

Will downtown Orlando look like this?



BRYANT PARK PHOTOS

Planners in Orlando are looking at urban spaces such as New York City's Bryant Park (above). The park has lots of room to relax and interact.

Inspiration

New York's Bryant Park most appeals to Craig Ustler. Called "Manhattan's town square" by *The New York Times*, the lush green space backs up to the grand New York Public Library on the east and faces the Avenue of the Americas on the west. It features two restaurants, a fountain and a carousel, chess tables, food kiosks and monuments. The park has wireless access and 2,000 movable chairs. During lunchtime on a warm day, it sees as many as 5,000 visitors.

Considerations

■ None of the urban spaces being studied are in cities as hot as Orlando, Ustler said. "So this is a question: How does it work in terms of rain and heat?"

■ "How we live in New York is not necessarily how we live in Florida," said Jefrè, an Orlando environmental-artist and landscape architect (who goes by a single name).

■ Use native plants in the plaza. "Is there a way to create a sophisticated landscape that's also a living laboratory for green ideas?" Jefrè

■ Use public art in a way that makes visitors stop and take it in. "Engaging the visitor for more than 30 seconds," Jefrè said, "is an opportunity to create memories."

Traps to avoid

■ "Miami is a poor example of using a performing-arts center to anchor a community," Ustler said. U.S. Highway 1 separates the two halls of its 2-year-old Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, and the surrounding area is filled with empty lots.

■ "There's a real risk of becoming Disneyesque with everything we do," Ustler said. "We want to be very sensitive to price point, variety and ethnic diversity. This is a very organic, real place. It's not Disneyfied."

— ELIZABETH MAUPIN



GEORGE SKENE/ORLANDO SENTINEL

The 9-acre lot across from Orlando City Hall will be the home of the new \$408 million performing-arts center and its plaza, scheduled to be completed in 2012. Planners want to create an iconic urban space.

VISION FOR CENTER: CREATE A NEW ICON

By ELIZABETH MAUPIN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Some Orlandoans look at an empty lot, and they see an empty lot.

Craig Ustler sees trees. Fountains. Benches. Sculpture. Ice-cream stands.

Ustler isn't hallucinating. He and other downtown activists are imagining how the entire 9-acre site of the downtown performing-arts complex will look when the \$408 million project is scheduled to be completed in 2012 — especially the open-air plaza that will stretch between the arts center and City Hall.

"We're only going to get this opportunity one

time," he says. "If we don't make a great urban place here, we fail."

As a board member of the Dr. P. Phillips Orlando Performing Arts Center, Ustler heads its urban design task force, charged with advising the board, as well as Hines, the center's development partner. Those on the task force already have visited iconic gathering places in several American cities — Copley Square in Boston, Millennium Park in Chicago, Bryant Park in New York City, Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, Pioneer Courthouse Square in Portland. And they've explored Se-

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DON AMMERMAN/DR. P. PHILLIPS ORLANDO PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

An aerial view shows the 2-block site (right) of the planned Dr. P. Phillips Orlando Performing Arts Center in downtown Orlando. Planners say the outside of the center will be as important as the inside.

CENTER

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attle, Denver and Vancouver, downtowns that have what Ustler calls “the ‘it’ factor.” Their mandate is daunting.

“There are many more bad urban designs than good,” said Ustler, a real-estate developer, third-generation Orlandoan and disciple of “new urbanism.”

So he’s asking questions — now to other task-force members and eventually to interested members of the public.

What does Orlando want the space to be? What kinds of restaurants, shops and other commercial activity do Orlandoans want? What kinds of sidewalks? What kind of parking? Should there be music? Water? Dogs?

The businesses that surround the plaza are also an issue, said Kathy Ramsberger, the center’s president. Commercial development on the site should complement the arts center, she said.

Both she and Barton Myers, the building’s design architect, long have insisted that the center will feature four perform-

ance spaces — the three indoor theaters and a fourth on the plaza outside.

“We’ve always said we want the outside to be as important as the inside,” she said.

Ramsberger and Ustler talk of the plaza bringing energy to the city and of finding ways to make visitors want to linger, inside and out.

“I want people to experience the place, to have dinner, to go to a gallery, to experience the city,” Ustler said.

He wants the task force to look for advice both from “industry experts” and the public — from those who run Bryant Park, from

downtown Orlando leaders and from the office workers, diners, club-goers and other visitors who will use the plaza every day.

“A vast majority of people will not set foot in [the center], but we want them to be proud of it,” Ustler said. “The outdoor space is the way we fulfill the mission we have to be more inclusive. This place becomes an awesome opportunity to be all things to all people.

“So there’s a lot of pressure.”

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