

perspective

Use it: The city should better utilize its vital public square

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Denver's Civic Center is not the urban gathering place that City Beautiful Mayor Robert Speer envisioned 100 years ago. Still, it reflects on his bold vision that the public square is generating so much passionate discussion.

The debate is whether to locate the Colorado Historical Society and Museum in Civic Center, on a site south of the historic Carnegie Library (now the McNichols Building), or in Denver's Permit Building across from Civic Center, or in the park at the southwest corner of Colfax and Broadway.

When the mayor and City Council adopted the 2005 Civic Center Park Master Plan, three priorities emerged:

Activate the space daily with people and activity;

Attract private investment and partnerships for enhancements; and

Restore and maintain existing structures (Carnegie Library, Greek Theatre, Voorhies Memorial and Seal Pond, pathways, balustrades, gardens and tree groves).

I am firmly on the side of locating the Colorado History Museum opposite the historic Carnegie, on the parcel identified by early 20th Century planners as ideal for a museum. This location completes the wonderful symmetry expressed in the relationship between the north wing of the City and County Building and the Carnegie. As early as 1907, planners proposed a second building to complement the Carnegie Library and to define the central court between two civic buildings.

Even the most recent 2005 master plan proposes, "in the spirit of the original intent," elevated Festival Gardens on this site above the lawn as a clearly defined space, including a park pavilion and café. The intention for nearly 100 years continues to be creating a lively place in that spot.

I do not believe preserving open space for a drive-by, over-the-shoulder view of the Civic Center is a compelling argument for rejecting a \$100 million state investment. This unique partnership can transform Civic Center from underutilized open space into the region's premiere public square, the heart and soul of our civic and cultural life.

If the historical society and its museum locate in the southwest quadrant of Civic Center, the city has an unprecedented opportunity to create a

new relationship with the state around our shared front door. Any agreement should require the state to:

Conform to Denver's land use regulations regarding historic preservation and design review anywhere in the Capitol complex that's part of the Civic Center Historic District;

Consider (and perhaps help fund) fewer traffic lanes and wider sidewalks on Colfax from Broadway west to Speer Boulevard; and

Agree that the CHM will never expand in Civic Center.

The Colorado Historical Society identified Civic Center as its preferred location based on opportunities detailed in Denver's 2005 Civic Center Park Master Plan. The state's investment will not only restore the long-abused Carnegie Library, it will bring more than 150,000 people to the park yearly. Thanks to Gov. Bill Ritter's High Performance Certification Program, the new museum will be environmentally sustainable, with a proposed footprint no greater than the historic library's and with a slightly lower height.

One idea that can be immediately dismissed is building the museum in the northwest quadrant of Civic Center. Destroying the historic red oak tree grove and abandoning the 2005 Master Plan's Broadway Terrace vision is a really bad idea.

This upper terrace is already scheduled to be

rehabilitated, re-establishing its historic pattern by restoring the original brick and concrete walk. More active park space will emerge from an expanded lawn. Two new gravel walks will connect plazas on both Colfax and 14th avenues with kiosks, benches and shady seating. Clearly, this is no place to insert a building.

By itself, the museum will not solve every problem that's resulted from the gradual degradation of Denver's premier civic space. However, as a catalyst for private and public investment, improved internal and external connections and enhanced access, it is hard to justify rejecting.

Locating the Colorado Historical Society, its museum and Stephen Hart Reading Room in Civic Center is the right thing to do.

Editor's note: Susan Barnes-Gelt is a paid consultant for Tryba Architects. However, neither the Colorado Historical Society, its museum nor the Civic Center are part of her work for Tryba or any other client.

How we got to this point

1997

Colorado Historic Society and Museum and Colorado Supreme Court occupy facilities on a block bounded by 13th and 14th avenues and Broadway.

Mid-'90s

CHS begins to explore upgrades and expansion needs.

Nov. 2007

City Hall is expected to decide on the location.

2000

CHS holds national design competition for new building on the site. Tryba Architects is selected. The project is designed but construction funds are rescinded due to state budget crisis.

2005

Urban Land Institute study shows the site is too small to accommodate both the museum and the judiciary. It recommends the museum relocate within the Civic Center District and the courts build a new, expanded facility on the site.

2006

General Assembly explores building a new justice center and relocating the museum. Eight sites evaluated, three viable. Denver Permit Center at 14th and Bannock preferred location. State requests site reevaluation to reduce project costs.

2007

CHS staff and board identify Civic Center site as the preferred location based on opportunities detailed in Denver's 2005 Civic Center Master Plan.

July 2007

A series of public discussions take place.