

Design of proposed Marriott wins praise

By GREGORY SMITH
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

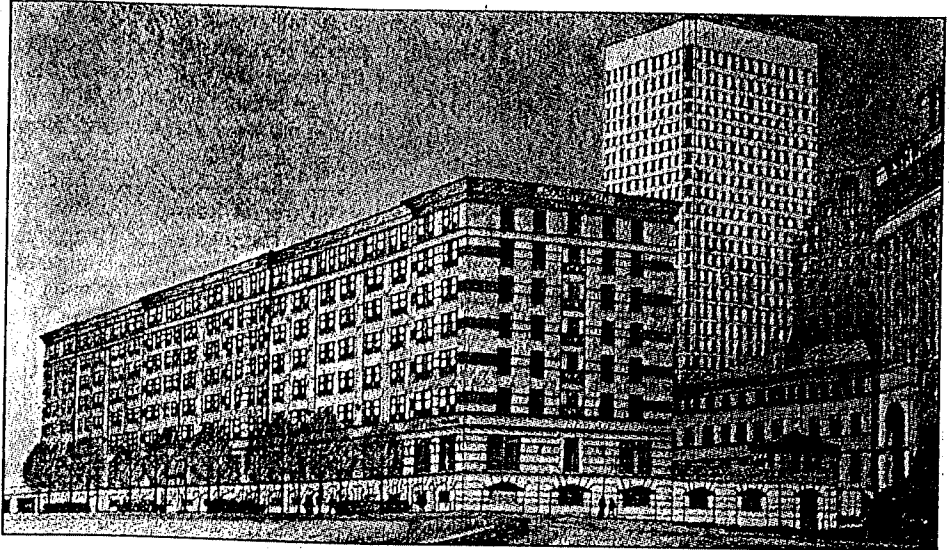
PROVIDENCE — The proposed Courtyard by Marriott hotel will be "a very handsome" addition to the downtown skyline, a city design reviewer says.

As a matter of fact, it will resemble the well-regarded 103-year-old Union Station next door.

The developer of the hotel, plans for which were announced last year, originally proposed that the exterior be composed of synthetic stucco. But representatives of the developer, Union Station Associates, confirmed the resemblance Wednesday when they told design reviewers that they definitely will use all brick.

Until then it was not clear if the budget for the \$23-million project would accommodate the higher cost of an all-brick exterior.

Union Station, a once-decrepit railroad center converted to offices and restaurants in the 1980s, features a buff-colored brick



with deep maroon trim. The base of each of the five buildings is a pinkish granite.

The Courtyard by Marriott "is a very handsome project that respects the Union Station complex," said Deborah Melino-

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DOWNTOWN PLANS:

An artist's rendering shows the Courtyard by Marriott hotel next to Union Station in Providence.

Marriott

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Wender, executive director of the Capital Center Commission.

The commission regulates zoning and design for Capital Center, the crescent-shaped special zoning district that sweeps east, south and west of the State House.

The commission's Design Review Committee asked the developer to forgo buff-colored stucco — a material often referred to by a brand name, Dryvit — in favor of buff-colored brick. Expanses of stucco on such a large building would be plain and unappealing, said committee member Wilfrid Gates.

Ron Marsella, a partner in Union Station Associates, said the building will not mimic Union Station entirely because its entrance, window configurations and roof line will differ.

