

Is The Smith Center the Last Good Thing?

BY GREG BLAKE MILLER

The Architect's Newspaper is a well-wrought niche publication for the national design community and its natural allies—builders, hipsters, place-and-space academics, urban boosters, zoning wonks, greens, artists, people who read Richard Florida and people who read about Tony Hsieh reading Richard Florida. In other words, *The Architect's Newspaper* should be a friend to the people, from city officials to Fremont East entrepreneurs, who have midwived the renaissance of downtown Las Vegas.

And, as it turns out, *The Architect's Newspaper* did indeed take an interest in the unfolding story of our urban core, going so far as to engage Los Angeles-based urban-design blogger James Brasuell to write about the opening of The Smith Center for the Performing



slowdown was almost certainly beneficial to downtown's long-term health. Planners now have an opportunity to respond to the cultural niche The Smith Center carves out rather than stamping the desert floor with another ready-made neighborhood. (Whether they take advantage of that opportunity remains to be seen.)

Brasuell neglects a crucial truth about place and space in Las Vegas: The city thrives on contingency; the future is unknowable, infinitely supple and alternately chilling and thrilling depending on the mood of the dreamer. For Las Vegas, the undeveloped lot is fodder for the imagination. For Brasuell, it is the aesthetic of a sealed fate.

He cannot avert his gaze from "the massive empty lots" that

residential properties and two hotels. At the moment, the Las Vegas Valley has a crippling oversupply of both hotel rooms and condominiums. The nonexistence of thousands of unnecessary residential and hotel units is a good thing.

• From the start, the plan was to unfold in phases. The Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health—which Brasuell does not mention—was the first. The Smith Center is the second. Even at the height of irrational boom-years Manhattanism, no one expected that some Goodman or other would pull back a veil and reveal a completed Symphony Park.

• Seven minutes away from The Smith Center, the once hollowed-out Streamline Tower has rebounded from the crash to find a second life as the Ogden, a nexus of residential urban energy, ambition and even hubris unequaled in the history of downtown Las Vegas. Just down the street, the Soho Lofts are at 90 percent occupancy. The entire area is abuzz with the gospel of connectivity and how to make the showpiece Smith Center interface with the burgeoning cultural life of Fremont East and the Arts District.

The opening of The Smith Center received far less national coverage than the opening of The Mob Museum. No surprise there; the world acknowledges what it's already equipped to see. The Vegas mob narrative occupies a well-worn groove in American consciousness. So, now, does the tale of our Valley's housing crash. Not so much the story of a performing arts center built at the very epicenter of the American Great Recession. Especially when it refuses to yield to the outsider's need to turn it into a cautionary tale. 🗨

surround The Smith Center; he focuses not on what *could* be there but on what, in his view, cannot. "No beaux arts street frontages, subway portals or pedestrian streetscapes will guide culture-seeking residents to the complex," he writes. "Given the surrounding desolation, The Smith Center mostly resembles a high-water mark on the desert landscape, where the civic aspirations of Las Vegas' locals finally lost momentum."

This darkly confident assessment of our future is striking, even romantic. The problem is, it defies the facts of the present:

• The Symphony Park master plan includes five high-density

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Arts. So far, so good.

Then Brasuell began to write. Sentence One: "The \$470 million Smith Center for the Performing Arts currently stands a lonely building on the outskirts of Las Vegas."

Outskirts?

Buckle up, Vegas, it's going to be a bumpy read.

Brasuell's thesis is that the housing crash killed Oscar Goodman's dream of a new urban center, leaving The Smith Center a triumphant but sad reminder of our unrealized hopes.

But the dream, otherwise known as Symphony Park, is still in gestation. And its recession-imposed

@7Vegas

TWEETS OF THE WEEK



@DovDavidoff

Vegas: one of the few places still encouraging men in their fifties to dress like they're in a boy-band from the '80s.



@AprilMacie

My mom doesn't know me at all. She sent me Kendra's workout video. I hate fitness & women who fuck old men in sailor hats for an allowance.



@ConanOBrien

I'm in Vegas with the boys! Wait, nope. Home alone playing roulette on my iPad.



@Hartluck

Getting an epidural for spine and hip injections now. Beat up on your body like I do, you have to pay the price. Let's get this over with.



@MarylandMudflap

If I don't watch the *Mad Men* premiere tonight am I still allowed to be a white person? Please say "yes"—I have a vegan potluck on Tues.



@JeffBorzello

One NBA guy told me this week that this year's UK group is the closest thing he's seen in the last 20 years to the early '90s UNLV teams.



@Alex_Acuna

So glad Olive Garden won Best Italian and Red Lobster won best seafood in the @bestoflasvegasPoll. Sad Taco Bell lost Best Mexican this year.



@Holly_Madison @ Alex_Acuna

I CAN'T with the restaurant choices! I remember Out-back got best steakhouse. We have the best food in the country 4 god's sake!



@PFTompkins

Should I see *The Hunger Games* movie? Bear in mind I haven't read the books and I'm not a tween racist.

SHARE YOUR TWEET. ADD #V7.