



Urban Icons Create Civic Identity and Promote Growth

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Cities across the country are investing in signature buildings or “urban icons” that are redefining downtown America in the early twenty-first century. While the central areas of most cities developed in the nineteenth century as hubs for commerce and industry, many of their prior uses are yielding to a host of new functions, such as cultural facilities, research centers, and tourist venues. To highlight these new uses, new iconic elements are being created as symbols to attract interest.

Among the usual clusters of office buildings, city agencies are subsidizing new types of public amenities, often in collaboration with private developers. Other cities are constructing larger community facilities in order to maximize their existing appeal. In Sun Valley, for instance, the owners of the Sun Valley resort are building a new symphony space that coincides with the city’s 10-year plan for development. Mayor [Jon] Thorson describes the future venue as “an art form which expresses that Sun Valley is a resort for active outdoor people, but we have a cultural underpinning for anyone who works and lives there.”

These ambitious projects fall under the purview of public officials who realize the value of shoring up core areas as a way to address economic and demographic change. Above and beyond civic buildings, such as schools, libraries, and courthouses, recent signature projects are allowing public authorities to reinvent their cities through public structures, or “urban icons,” that reflect the flavor and functions of their unique locales. The recent appearance of these skillfully designed, prominent buildings is one of the most obvious measures of such growth.

Within their immediate context, urban icons can help to stimulate activity by attracting a wide range of users to a certain place. How can they additionally help public and private investors to meet far-reaching goals that exceed their perceived value, or bring greater return on investment?

More than just practical responses to a specific program, urban icons are a type of branding on a metropolitan scale. Faced with the fact of local and even international competition for people and resources, cities are beginning to emphasize – and profit from -- their differences. In contrast to the homogenization of American suburbs and the proliferation of strip malls, urban icons are distinct stand alone entities. As gathering places, they bring people in contact (attract individual interaction) and build momentum to attract new streams of revenue.

The symbolic function of urban icons is essential, to the degree that their visual significance often meets or exceeds their practical use. As art forms in their own right, urban icons can elevate or inspire: think of the Sydney Opera House or the St. Louis Arch and how these icons have changed our understanding of those cities. Aside from individual buildings, a singular element, such as a tower or entrance, may be iconic in its own right. Smaller, repetitious structures such as street furniture can also function in the same way. The Paris *metro* stations, London’s red telephone booths, and San Francisco’s cable cars come to mind.

Whereas the concept of iconic buildings is not new, the complexity of our contemporary urban environments requires that objects be larger and grander than they have in the past. Cities are deliberately planning and building new types of status-building symbols to fortify their local, regional, and national standing. Tensile structures serve this purpose quite well, as they produce inherently unique forms which are directly related to indigenous conditions like climate, as well as practical considerations such as program and placement.

Cities are finding creative ways to transform even the most utilitarian structures into urban icons, even with limited public funds. Recently, the office of Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick earmarked the new Detroit Transit Center as a building of landmark status. Located along one of the busiest streets in downtown Detroit, the hub for multiple bus routes includes a bus bay, covered seating, and a pedestrian plaza.

The Transit Center dovetails with the city's recent redevelopment efforts to revitalize inner city neighborhoods by creating a noteworthy destination in an area filled with abandoned buildings and parking lots. Parsons Brinckerhoff designed a transit center with a lightweight façade of terra cotta, aluminum, and glass that is complemented by an outdoor shelter composed of Teflon-coated glass fiber canopies.

The synergy of canopy and building produces an image that "goes beyond its practical function," according to John Roberts, the architect at Parsons Brinckerhoff, because the canopies' "scaled modeling beautifully displays the design intent." The A-frame structure by FTL Design Engineering Studio supports seven bays suspended from steel trusses that define ground-level precincts which protect waiting passengers from the sun and rain. From afar, the canopies invent a fanciful, symbolic skyscape which represents the positive civic improvements that are happening in Detroit.

Civic goals, motivated by public agencies, can also coincide with the objectives of developers and private clients who realize the financial benefits of investing in quality design. [In its competition brief] for the Scottsdale Center for New Technology and Innovation at Arizona State University, the city mandated an overall, progressive image for the 47-acre project that would symbolize its use and reinvigorate an underutilized urban site.

In Higgins Development's winning scheme, a taut fabric structure called "SkySong" floats gently across the academic precinct which was designed by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners in association with DMJM Design. The whimsical form is composed of soaring arcs that enfold the main pedestrian and vehicular corridor, providing shade for retail shops that line the buildings' base.