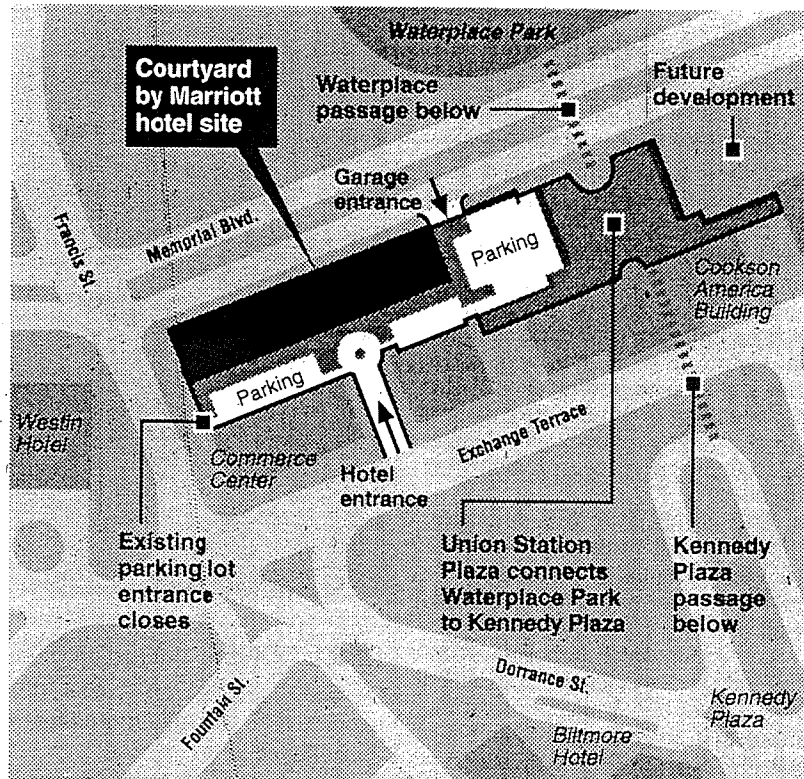
With 204 rooms, the hotel would rise seven stories at the corner of Francis Street and Memorial Boulevard, in the parking lot that serves Union Station. It would be across the street from the Westin hotel and the Providence Place shopping mall, and would sit atop a two-level parking garage.

Given the prominence of the site, the design committee has asked the developer to do something more to enliven the northwest corner of the building, Melino-Wender said.

The site is at a city gateway, where traffic from Routes 95 and 6 would flow into downtown beneath a skywalk linking the Westin and the mall, which is under construction.

That corner of the building needs to be "livelier, more inventive, more welcoming," Melino-Wender declared. Decorative touches such as lighting, a different brick pattern and awnings might do the trick, Gates said.

Union Station Associates has requested permission to make three



Journal-Bulletin/GEORGE SYLVIA

"The way the project is laid out, it fits and it makes sense" at that height, Melino-Wender said. If limited to the height of Union Station, the building might have created a boxy feel, some committee members thought.

One of the guiding principles in the creation of the district was the preservation of sight lines from all directions to the State House. Allowing a taller building will not violate that principle, commission officials said, because the view corridors are along boulevards such as Francis Street, and not between buildings.

The hotel's main entrance will open to Exchange Terrace, between the westernmost building in Union Station, occupied by the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, and the building next door occupied by Union Station.

Kennedy Plaza through an existing concourse beneath Exchange Terrace, into the plaza and out to Waterplace Park.

Raphael Bar-Risto, which used to be on South Water Street, is scheduled to reopen in larger quarters at Union Station next summer. The restaurant, which has another location in East Greenwich, would be open to the concourse and the plaza. The entrance to the Capital Grille restaurant would also face the plaza.

In future years, Marsella hopes to fill out the Union Station complex with a final structure on the remaining part of the parking lot — a structure that he said would maintain the architectural symmetry. It could be residential, but the market will determine its purpose, he said yesterday.

