

Armory Square: Lessons from the Rebirth – April 21, 2006

Panelists: George Curry (Armory Square developer and SUNY-ESF professor of landscape architecture), Bob Doucette (president of Armory Square Development and Management), Lyn Simmer (artist and former Armory Square retailer), Joe Mareane (former city economic development director)

George Curry opened the program with an overview of the historical development of Armory Square. Prior to the revival (which began in the late 1970s and into the '80s), the area had, among other things: 15 retail/wholesale businesses, 10 storage and factory facilities, one hotel, and four adult bookstores. Post-revival, it has 38 restaurants/clubs, 35 retail businesses, 65 professional offices and services, 80 residential units, two hotels, the MOST and the OnTrack station.

The idea for revival began to stir in the late '70s, when a small group of entrepreneurs decided to take a risk on a forgotten pocket of the city and open businesses (ie., Packinghouse Row Café, Eureka Studios). Some reasons Curry cited for its success:

- Federal government began offering income tax credits for rehabilitating buildings following a certain set of criteria.
- New construction that replaced parking lots was designed to blend with the historic character of the area.
- Amenities such as a small park were added, signaling that this is an area where people live as well as do business.

Panelists introduced themselves and fielded questions from the attendees. Among the points they made about the Armory Square revival:

- When Bob Doucette and George Curry decided to buy a building in Armory Square, their goal was to create an “urban experience” that they felt was missing in Syracuse. “We had no money and no experience. But we had a great idea.” George Curry had catalogued all of the buildings in the neighborhood, which was critical to gaining historic district designation to qualify for tax credits.
- The city was not the leader but rather a follower in the revitalization of Armory Square. The undertaking was fueled by a diverse group of creative individuals and entrepreneurs who shared a common vision.
- The city did provide assistance and support in several ways: Through tax law, it helped to free up a critically located tax-delinquent property, the Hogan block building, for an interested buyer. The publicized struggle between the city and the original owner focused attention on the Armory Square project and sent a signal that the city was participating in the transition of the area. Incentives also were made available to Armory Square developers through Economic Development Zone status as well as through a small loan program created by the city to help higher-risk companies get on their feet.
- The city listened and followed the lead of those driving the revitalization. It assigned an individual full time to work in partnership with the group in an effort to identify further ways it could assist. It also took responsibility for maintaining

an appealing streetscape – planting trees, maintaining sidewalks, providing green space, ie.

- The Downtown Committee provided significant support, including funding for National Register applications to allow for income tax credits.
- Those who drove the revitalization effort had a solid vision and didn't waver from that. The mixed-use concept for the neighborhood was considered vital. Housing in the neighborhood also was considered critical. Retail was to be located on the first floor and offices and services on upper floors. There also was a commitment to good quality – “We said we would never make anything that was ‘OK in Syracuse’ but wasn't good quality,” said Doucette. “We wanted things that could exist in any city.”
- Creation of a merchants association reinforced the idea that everyone, in spite of individual differences, shared a common goal. That increased their effectiveness and the need for others to listen and respond to them.
- In order for revitalization like Armory Square to work, the public must understand that economic incentives are not the same as corporate welfare. Economic incentives bridge the financial gap between what we aspire to and what the market is willing to pay. It's an investment that pays off in increased tax revenue.

The panel agreed that Syracuse has the potential for other success stories like Armory Square. The single most important factor, they said, is a strong vision that can draw others into supporting and investing in the project.

“What happened (at Armory Square) was not a plan,” said Curry. “It was a group of very different individuals who somehow got together in this physical place. It was individual entrepreneurs who had this belief and commitment to an idea – making a downtown neighborhood a 24-hour place, where people could live, work, eat and enjoy entertainment.”

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