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ROTUNDA SQUARE WILL REVITALIZE HISTORIC BALTIMORE NEIGHBORHOOD

by Richard T. Burns

Perhaps no metropolitan area exemplifies a return to traditional urban planning and the revitalization of historic urban property more clearly than Baltimore. In a city rich with an architectural vernacular of brick and brownstone, developers and urban pioneers, baseball teams and architects have found a palette upon which to paint a fresh metropolitan future. Rotunda Square, at the juxtaposition of several inner-ring suburbs and neighborhoods, is the newest brushstroke on Baltimore's canvas.

SITE AND NEIGHBORHOOD

Formerly the home of the Baltimore Life Insurance Co., the Rotunda building as it came to be known, was renovated in 1970 and included a mid-sized supermarket and a national chain drugstore. While the renovation was initially successful, over time consumer shopping patterns changed as larger and larger malls appeared on the metropolitan periphery. Shoppers across the nation were drawn away from older retail center and toward the newer malls. Neighborhood centers like the Rotunda suffered.

The 1970 renovation was partly to blame as well for the Rotunda's decline. As was common with renovations of that period, the historic nature of the Rotunda was not viewed as an asset and was largely ignored. The building was modified into an enclosed mall and had virtually no visibility from the street. Further complicating things, the site had been reconfigured to accommodate a parking lot—a parking lot with an unfortunate 10 percent slope, rendering it nearly unusable. With vehicular parking constrained, pedestrian access limited, and much of the building's charm stripped away, over time the Rotunda became yet another nonperforming retail property.

Hekemian & Co., a Hackensack, N.J.-based developer, realized that the Rotunda, located at the crossroads of Roland Park, Hampden, and the Johns Hopkins University campus, was a tarnished diamond, but a diamond nonetheless. Recognizing that a mixed-use development consisting of retail, commercial, and residential space was ideal for the property, Hekemian purchased the site in 2005. The hidden bonus was that the Rotunda was already zoned for mixed-use development. A lengthy and costly entitlement process was not necessary to achieve the potential this project possessed.

PUBLIC PROCESS

Although Hekemian could have proceeded with the proposed uses by right, they made the strategic decision to engage the neighboring communities in the planning and design process.



“We met with upwards of 23 different neighborhood associations, civic groups, and municipal agencies,” recalls Chris Bell, senior vice president with Hekemian. “We felt that getting community buy-in would significantly increase our chances of success.”

The surrounding neighborhoods were motivated to collaborate with Hekemian, too. Several big-box retailers expressed interest in the site, something that made the neighborhoods extremely wary. Hekemian knew that a mixed-use development was something that the community would rally behind; there were still many positive, although latent, memories of the Rotunda as a functioning retail center. Hekemian sought to capitalize on those memories and expand upon them. The rebirth of the Rotunda, now rechristened Rotunda Square, had begun.

CHALLENGE AND SOLUTION

The site presented severe problems. The earlier Rotunda renovation had created a steeply sloping parking lot behind the supermarket. Hekemian’s design team proposed a simple yet daring solution – push the supermarket a full floor below its current level. This solution created a street level front for the supermarket where only the entrance to the unusable parking had existed before. Escalators from the supermarket level would bring shoppers up to a new town square, which would sit on top of the supermarket.

The town square, which did not exist previously, would be fronted by the historic Rotunda building, an existing power plant building, and two new retail buildings. This solution gave the site a strong focal point; there was now a “there” there.

The area of the supermarket was doubled to 68,000 square feet, which was an economic necessity for the supermarket. Because the supermarket would be largely below grade, the visual impact was minimized. The complex grade and slope problems of the site were resolved in a way that made a completely new urban space.

THE RETAIL LEVELS

The town square, surrounded by shops and restaurants, was key to revitalizing the Rotunda. Large and small retailers have always known that foot traffic around their stores was a requisite for success. Hekemian and the design team, by listening to the surrounding community, found that neighborhoods were desirous of neighborhood services within walking distance. With several thousand residents and students living within a few blocks, a critical mass of customers could easily patronize stores. This represented a marked change to the prior retail model, which relied on shoppers arriving by car.

Multi-story buildings are normal in a dense urban fabric. Taking their cue from traditional neighborhood design, the architects placed commercial office space above the street level retail. The mix of retail and commercial provides a sustainable lease model for the developer and makes possible the ability to work and shop in the same place – the main street format that worked in countless towns and cities for decades.

RESIDENTIAL SOLUTION

Along with retail and commercial space, an opportunity existed for residential space as well. As obvious as that opportunity was, it wasn't immediately recognized that not only would the residential units be ultra-convenient in terms of shopping, dining, and services, but that residences placed at the elevations necessary would have stunning views of the downtown skyline and Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

"Adding residential into the mix was an obvious choice and a good one," said developer Bell. "What we didn't realize was how fantastic the views would be from the residential levels."

Hekemian knew that those views translated into a great return on investment because of the premiums they would command.

VEHICLES, WALKING

Without a strong, simple, and visible connection to the surrounding urban fabric, no development could succeed. The town square not only provided storefronts for the numerous shops, it became the node for movement into the site. By connecting the square to the existing street grid, both pedestrians and cars are allowed to enter Rotunda Square.

Vehicles can actually park along the perimeter of the square, in a way reminiscent of the small town squares that existed in most of America prior to the growth of suburbs. Vehicles for retail and office workers are accommodated in a parking structure located just off the square but still within the confines of the development.

Rotunda Square promises to be a welcome and inviting addition to its neighborhood when it is completed in 2010. With nearly a quarter of a million square feet of retail, 140,000 square feet of commercial space, and more than 400 apartments and condos, it represents one of the most significant investments in mixed-use in Baltimore. As a development, it will reaffirm the validity of the urban experience that Baltimore has come to represent.