

Louisville Arena Urban Design Workshop
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Alex Krieger, FAIA

**“Turning Large Spaces in Great Places”
Characteristics and Challenges of Urban Arenas**

**By
Alex Krieger FAIA
Professor of Urban Design
Graduate School of Design
Harvard University**

(The following is a summary of the presentation made by Mr. Krieger on November 16th at the Louisville Arena Urban Design Forum presented by the Downtown Development Corporation on behalf of the Louisville Arena Authority. Mr. Krieger served as the moderator of the Forum. Public input on the urban design issues associated with the proposed Louisville Arena can be made at www.arenalouisville.com)

For a period of time, before and after an event, sports arenas – and other large, urban places of gathering – energize their host surroundings. The areas around them come alive. One need not be a sports fan to feel a measure of excitement as crowds fill the streets and sidewalks while approaching or leaving an arena. Such moments highlight the uniqueness of urban experience: a sense of bustle, of interaction, of curiosity, of anticipation, of the energy accompanying being part of a crowd. The appeal of such experience is partially why venues like arenas and ballparks are returning to the hearts of American cities, having migrated to the suburbs a generation-or-two earlier. Out there the energy of assembly dissipated quickly, as if nothing at all special had happened, except for temporary traffic bottlenecks along the arterials leading to and from the ample parking lots. Back at the city centers, too, there was a sense of opportunity lost. The gathering of people around civic or celebratory occasions is, after all, a phenomenon that belongs to city life.

Of course after the crowds dissipate, or on days when there are no activities programmed, a large empty arena can also make its surroundings feel emptier. So the key in locating an arena in Downtown Louisville – right on Main Street – is to seize upon its advantages as a magnet of people, while minimizing the emptiness caused by its closed doors. Barry Alberts, Executive Director of the Downtown Development Corporation, identifies three major design challenges for the Louisville arena: 1) Having it maintain a modicum of use and activity around it regardless of whether an event is scheduled. 2) Having it engage rather than stay aloof from its surroundings. 3) Having the structure and space around it represent something unique about its host city. These are worthy goals, difficult but achievable if insisted upon by the community. They also represent the objectives and benefits of an urban design approach to the design of the Arena.

Arenas are by their nature inward-focused places. Court dimensions, seating arrangement, sight lines, queuing space for arrival and exit, sound systems, concessions areas, and an increasingly broader range of amenities to enhance the fan experience rightly take priority in arena design. From the narrowest operational standpoint the outside must merely keep the weather out. But while catering first to those inside, 22,000 people at a time, the impression and the impact that its outside makes affects many more people, indeed, all Louisvillians. Occupying an entire block-or-more of a downtown of a major city requires an arena to undergo a certain metamorphosis. The arena 'chrysalis' must acquire a few butterfly characteristics. The experience of the Arena outside must be comparable to the energy and convenience that spectators find inside.

First, because it is large and visible, both from immediate surroundings and from great distances, its overall presence on the city skyline is a crucial design matter. A big, largely blank box with a sign on top is unacceptable, though sadly not uncommon. The shape of the overall volume, the profile and expression of its long span roof structure, the nature and texture of the tall enclosing walls, the opportunistic placement of windows to help connect inside to outside, must all gather to achieve architectural distinction for what is fundamentally a civic monument, a very large one at that. Stretching the point slightly, one should care no less today for an arena's character than how we used to care for the quality of our courthouses, town halls and post offices. For contemporary culture, arenas are of no less significance and are more prominent.

While presence and distinction (dare one ask for beauty) from a distance is important, engagement at its base with the street fabric of its surroundings is even more crucial. The site is well chosen, spanning from West Main Street to the riverfront, between Second and Third Streets, and nearby to the blossoming Fourth Street corridor. The fact that the front doors will face Main Street is terrific, so long as the plaza between these doors and Main Street is well scaled for both Arena crowds and the everyday bustle of Main Street, and so long as along the plaza perimeter activities and uses that remain open on non-game days are accommodated. This requires careful management and programming, too. The other three facades of the arena, lacking doors and needing to be part of the perimeter flood protection, require different forms of design ingenuity. The facades along Second and Third Streets and River Road, of necessity largely blank, must nonetheless be attractive for passersby. There are good historic precedents of major public buildings whose ground floors are not lined with shops. In these instances the texture, detailing and material palette of the walls still speak of quality and offer some visual delight. They do not look 'cheap' and neither must those of the Arena.

Downtown Louisville has risen brilliantly to similar challenges at least twice recently, and the Arena should do so no less well. Surely there were skeptics about how appealing a baseball bat plant – even one churning out *Louisville Sluggers* – would be on Main Street. A factory next to that marvelous, delicate row of historic commercial architecture? Surely not! Yet how engaging an institution it has become: scaled properly to its surroundings; of materials sympathetic to its neighbors; offering wonderful street level glimpses into its purpose; presenting a larger than life work of public art;

accommodating a nearly irresistible destination in its gift shop and museum. In short, it is a unique institution that is *in, for and about* Louisville, as should the arena be.

More recently still, you have built a marvelous baseball park. Slugger Field is, like the Louisville Slugger Plant, a great contributor to downtown life. Its modest scale and open design; its reuse of the historic and beautiful train shed structure, its visual orientation towards Riverfront Park; the eateries, bars and clubs that have opened nearby, all contribute to the ballpark's engagement with its surroundings. This too, is not always the case with such places.

So Main Street has these two wonderful anchors, about two-thirds of a mile apart, and now awaits a third, almost equally spaced between them. This is significant. Major urban avenues such as East and West Main Street represent a sort of 'x-ray' through a downtown. The ease with which one can move along them, the diversity of uses to be found along their length, the continuity and character of the built fabric lining them, the quality of the streetscape and the frequency of attractive, welcoming doors, the absence of gaps, empty storefronts or blank walls along the path, all reveal much about the health of the place. To identify shortcomings and then improve the nature of such corridors is to figuratively restore and sustain urban health. This must be one of the obligations of the arena. If it facilitates the engagement of more people with the broader amenities and services of the downtown, if it sponsors activities along its perimeter and nearby, if it is as attractive and well designed as Slugger Field and the Louisville Slugger Museum, if it somehow reinforces the proximity of the river to Main Street, then it shall be a worthy and cherished contributor to downtown Louisville.