

Merging Old *and* NEW

While adapting old buildings for new uses is nothing new, one particular type of adaptive use—parabuilding—is gaining momentum worldwide.

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NEW YORK TIMES ARCHITECTURAL critic Herbert Muschamp coined the term “parabuilding” in 1999 to describe what he called an “embryonic building type” that allowed architects to build vertically in the city. Muschamp defined the term as using the Greek-derived prefix for “alongside” for an alteration to a previously existing building. He also likened the term to the concept of a parasite that feeds off a host, with the older building acting as the host and the newer addition as the parasite that interacts with it organically.

Since then, Muschamp and other architectural writers have used the term parabuilding to describe other buildings that merge old with new, often creating entirely different uses and looks for the original building. The concept is catching on with architects and developers, who increasingly are seeing the value

in renovating, remodeling, and preserving historic buildings rather than tearing them down and starting from scratch. Parabuilding gives developers an opportunity to expand on a site they already own while, at the same time, allowing them to hide unsightly structures such as parking garages. As an added bonus, the new structure often incorporates more glass than the old structure, which allows for more natural light. As additions to existing structures, parabuildings can help create a balance in terms of scale and visual impact, so that neither tends to dominate the other.

Densely populated urban areas, such as Chicago and Hamburg, Germany, can provide an ideal backdrop for parabuildings. As real estate prices soar in urban centers, it often makes sense to increase the capacity of a property by adding to an existing building, rather than replacing it. In addition, unoccu-

pied land may be scarce—or simply not available. To developers who own buildings that can be expanded, those buildings essentially are “free land.”

The concept is even more prevalent in Europe, where there are more historic buildings to act as hosts for parabuildings. These European examples often are the most striking, perhaps because the additions frequently are made to sometimes centuries-old buildings, creating a sharper contrast between old and new.

Europeans seem to have a greater appreciation of modern architecture, as well as a perspective on their own histories that sees their historic urban centers as living cities, not as museums. In addition, Europeans have more advanced building technologies, making possible more daring parabuildings. Curving, liquidlike glass walls, extreme cantilevers, and





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sophisticated space-frame structures often can be seen gracing buildings from the 18th, or even 17th, centuries.

With their distinctly unusual look, parabuildings can act as their own marketing tools, making a once-overlooked building a subject of major attention, admiration—or even controversy. One recent controversy involving a parabuilding occurred in Chicago, when a radical addition to the venerable Soldiers Field, home of the Chicago Bears, was approved and eventually built, despite loud protests from traditionalist fans of both football and architecture. The careening, cantilevered structure caps the original stadium, with its fully glazed exterior in stark contrast to the Greek Revival columns below. Fans of the new Soldiers Field say the design expresses Chicago's progressive transition to the 21st century.

New York City offers prime examples of parabuildings designed by noted architects and architectural firms, including the Porter House (SHoP Architects), the Hearst Co. Headquarters (Norman Foster), and the Penn Station renovation (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill). With this type of adaptive use, building owners can profit by expanding their available sellable or leasable floor space, while residents/tenants of landmark buildings can profit with upgrades to their homes or offices. If designed with skill, these buildings can represent cutting-edge architecture in a revived and re-created space.

The trend has also come to downtown Columbus, Ohio, where each of three parabuildings showcases a distinctive look not present before the extensive renovations. The first example—the Hartman Building—was built at the turn of the last century as a medical hotel by a wealthy local physician.

The historic street facades of the Hartman Building, built at the turn of the century as a medical hotel and now home to urban loft condos in downtown Columbus, Ohio, has a projecting six-story, steel and glass staircase that serves as the tenant entrance.

Patients in the hotel were treated with the doctor's own brand of elixir called Peruna. Today, the building is being converted to urban loft condominiums.

The historic street facades of the Hartman Building were restored while the remaining facade, once a party wall with an adjacent building, became the location of the new tenant entrance. This entrance is marked by a six-story, steel and glass staircase projecting from the broad masonry wall. Built of contemporary materials, the stair tower with its physical and stylistic relationship to its historic host, provides a strong contrast that helps



Some parabolings can create a balance between the new addition and the host building in terms of scale and visual impact so that neither dominates the other. The steel and glass addition to the 1900s Brunson Building in downtown Columbus, Ohio, reflects a contemporary version of the historic building.

create a new image for the building—and a highly visible sign of its new use.

