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Could Seattle's historic warehouses be key to successful office-to-housing conversions?

When Miller Hull learned about the city's recent office-to-residential design competition, which challenged building owners and architects to submit proposals exploring the conversion of existing downtown office space into new residential and commercial uses, the firm saw this as an opportunity to continue decades of work committed to exploring how good architecture and design can help the city and its inhabitants.

Miller Hull's entry, which came in joint second place, focused on the transformation of two historic warehouses from 1910, the Polson and Western buildings, which are located adjacent to one another in Pioneer Square.

Miller Hull's Seattle office is in the Polson building and the firm teamed up with Stanley Real Estate, owner of both the Polson and Western, on the proposal.

The proposal explores the transformation and conjoining of the two buildings into what the design team calls an "urban micro-neighborhood." That neighborhood would consist of three levels of workforce housing (with approximately 114 studio units), two levels of office space, and 11 units of two and three-bedroom market rate homes, geared towards families, located within a new penthouse addition added atop the historic six story structures.



To successfully achieve this, a large rectangular portion would be carved out of the former warehouses' heavy timber frames on levels three through five. This would bring lots of natural light and ventilation into the properties to serve the proposed residential units. The cutout would also create a unique shared central courtyard tenant amenity space, that would also provide internal balconies for some of the units.

The penthouse addition would replace the square footage lost from the cutout. Two lower levels of existing office space would be renovated and combined, and existing office bays on levels three through five would be flipped to a series of uniform workforce housing studios, with around 470 square feet each.

I recently spoke with the design team behind the proposal. They explained that creating this mix of uses was really important to ensure that the reimaged buildings served multiple and diverse groups.

I asked the team why they chose the Polson and Western buildings and what makes them good candidates for residential conversion.

Early twentieth century properties tend to be favorable for this kind of adaptive reuse because, being built before the age of electrification and air conditioning, they are designed in a way that lets in natural light and ventilation, with wrap-around exterior operable windows and good floor-to-ceiling heights. The Polson and Western have both those features.

To create as much natural light and ventilation as possible, many older office buildings were also designed with cutout portions on the interior, just like the one Miller Hull proposes for the rectangular former warehouses. "The Polson and Western's floor plates are essentially a cellular grid which makes this kind of conversion achievable," Cory Mattheis, senior associate at Miller Hull, explained during our conversation. That rational cellular grid also lends itself to the creation of uniform residential units in place of existing office bays. Moreover, the size of those units could

be amended and evolve over time without much intervention as housing needs/wants evolve, via the combination of two or more units.

The team explained that an additional reason for selecting these buildings was because they are representative of a typology very common in the city. “There are so many six or seven-story heavy timber warehouses like the Polson and Western in Pioneer Square and all over Seattle’s historic waterfront,” David Miller, founding partner of Miller Hull said. “When we began working on this proposal, we were looking for a building/building typology that could have a greater impact beyond just one project,” Scott Wolf, Miller Hull partner, added. “We are especially excited about the ripple effect this study could have on similar structures and subsequently its potential to effect real and significant change.”

The team also believes that these kinds of warehouse conversions can be achieved on budgets and timelines comparable to real-world adaptive reuse projects/new construction. When working on the proposal, the firm looked closely at one of its current projects, the adaptive reuse of the nearby Westland building. That warehouse, turned hotel and then turned office building, is now being converted into a boutique hotel by developer Urban Villages as part of its RailSpur micro-district. Miller Hull’s design includes a new cutout in the center of the building that will create a cavernous lobby space, not dissimilar from the internal courtyard in the office-to-residential proposal, and internal balconies for several hotel rooms. That conversion is underway and expected to be completed by next summer.

The team said the cost of converting the Polson and Western buildings is comparable to the Westland project and that it could be done in around two-and-a-half to three years. Moreover, the project is made more financially attractive due to the proposed mix of uses, with the penthouse addition and retention of office space intended to counteract the lower rental rates of the workforce housing.

Not only are these projects achievable but might they also be preferable to new construction? Miller Hull’s proposal also begged that question. There are clear sustainability benefits that come from turning to adaptive reuse to address the need for more housing, but could there also be social and communal ones?



Photo by Emma Hinchliffe [\[enlarge\]](#)

Miller Hull’s OTR proposal explored the conversion of the Polson and Western buildings into an “urban micro-neighborhood” with 114 affordable units.



Rendering courtesy of Miller Hull [\[enlarge\]](#)

The proposal would carve out a central space in the warehouses to create a unique shared central courtyard and flood the structures with natural light.

“I think the competition and the broader discussion around office-to-residential conversions gives us a unique chance to re-think the kinds of buildings we want to live in,” Margaret Sprug, principal at Miller Hull, reflected during the call and noted the health and social benefits that could come from living in smaller, better naturally ventilated buildings, with central communal spaces.

An additional element of the design competition asked teams to suggest possible code changes and/or programs that would encourage and make these kinds of projects easier to do. Miller Hull's suggestions included new financial incentive programs, streamlining the entitlement process and permit review process to encourage 'speed to market', and the removal of development impact fees and permit processing.

“Since I co-funded Miller Hull 45 years ago we've been involved with research and projects that aim to improve the city and quality of life for its inhabitants, so we were excited to be a part of this important competition,” Miller added during the call. “We're really hopeful that our proposal, and all the other great entries, can equate to real change,” Wolf concluded.



Photo via city of Seattle [\[enlarge\]](#)

Members of Miller Hull's OTR project team shared their proposal at a competition celebration event last month.

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