzy ensemble of buildings that respect the past but do so mostly in the design language of today. The result is a near-model of how to do infill construction, the art of fitting new buildings into tight urban spaces. Milwaukee, take note.

Valerio is a droll, unflappable man who taught in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee between 1974 and 1985, when he ran a small firm here called Chrysalis of Wisconsin.

In many ways he and his partners were ahead of their time, committed to innovative, fine-grain urbanism in a period when Milwaukee was fixated on bland parodies of modernism and kitschy imitations of old buildings. Among projects with Valerio's creative stamp: the Kilbourn Row townhouses, those rhythmic, russet-colored condos in the 800 block of E. Kilbourn Ave.

"We picked Joe for his passion for good design and for his ability to handle a complicated site," said Brad Binkowski of Urban Land Interests, the far-sighted developer of the \$90 million project known as "Block 89" after its name on Madison's historic plat maps. The site, acquired over several years, is bordered by E. Main, E. Doty and S. Pinckney streets and Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

Besides contending with changes in grade, the team and their contractor, J.H. Findorff & Son, had to put parking for 750 cars underground or hide it from the street; include retail at street level; respect height limits designed to protect views of the Capitol; deal with two historic buildings; and not disrupt tenants, including several law firms and legislative support services. Also, old wells filled with dry cleaning fluids had to be cleaned up.



This office building on Doty St. features a curved end. The Capitol is in the distance.



This Walgreen's on Main St. facing the Capitol is fronted with a curved aluminum facade over a cut-stone base.



The Opera House restaurant is on Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. in downtown Madison.

Photos/Karant + Associates, DeMaio Photography

The quick and dirty solution would have been to relocate everyone temporarily and develop a “superblock” - a monolith, or a series of near-look-alikes. Thank goodness that didn’t materialize.

“We prefer messy vitality,” Valerio said. “We figured, let’s not be neat and clean. The antiseptic approach is deadening. We wanted to create buildings that carry on a dialogue with each other.”

As Valerio noted, this reflects the way Madison’s downtown evolved in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with the monumental, Beaux-Arts Capitol at the center and the small tracts of land around it developed gradually by individual entrepreneurs, “each rubbing elbows with the other and creating friction.”

Block 89 continues that tradition, starting with a 10-story office tower facing Doty St. Like a waterfall, a transparent bay cascades down the red-brick facade. The building’s bulk is also softened by gentle setbacks that lean away from the street; a rounded corner; and a glassy penthouse and eyebrow-like overhang. The fenestration is in sync with an adjacent insurance building from 1921, which was restored; the entrance, as in older buildings, is well-defined. But despite these nods to history, the tower is proudly modernist.

On Main St., facing the Capitol, is what may be the country’s sassiest Walgreen’s, with a curved aluminum top and a cut stone base. Next door is a simple, blond-brick background building linked to a redesigned former J.C. Penney store; the latter’s boxy grid at street level is, like the Walgreen’s building, moderated by curves above. Still to come, at the corner of Main and Pinckney, is a shimmering, all-glass office building that will resemble a see-through Rubik’s cube with its squares punched in and out.

It’s this marriage of opposites - lightness and solidity; straight lines and curves; right angles and diagonals; traditional and industrial materials - that gives Block 89 its unpredictable charm and sophistication. The scale is sensitive to its surroundings; the site work, including granite planters on Doty St. and roof gardens on a couple of the buildings, is first-rate. And the customized interiors are drop-dead beautiful: lots of glass and steel mixed in with bird’s-eye maple, cherry and slate. There are breathtaking views of two lakes from some of the offices. Parking, mercifully, is out of sight.

The one problematic piece, on Pinckney St., is the so-called Burrows Block, the site of an old opera house and Turkish bath. The modest original, built in 1850, was crumbling beyond repair, although many of the sandstone blocks were saved for reuse elsewhere. The replicated three-story facade, of Minnesota limestone, is almost too perfect; you want to rough it up a bit. It sounds a false note in an otherwise pitch-perfect composition.

There are lessons here for architects, developers and planners in Milwaukee and elsewhere:

1.) Architects are only as good as their clients, and vice versa. 2.) Regulations designed to protect the integrity of cherished sites do not have to thwart redevelopment; to the contrary, smart rules offer creative challenges to designers and developers. 3.) Cities are living, breathing organisms: They need to allow for surprises - “messy vitality,” in Valerio’s words - to stay interesting from one generation to the next.

In this stellar project, everything clicked. Would that such serendipitous collaborations happened more often.

