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The Rincon Hill Projects

Allan Jacobs

Hill Plan. The decision is now in: they got their “grandfathered birth.”

This unfortunate and contradictory metaphor should give the game away: who could argue that grandfathered births are not some freak of nature? While they have different developers, the two projects have been designed by the same firm, aggressively promoted as a single project, and accompanied by a flashy website and public-relations campaign.

Despite slightly different corporate parentage, the two projects are siblings; two sets of dumpy fraternal twins, to put it bluntly. Vancouver has learned the hard way that if the quality of architecture is not good at the beginning, it never gets better. The architecture here is uninspired at best, and will set a standard of mediocrity that will prevail for years.

Do us one better, San Francisco. Demand better architecture and more enlightened urbanism. Do it now!

Left: The Vancouver model combines highrise towers with continuous townhouses to create an active, pedestrian-oriented streetscape. Photo courtesy of the City of Vancouver, Planning Department.

Middle: Heller-Manus Architects’ project for 300 Spear Street. Birds-eye rendering from submittal to the San Francisco Planning Commission. Courtesy of the City of San Francisco, Planning Department.

Right: Heller-Manus Architects’ project for 201 Folsom Street. Street-level rendering from submittal to the San Francisco Planning Commission. Courtesy of the City of San Francisco, Planning Department.

The approval of the two Rincon Hill-Folsom Street behemoths by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors is a standout example of non-planning, ad-hoc, project decision-making at its worst.

Initially planned as speculative large-floor-plate office developments of the late 1990s (themselves totally out of keeping with San Francisco’s finely scaled development pattern), they were quickly reconstituted as housing proposals when the dot-com market dried up.

The proposals, to start, were far out of scale with the 200-ft. height limit of the area and the requirement that there be 150 ft. between towers. San Francisco City Planning Department staff were then working on a Rincon Hill Plan that was looking to a 250 to 300-ft. height limit, not the proposal for 400-ft. heights and only 82 ft. between towers the developers’ architects were offering. So why not go for broke? My understanding is that the developers and their architects decided to try their own zoning proposal, and that they did a great job of railroading their rezoning through the city and around concerned neighborhoods. Loads of people spoke out against the proposals and the conditional use — to no avail. In the end, only one supervisor, Tom Amiano, voted against the project.

This project will have a floor area ratio of close to 2.1. There will be 800 dwelling units in each of the two buildings, and the density will be about 460 units per acre.

To say that this development follows the Vancouver Model, as some of its proponents do, where the highest floor area ratio in the downtown housing areas is about 5 is an insult to Vancouver and to sane, knowing people’s credulity.

I am advised that as the hearings were coming to a close, one of the

supervisors asked for one hundred additional affordable housing units, and got them speedily, presumably as the price for his vote. One of the local city planners estimates that the developers made about \$100 million as a result of what the city gave them.

There is an old, old lesson of city planning here that few seem to be able to learn. When design-development decisions are made one by one, case by case, and there are either no plans or community requirements, or those that exist are easily up for grabs, then the side with the most power will usually win. And in our society, in large development matters, the side with the most power is the side with the most money. That side is never the city planners or urban designers working for the public.

This is not a case study of making place. It is a study of ruining place. The place is San Francisco.