

Columbus Commons a new take on old idea

City wanted similar project in 1977, got City Center instead

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Once-thriving Downtown stores are being razed to make way for the next big thing: a tree-lined park surrounded by a variety of development.

The place? Capitol South, the three-block area that people know now as the Columbus City Center site, just south of the Statehouse.

The year? 1977

The park and surrounding housing, hotel and office development didn't come to pass. Instead, Columbus got City Center mall.

That mall opened in 1989, enjoyed great popularity for more than a decade, withered when suburban competition exploded and now is being demolished.

Rising in its place is Columbus Commons, a project similar to the one floated in 1977. The first phase of Columbus Commons, a 6-acre park, is expected to open late this year, with plans for a variety of other development to follow over the next five to 10 years.

"Hindsight is so wonderful," said John Rosenberger with a sigh. He took over as director of the Capitol South Community Urban Redevelopment Corp. — the private entity created by the city to spearhead the Capitol South project — in 1984, after the 1977 plan had been shelved as impractical.

In many ways, Columbus and other cities across the country are going back to the future in terms of urban planning. Although a number of cities "thought big" in the 1970s and '80s about building housing and luring people back downtown with new restaurants, parks and shops, many of those projects didn't materialize.

"Things get footed in economic reality," said George J. Arnold, a real-estate attorney for the city of Columbus at the time the city committed \$18 million to acquire property south of the Statehouse in a bid to revitalize the central business district.

"A lot of concepts look good on paper, but in the reality of making things happen, so many things can throw them off track," Arnold said. "Circumstances can intervene that no city has control over."

Arnold, now in business development with local construction-management firm H.R. Gray, said roadblocks to progress in that period included high inflation and interest rates in the late 1970s and early '80s that shot into double digits and peaked at more than 20 percent.

Rosenberger said the mix of development, particularly the housing component that would have helped support other amenities, was just too ahead of its time for most cities in the '70s and '80s.

"The 'Columbus way' relies on market forces to get projects done," Rosenberger said, in contrast to the "sheer brute force" that pushes projects forward in a city such as Chicago.

"In our reliance on market forces, the moon and the stars have to be aligned for private investors to move forward," Rosenberger said. "In this case, it wasn't until the empty nesters and the twentysomethings started wanting the urban experience again in significant numbers that developers saw downtown housing as viable."

Charles Lazarus of the Columbus department-store family championed bringing in the Rouse Co. of Maryland to develop Capitol South, said John W. Kessler, chairman of development for the New Albany Co. and an original board member of the Capitol South urban improvement district in the 1970s.

Rouse was becoming known for creating downtown "festival marketplaces," which were

mixed-use developments that gave suburbanites a reason to return to downtowns. Rouse became famous for its redevelopment of Boston's Faneuil Hall and would go on to revitalize the Baltimore waterfront in 1980 and develop the South Street Seaport project in Manhattan in 1983.

Columbus leaders liked Rouse's vision, but money became the stumbling block.

"They (Rouse) were only interested if they were given a blank check," Kessler recalled. That didn't fly with then-Mayor Tom Moody. Rouse stepped down as developer in 1978, eight months after ground was broken on the first phase of the Capitol South project.

A federal grant was used to pay the \$4 million cost of building a skating rink that was to be a small part of the overall project. In December 1979, the Centrum opened at the southeast corner of Town and High streets. Absent other adjacent development, though, and with high maintenance costs, the rink never made a profit.

By the early 1980s, retail, restaurants and housing elements were still on hold, but several major office and hotel projects were built, aided by tax abatements and loans made through the city, courtesy of federal grants.

These projects began to change the direction of development at the Downtown site.

They blocked the rest of Capitol South from the Statehouse and took up what had been park space in the original plan.

Green space wasn't the only victim of the change of direction. History was lost, too. The historic Hartman Building was torn down to make way for the Hyatt on Capitol Square. The Ohio Theatre narrowly escaped the same fate.

Meanwhile, Capitol South went through several directors and developers.

"Nobody was knocking down our door," said Kessler, recalling the lack of interest on the part of private developers.

By 1984, Columbus leaders joined other cities in choosing to build a suburban-style shopping mall in a bid to return to the bygone days of the downtown department store.

"The park land and mixed-used space just wasn't financially an option that any developer was willing to take on without major city financing," said Greg Lashutka, a city attorney in the 1970s and '80s who became mayor at the end of 1991.

Leslie H. Wexner, chairman of Limited Brands, persuaded mall developer Alfred Taubman to take on the City Center project, partly by pledging his stores at the time, including The Limited, Victoria's Secret and Lane Bryant, to long-term leases there.

Dana "Buck" Rinehart, who became mayor of Columbus in 1983 partly on a campaign promise of completing the Capitol South project, said he also "had to lower the hammer" on Taubman to get him to commit to the project.

"I said either build the damn thing or get out," Rinehart said.

Under Rosenberger's leadership, Capitol South pursued development of City Center, "temporarily" closing the Centrum ice rink in 1986 to facilitate the mall's construction. Instead, the rink ended up being sold to Taubman for nearly \$5 million and demolished.

Looking back, those involved in the history of Capitol South defend its contributions.

"You can't dismiss the good that City Center provided in its time," Lashutka said. "When I was mayor, we financed a lot of other projects by the money it generated."

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