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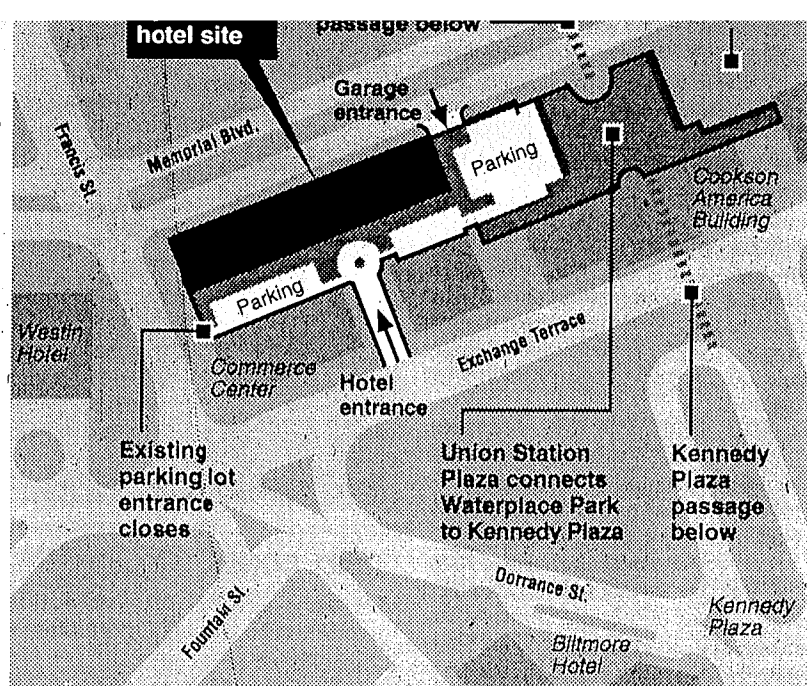
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Union Station Associates has requested permission to make three deviations from district design rules: to build higher than allowed, to make a curb cut on Memorial Boulevard for an entrance to the garage and to disregard a prohibition of ground-level parking.

A public hearing of the proposed design and site plan is scheduled for April 1. The developer hopes to receive design approval that same day, according to Melino-Wender.

"Deviations are traded off on the one side for things that would enhance the project on the other," such as the brick, said committee member Barry Fain. The Marriott will be "a nice addition to the cityscape," he commented.

At the planned height of 100 feet, the cornice line of the hotel would exceed the district guideline by 46 feet, or almost twice as much as allowed. The guideline is set by the height of the cornice line of the Cookson America building at Union



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The hotel's main entrance will open to Exchange Terrace, between the westernmost building in Union Station, occupied by the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, and the building next door occupied by Union Station Brewery.

But daily and special-events parkers would pull into the garage from Memorial Boulevard. The hotel, 360-car garage and a plaza would fill up about half of the existing parking lot.

The precast concrete garage would not be a gaping open-deck structure similar to the garage at the Rhode Island Convention Center, officials said, but rather a well-designed structure that signs, grillwork and other elements would make visually palatable.

Marsella likened its appearance to the base of the Dome Building, where the Westin lobby is located.

"You're not going to know this is a garage," he remarked.

The east side of the hotel would open to a plaza behind the Cookson America building, where small shops and perhaps a small food-service operation are planned. Pedestri-

ans would access Kennedy Plaza through an existing concourse beneath Exchange Terrace, into the plaza and out to Waterplace Park.

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If the necessary approvals are obtained, construction of the hotel and garage would begin in May, with the garage completed in six months and the hotel completed in 15 to 18 months.

Courtyard by Marriott traditionally serves corporate travelers and tourists, from locations on a city periphery. But more are being built in downtowns to serve the convention trade, too, according to Marsella.

The hotel will include a small restaurant and lounge and small meeting rooms but will lack the substantial restaurants, lounges and meeting and banquet spaces of a full-service hotel. Marsella compared Courtyard by Marriott to a Hampton Inn and Suites or Hilton Garden.

The average daily room rate is expected to be \$105, about \$10 to \$15 less than a full-service Marriott



A new rink, a new hotel

THESE ARE HAPPY TIMES for those of us who care about architecture in Providence, and who enjoy sitting in on review panels, following the give and take over what buildings should look like. Now that the design of Providence Place is set in, well, in paper (legally binding paper, to be sure), two more major projects are on the boards. Thankfully, both pick up the mall's traditional vernacular.

On Monday, the latest version of the pavilion for the proposed ice skating rink in Kennedy Plaza was revealed to the DOWNCITY Review Commission. Architect Glen Fontecchio, of William D. Warner Architects & Planners, explained the design. Conceived by Bill Warner (with some mayoral kibitzing), it features an observation platform between two towers that reflect those of Thomas Tefft's original Union Passenger Depot, one of the world's largest, and considered one of its most beautiful, when it was built in 1848.

