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 feeling that something happened 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.

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 unformed 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 poetically and Seuss-like, resonated with me and my own experience with Parcel 5. It seemed to parallel my recent thoughts on what’s best for the city. I frequently visited Parcel 5 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 caution 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 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 light to keep these holes?

Architects design, but we also build. Our training has taught us the capacity to 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?

“…except when you don’t because sometimes you won’t…” — Dr. Seuss

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.

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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. 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 For-

Although we have stumbled upon a space in our city that for better or worse has captured our imaginations Parcel 5 is successful because we have harnessed the place matters! Ultimately, the design of this place is not so much a change of mind but rather a shift of

Oh the places we’ll go…

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