Technology, community coexist at Kendall

ARCHITECTURE
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Technological innovation created a Kendall Square of workshops, transformed it into a district of red-brick mills and is now rebuilding it as an area of towering laboratories and offices.

Progress, though, is taking its toll, filling a finely scaled Cambridge neighborhood with a could-be-anywhere collection of faceless corporate behemoths.

Lyme Properties' new development, now being built between Second and Third streets, suggests there is an alternative: a big research complex designed to rebuild a sense of community. But as Lyme's managing partner, David Clem, will tell you, it doesn't happen by accident.

A former Cambridge city councilor well-versed in the politics of development, Clem worked closely with Cambridge officials and Urban Strategies Inc. of Toronto to turn a vast sea of parking lots into a contemporary multi-use neighborhood.

The thoughtful master plan integrates new streets, biotechnology research facilities, open space, housing, retail and cultural facilities into the traditional city fabric, while keeping all the parking below ground.

Architects for the buildings were selected through a design competition that sought innovation rather than tired old formulas. Los Angeles architect Steven Ehrlich's Kendall Square Biotechnology Laboratory and Behnisch and Partners' Genzyme headquarters are now complete. Together they set a new standard for what we should expect from urban architecture.

Ehrlich's building on Third Street uses interlocking planes of terra cotta tile, textured glass panels and silvery metallic cladding to form an almost perfectly composed building. Projecting and recessed balconies weave in and out to give it a sense of accessibility, while slender black utility towers become monuments in the landscape.

A floating roof supported on two eccentrically placed struts hovers over the corner like an acrobat frozen in flight. Even the penthouse filled with equipment is integrated into the composition.

Breaking the big blocky building into precisely crafted pieces creates a lively pedestrian environment that engages the street, nearby structures and the public plaza being built behind it. The carefully studied proportions, the voluptuous materials and the elegant details give the architecture a feeling of real integrity compared to so much of what has been built nearby.

The interior is focused on a dramatic skylit courtyard surrounded by flying staircases and death-defying walkways. Delicate screens of woven wire and wood lattice seem to dance through the space, defining areas of peace and tranquility. Warm natural materials and cool machinelike components, cozy corner overlooks and monumentally scaled volumes create thought-provoking contrasts intended to draw researchers together.

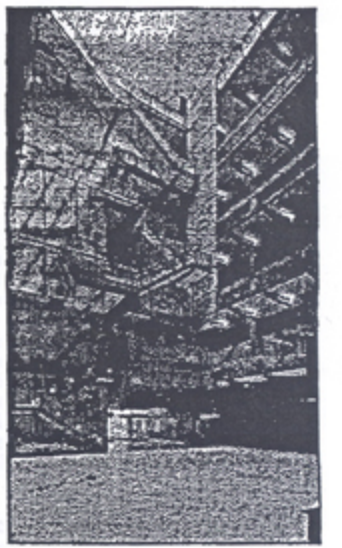
The Genzyme headquarters, built diagonally across the plaza, expresses similar ideas in a very different way. Behnisch, like Ehrlich, has designed an abstract composition of interlocked blocks, but then built it almost entirely of glass. The building looks like a piece of urban-scaled laboratory apparatus with bright green panels giving it a high-style appeal and balconies and bays humanizing its facades.

A cascading interior atrium is capped with glazing that fills the entire 12-story building with light. At every level, platforms, bridges and stairways animate the space with the drama of people in motion. Walking in the door is like discovering some fantastic cliff-side village, built from glistening metal and shimmering glass, surrounded by fountains and gardens.

The Genzyme building is engineered to be energy efficient, reflecting sunlight deep into the building and using natural ventilation to keep it cool. These "green" strategies have an experiential component as well. They open the building up, filling it with views of the sky and the urban landscape being built around it.

All of which suggests that good design and good business can go hand in hand. Lyme's new development is intended to attract the best companies and the most creative employees. The atriums, cafes and the plaza will get researchers out of their cubicles. A performance space, scheduled for completion in 2006, will invite the community in. Soon-to-be-constructed apartments will allow a walk to work rather than a battle with freeway traffic.

Neighborhoods aren't formed by brick and clapboard but by welcoming spaces in which to live, work, eat and play. Clem and his colleagues are off to a good start in creating a neighborhood for the 21st century.



A FOR ATRIUM: The Kendall Square Biotechnology Lab's stairs, lounges and walkways overlook a skylit atrium.