

CITIES PIN HOPES ON PARKS

Downtown green spaces can have drawing power challenge is to see projects through to completion

By Marla Matzer Rose
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

ST. LOUIS — St. Louis and Columbus are a lot alike.

Both lost nearly all their downtown residents during the post-World War II flight to the suburbs. The Gateway City once even had a replica of Christopher Columbus' Santa Maria docked on the river, until a storm on the mighty Mississippi destroyed it decades ago.

St. Louis also has had to wrestle with the challenge presented by an empty downtown shopping mall. Theirs is still awaiting redevelopment, unlike in Columbus, where Columbus City Center is being torn down to build a new urban park.

A few blocks from St. Louis' ghost mall, an urban park called Citygarden was opened last summer to great fanfare. Other cities also are joining the trend.

"I truly think Citygarden is one of the best things to happen in downtown in many decades," said Barbara Geisman, St. Louis' deputy mayor for development.

In the beginning, the urban park plan in St. Louis had its critics, who predicted that it would only be a magnet for vagrants. But even a steady rain on a cool day couldn't detract from the beauty of the park.

Raindrops formed patterns in a fountain just outside the glassenclosed Terrace View cafe. Even without children playing in the fountains and people strolling along the winding paths, the park was a jewel in the heart of the city.

The \$30 million, two-block Citygarden, featuring a multimilliondollar sculpture garden, opened in July to rave reviews around the world. In its hometown, it's widely seen as a symbol of renewed life and investment in the city known as the Gateway to the West.

The challenge now, Geisman said, is to complete the plan, one that expects the park to spur other downtown development.

It's a challenge Columbus will face as well.

With Columbus Commons park set to open on the site of the former City Center mall at year's end, Columbus is poised to join cities across the U.S. that recently have embraced the urban-park movement.

In fact, Columbus, St. Louis, Detroit, Houston and others are actually returning to a century-old urban planning idea that holds that open spaces enhance both the quality of life and the economic development of an area.

The payoff that cities are hoping for is private investment arising from the presence of these parks. The plan for Columbus Commons, for example, calls for millions to be invested over five to 10 years in privately financed retail and office developments along the perimeter of the park.

"What we've found is that great parks make great cities, and great cities have great parks," said Ed McMahon, senior resident fellow at the Washington-based Urban Land Institute. McMahon rattles off a list of cities, including New York, Chicago and Charleston, S.C., where major parks have made the adjoining land some of the most expensive private real estate in their respective states.

New life for neglected mall area

St. Louis' Citygarden opened in July and is already being credited with helping breathe new life into the long-neglected open mall leading to the city's signature Gateway Arch. The park itself was a \$30 million gift from the private Gateway Foundation, and projects that had languished for years now are moving forward.

As in Columbus, big plans didn't always produce results in St. Louis. A renovation of the city's 1934 Kiel Opera House was promised but never delivered by a past owner of the St. Louis Blues hockey team, which plays in an

arena built adjoining the opera house. Now, the team's current owners, led by Dave Checketts, are moving forward with a \$70 million renovation of the 1934 landmark.

Another positive sign that's considered an outgrowth of Citygarden's success is a competition just announced by the National Park Service to redesign the grounds where the Gateway Arch stands.

The project is planned ahead of the monument's 50th anniversary in 2015. And Citygarden is seen as an amenity for the downtown lofts that have been springing up in renovated buildings in St. Louis' historic garment district, for example.

"Citygarden was the first couple of blocks to get done of a larger-scale plan for the Gateway Mall," said Kevin Farrell, senior director of economic development for the Partnership for Downtown St. Louis. Gateway Mall is the open space — think of the mall in Washington, D.C. — that was created in the heart of downtown St. Louis over several decades, starting in the 1920s.

"Without a role model out there to set a high bar in terms of impact and quality, it's harder to raise the money to get other projects done."

