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Stepping It Up in the Park

by Robbie Whelan

A riddle: When is a hotel not just a regular hotel and when is a condo building not just an ordinary condo building?

For architect Jonathan Marvel, who is designing a long-awaited hotel-condominium project for a partnership led by Toll Brothers Inc. and Starwood Capital at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, the answer is easy: When it is in a park.



Mr. Marvel says he divides all the structures in New York City into two categories: “fabric buildings,” or structures such as warehouses and brownstones that blend into their context because of design that isn’t distinctive; and “iconic buildings” such as signature office towers, bridges and public buildings that are meant to be singular and require more of architects in the way of creativity, ingenuity and personality.

Ordinarily, a 200-room hotel and 159 condominiums spread across two buildings could easily fall into the former category. But since the buildings are to be situated inside Brooklyn Bridge Park, they can’t be just another part of the urban fabric—they have to be something more.

“When you’re designing a building in a park, you’re no longer part of the fabric around you, and you’re immediately thrust in the situation of being an icon, and the bar is raised super high in terms of being architecture of consequence,” Mr. Marvel said in an interview.

Early renderings show two long, relatively low-slung residential buildings made of white limestone and glass, placed on two pieces of land near Pier 1 known as Parcel A and Parcel B. The first, and larger, is 10 stories high, and attached to its north end is the glassy, box-shaped hotel building, which wraps around the back side of the condo portion.

Both structures use a what Mr. Marvel calls a “step-up” design, meaning the units toward the front rise like a staircase, giving the apartments behind them views of the East River and Manhattan. All steps, as well as some roof and terrace surfaces, are topped with vegetation, making the condo buildings resemble rock formations overgrown with moss.

“We want the park to come into the building,” Mr. Marvel says. “The public benefit is that the building is going to blend with the park. That’s a very important part of the design. We didn’t want the building to draw too much attention to itself. We wanted it to be a good neighbor.”

That’s important with this project in particular, because Brooklyn Bridge Park’s development has been fraught with politics. Critics have said the park was built as a favor to real-estate developers, who wanted to use the waterfront green spaces as a fancy front lawn to juice the values of their condominiums.

The park’s planners, including its landscape architect, Matthew Urbanski of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc., have responded that the project was designed for the public first. In addition, fees generated by the condo and hotel properties will pay some \$3.3 million of the park’s annual maintenance cost. Toll Brothers and Starwood will cover these fees initially, and later the condo owners will contribute as well.

Still, there is the question of the architect’s responsibility to build structures that are neighborly but at the same time consequential to the landscape. Given such a handsome front yard and such a prominent location, don’t Starwood, Toll Brothers and the park’s nonprofit managers, who selected them, owe the public a great set of buildings?

In this sense, the design largely succeeds, with a few exceptions.

The step-up design is a welcome novelty, and helps break the buildings’ mass into smaller units, giving the project a somewhat demure scale and character. In addition, Mr. Marvel is leaning toward constructing the residential building’s bones out of white limestone, quarried from Maine. Limestone, unlike other, less-gentle stones, looks gorgeous in the changing light at different times of day.

This isn’t lost on Mr. Marvel, who has studied and worked under famed modernist architects Henry Cobb and Richard Meier, and also is trained as a painter. Parkgoers, ferry passengers and drivers crossing the Brooklyn Bridge will see a building near the water that changes with the light from the river, burning brown in late afternoon sun and cooling off in the early morning.

The hotel's design, however, still sticks out. Mr. Marvel has carved out a pedestrian "pass-through" between the hotel and the condo sections, but he also plans to make the hotel as a softly lit "beacon" at night, and with so much glass, the structure will look anesthetized and bright.

David Von Spreckelsen, who heads the Toll Brothers City Living division, which is quarterbacking this project, said the design team has taken steps to soften the hotel's original design by giving it more natural finishes and coating support columns with wood, for example. "We wanted to respect the park, not overwhelm it," he said.

These touches are nice, but the hotel design is still short of the type of iconic status that Mr. Marvel says is his responsibility. That said, it is a tremendous improvement over the barnlike structure originally proposed by Starwood early on. The park selected the Toll/Starwood team this year after Toll's chairman, Bob Toll, and Starwood's chief executive, Barry Sternlicht—old friends in the business world—decided to join forces.

Also, the design is still in flux and hasn't received its final blessing from the park's board. But as an early draft, the Brooklyn Bridge Park's first large-scale commercial construction project reads like bad news, well-written: It's a shame that the park's maintenance has to be tied to the success of a hotel/condo, but an occasion of clemency that the buildings themselves look quite at home.

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