

Appraisal Research Counselors

400 E Randolph Street, Suite 715
Chicago, Illinois 60601-7388

T: 312-565-0977
F: 312-565-3436

[Click here to view AppraisalResearch.com](http://AppraisalResearch.com)



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Related Midwest recruits Robert Stern to design next tower

By Alby Gallun



Robert A.M. Stern

Related Midwest LLC has looked beyond Chicago for the designer of its next downtown development, picking renowned New York architect Robert A.M. Stern to draw up plans for a residential tower in Streeterville, his largest commission here by far.

Chicago-based Related Midwest is getting ready to submit plans with the city for a Stern-designed high-rise at the southwest corner of Peshtigo Court and Grand Avenue, according to people familiar with the project. It's unclear what the developer plans to build on the site — which sits just west of a new Related Midwest apartment building — but it has considered a tower that would include both apartments and condominiums, according to the people.

Mr. Stern, 74, who founded Robert A.M. Stern Architects LLP in 1969, is one of the most prominent U.S. post-war architects, a postmodernist pioneer who is known for looking to the past for inspiration. He has served as the dean of the Yale School of Architecture since 1998, written several books on architecture and designed everything from high-end homes to Walt Disney World hotels.

In Chicago, Mr. Stern's firm has designed the ubiquitous J.C. Decaux bus shelters around the city and a store for Banana Republic on Michigan Avenue that was torn down in the 1990s. His local commissions also include a 17,000-square-foot mansion on the Winnetka lakefront for former Goldman Sachs investment banker Byron Trott.

Though Mr. Stern's firm has never designed a high-rise built in Chicago, it has completed multiple buildings for New York-based Related Cos., which controls Related Midwest. A spokesman for Related Midwest declined to comment, and a spokesman for Mr. Stern's firm did not provide a comment late yesterday.

BUSY DEVELOPER

Related Midwest has been one of the busiest residential developers in Chicago the past few years, taking over a trio of [failed South Loop condominium projects](#) and building two apartment towers, including a 500-unit building at [500 N. Lake Shore Drive](#), just east of the site of its new tower. The developer [acquired the property last summer](#) from a lender that had seized it through foreclosure from Chicago developer Dan McLean.

The question is whether apartments, condos or both make the most sense for the Streeterville site. Though apartments have been the residential unit of choice the last few years, the condo market [is coming back](#) after a long slump. Two developers already are moving forward with downtown condo towers — CMK Cos. is building 144 units [at 1345 S. Wabash Ave.](#) and DRW Holdings LLC is marketing a 40-unit, 25-story building at [1149-1167 N. State St.](#) — and more are expected in the next couple years as the market strengthens.

Meanwhile, the outlook for apartments is [getting cloudier](#) amid a major construction boom that is fueling concerns about a potential glut.

KEEPING OPTIONS OPEN

With the market shifting, more developers are keeping their options open by considering both rentals and condos for their downtown sites, said Gail Lissner, vice-president at Appraisal Research Counselors, a Chicago-based consulting firm.

"Where the market is today, developers need to look at both scenarios because we're certainly seeing great improvement in the condo market," she said. The Related Midwest site "is a great candidate for condo. Naturally, it's a strong rental location, too."

The size of the project is another unknown. The Streeterville property is zoned for a 280-foot building with 232 residential units, but Related Midwest wants the city to change the zoning so it can build a bigger tower.

Before losing the project to foreclosure, Mr. McLean talked about seeking the city's blessing for a roughly 47-story high-rise, which would have matched another McLean condo building across a park to the west, said Gail Spreen, a real estate agent and president of the Streeterville Organization of Active Residents, an influential neighborhood group. Ms. Spreen said she probably wouldn't object if Related Midwest pushed for a taller tower, too.

"We would prefer to have something tall and skinny vs. something girthy and low," she said. "We want light to come around it, we want great design, we want a great pedestrian experience and have it flow into the park."