

Whitney Gould: Timid Edgewater design needs lighter touch

Whitney Gould | Posted: Wednesday, September 16, 2009 5:00 am

What a lovely artifact the Edgewater Hotel is. Designed by architect Lawrence Monberg and opened in 1948 as an apartment building, the Edgewater was a last gasp of the Streamline Moderne style, which celebrated the sleek profiles and aerodynamic shapes of luxury liners, locomotives and other symbols of the machine age.

With its portholes, wraparound windows, curved portico and buff brick, the Edgewater (it became a hotel in 1950) is all of a piece with two other Monberg buildings nearby: the Quisling Terrace apartments (formerly the Quisling Clinic), at 2 W. Gorham St., and the Quisling Towers apartment building, 1 E. Gilman St.

Alas, a 1973 addition to the hotel - a graceless horizontal slab - was an insult, cheapening the original.

The latest proposed expansion, designed by the Boston firm of Elkus Manfredi for the Hammes Co., is not in that dismal rank, thank goodness, but it's far from inspired. Rather, it's timid and nostalgic. Surely these otherwise talented architects, and Madison, can do better.

The \$109 million project envisions a landscaped public plaza atop the '70s addition, with a staircase down to the lake, and an 11-story tower at the east end of the property. The old Edgewater would be restored.

Three cheers for the restoration. But so far the design for the plaza looks generic; the architects say it is undergoing revisions. One can only hope the result will be greener and more inventive. Imagine what a world-class landscape architect like Kathryn Gustafson, who designed the lush, evocative Lurie Garden at Chicago's Millennium Park, could do with such a space.

The proposed tower is more problematic. Its light brick skin is sympathetic to the old Edgewater; the top is tiered like a wedding cake, not unlike the caps of some Streamline Moderne buildings elsewhere, although architect David Manfredi told me that his real inspiration was the neoclassical beaux-arts architecture that flourished at the turn of the last century. Mindful that he was working within the Mansion Hill Historic District, Manfredi said the addition "really wants to belong to that historic context," not in order to mimic nearby buildings but to take cues from their rhythms and proportions and do so in the form of a handsome civic building.

Those broad goals are admirable. But why can't this be a building of its own time and place? Madison is not early 20th century Paris. This yeasty, argumentative city, my hometown, deserves architecture that responds to the aspirations and values of the 21st century, not the last one. And in this spot, especially, the optimism that produced the original Edgewater should inspire a much lighter, more transparent and sculptural expression than a modern-day reincarnation of the formalist beaux-arts tradition, with all of its links to hierarchical societies.

I know there are those who will object to almost any intrusion of modernism in a historic neighborhood. But walk down Langdon Street a few blocks west of the Edgewater and behold the drop-dead-beautiful new Barbara Hochberg Center for Jewish Student Life, designed by Milwaukee's Engberg Anderson firm. With its canted walls, silvery metal panels, welcoming glass front and bold diagonals, it is unapologetically contemporary. Yet it is also pedestrian-friendly, hugging the street, while being sensitive to the scale and proportions of its neighbors. It raises the design bar for future construction on a street marred by phony-colonial and mock-mansard kitsch from recent decades.

