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Green design is good for business, not politics

John King Wednesday, August 17, 2011

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Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP / Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP

The 50 Fremont office tower includes a plaza, left, that has been replanted, but not renovated since opening day in 1983. Plans now call for a total redesign to allow more flexibility, in which the center is active and the perimeter is quiet.

This column is rooted in architecture, not politics, so I won't dwell on the corrosive know-nothingism that passes for discourse these days in Washington, D.C.

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Instead, let's stay in the real world - where developers know better than to insist the world is flat. Such initiatives as energy conservation or "green" design aren't socialist plots, they're bottom-line smart.

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"In many cases, the businesspeople are so far ahead of the politics it's beyond belief," says architect Craig Hartman of Skidmore Owings & Merrill. "They see a market basis for pursuing sustainability, and meeting changing social demands."

Hartman's known for such expansive projects as the recently approved plan that seeks to transform Parkmerced - a 1940s suburban implant in San Francisco's southwest corner - into a dense urban district focused on walking and transit, not cars.

But his current project is something much different: the retooling of public spaces at 50 Fremont, a 42-story high-rise from 1983.

It opened on the south edge of the Financial District at

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a time when corporate modernism was being pushed to acknowledge architectural history, and that tension shaped the design. The travertine box starts at the sidewalk and stops 600 feet later, but the upper floors have notched glass corners to evoke (slightly) the telescoping towers of yore. It rises from the corner of Fremont and Mission streets, yet a plaza along the north slides as close to Market Street as possible.

The upgrade set to begin this winter will change the tone from ceremonial to approachable, in keeping with an age where quality of life is associated with food trucks and farmers' markets. Pomp counts for less than ease of passage.

The broad black granite that now frames each travertine-faced column along the sidewalk would be removed, enlarging by nearly 3 feet the space between the columns. This opens up sightlines from the street to the lobby - a marble-slathered space soon to be lightened with a stone floor that would feature the same paving as the plaza beyond.

As for that plaza, say goodbye to the raised concrete planter beds filled by shrubs and flowering trees (rest assured, they're destined for new gardens rather than the compost bin). There'd be a grassy square along one edge, from which amphitheater-like steps would descend into a central space with movable tables and chairs.

"The idea is to make the plaza flexible, responsive to different needs," Hartman says. "Active in the center, quiet along the perimeter. It's all about human theater."

This \$10 million makeover follows a series of upgrades that last year earned 50 Fremont a Platinum award from the United States Green Building Council. That's the top ranking under the council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification system. And get this: none involved major work. The effort was a collage of small moves that add up.

Motion detectors in stairwells, for instance. Why burn lights 24/7 in a passage used for fire drills and little else?

Nor is 50 Fremont owner TIAA-CREF a green-tinted renegade.

Within San Francisco, 35 million square feet of commercial space have received LEED certification of some sort. Another 107 million square feet are "registered," meaning work is being done in accordance with LEED guidelines, possible certification to follow.

Some LEEDites are newcomers, such as the ballyhooed platinum California Academy of Sciences. Others are skyline mainstays - such as multi-towered Embarcadero Center, which has just been awarded LEED Gold.

"If you run your building efficiently, then it costs less to do business here," said Blake Peterson of Ashforth Pacific, who heads the energy and environment committee of the city's chapter of the Building Owners and Managers Association.

"Properties choose to do energy-efficient projects because they make financial sense."

That's not politics. It's a pragmatic approach to our future, and the urban world so many of us share. Common sense about a changing world - what a concept.

Place appears on Wednesdays. E-mail John King at [jkings@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jkings@sfchronicle.com).

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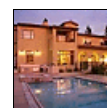
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