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Dooling Woodbrier Architects examines the recent trends in the retail mark

May 21, 2008 - Retail

Dooling Woodbrier Architects has devoted a major part of our practice to work in the retail world. Retail occurs as both challenging and rewarding to us, as our clients listen carefully to the market to serve their tenants/users. And as part of that broader conversation, we find ourselves reconciling the positions of developers, planning boards, tenants, fire marshal's etc. From this position, I've noticed many trends in retail development...perhaps you recognize some of them yourself!

The Importance of Design:

This is on everyone's mind and presents many challenges as different members of the delivery team and the planning boards assess sometimes competing interests. However, it occurs to me that the competition of yore is lessening as the expectations of forward looking municipalities and sincere developers begin to overlap more in the face of time and budget demands. This trend seems to be more apparent with our local developers than those far away, but the environmental, aesthetic, political, civil and legal demands of the process are calling to the best of us all to achieve results that enhance the communities we build in.

Flexibility in Face of a Shifting Market:

This issue arises not so much in the case of the large anchor stores, but more often in those buildings and pad for smaller tenants. What happens to these buildings as tenants turn over and column layouts and facades become awkwardly inconvenient? Dealing with these matters in the design phase can increase the flexibility of a building and, when turnover time comes, the well thought out design will accommodate new tenants more readily.

The Desirability of New England:

Dick Lampman at Tocci notes that more nationals are discovering New England every year. Is this a reflection of our relatively stable economy...or a sense of opportunity apparent to these away companies. For whatever reason, they're here with lots to teach us and an equal amount to learn. (I do remember going through an approvals process for UNO's in Schaumburg, Illinois, and being struck by how demanding and, at the same time, straight forward that community was...they do have something to teach us!) and how fortunate that the nationals are showing up.

Renovation of Existing and New Buildings:

These days we find more clients taking on major renovation projects vs. new building construction. These renovations generally involve less review time with the municipalities but sometimes encounter other issues, as when the original construction was less than up to par. In a couple of recent cases we've encountered large, poorly framed & vented basements with egress issues. No

doubt these basements once served as valuable storage space - no more! These situations now call for creative solutions and sensitivity to new possibilities.

Energy Conservation:

Jihad Rizkallah at Stop & Shop is proud to point to the EPA's public recognition of 'Stop as a 2007 Energy Star Leader for New England. In this case, their recognition derives not only from improvements to their stores, but also to the corporate transportation system serving them.

In working with this company for years we applaud their use of skylights, T5 Lighting, occupancy sensors and appropriate insulation as contributing to this recognition. We're encouraged to see such a large corporation paying attention to these matters and hope to see others take their cue from them. We'd like to see retailers enhance the possibilities presented by panelized steel and insulation wall / roof systems, green roofs, et al.

Future Initiatives for Retail:

*We'd like to see zoning benefits accrue to retailers who take on conservation matters with a vengeance.

*We'd like to see more retail development as part of mixed use buildings near public transportation stops.

*We'd like to see more pedestrian friendly environments in the larger retail developments.

*We'd like to see new retail developments complimenting and supporting existing commercial centers when and where they are close to each other.

*We'd like to see more design diversity from the corporate world; hasn't branding by façade been run into the ground? Check out Whole Foods & Starbucks for companies that refuse to live by that mantra!

*We'd like to see more collaboration between the retailer, the AE team and the contractor from the beginning of design through the end of construction...This to achieve the speed, cost control, and good design that all desire.

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