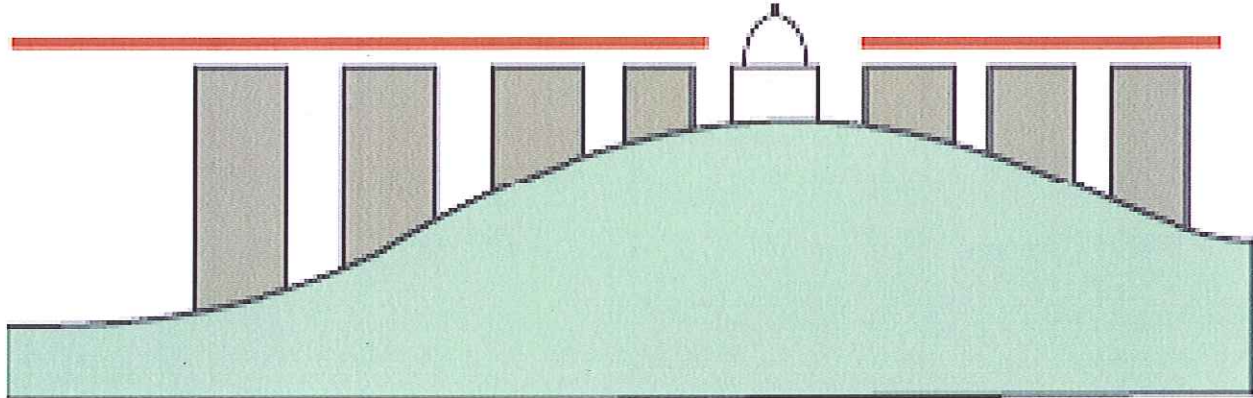
In the University Heights neighborhood on the west side, where my family lived when I was in high school and college, is another great example of how history can be enriched by thoughtful modernism: Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Gilmore House (1908) at 120 Ely Place. Its broad horizontals and projecting, cantilevered roof must have been quite a jolt 100 years ago to the owners of nearby Georgian Revival and Queen Anne mansions. But today Wright's Prairie School "Airplane House," as it came to be known, is a treasured part of the University Heights Historic District, which has welcomed some additional modernist homes in recent years.

For a more current illustration of how past and present can peacefully co-exist, check out Renzo Piano's sublime, lighter-than-air modern wing at the Art Institute of Chicago. It honors the classical proportions of the parent building, but in the design language of today, and seamlessly links the museum to Millennium Park.

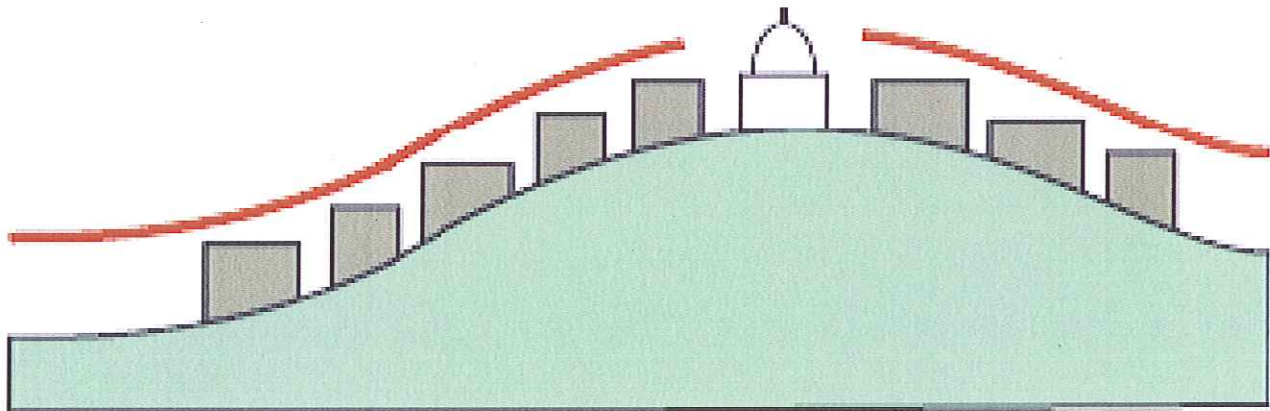
If the Edgewater's architects are courageous enough to go back to the drawing board, and Madison is willing to insist on more for its \$16 million in proposed public assistance for this project, the Edgewater addition could become one of tomorrow's landmarks. But to get there, the city must look forward, not backward.

Capital Times alumna Whitney Gould retired in 2007 as the architecture critic for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. She lives in Milwaukee and serves on the City Plan Commission there.

Land Use Objectives and Policies for Planning the Built Environment*



Skyline effect resulting from establishing maximum building heights relative to the base of the Capitol dome.

