Loophole Masters

Will the new rules of smart growth turn architects into density entrepreneurs? Lawrence W. Cheek pounds the pavement with a new breed of designer devoted to exploiting underdeveloped sites.

Business If there’s one thing that fills Portlanders with fear and loathing, it’s the specter of Los Angeles. If there’s one other, it’s Manhattan. The two horns of the apocalypse loom equally sharp in the nightmares of this outrageously clean, green, and prospering city, which, as prospering cities always do, must choose between growing up or spreading out. In 1973 the Oregon legislature enacted a system of urban growth boundaries to corral sprawl, but politics and population keep poking at the fences—just last year the Portland metro area harvested another 5,300 acres of “urban reserve” land to accommodate 23,000 new housing units.

That way lies Los Angeles, and Gary Reddick, CEO of Sienna Architecture Company, doesn’t want to go there. But by leading Portland in the other direction—vertically—aggressively proposing and promoting unconventional urban infill projects, he’s being accused of “Manhattanizing” the town. “We can count on seeing that word in an op-ed piece or letter every couple of months,” Reddick says. “It makes me want to ask, ‘Have you ever been to Manhattan?’ We’ve heard that accusation even when we were adding one story to a building. So we have to be as much educators as architects.”

Reddick is doing more than adding stories and educating; he’s reconfiguring the traditional role of architects. He doesn’t wait for clients to discover Sienna; he literally cruises the streets, looking for underdeveloped sites such as surface parking lots, then approaches the owners with ideas for high-density infill. He does little designing himself; he is lobbyist and pitchman, capitalizing on Portland’s struggle to accommodate growth smartly. As more cities wrangle with these issues, more architects may take Reddick’s lead—and probably can count on drawing fire because of it.

Reddick would seem, at first, miscast as a pitchman. The 55-year-old Oregon native talks softly and in carefully modulated tones, seldom seeming to italicize a strong word. But he’s as persistent as an evangelist. In fact, says Portland city commissioner Charlie Hales, “It goes beyond education. ‘Proselytizing’ would be more accurate. But I love it. Somebody’s got to get out there with these ideas.” Reddick has good P.R. instincts: Before breaking ground on a complicated townhouse project, he threw a block party for the neighbors and talked them through the construction. He may be mining a fundamental truth: Architects are better suited than developers for shepherding projects through thick-
ets of controversy because they can address real design issues, and their motives aren’t so obviously self-serving.

Sienna began life in 1951 as JKS Architects, which for decades focused narrowly on retail design. When Reddick joined the firm in 1990, 85 percent of its work was for one client—Fred Meyer, a Pacific Northwest big-box chain. In 1994 JKS changed name and ownership, and reengineered itself for diversification. Today Fred Meyer endures as a major client, along with other retail and town planning work. But Reddick’s passion is innovative urban development. “It’s more challenging to make inner cities work than to build something out in a green field,” Reddick says. “It really has me lit up.”

One of his pet projects transformed a 92-year-old warehouse in the Pearl District, Portland’s SoHo, into 68 residential lofts. Project architect Sharilyn Olson Rigdon added seismic fortifications, stacked four new floors onto the existing six, and infused the small (mostly 700 to 1,000 square feet) lofts with an industrial-strength urban attitude in plan and finish. Most units comprise a single room with a sleeping alcove; residents gaze at Portland’s industrial skyline through massive seismic brace frames that slash across the windows. Customers have responded—with interior construction still in progress [in February 2000] units were sold at prices from $118,000 to $573,000.

Macadam Village, a mixed-use urban retail strip three miles from downtown, took a more innovative approach to urban infill—and sparked more controversy. The tenant was an upscale grocery, with an appendix of small shops totaling 26,650 square feet of retail. Sienna stacked an extra level of apartments on the roof, then added what Reddick calls a “transition” row of flats and townhouses behind it, buffering a neighborhood of single-family homes. Since the site slopes upward from the street, Reddick saw an Italian hill town. The neighbors behind saw red. Sienna’s “transition” rose four stories and walled off most of their views of the Willamette River and Mt. Hood, Portland’s white-mantled volcano looming in the distance. “There was a fairly pitched battle,” admits Reddick. Since the project didn’t require a zoning change or height variance, the neighborhood had no legal way to stop it. Reddick prevailed.