Crossroads of Detroit

Closer to Ohio, Detroit also has used the downtown-park concept to attack a well-documented decline in jobs and population.

It's done so at the spot that once literally was the crossroads of Detroit: Campus Martius. The site was made the centerpoint of Detroit in the early 1800s, when the city was replotted after a major fire. The land became vacant more than a decade ago, after several major department stores closed and were demolished.

A plan was developed in 2001, Detroit's 300th anniversary, by local leader Edsel Ford II and others to create a park on the site as a "legacy gift to the city," said Robert Gregory, who now leads the Detroit 300 Conservancy, which oversees Campus Martius Park.

The park opened in 2004. It has attracted the headquarters of Compuware Corp., a major software company that had been based in the Detroit suburbs. And Starwood Hotels opened a \$200 million renovation of the nearby Westin Book Cadillac Hotel, a 1924 hotel that was once the tallest in the world but recently had sat vacant.

Gregory says in the heart of a city known widely for urban decay, Campus Martius has been nothing but a benefit.

"In five years, there's never been a problem with crime, drugs, vagrants, none of that," Gregory said. "We have moveable chairs out all around the park. Nobody takes them.

"If you build a beautiful place and maintain it to a high quality, people respect that no matter what kind of people they are. You hardly ever even see litter on the ground."

Campus Martius was dealt a minor setback when Au Bon Pain announced this month that it is closing its restaurant in the park, but the conservancy immediately announced that it would open a cafe at that location in the spring.

The seasonal nature of a park makes the prospects for year-round restaurants tough in northern climates. Only seasonal food kiosks are planned for Columbus Commons.

"We were able to create something that really exceeded all of our expectations," Gregory said. "We get calls from all over the world about the park. That doesn't mean Detroit is turned around overall. But something like this helps the image of Detroit everywhere."

Texas-size park

In Houston, civic leaders describe a similar success story for the Texas-size Discovery Green. The \$125 million, 12-acre park became an instant hit when it opened in April 2008. The site had been largely parking lots next to the city's convention center and Houston Astros venue Minute Maid Park.

"The development story started to play out before the park was done," said Guy Hagstette, president of the Discovery Green Conservancy.

"A local developer bought an adjacent lot about the same time as the land for the park was bought. That

project became a 347-unit high-end apartment tower with ground-floor retail. It opened a year ago in a very tough environment, and they're doing very well."

Just before the park opened, another developer announced a new 800,000-square-foot office building across from the park. The whole building was leased to the Hess Corp., which expanded its Houston operations.

Leaders in cities with major urban parks emphasize that maintenance, reinvestment and frequent programming are crucial to the parks' success. These elements are what make a park inviting and vibrant, and in turn spark other development.

The group working on Columbus' park project, Capitol South Community Urban Redevelopment Corp., is keeping that in mind. Capitol South director Guy Worley says he wants Columbus Commons to be "programmed daily" with everything from concerts to kickball games. To aid in this, Capitol South is working with the Columbus Association for the Performing Arts and is talking to local gyms, Worley said.

Worley also envisions an outdoor reading room similar to Bryant Park in New York City, and possibly even a carousel in the park.

Gregory, of Campus Martius in Detroit, says a park might not work miracles, but it could be a key step in reviving a city.

"A great signature park isn't going to turn around a city by itself," Gregory said. "But great cities have strong and vibrant downtown cores. A signature place downtown where people can come together is a part of that."

