

REAL ESTATE WEEKLY

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2006

Never overlook the 'leftovers'

BY STEVEN KRATCHMAN, AIA, FOUNDER & CEO,
STEVEN KRATCHMAN ARCHITECT, P.C.

Typically, the most desirable and developable land parcels for new from-the-ground up building opportunities have already been taken. And the re-maining few available, attractive lots are often unaffordable.

Many real estate developers have in their portfolios "leftover" building lots that haven't been sold off or developed because the "good ones" are easy to sell. Some developers are now stuck with "the crumbs," that is, lots of land parcels that may be located in great neighborhoods, but have unusual (sometimes mixed) zoning or odd property lines or have been merged, combined or assembled over time and may have irregular shapes and boundaries, or are lots that simply seem inefficient for development.

Our firm has been able to demonstrate that, with creative architecture, you can profitably and positively overcome the challenge of irregular building lots, even those that are oddly shaped, including those that are pieced together and may straddle a boundary line,

if you take a fresh approach that includes an understanding of the relationship between zoning and property rights, and then invent creative options within those limitations.

New York's zoning resolution mandates both restrictions and requirements, but we have found a number of architectural techniques to develop interesting and creative building solutions. Here are two examples that are currently underway right now.

One example is in the heart of Park Slope in Brooklyn in part of the revised Sixth Avenue zoning there, which is similar to Manhattan zoning, with taller buildings allowed on the main streets or avenues and smaller buildings on the side streets.

A zoning boundary crosses through the middle of our client's piece of property. He had assembled three odd lots. But, the resulting, combined, buildable land parcel is divided into two zones with two different height allowances and different parking requirements. We had to determine if it was even possible to

design one, single building for this well located, but unusual piece of property. At one point we considered two and then three buildings for this site.

After considering a number of design solutions, our team determined that we could offer architectural plans for a single building with a centrally located core and then use the liability of the lower building allowance area and turn that into an advantage by using the roof level of one zone as terrace and outdoor space for the other.

We merged our client's three lots into one and our architectural solution is now under construction. It is a twelve-storey, 32-unit condominium apartment building on the combined, three-lot site on First Street near Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn. The overall structure spanning the differing zoning regulations features large, bright areas of ceiling-high windows on all exposures, plus large balconies and visually dramatic setbacks on every floor, and four rooftop terraces. We preserved an un-built yard area that legally gave us space for eleven (11) off-street parking spaces, adding a highly desirable selling point for our client. The interior layout offers a range of apartment types and sizes, with a 32-unit mix of one, two and three-bedroom apartments. Without a creative architectural design solution, those three, separate lots might still stand vacant today.

The bottom line for developers who own an unusual single lot or a merged group of irregular building parcels is to understand the specific zoning of their particular location and how those parcels are affected by all aspects of zoning allowances and restrictions.

Legal counsel is often required. However, it is vital to have an understanding of property rights and divisions, especially easements, zoning lot mergers and lot line mergers.

Finally, you need to know how to craft a site-specific architectural design for an economical building that meets basic design principles, yet does so with creativity. Unusual land parcels demand thinking that is different than usual, but with creative architectural problem-solving, a developer can profitably and positively overcome the challenge.