Iowa City's Tower: Big City Building for a Small Midwest Town

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Abstract
Iowa City’s 14-story Plaza Towers is an innovative variation on the block and tower parti that has prevailed in large American cities for over a century. By permitting its block to address the public while its tower addresses the private, it masterfully resolves the difficult issues of a 21st-century development in a 19th-century Midwestern town.

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This article was originally published in the Iowa Architect magazine, the official magazine of the American Institute of Architects, Iowa Chapter. For more information contact AIA Iowa at 515.244.7502.
Plaza Towers is a version of a block and tower parti. It combines a three-story block that conforms to Iowa City’s small-scale townscape with a pair of 11-story towers that rise from the block in an independent manner. The block addresses the pre-established city grid, provides street-related grocery, restaurant, lobbies, gym, conference center, and office space, and is scaled to the surrounding pedestrian mall. The two towers are linked and are situated on the block, set back from the street face, with one tower on grid and one tower at an angle. The towers serve largely individual residential needs, with hotel suites on floors four through six, and condominiums on floors seven through fourteen.

The goals of the program call for a volume larger than what might fit well in this college town. By visually separating block and tower, the architect is able to lessen the impact of the building. For this reason, too, the tower is remote from the street, detaching itself and distinguishing itself with its unique position. The primary axis of the east tower runs north-south on the grid, with the west tower turned 45 degrees. This twisting of the plan acknowledges the neighboring 10-story hotel, which is also off the grid. The manipulation of the second tower creates a third floor outdoor terrace, offers the best light to the towers’ inhabitants, and presents a view as unique in this town as it might have been in Paris in 1889 with the building of the Eiffel Tower. In addition, the impact of the shadow of the building is greatly diminished by the tower’s angled position and by its withdrawal from the street.

The independence of tower from block accommodates the building’s dual allegiance in other ways as in the form of exclusive dwellings and the block, which is devoted to street-related, communal functions. Economical in that it builds out the site, the block combines diverse functions in a single form. Each function is treated as a discreet and separate entity, one that generates its own volume. All volumes are then packed neatly in the block itself.

In addition, the structural layout of the complex permits its block to conform to the city grid while allowing its west tower to break the grid. The parti is one of collage, and a sort of somatic adventurousness encouraged as the visitor moves from place-volume to place-volume. That is to say, the lobby, the grocery, the gym are readily understood entities that can be comprehended from a distance, often from the street itself. Their relationship to one another, however, is one that must be discovered by the visitor moving through the block. The architect offers several paths for this discovery, most notably a vertical promenade that
includes a feature stair that defines the lobby to the three-story block. By traversing the stair—it shifts at the second level and meanders up to the third, reinforcing one's sense of finding and underscoring the importance of experiencing the building somatically—one discovers the amenities of the block's upper level: a conference center, office space, a health club.

All of this offers a less regimented, smaller-scale unit that more readily relates to the intimacy of the surrounding environment. The street serves as corridor to ground-level units—a grocery store, for instance, or a restaurant, as well as two lobbies. This use of the street reinforces the vitality. In addition, commercial/retail tenants occupying block volumes no longer need to identify themselves with either the tower or the hotel lobby, as is so often the case in Modernist versions of the parti.

The towers' exterior is comprised of large expanses of glazing which reflects the exterior and reveals the interior. Stainless steel metal panels complement the glazing. This palette is then extended to the block's street elevations with the addition of precast concrete, which provides a solidity that relates to the surrounding buildings. Stainless steel has many benefits. It is relatively inexpensive, suggests high technology in brutal yet acceptable terms, and allows for the use of off-the-shelf materials that might not otherwise be considered.
appropriate to a sophisticated aesthetic. In addition, it offers an authenticity no longer found in natural—and therefore categorically not high-tech—materials such as brick and wood. Stainless steel reflects light, creating a sense of spaciousness that undermines the reality of heavy, inert materials and reduces the apparent impact of the building’s volume. At night, stainless steel amplifies artificial light: energy becomes ambiance and the building becomes a light phenomenon analogous to a backlit computer screen.

In Plaza Towers, screens of perforated stainless steel form a veil of planes which wrap the traditionally framed tower. This layering exaggerates the sensation of light in space, reinforcing the enigmatic and intriguing, and labeling the building unmistakably twenty-first century.

More abstractly but perhaps most importantly, Plaza Towers demonstrates how a building of considerable size and height might be made to fit commodiously into a preestablished urban condition. It has much to commend by extending the scope of Iowa City to allow for large-scale development projects that have been the hallmark of urban renewal for more than half a century.

—Daniel Naegle, Ph.D., is an architect and assistant professor of architecture at Iowa State University.
Above: The Plaza Towers complex at night from College Street pedestrian mall.

Left: Translucent glass wall at Plaza Towers' second-floor conference center.