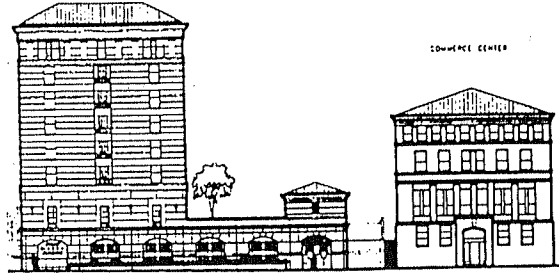
The depot's towers were tall, slender and square, while the rink's are short and Rubenesque. But they do reflect the depot's pair in that they are, so far as I am aware, the first set of twin towers proposed for downtown since the old depot's demise in 1896.

Warner's towers are, I'd say, quite as attractive in their way as were Tefft's, and so it is with a sad heart that I must report that they came under attack at Monday's meeting. They are, it was said, too massive a presence in the plaza. Maybe they should be diminished, it was suggested, and while you're at it, maybe the pitched roof covering the observatory between them should be eliminated. That would not only reduce the presence of the rink, but expose observers to the same weather conditions as the skaters.

Leaving aside the fact that the skaters are skating and the observers are watching (that is, working up a sweat versus not working up a sweat!), neither the building nor the towers are, in fact, large, and certainly not so large as to diminish the openness of the plaza, let alone the prominence of City Hall. (And I suspect that if the latter were even a remote possibility, we'd have heard about it from Mayor Cianci.)

I have a lot of fun lampooning such critiques, but they are serious business, and the public (or, as in this case, various bodies who speak on its behalf) has both the right and the responsibility to weigh in on the appearance of structures that will occupy public space. Yet, in my opinion, the current design adds character to the plaza. After the absurd "northeast corner crisis" during the mall design debate (in which it was earnestly predicted that its corner tower would "mislead" shoppers), we don't need any "towerectomies." Needless dithering will only delay the day when we can skate in Kennedy Plaza.

With luck, the skating rink will be finished in the fall of 1998, at about the



DAVID BRUSSAT

Yesterday, developer Ron Marsella displayed the hotel plan before the design panel of the Capital Center Commission. Members seemed to receive the presentation with satisfaction; even modernist Prof. Derek Bradford of RISD seemed quiescent. Nobody even objected to its height, which will require (and should be granted) a deviation from the guidelines.

The image in Tuesday's Journal-Bulletin, of a model of the hotel inserted into a photo of its surroundings, revealed its size and location better than it revealed its architectural detail. Thus one acquaintance told me he thought it looked like the sort of edifice the Soviets used to inflict upon historic Moscow.

The line drawings above should soothe such concerns, somewhat. The hotel will reflect (or "copy," as modernists would say) the architecture of Union Station, as it should. Anxiety regarding the fact that the hotel will not, like the station, be of brick could be alleviated by boosting the ratio of fenestration in the facade. More or bigger windows, with glazing recessed more deeply into the walls, would render the planned "imitation stucco" more agreeable. Such stucco works well on Union Station's rear renovation, done after the 1989 fire; that's probably because it has lots of windows, albeit not as deeply set as in the old facades.

Important as they are in assuring a truly contextual design, these are minor points compared with those debated during the invigorating days not so long ago when Providence was fending off the threat of modern architecture (for a while with very little success). I remember those days fondly, but hope not to relive them. May they continue to recede into the past.

Above all, the hotel will be a linchpin promoting use of the Convention Center, the mall, Waterplace, the skating rink, Kennedy Plaza and the rest of downtown — so much so, I hope, that the apartment building to be paired with the hotel will become feasible sooner than even Ron Marsella dares to suspect.

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Seeing secret harmonies Providence's architecture of the Golden Mean

HAVE YOU EVER walked in downtown Providence and wondered why the five buildings of the old Union Station (built 1896-1898) along Kennedy Plaza are so pleasing to the eye? They have a sense of proportion and harmony that is lacking from some of the newer downtown buildings.

In seventh grade at Nathanael Greene Middle School, when I was asked to do a math project for my geometry class, I thought that studying the proportions of these buildings might help me understand what made them so pleasing. Failing to find any background information at the Providence Public Library, my father and I went downtown and paced out the proportions. Now, four years after completing this project, while frequently pondering how my math class could possibly be of any relevance to the real world, driving by the old Union Station in the mornings on the way to school helps remind me how the seemingly unimportant formulas we learn in math enhance our world.