The new stair tower stands out among the neighboring historic brick buildings, extending like a sail from the Hartman’s broad masonry exterior wall. At night, with the glass structure fully lit, its presence is even more revealing. Even at its base, the stair tower contrasts with its host; the tower’s enclosure stops short of the ground, providing a covered entrance for tenants and visitors from the adjacent parking lot.

The second example—the Brunson Building—includes a 12-story addition that contrasts strikingly with the architectural style of the original building. However, the old and the new parts are compositional equals, with the

parabuilding reinterpreting the existing historic architectural features in a modern aesthetic and with today’s materials. Stone lintels and brick banding align with adjacent two-toned glass spandrel panels, emphasizing continuous horizontal lines in both buildings.

The Brunson Building was constructed in the early 1900s in the architectural tradition of the Chicago School. Decorative brick banding, arches, and a tripartite organization—base, shaft, capitol—distinguish the building as a prime example of tall buildings of its time. But by the turn of this century, the Brunson was nearly vacant, and dated as an office building. The new owners took advantage of the current upswing in the downtown Columbus residential real estate market and began plans to convert the building to high-end residential lofts. As it became apparent that the costs of the renovation required more sellable area for the residential units, the owners purchased an adjacent surface parking lot to accommodate the expansion. The project will include 5,000 square feet of retail space on the first floor.

For reasons both aesthetic and financial, a minimalist, modernist architectural approach was pursued for the 12-story addition. The floor plan allots the addition only 900 square feet, yet this amount allowed developers room to create larger residential units, ranging in size from 1,400 to 3,400 square feet, with prices ranging from \$340,000 to more than \$1 million. The addition became a contemporary version of the historic building. The extensive use of glass contrasts with the solid masonry of the original structure, and floods the interiors with sunlight. The exterior balconies, cantilevering beyond the building’s corner like a diving board for a full 180-degree view of downtown, represent outdoor space, and, from the street, are the unmistakable clue to the building’s residential use. The interior contains a lobby with 14-foot-high ceilings, marble columns, and a marble staircase with iron handrails.

Another example of a parabuilding in downtown Columbus is the 225 N. Fourth Lofts, a four-story historic brick building, home to a printing company at the turn of the



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Parabuildings can double the size of the original building and provide equal yet contrasting structures. The four-story, modern glass and steel addition to a four-story, historic brick building, formerly home to a printing company at the turn of the last century, now houses 225 N. Fourth Lofts, a residential loft project with full-width terraces providing views of downtown Columbus, Ohio.

last century that currently is being converted to residential lofts. The project includes a four-story adjacent infill addition that is minimalist and modern, made of glass and steel, with full-width terraces that offer views of the city. The minimalist scale of the addition makes the contrast with the original structure even more apparent than it would have been had the building been taller, as the entire building reveals itself up close from the street.

Designing parabuildings has certain challenges for architects and developers: they must be careful not to underestimate—or overestimate—the structural capacity of an older building. Often buildings constructed in the early 20th century and before were structurally overbuilt in terms of their capacity to accommodate additions. Concrete warehouses from the 1920s frequently can support several additional stories, unlike their modern steel-frame counterparts.

But care must be taken to determine the quality of existing construction. Voids in concrete columns or poorly mixed concrete, cracked wood timbers, and poorly main-

tained masonry must be remedied. The risks of adding a new structure to an old building can be hidden and difficult to identify. Architects and structural engineers need to make detailed examinations; selective demolition may be required to discover deficiencies. This kind of planning can help avoid costly remedies in midconstruction, or even can determine that a project should be abandoned before it starts.

Sometimes, the remedies are quite simple. In a warehouse loft conversion and addition project in Columbus, for example, when deficient concrete was discovered, all that was required to remedy it was adding a new concrete collar around some of the columns. The addition to the Brunson Building in Columbus was a tall slender steel-frame structure, tall enough to handle movement at the top floors during strong winds. A movement joint was required between the two structures, a zipper of sorts that would allow the addition to flex slightly.

Parabuildings can transform a neighborhood. For example, the Hartman Building ren-

ovation and addition led to a number of residential, office, retail, and restaurant projects in the neighborhood, helping to rejuvenate a once-thriving business district.

While parabuildings have many supporters, they have dissenters as well. Often, historic preservationists would rather buildings remain untouched than see them transformed into something new. To the uninitiated, the parabuilding concept can seem extreme and is not easily accepted. Parabuildings are not, by nature, “tame” or conventional architecture. However, they can offer interesting and unusual ways to update and re-create aging cities, one project at a time. **U**

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