

# Murray Street development will fit in with neighboring buildings



**Cityscape**  
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Rhys Phillips is an Ottawa writer with an interest in architecture and urban planning.

The Gallery Court project on Murray Street in the Byward Market is evidence of a positive outcome of the ideological wars that have raged within architecture during the last decade.

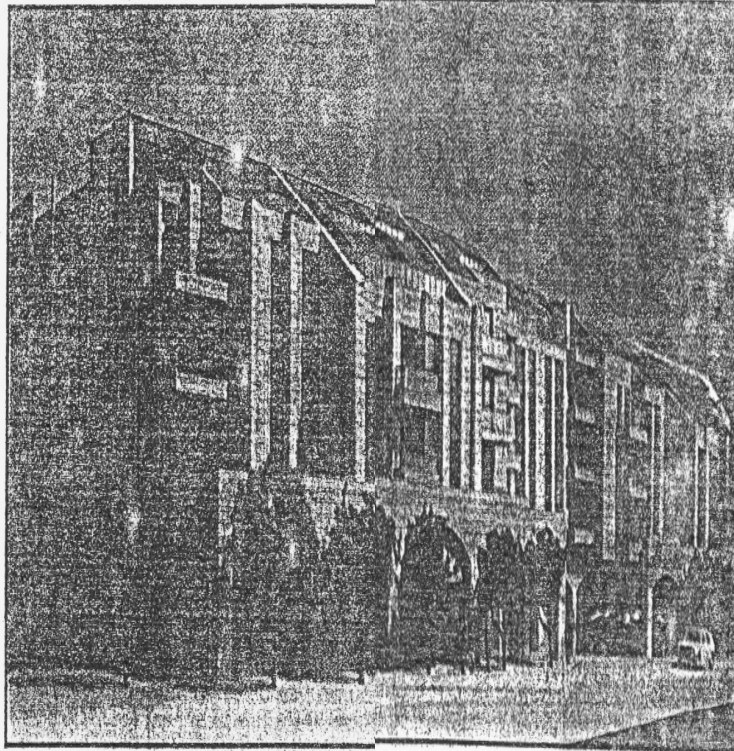
An appreciation of historical styles has returned. Associated with this trend is a renewed interest and appreciation for the urban context in which a building will be situated.

"Contextualism," as the development is called, is more than ensuring an obvious relationship with surrounding structures. It also means, in the urban context, a return to the sensible notions of such early city planners as Hendrik Berlage that architecture should make streetscapes an extension of our internal living spaces.

In the market, the revitalization of the many small shops will go a long way to maintaining the area's particular charm. Certainly, small triumphs are vital to the market's success.

But these can be all but wiped out if some of the major existing gaps in the streetscape are treated insensitively. For this reason, there is some room for optimism given the design proposed for Gallery Court.

Designed by Toronto architect Brian Brisbin, for Timberlay-Citicom, this condominium and retail development is between the restored Martineau hotel and soon to be reconstructed



An artist's conception of the Gallery Court project on Murray Street

"heritage" building on Murray and Sussex Drive.

When finished, the building will complete an important block that has seen its share of controversy.

To the east, the six-storey addition to the Martineau was completed over loud objections from neighbors.

The National Capital Commission's undue haste in demolishing its heritage Sussex Drive property in favor of a reproduction infuriated many heritage planners.

In addition, the building will sit between two historical styles, the austere simplicity of the Martineau and the Italianate detailing of the NCC building. Other site determinants include the heavy traffic on Murray and the need to exploit the stunning view of Parliament Hill and surrounding attractions. In response, Brisbin has not

relied on post-modern historicism where direct use of historical details is designed to establish a contextual relationship with neighboring older buildings. As appropriate as this device may be, he has chosen instead to produce an inherently modern design, but one that American architect Robert Stern would claim "dialogues with the past."

Such statements have led some wags to ask: "What exactly did the building say?" But the phrase does capture an important idea for design in the urban context — the ability of a building to establish a supportive relationship with its older neighbors and by so doing establish an integrated and comfortable cityscape.

The key to this approach is the possibility of establishing such a "dialogue" without necessarily turning to overt histori-

cal details. Douglas Brenner calls this "avoiding pastiche in favor of more allusive historical reminiscence."

Although "allusive," the connections and images used to trigger the memory must be clearly available to all those who come in contact with the building. Architects are notorious for claiming images and relationships visible only to themselves or, at best, other architects.

Gallery Court is almost symmetrical, continuing the neo-classical form of the Martineau. But the Murray Street facade is U-shaped with two side pavilions and a recessed centre court. Across the front of these pavilions runs a two-storey screen of pillars supporting arches carrying on rhythms established by slightly smaller arches in the old hotel.

To the centre, the screen is carried one arch past the pavilions. This partially closes off the cen-

tre courtyard against the rush to Murray yet maintains the square as a "public" space. Here, Brisbin has taken the area's unique open square and sheltered courtyard and produced a successful hybrid.

Equally important, the front screen maintains the streetline of the hotel, an urban design requirement the importance of which architects have only recently rediscovered. The arches act as either retail window frames, or lobby, garage and store entrances.

The street level shopping will add a strong streetscape and will go a long way to completing west Murray as a high-grade commercial area.

All stores maintain direct street access, avoiding the mistakes of the "Atrium and Martineau addition."

The west wall borders the last link in the NCC square system parallel to Sussex. Here the arched screen is carried 2 1/4 bays

down the square and the remaining half of the wall is enlivened by recessed balconies and five long vertical window strips.

The double height screen imposes order at the street level. Above, the two projecting pavilions recede asymmetrically on each side. Strong vertical motion is created by the use of corner piers, pilaster columns and window strips. Apartment balconies provide further details and a countering horizontal influence.

A clear example of Brisbin's "allusive" approach is his handling of the roofline. The slanted green houses extending from the fifth to the sixth floor, with their green tinted glass and shades, are a reference to the many mansard and copper roofs of the surrounding historical buildings.

Clearly this is but a recognition of form and not an attempt to reproduce. Although the roof is primarily flat, the slanted balcony and greenhouse lines will read from the street as a pitched roof.

The height of the building is between that of the Martineau and its taller addition. This is a consequence of the intense fight over the addition's extra height, which resulted in a guaranteed 35-foot maximum for all future development on the block.

In his waxing elegant on architecture, Stern has also spoken of the need to "dream of the past with the material of today." Brisbin has coincidentally followed this dictum.

Gallery Court will be clad in a new product called Renaissance stone. This manufactured product is born-again angelstone, a Canadian-made product invented by Edward Bevan Ratcliffe and for years shunned by architects but loved by home renovators.

Brisbin decided to use this new material because it gives the illusion of stone's texture and hand-crafted nature, thus avoiding the catalogue feel of curtain wall siding.