

## Second architectural thoughts on the best uses of Parcel 5

I didn't want to like it. I wasn't expecting the space or experience to be as special as it was. Certainly this feeling would fade in time, and I could chalk up the memory to a singular, rare occurrence.

In the days and weeks following Rochester's Jazz Fest, I was hoping my opinion of Parcel 5 would return to what it was. Yet I can't shake off the energy the closing Saturday show brought there. I stood in wonder at the thousands of people filling the space. High rise buildings provided the backdrop with lights, music and smells of food and drinks. It felt right; yet it didn't feel like Rochester. It felt like a *new* Rochester, with an urban public square embodying everything it's supposed to be.

I've followed the proposed development and debate on the empty parcel for years, much like everyone else. Being in a profession that designs spaces, curates people's experiences and creates a built environment I've always tended to be on the 'pro-development' side of the conversation. I dismissed the call for the area to be left open as uninformed and short-sighted. But perhaps the short-sighted vision is the one that's built. Perhaps the best vision of the space is one left alone from assuming hands that over-promise and under-deliver. Perhaps subtraction is better than addition.

"It's opener there in the wide-open air." —Dr. Seuss

As I've entered the phase in my life where children's books are a nightly routine, I was struck recently by a single line quote on a two-page spread in "Oh the Places You'll Go" by Dr. Seuss. The quote, so poetic and Seuss-like, resonated with me and my conundrum with Parcel 5. It seemed to parallel my recent thoughts on what's best for the cinder-laden plot of land smack in the middle of our downtown. Given how uniquely magical that space was during Jazz Fest — could I have been wrong about Parcel 5?

Thinking back to the book, Seuss essentially tells us to find our own path and create our own experiences. It's uplifting, and yet it cautions us about life's ups and downs and general uncertainty. About succeeding he says "...except when you don't because sometimes you won't..."

As I mentioned, I've always felt



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Jason Streb

that some sort of development fronting Main Street was essential to the success of that area. After all, shouldn't a city with so many holes in its urban fabric, focus on density rather than fight to keep these holes?

Architects design, but we also build. Our training has taught us that we can design anything. That's the reason people hire us, because through design we can create places that both function and excite at the same time. So why shouldn't that same logic apply to Parcel 5? If we design it to perform and function in a specific way, shouldn't it work?

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The experience of Parcel 5 at Jazz Fest had nothing to do with how the space was designed. In fact, that space is void of any design or manipulation. Its emptiness actually allowed freedom and personal ownership of the space. People used the space as they saw fit and congregated where and how they wanted. It's that freedom that makes the space truly public, truly special.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Parcel 5 is that its value is more external than internal. The true opportunity of that space has nothing to do with the space itself. It was getting to experience the city, the backdrop of our urban environment on full display. I think that's the magic of places like Central Park. These areas allow for refuge but also make nearby real estate more desirable. A symbiotic relationship between solid and void.

The space needs to be designed, but not designed in a way that assumes. It should be a destination, a focal point. The greatest value that area offers is its ability to enhance the urban experience around it—to be participatory.

Cleveland's Public Square, de-

signed by the firm Field Operations is a prime example of this. Other Rust Belt cities have found similar success such as Detroit's Campus Martius and Pittsburgh's Market Square. All of these spaces offer a variety of attractions & destinations and incorporate seasonal strategies. At Campus Martius, there exists both an urban beach as well as an ice skating rink. It allows public space to be flexible and nimble in order to respond to natural fluctuation of activity over a day, week and year.

Architect James Durfee, principal at Bergmann P.C., has written extensively on this space and others in the city. He sees Parcel 5 similarly. "Thankfully, the community has taken a step back to think about everything this already very

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public space has to offer. The current consideration—making the space a permanent public venue—is one that I welcome. My hope would be that 'new improvements' not overwhelm what is already so special about Parcel 5," Durfee said.

"It is quite compelling 'as is'..."

Rarely do you get the chance to "test" out a plot of land before it's developed. With Parcel 5, we've had several years of seeing the vacant space utilized and re-imagined.

"We are reinvigorating this area by the experimentation of temporary happenings: from concerts to pop-up events," says Robert Fornataro, senior associate, project architect at SWBR Architects & Engineers P.C. "All of this has shown us how important this space is. How do we make it a place though? We have seen this space serve different levels of the community. We need to capture

the uniqueness of the space. We need to make spaces that are of value for developers and value for the community. That is place-making."

Up until recently, it seemed as if a performing arts complex was destined for the space. However, it seems the theatrics of everyday life may be what is more successful than a professional stage.

"Without the PAC the city has a chance to create a neighborhood," says Dirk Schneider, partner at CJS Architects LLP. "The most successful places in the cities that we love are the places that we use, actively use, all the time, and use throughout the day and night. These places are invariably integral parts of neighborhoods where the residents themselves live and work and socialize.

"The proposed PAC was not a neighborhood use, not active use, and it is not a use that will improve the daily life of the residents of the center city," Schneider continues. "A PAC is just a very big box that displaces the active uses that knit a vital and/or emerging neighborhood together."

Despite all the debate, if a building should be destined for Parcel 5, the architecture will want to contribute to the city in a similar way.

"Urban Planning 101 states that we should continue the architecture along Main Street. Not very deep because we want room for open space," Fornataro says. "This building can't be solid though. It needs to be perforated so the public realm weaves through it, under it and all along its sides. Some space for the public and some for private. This will have the makings of something connected to the community and be a wonderful asset that can still organically grow."

Whether to build or not, it's become clear that we have stumbled upon a space in our city that for better or worse has captured our imaginations. Parcel 5 is successful already in that we all agree this place matters! Ultimately, the design of this place is not so much a change of mind but rather a shift in direction.

Oh the places we'll go...

*Jason Streb is an architect and associate at CPL as well as current president of A.I.A. Rochester.*