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Originally published December 6, 2011 at 9:00 PM | Page modified December 7, 2011 at 4:22 PM

Planned Stadium Place tower a game changer

The developers of part of CenturyLink Field's north parking lot are unveiling the first detailed designs for their project's first phase this week — including a 25-story apartment tower that promises to be one of the city's most visible and architecturally distinctive new buildings.

By Eric Pryne

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With a little imagination, you might picture a giant toddler putting this tower together with really big blocks.

The developers of part of CenturyLink Field's north parking lot are unveiling the first detailed designs for their project's first phase this week — including a 25-story apartment tower that promises to be one of the city's most visible and architecturally distinctive new buildings.

The city's Pioneer Square Preservation Board will consider the project, Stadium Place, on Wednesday. While the panel has given its blessing to the project's height, bulk, scale and uses, it still must determine whether the design is compatible with the historic neighborhood.

Stadium Place's 25-story South Tower would be divided into two- to four-story "boxes," stacked on top of one another — but not directly.

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They wouldn't line up. Some boxes would overhang or pull back from others. They would be positioned at different angles, as if a small child had done the stacking.

The glass-and-steel tower, designed by ZGF Architects, would be a prominent part of the view north from the stadium toward the downtown skyline, a panorama featured regularly during TV broadcasts of Seahawks games.

At 240 feet, the South Tower would be a little shorter than the stadium, about 500 feet away.

Kevin Daniels of Daniels Real Estate, one of the partners in Stadium Place, calls the tower "a nod to both the history and future of Pioneer Square. ... "

"This is a statement," he said.

The other partner in the project is R.D. Merrill, the venerable Seattle timber, senior-living and real-estate company. Chairman Charlie Wright's father, the late Bagley Wright, was one of five original investors in the Space Needle.

It's fitting, Wright says, that his family invest 50 years later in another building, at the other end of downtown, that also aims to be iconic, "one of the images of Seattle that you take away."

He recruited members of several other old Seattle families, including telecom tycoon John McCaw, timber executive Bill Ketcham and investor David Wyman, to invest in the project.

The South Tower is one component of the \$193 million first phase of the ambitious Stadium Place development, which broke ground this week after a delay of several months to clear up the construction lender's title concerns.

Also under way: a 10-story West Tower of loft-style apartments at Occidental Avenue South and South King Street.

Both towers would share a base, or podium, with more apartments, space for shops and restaurants, and a parking garage.

Altogether, the first phase would have 514 apartments. Planned later: a 20-story condo tower, 20-story office building and 25-story hotel.

The preservation board will judge the project using guidelines it adopted in 2007 to ensure North Lot development "is visually compatible with, and does not detract from or overwhelm, the character" of the historic district, Seattle's birthplace.

Daniels, a trustee of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, maintains the South Tower's unconventional design complements what's already in Pioneer Square.

The much-loved Smith Tower, five blocks to the north, didn't look like anything else in the neighborhood when it was built nearly a century ago, he contends.

The stacked, offset boxes into which the South Tower is divided fit in better with the scale and architecture of Pioneer Square's two- to eight-story buildings than a more monolithic structure would, Daniels says.

And the South Tower would be built on the side of the property farthest from the historic buildings — and closest to 10-year-old CenturyLink Field.

The design of the shorter West Tower, closer to Pioneer Square's old buildings, resembles them more, says John Chau, one of Stadium Place's architects.

Pioneer Square's advocates long have maintained the neighborhood needs middle-income housing to thrive. Stadium Place would provide the first big slug of new residents.

King County and Seattle officials first began talking about redeveloping the county-owned North Lot property more than a decade ago. The city rezoned the 4-acre site to allow taller buildings, and the Daniels-Merrill partnership took title to it in September after reaching agreement with stadium officials about replacement parking.

The South Tower's 333 apartments will be aimed at young adults. Daniels and Merrill hope the design will appeal to them, along with the location near downtown jobs and transit — light rail, commuter rail, buses, a proposed streetcar.

While the 25-story tower would be part of the view north from CenturyLink, covenants should protect key views from the stadium of the Space Needle and historic King Street Station's clock tower.

People who live in the South Tower will have views, too. They will be able to watch football games from the upper floors on the south side, Daniels says — but only the action on the west side of the north-south field.

The stadium's "Hawks Nest" tower blocks the rest of the view.

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