

Louisville Arena Urban Design Forum

“Turning Large Spaces into Great Places”

November 16, 2006

Introductory Comments

By

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We are about to embark on a truly significant project for our community, one that has been a long time in the making ...the construction of a new multi-purpose arena in downtown Louisville.

While we have come through an active and lively debate about different locations, the good news is that the community overwhelmingly supported a location downtown; with the consensus that a downtown location could help make this arena a great facility – great for the University of Louisville, its prime tenant, and its fans; great for the redevelopment of downtown Louisville and Metro Louisville; and great for the Commonwealth of Kentucky. We can now celebrate that the arena WILL be built, WILL be fully funded, WILL be downtown, and WILL be second to none as a place to attend games and events.

Over the past decade or so we have seen many examples of a new downtown multi-purpose arena becoming a focal point of activity, of vitality, a symbol for the community, and a place where people congregate to be entertained, to be engaged, and to come together. Actually, many of these facilities are called centers rather than merely arenas. A center connotes a hub, a place to come together, a place where activity and energy radiate out from and draw in to. While we have learned that downtown arenas do not by themselves result in massive changes, they *can* play key roles in larger overall master development plans that aggregately and over time can have dramatic results.

But arenas or centers with these positive impacts do not happen by accident, nor do they happen without a lot of attention paid to detail – upfront in the design process. Sports architecture has taken great leaps forward in a relatively short period of time. Compare some of the examples in the 70s and 80s– facilities that are literally being blown up now - often replaced with the kind of buildings that will be discussed this evening. What are the community’s goals for these facilities, and why are they now overwhelmingly being constructed downtown? The goals are often to have these large facilities be active regardless of whether there is an event occurring, of having them engage the fabric of their urban surroundings, of having their design represent something about the character and ethos of each community in which they are built. Arena projects where these goals

are taken seriously by their designers are being seen with increasingly frequency, But with all due respect to architects – even sports architects, some of the best in the country who are in the audience this evening – these details are far too important to simply be left solely in their hands. It must be clear from the outset that these issues, these goals, are important to their client, and ultimately important to the community. We are here tonight – and tomorrow- and the next few weeks – to help provide that client – The Louisville Arena Authority – and the design team that will shortly be selected, with some guidance and input as to what is important to the Louisville community, why it is important, and what particular elements of the design of the arena will most likely resonate with its residents.

Let me therefore take a few minutes to discuss what we will *not* be doing. First, we will not be revisiting the issue surrounding the arena location. As I said earlier, we should be celebrating the fact that a state-of-the-art multi-purpose facility is being built in the heart of our central business district. We all know what the opportunities can be with a downtown arena; the challenge now is to ensure that the building takes advantages of these tremendous opportunities, and our goal is to help suggest ways to *best* take advantage. If we do not, if attention is not paid to the elements of urban design that help make this a building that engages the surrounding pulse of downtown, if this becomes a building that people must merely get past when it is not being used, then we will have squandered the advantages of its downtown location. If people attending events in the arena simply drive to the nearest garage, go directly to the event, get back in their cars and leave, then it really doesn't need to be downtown. If the activity that is being generated along West Main Street, down Fourth Street, into the East Main and Market area – each just a couple of blocks from the arena entrance – doesn't increase from the arena, then it could be built anywhere. And this is true regardless of the site that was chosen. No site –no matter how many built-in advantages it may have – can guarantee success in this regard. How it can best relate to its downtown neighborhood must be carefully thought through and carefully analyzed; the experience that takes place outside its walls must be given as much emphasis and priority as the experience taking place inside the building.

So we take the site and its various characteristics – both its assets and deficits, be it the river, the floodplain, the highway, Main Street, as a given, and work with that as our palette. Our goal is to fully take advantage of the arena's location, the people and activity that it brings, and likewise make sure that the arena takes advantage of the activity level that already exists – and is growing every day – downtown.

The second caveat is that we are not here to design the arena...Many of the most recently constructed arenas are remarkably well designed to provide a fan-friendly, comfortable and exciting experience for those who attend their events. These have become more than just sports venues; they are truly exceptional entertainment spaces. The Arena Authority will no doubt select a design team that has the skills and expertise to equal and surpass these examples, and who hopefully will also exhibit the sensitivity to understand how to make this great building, this large space, into - and as the title of this discussion indicates - a truly Great Place. And frankly, at this stage no one SHOULD be designing

the arena. We need at this point to focus attention on the input that the designers need before they begin their design; to help them understand what is special about this community, what symbols of Louisville make us the proudest, what emotions we want the arena to evoke not only when we attend an event inside, but when we see it, when we walk by it. It is going to be a very big part of downtown for a long while, not just as we drive over the bridge or see it from the highway or from the blimp on game day, but when 60,000 people experience it as part of the urban fabric of downtown on a daily basis, at street level, on the sidewalk.. It needs to become a part of that fabric, not stand apart from it.

Finally, we need to help the design team understand how people use – and experience - downtown Louisville: what our walking patterns are, how the atmosphere of East Main and Market is different from West Main; how people use the Waterfront Park and the Wharf., what makes Fourth Street Live a special space; our connection to the River. We need to discuss those elements of downtown that the arena can impact, and what must be considered as the designers assess how that impact can be most beneficial. For every arena that engages the community successfully, there are other examples of projects where simple things such as the location of the loading dock, or the difference in elevation between the street and the front door, made this engagement more difficult or even impossible.

So our goal is very simple: how do we help ensure that the experience that takes place outside the arena is every bit as exciting, enervating and engaging as takes place inside the arena. The goal is simple, but the work is difficult. It may initially seem more like an art than a science. You can't really quantify the things, can you? How do you measure a street's vitality, its excitement, its energy.

Well, to some extent the elements of the exterior design are not all that different than the way the interior design process takes place, if you look closely. They both have quantity and quality issues. We can think of arenas of stadiums or ballparks with similar number of seats, the same number of concession stands, the same concourse width. Yet one may be a terrific place to attend a game and the other may be a dreary experience. Again, it's all in the details, it's all in someone's understanding that the experience begins from the time one gets into their car and ends when they get home. It's not just about having a good seat. We shouldn't worry much about this at all when it comes to the fan experience inside. Anyone who has spent 5 minutes listening to Jim Host talk about the experience he envisions in this arena knows what I am talking about. The external design is pretty much the same. There are indeed just as many quantifiable rules that must be followed: how much glass on a façade, how many curb cuts, how wide a street, how large an entrance plaza. But the overall experience that results is more than just following these rules; it also depends on an understanding of the interaction of all these elements, of how urban places actually work, about what kind of attitude these design features collectively possess. Buildings do indeed have attitudes, sometimes these are conscious, often they are unintended. Good buildings are good because someone was paying attention to how all of these elements interact.