



Mike Greenberg: Developer has right touch, in right place

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There's one big problem with The Vistana, a downtown mixed-use project that developer Ed Cross unveiled last week.

The problem is, there aren't more of them — more projects like The Vistana and more developers like Ed Cross.

Not counting a residential penthouse in a tiered corner tower, The Vistana is to rise 14 stories — 246 rental apartments on nine U-shaped floors, a four-level parking garage and street-level retail — on the full block across Santa Rosa Street from Milam Park.

Architecturally, it promises to be like an ideal dinner-party guest, conversing intelligently with N. Straus Nayfach's 1949 Alameda Theater on the next block east and with Jackson & Ryan's splendid Museo Alameda, nearing completion catercorner from The Vistana in Market Square.

Michael Imber, who also designed the Cross family home, is the design architect for The Vistana. (The architect of record is RVK.)

Imber's facades are somewhat streamlined versions of Midwestern commercial architecture of the 1920s. The result comes close to Art Deco without explicitly quoting the style.

In its massing, its wide windows, its chamfered corner entrances and its material palette of 12-inch terracotta-colored brick and cast stone, the building recalls big downtown department stores such as were built in Chicago. It also bears a striking resemblance to the San Antonio Express-News building.

The design is very urban in character and appropriate to the building type, and it asserts its own personality without resorting to flamboyance or braggadocio.

More important than the design is the fact that it is being built at all, on a highly strategic site near the center of downtown.

In the 1980s, San Antonio was the first major city in Texas to see a revival of downtown mid-rise and high-rise living, thanks largely to the city's preservationist ethic.

The Casino Club, the Majestic and Brady office buildings and a few smaller historic buildings were adapted to residential use in that decade. More recent years brought the conversions of the Robert E. Lee Hotel and the Maverick and Calcasieu office buildings, with the help of tax credits for historic preservation and affordable housing.

One 1980s attempt at a new high-rise, high-end project, a Manhattan-style apartment building designed by architect Cy Wagner, died soon after it was announced.

The only new residential tower to be completed thus far downtown is La Cascada, which opened last year a few blocks south of the Bexar County Courthouse.

(La Cascada is such a dud, architecturally, that I prefer to think of it as located not in downtown San Antonio but on the northern outskirts of Jourdanton.)

The past few years have brought a big increase in plans for new downtown residential projects, but Houston and Austin have outpaced San Antonio in actual units.

Austin Mayor Will Wynn has stated a goal of 25,000 downtown residential units by 2015, and developers are falling all over each other trying to make that goal a reality.

San Antonio's downtown housing market has been cooler, but the temperature appears to be rising.

A few weeks ago, Cross' development team acquired the long-stalled Villaje del Rio on Broadway, across the river from the San Antonio Museum of Art, and Cross plans to revive the mixed-use project with some redesign by David Lake of Lake/Flato Architects.

Downtown residential growth is good for the whole city. It portends a larger audience for downtown arts institutions, along with a broader and deeper menu of downtown entertainment, dining and shopping — and not just for tourists.

It's good to see that Cross, a genuinely good guy who understands and loves urban life, is playing a major role in the renaissance.

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