

An Expert Observation About Performing Art Centers

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It has been my observation over forty years of developing real estate that performing art venues are built for "reasons" other than selling tickets, principally downtown "revitalization". The results are consistently poor and do little to revitalize, as these venues are used at night and patrons leave immediately after a performance. Most arguments for these locations are no more than well intended, often political rationalizations. Any experienced developer could quickly point out their short comings.

Many of these venues replace old less expensive theaters. The increased costs associated with the new venues puts "high culture" organizations at risk with the increased costs. Ballet, opera, and symphony companies give multiple annual performances and must rely on their audiences repeat attendance.

The principal deterrent patrons face is uniformly the same, poor parking situations including parking garages and difficulty of access and egress. The Bob Carr is typical, except for the bus lanes which are an added deterrent and inconvenience, for a two hour event.

The Orlando "regional" demographic is a huge area of about 3000 square miles, a 45 mile by 65 mile "free form rectangle", from Leesburg and Clermont to Titusville and from well into Polk County all the way to Daytona Beach. By contrast New York City is about 450 square miles from west of Newark to well out on Long Island and from New Rochelle to Atlantic Beach on the South side of Manhattan, and has a population of around 9 million, a totally different life style.

The Central Florida demographic, is an automobile culture and will remain so for the next 50 – 60 years or longer, in spite of all the talk of mass transit and light rail. These systems are no match for the comfort, dependability, convenience and security of automobiles, (traffic delays notwithstanding). Look at Los Angeles California if you don't believe me. Thus far "all" the mass transit systems built in Los Angeles, Miami, etc. have been financial and ridership disasters. The point is, if you don't deal with parking (at grade) in this demographic the cultural companies, ballet, opera and symphony will consistently severely handicapped. It has always been a mystery to me that city building codes require auto parking ratios per thousand square feet of retail, office, or show room space, that downtown areas do not even come close to providing. In effect they have put into use codes that insure the continued decline of downtown areas.

Parking garages only work for employment centers where people must attend and are sometimes mandated to do so. Court houses and city halls are visited primarily by people who must do business with them. They do little to rejuvenate a down town. Most of the traffic is usually anxious to get out of them as quickly as possible.

A performing arts venue is in competition with a variety of entertainment alternatives, most or all of which provide free, at grade parking as well as easy access and egress, such as regional malls, theaters, restaurants and so on. It should be as easy to attend the ballet as it is to go to the movies.

In the Orlando regional demographic 85% or more of prospective patrons that might attend the opera, ballet or symphony do not even have them on their radar screen. Remember, there is probably an hour or so one way travel time, allowing for some lead time, say two hours total both ways for a two hour performance. A "tough sell" after (5) days of commuting to work which is an 8 hour or more performance.

A successful performance arts center must provide at grade parking, parking garages do not work for voluntary events. The brown Theater in Houston, the Fox in Atlanta, Union Times in Jacksonville, etc., were all built in name of revitalization and all suffer at the box office with cultural events, occasionally they will get a full house, if Frank Sinatra comes to town, but that is once in a lifetime, and Frank is gone. If anyone ever does this right it will be a "political high water mark".

Since Orlando is the center of the regional demographic it makes sense that the Performing Arts Venue needs to be downtown at 50 and I-4 with interstate visibility, so it becomes a landmark. Being on I-4 is like owning a newspaper. The problem is obviously land and those awful bus lanes which have a very low yield of traffic over pavement, however government always has wondrous figures on how great they are: the figures are not credible.

It is not going to be easy or cheap but it could be done. The parking lot would be visible from I-4, it would be like a magnet. The center should have a wide, long drive up canopy for protection from the heat and rain. The lobby should be large with lots of scattered seating and a gracious elegant design with restaurants at both ends, a ticket office and gift shop. The facility should also have an outside large reader marquee announcing performances, etc. The performing Arts Center should be open daily including Sunday. It should glow like a Christmas tree on a holiday evening.

The opera, symphony and ballet companies would then be able to horizontally expand their audiences. Do not underestimate the public's interest in these performances. Forget about the tourists. These high culture companies marketing departments would then have great success, instead of killing themselves trying to market a losing venue; everything would rise, ticket sales, fund raising, performance levels, public image – everything – including downtown.

If it is built as usual these companies will be at risk to fail, I repeat the performance costs will rise but the audience will not. The Miami Symphony recently went bankrupt, largely because of the preceding. Outreach by these organizations: opera, symphony, and ballet is now largely wasted as the vast majority of people will not be inconvenienced to attend these performances. If anyone ever built a performing arts center right, I believe it would be a national sensation. **After forty years of retail development I will tell you there is no substitute for visibility and a large parking lot...NONE.**

Good things happen around parking lots, nothing is easier to manage than a full house and a full parking lot. Conversely nothing is more difficult to manage than poor attendances and empty parking garages.

Like most successful projects it is not complicated it is just tough to do. If Orlando uses the same old approach everyone else uses they will get the same poor result. But for now, I will remain hopeful.

Respectfully,

Gary F. Paduch