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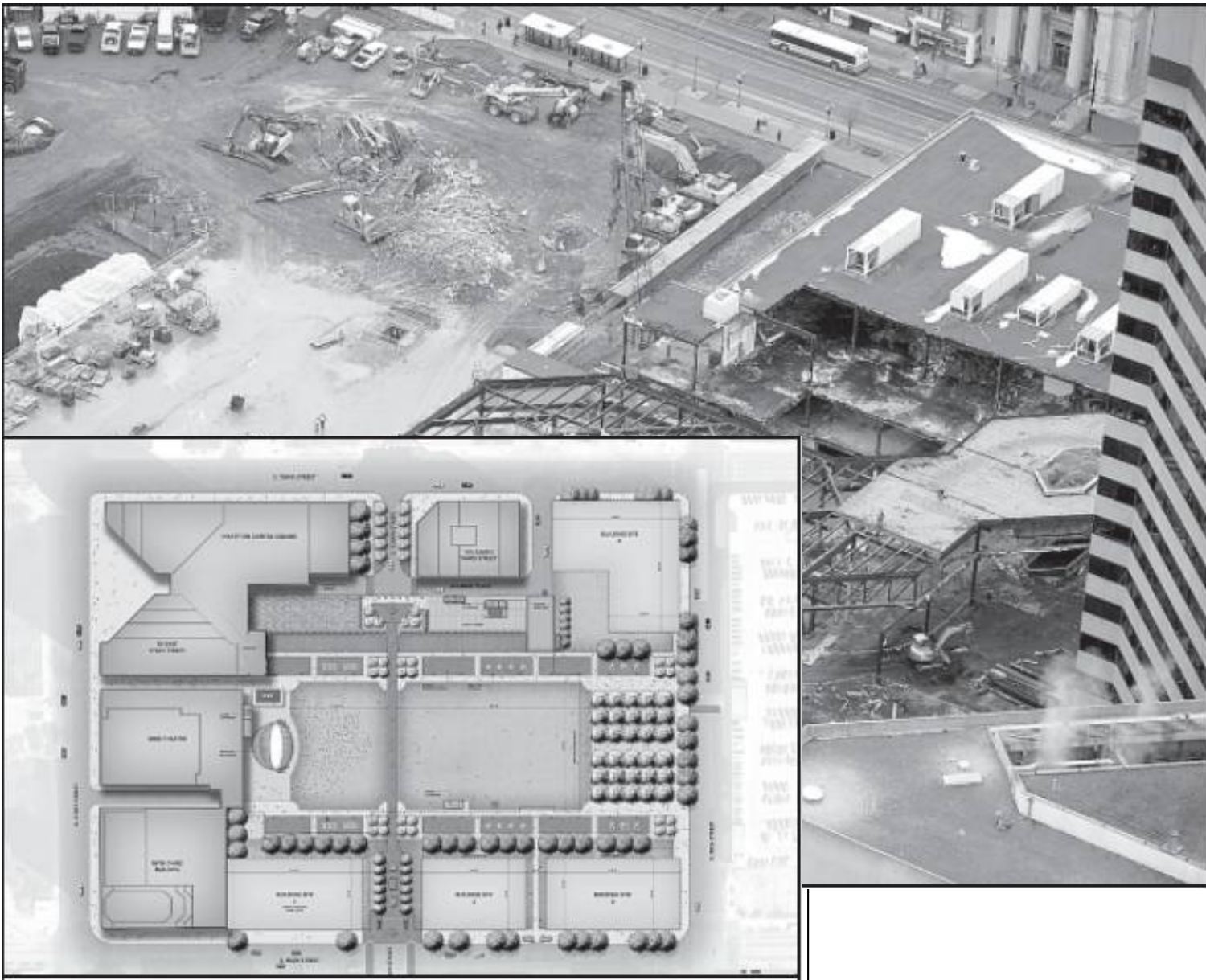




CAPITOL SOUTH COMMUNITY URBAN REDEVELOPMENT

This is an updated rendering of Columbus Commons, the green space that will nestle into the Downtown area that once housed the City Center mall. The plan is to have daily programming, from concerts on the covered stage to kickball games.





CAPITOL SOUTH COMMUNITY URBAN REDEVELOPMENT

This sketch shows how buildings would develop around Columbus Commons, anchored on one end by the Fifth Third Building, the Hyatt on Capitol Square and the Ohio Theatre.