Aside from its practical function, SkySong creates a lasting impression that ultimately set the project apart. More than simply fulfilling the project's academic program, Sky Song creates the kind of forward-looking expression that the city was looking to achieve. Although adding [somewhat to the Center's cost], the investment on the 10-year project is long-term. By creating a unique environment for research, SkySong serves as a promotional tool for the University to attract future funding for its programs.

Urban icons can also expand a city's visibility by providing greater opportunities for existing community assets. Many cities are keen to develop new amenities that will attract both tourists and residents. Often funded through a combination of public and private sources, such facilities can serve as catalysts for lasting change.

[Carol and Earl Holding, owners of the Sun Valley Company,] were eager to build a permanent symphony hall and launched the project at a time when the city was developing its community comprehensive plan. Although drawing an international audience during its summer season, the world-class symphony was frequently performing to overflowing crowds. Mayor Thorson was also eager expand Sun Valley's year-round cultural offerings. The permanent venue dramatically expands the city's capability to host community programs before and after the symphony's short, one-month season.

The impact of urban icons is most successful, as in the case of the [Sun Valley Symphony Pavilion], when they respond directly to their siting, locale, and use. The signature building reflects Sun Valley's cultural heritage and indigenous architecture. It features a curvaceous, timber-clad structure that supports a stage and amphitheater seating under a sweeping fabric tent. Although the amphitheater will be sealed from the elements during the winter, the timber structure will have a visual presence that remains year-round.

Likewise, the new Charlottesville Music Pavilion will be used a seasonal basis, but the city was convinced of the greater value that a permanent cultural icon, rather than a temporary structure, could bring to the city and region. Entrepreneur Coran Capshaw provided financial support for the much-needed venue which opened in July of this year. Although privately funded, the development of this new urban magnet corresponded with a citywide effort to redevelop the eastern end of its Downtown Mall. The new amphitheater was strategically placed in a small park that terminates the city's central business district. It is serving as the centerpiece of other civic improvements, including a new bus station and a community monument to free speech.

The music pavilion is a simple, elegant solution that shows how visibility can be as powerful as size, and a strong urban presence can be as important as the immediate impact that a structure has on a site. The structure consists of a delicate, triangular steel arch that supports a fabric tent. During the performance season, the structure accommodates 2,800 covered seats, and a range of activities, from concerts to outdoor festivals. The arch is slightly canted away from the Main Street axis so that, even when the tent is dismantled during the winter, the arch appears to change as visitors move towards it, creating a dynamic image for downtown Charlottesville.

Urban icons can also assist in the ambitious reinvention of civic space that boosts local identity. Several years ago, the City of Mesa, Arizona, initiated a new arts district as a way to distinguish the city among 27 municipalities in the growing metropolitan region known as the "Valley of the Sun." Although it will officially open this month, already the Center has already started to create a buzz. Gerry Fathauer, Executive Director of the Mesa Arts and Entertainment Center, explains that "the civic pride that has grown out of this project is palpable."

The 7-acre site includes [four] theaters, extensive performance venues, classrooms, and art galleries that are clustered around a central outdoor plaza or "Shadow Walk," so-called because it reflects the dramatic contrast of shade and light caused by the sun. During the design development stage of the project, BOORA Architects sought to add a signature element to the project. Principal Michael Tingley believed that a tensile structure would imbue the complex with a "celebratory quality that was consistent with the idea of an arts center" and help to recast Mesa as a unique cultural place.

FTL captured the natural quality of the environment by creating ribbons of fabric that hover above the Shadow Walk and provide shading on the glazed surfaces of the cultural buildings. Suggesting passing clouds or flying carpets, the overlapping sail elements provide a distinctive iconic image that unifies the arts precinct. Although the fabric structures were almost cut from the budget, the client eventually found other ways to reduce project costs. Now that the Center is complete, Fathauer is convinced that urban icons are what "make the project soar."

Almost any public building will inherently fulfill a civic function, but not every building is an urban icon. Urban icons are distinguished by their prominence, the quality of their visual expression, and their appropriateness within a certain place. Most cities may not have the resources to initiate large and costly projects, but even modest structures or semi-permanent facilities can help public and private investors to meet civic goals. Although the Detroit Transit Center and the Sun Valley Symphony Hall serve quite different purposes, for instance, both are urban icons because they create unique identities that uplift their respective urban

environments. Urban icons such as these have the power to sustain their local communities in a way that is much greater than the sum of their parts.

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