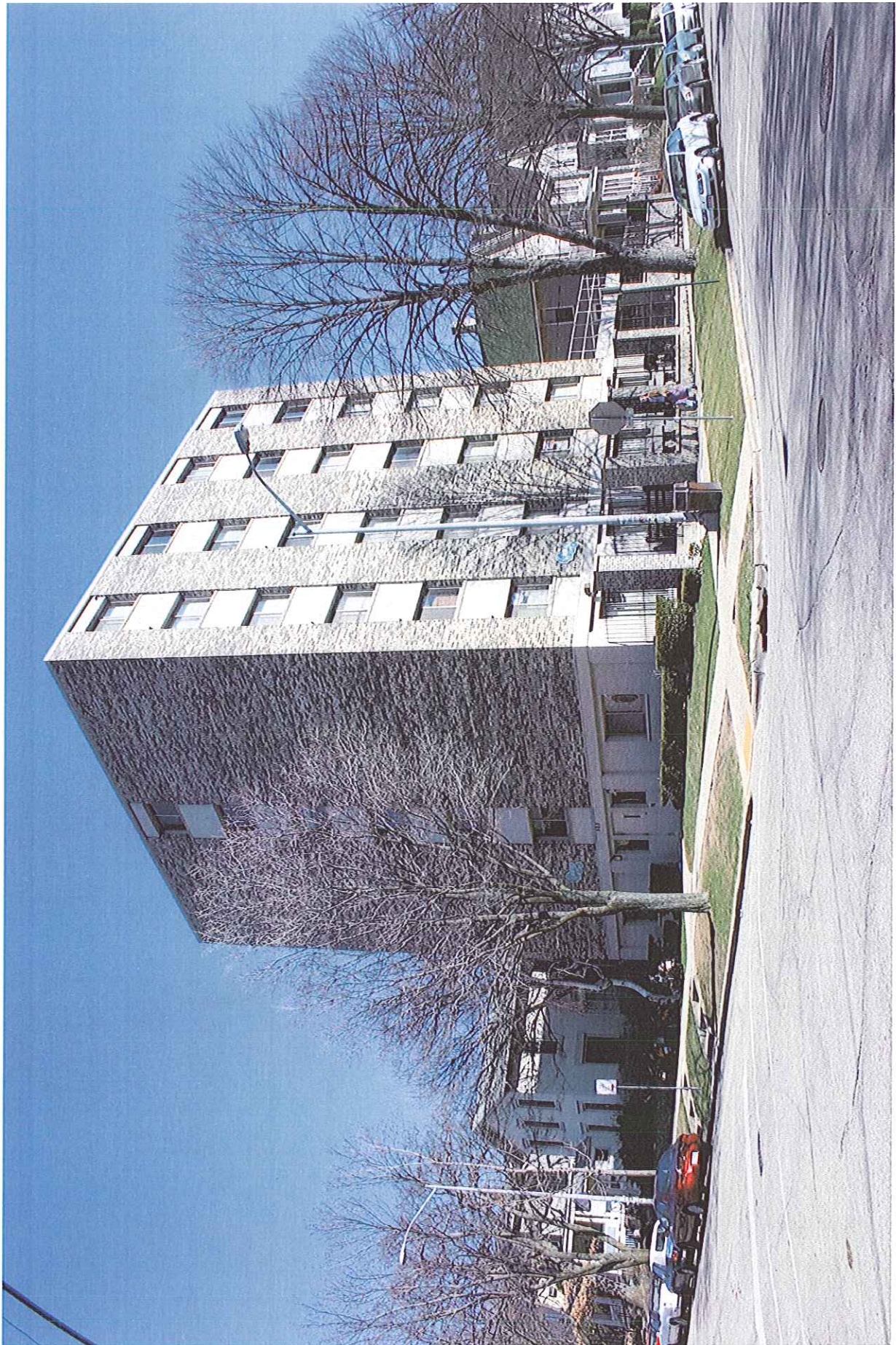


Skyline effect resulting from establishing maximum building heights relative to the natural topography of the Isthmus.

Policy 2: Establish building height standards for the Downtown/Isthmus area that will result in a skyline that reflects and emphasizes the natural topography, with taller buildings on the high ground and lower buildings toward the lakeshores.

*City of Madison Comprehensive Plan. Volume II, page 2-44.

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