The five buildings are based on what the Greek mathematician and philosopher Eudoxus described as the Golden Mean, and its three components: the square, the root five rectangle, and the "golden rectangle." The golden rectan-

NATALIE VAZ MacLEAN

gle buildings are at each end and are 31 by 50 paces. Inside them lie the two squares, 39 by 35 paces, and in the center, a building proportioned as a root five rectangle, 38 by 88 paces. All golden rectangles have similar proportions. They have a short side, "a," a long side, "b," in which the ratio of "a" to "b" is the same as the ratio of "b" to "a+b," and usually equal to about 0.6180.

In the case of these golden rectangle buildings, $31(a):50(b)$ equals $50(b):81(a+b)$. The root five rectangle is the long rectangle shown in the accompanying figure (and called "root five" because the ratio of $(a+b+a):a$ equals the square root of five).

It is the assembling of all three of the compo-

nents of the Eudoxus derivation that makes the five-building Union Station complex unique.

A golden rectangle is pleasing in a deeper sense because the a:b ratio also is the proportion of fractals, the fundamental way in which nature reproduces itself as it divides into smaller and smaller portions. For example, as we look at a branching tree, each successively outward limb on a branch shortens by the fractal proportion, a to b. Even our bodies are fractally proportioned; the length of our fingers "a" to the length of our hand "b" to the length of our forearm, "a+b," etc.

Downtown Providence is beautiful because of the attention its original architects paid to the mathematical and natural proportions discovered by Eudoxus and by others, such as Fibonacci, who described the fractal sequence. Our appreciation of this heritage and some understanding of its mathematical and scientific foundation will ensure that we will continue to design our city in a beautiful and harmonious way.

Hopefully, new structures such as the skating rink and Providence Place mall will adhere to these fundamental principles so that in the years to come they will be as pleasing to the eye as the old Union Station.

Natalie Vaz MacLean is in Grade 11 at Classical High School, Providence.

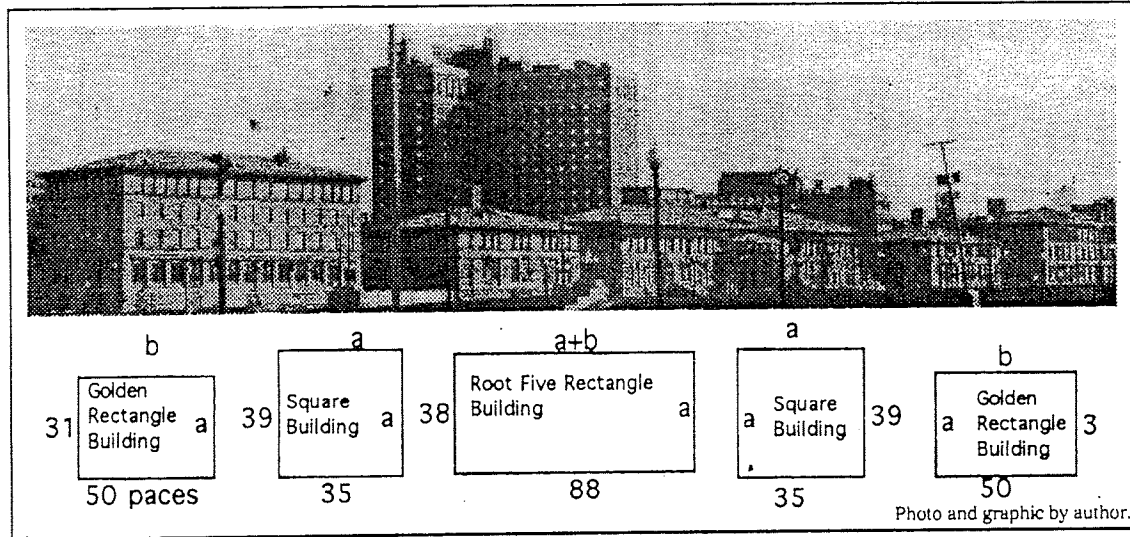


Photo and graphic by author.