“We’re at a defining moment as a city,” Reddick says. “The choice is whether we’re going to grow up and sparkle, or wave our hands and fall back.” As he sees it, every retail development, every low-rise office complex, even every church hanging onto precious surface parking is denying the city, and itself, obvious opportunities. Every Sienna client pondering a store gets the push: Sell the air rights over your parking and even the store itself, and you get a new income source, dry parking in a notoriously drippy climate, and a hundred new customers living right on the site. What’s not to like? Churches hear the same pitch with a moral overlay: Your parking lot is an opportunity to address Portland’s need for affordable urban housing. At least one church, says Reddick, is at the schematic stage on a plan to provide housing and graduated care for its own senior members.

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The most telling project is Northrup Commons, a four-story, 20-unit townhouse that uses the air rights over a medical clinic’s parking. Reddick spotted the asphalt just off Portland’s tony 23rd Street shopping district a mile northwest of downtown, did a title search, and cold-called the property owners. They weren’t avid developers, so Reddick made an unusual offer: Sienna would front the design costs and test the waters. Eleven units sold in 45 days with nothing but a model and color/material boards. The owners agreed to proceed, and made another unusual offer to soothe the clinic’s prime concern: They would pay for valet parking during the 15-month construction mess.

This site also bordered a neighborhood of single-family homes, so Sienna worked with existing zoning to avoid giving the neighborhood a way to kill the project. Although he didn’t have to, Reddick met with the neighborhood association, which has a record of hostility toward new development. He won moral support with the tack that the project would remove bare asphalt from a view—two parking levels would slip into the townhouse building, serving clinic and residents. “At the end of the meeting,” says Reddick, still savoring the surprise, “the head of the neighborhood association told us, ‘Go find some more parking lots.’”

Sienna is doing exactly that. Construction is starting on a 28-story residential tower opposite downtown across the Willamette River—the first high-rise in that neighborhood. The firm volunteered a scheme for another 20-story tower on a wedge of municipal parking at the foot of a downtown bridge. When City Hall recoiled—“Wait, this isn’t anywhere on our radar screen”—Reddick had a strong response: “The value of that dirt is $4 to $6 million. What better public servants can you be than to show voters you’ve found creative ways to develop revenue—other than new taxes? Climb on your white horse here.” The project is under discussion.

Commissioner Hales is an unabashed fan of Sienna’s modus operandi. “This entrepreneurial approach is exactly what’s needed to change the practice of development. If you wait for property owners and developers to scratch their heads and say, ‘Huh, maybe we ought to be doing something different here,’ you’re going to wait a long time in some cases and forever in others. Property ownership and vision are not genetically linked. What Gary is doing is serving not only the client, but also the city.”

In several important ways, Portland is pruned for Reddick’s vision. It has a lively and lovely downtown that never suffered severe retail and residential flight. People want to snuggle up to the city’s heart; it beats with a welcome. Portland has the best mass transit in the western United States, and a dark suspicion of households that claim to need two cars. (Northrup Commons, with units priced $300,000 and up, allots just one parking slot per residence. The broker says no buyers have objected.) And it needs creative ways to accommodate growth. The metro population, 1.6 million, has ballooned 17 percent since 1990.

At the same time, Portland cherishes its communion with nature, its views of mountains, forested hillsides, and rivers. It legitimately fears the Los Angeles and Manhattan archetypes; it has much to lose. And while Sienna’s strength is in creative urban land use, its weakness is design. These showcase projects so far haven’t cut intriguing profiles in the streetscape or used graceful detailing to stitch them into the inner-city’s historic fabric. They’re bland background buildings, thrust into the foreground in their role as demo projects for thickening the urban stew.

But Portland will grow one way or another, and Reddick has shrewdly positioned Sienna at the epicenter. If his firm doesn’t reinvent the city, it may at least revolutionize the marketing of architecture. What works for Sienna may work elsewhere as growth boundaries encircle more and more sprawl-plagued cities. It’s like fishing, Reddick says. “If you wait for work to come to you, there’s always going to be someone already casting upstream.”