Urban Icons Create Civic Identity and Promote Growth

Cities across the country are investing in signature structures or urban icons that are redefining downtown America. Although the central areas of most cities emerged in the 19th century as hubs for commerce and industry, many of their previous uses are yielding to new ones involving cultural facilities, research centers, and tourist venues. To highlight these emerging uses, cities are building symbolic, iconic elements in central locations.

The symbolic function of urban icons is essential, even to the degree that their visual significance often exceeds their practical use. As art forms in their own right, urban icons can elevate or inspire: for instance, the way the Sydney Opera House or the St. Louis Gateway Arch identifies each city. Aside from individual buildings, a singular element such as a tower or an entrance may be iconic in its own right. Smaller, repetitive structures such as street furniture can also function in this way: examples are Paris's Metro stations, London's red telephone booths, and San Francisco's cable cars.

More than just practical responses to a specific program, urban icons constitute branding on a metropolitan scale. Faced with local and even international competition for people and resources, cities are emphasizing—and profiting from—their differences. In contrast with the homogenization of American suburbs and the proliferation of strip malls, urban icons are distinct, stand-alone entities. As gathering places, they bring people into contact with one another, encourage social interaction, and build momentum to attract new streams of revenue.

While the concept of iconic structures is not new, the complexity of contemporary urban environments requires that objects be larger and grander than they have been in the past in order to stand out. Cities are deliberately planning and building new types of identity-building symbols to fortify their local, regional, and national standing. Tensile structures, which rely on the tension of a membrane system, typically held in place by cables, to provide structural support, serve this purpose well. They have a small mass relative to their span, allowing the production of inherently creative forms that directly relate to indigenous conditions like climate, as well as address practical considerations such as program and placement.

Cities are finding creative ways to transform even the most utilitarian structures into urban icons—and with limited public funds. Recently, the office of Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick earmarked the new Detroit Transit Center, the hub for multiple bus routes, as a building of landmark status. Located along one of the busiest streets in downtown Detroit, the facility when completed at the end of 2006 will include a bus bay, covered seating, and a pedestrian plaza.

By creating a noteworthy destination in an area filled with abandoned buildings and parking lots, the transit center plans dovetail with the city's recent efforts to revitalize inner-city neighborhoods. The transit center will have a lightweight facade of terra-cotta, aluminum, and glass, complemented by an outdoor shelter composed of Teflon-coated glass-fiber canopies. The synergy of canopy and building will produce an image that goes beyond its practical function, because the canopies' 'scaled modeling displays the design intent,' says John Roberts, supervising architect in the Detroit office of building designer Parsons Brinckerhoff. The A-frame structure, designed by New York City-based FTL Design Engineering Studio, will support a canopy suspended from steel trusses that will cover seven bus bays, define ground-level precincts, and protect waiting passengers from the sun and rain. From afar, the canopies will create a fanciful, symbolic skyscape representing the civic improvements being implemented in Detroit.

Civic goals promoted by public agencies can coincide with the objectives of developers and private clients who realize the financial benefits of investing in high-quality design. For the Scottsdale Center for New Technology and Innovation at Arizona State University, Scottsdale requested an overall progressive image for the 47-acre project that would symbolize its use and reinvigorate an underused urban site. In the winning scheme by Chicago-based Higgins Development, a taut fabric structure called Sky Song will float across the academic precinct, designed by Pei Cobb Freed & Partners in association with DMJM Design. The whimsical form will be composed of soaring arcs that enfold the main pedestrian and vehicular com-

The Teflon-coated glass-fiber canopies over the bus drop-off area at the new Detroit Transit Center, the hub for multiple bus routes, will provide a symbolic skyscape for one of the busiest streets in downtown Detroit.
At the Scottsdale Center for New Technology and Innovation at Arizona State University, a taut fabric structure called Sky Song will create soaring arcs over the main pedestrian and vehicular corridor, providing shade for the 1,400-foot-long public space lined with shops.

