

# City of Durham: bring your ideas

## Modernist panache and highest use desired for downtown parcel

Article by Sally Keeney // Photos contributed



What happens to the modernist structure built in 1958 in downtown Durham is up in the air as Durham's City Council weighs its options.

While Frank Sinatra's *Witchcraft* was climbing the charts in 1958, architect G. Milton Small Jr. was undoubtedly keeping a watchful eye as builders applied clear glazing to the glass window walls of the sleek, five-story modernist Small designed for 505 West Chapel Hill Street in downtown Durham.

The modern office building with high ceilings, terrazzo flooring and rich mahogany interiors, originally designed for Home Security Life (HSL) Insurance Company ([ncmodernist.org/hsl.htm](http://ncmodernist.org/hsl.htm)), has been used as administrative offices for the Durham Police Department since the mid-90s.

But with completion of new police quarters in East Durham slated for mid-2018, Small's building and the four-acre parcel upon which it sets are freed for redesign. Its location within a six-minute walk to Durham's Train Station and 12- to 15-minutes to the American Tobacco campus and Durham Performing Arts Center make it a great place for mixed-use redevelopment.

Perkins + Will architectural firm had a nationwide contest with the winning design including the historic HSL building. Durham-based Duda Paine Architects, who was hired by the city along with HR&A Advisors to come up with options for the 4-acre parcel, also has 2 of its four designs including the historic HSL building. HR&A Advisors has "provided strategic advisory services for some of the most complex mixed-use, neighborhood, downtown, campus, and regional development projects across North America and abroad for forty years."

Hundreds of citizens have visited the Durham government website to look at four designs by Duda Paine Architects that city officials hope will foster discussion about the parcel; taken a survey about what should

happen on the parcel; and signed up for online building updates — all of this in preparation for the next public forum — Thursday, November 9, in the City Council Chambers. The boxed inset with this story directs readers to URLs to voice opinions online.

Three groups — Preservation Durham, the Durham City-County Appearance Commission and NC Modernist Houses — have made known their desire for the parcel's redesign to include keeping Small's 1958 modernist in the plan.

In its September 20 letter to Durham's City Council, the Appearance Commission recommends "preservation and restoration of the existing building on the site ... and to better integrate the building into the fabric of the larger development of the (4-acre) site ...an addition to the building or an active open space plaza should be developed between the building and Chapel Hill and Duke streets."

To better ensure a development that meets public goals (such as open space, recreation, set-back and height considerations) and public benefit (such as affordable housing with adjacent mixed-use retail) the Appearance Commission recommends the property be sold to a private or non-profit sector developer and that the city be open to options that may divide the property into multiple developers, including the city, itself, so as to encourage diversity in use and architectural design and encourage preservation of the 1958 HSL building.

George Smart, executive director for NC Modernist Houses, says estimates to repurpose the HSL building into mixed-use retail/office space and boutique apartments are \$3to-\$4 million, while tearing down and rebuilding a structure with similar square footage has estimates running at \$35-to-\$40 million.

Designing a general office building with reasonably-sized rooms and offices lends itself to later conversion to condominiums or boutique apartments. Fortunately, other than the 911 call center floor, the HSL building interior remains largely intact and was used by Durham's police for administrative offices, as it was used by HSL when built in 1958, Smart says.

"I admire this building because it represents Milton Small's experience learning from the great master Mies van der Rohe in Chicago," Smart says. "The exterior is glass, which is not that unusual, but as you can see from the photos it has a very metropolitan feel. It is one of Small's best works and is deserving of preservation and a new life where it stands."

See a 1954 Milton Small home design in Chapel Hill among many others at [ncmodernist.org/small.htm](http://ncmodernist.org/small.htm).