The Sun Valley Symphony Pavilion will reflect Sun Valley’s cultural heritage and indigenous architecture with a curved, timber-clad structure supporting a stage and an amphitheater seating 2,000 under a sweeping fabric tent.

dor, providing shade for shops that line the base of the research buildings. By providing an interesting environment for the research facilities, Sky Song will serve as a promotional tool for the university to help it attract program funding.

Urban icons can also expand a city’s visibility by providing greater opportunities for the use of existing community assets. Cities find that developing new amenities can help attract both tourists and new residents. Often funded with money from a combination of public and private sources, such facilities can serve as catalysts for lasting changes to cities.

The Sun Valley Company, owners and developers of the Sun Valley resort, for example, wanted to build a permanent symphony hall, launching the project at a time when the city of Sun Valley, Idaho, was developing its community comprehensive plan. The world-class symphony draws an international audience during its summer season, frequently performing to overflow crowds. Sun Valley mayor Jon Thorson, eager to expand Sun Valley’s year-round cultural offerings, is supporting a permanent venue for the symphony, expanding the city’s capability to play host to community programs before and after the symphony’s short, one-month season. Thorson describes the future venue as “an art form that expresses Sun Valley as a resort for active outdoor people, but we have a cultural underpinning for anyone who works and lives there.”

The impact of urban icons is most successful when, as is intended with the Sun Valley Symphony Pavilion, these icons respond directly to their site, locale, and use. The building will reflect Sun Valley’s cultural heritage and indigenous architecture with a curved, timber-clad structure supporting a stage and amphitheater seats under a sweeping fabric tent. Though the amphitheater will be sealed from the elements during the winter, the timber structure will be visible in the city year-round.

Likewise in Charlottesville, Virginia, the new Charlottesville Pavilion will be used on a seasonal basis, but the city was convinced of the greater value a permanent cultural icon, rather than a temporary structure, could bring to the city and region. Entrepreneur Coran Capshaw provided financial support for the venue, which opened in July. Although privately funded, development of this new urban magnet corresponded with the city’s effort to redevelop the eastern end of its historic downtown mall. The new amphitheater was strategically placed in a small park at the end of the city’s central business district and is serving as the centerpiece of other civic improve-
The new Charlottesville Pavilion, strategically placed in a small park at the eastern end of the city’s downtown mall area, consists of a fabric tent that covers 2,800 seats and accommodates a range of activities, from concerts to outdoor festivals.

The seven-acre Mesa Arts and Entertainment Center includes four theaters, classrooms, and art galleries clustered around a central outdoor plaza with a tensile structure that acts as a signature element for the project.

Urban icons can also assist in reinvention of civic space to boost local identity. Several years ago, Mesa, Arizona, initiated a new arts and entertainment district as a way to distinguish itself among 27 municipalities in the growing metropolitan region known as the Valley of the Sun. “The civic pride that has grown out of this project is palpable,” says Gerry Fathauer, executive director of the Mesa Arts and Entertainment Center.

The seven-acre site includes four theaters, extensive performance venues, classrooms, and art galleries clustered around the Shadow Walk, a central outdoor plaza that reflects the dramatic contrast of sunlight and shade. During the design development stage, BOORA Architects of Portland, Oregon, sought to add a signature element to the project. BOORA principal Michael Tingley says he 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 Design Engineering Studio 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 image that unifies the arts precinct. Although the fabric structures were almost cut from the budget, other ways eventually were found to reduce project costs. Now that the center is complete, Fathauer says she is convinced that the iconic elements 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 high 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 semipermanent facilities can help public and private investors to meet civic goals. Although the Detroit Transit Center and the Sun Valley Symphony Pavilion serve quite different purposes, both will be urban icons because they will create one-of-a-kind 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.—Nicholas Goldsmith, a senior principal of FTL Design Engineering Studio and chairman of the Lightweight Structures Association of the Americas.