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Skyscraper to transform Louisville skyline

Radical architectural creation to house museum, condos, offices

By **Chris Poynter**
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The Courier-Journal

It will thrust 61 stories into the sky, a trio of towers that will dominate Louisville's skyline.

It will feature an acre-sized "island," open to the public, that will hover 22 stories in the air.



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It will contain a contemporary art museum, restaurants and retail stores, 85 luxury condominiums, 150 lofts, a 300-room hotel, office space and a 1,100-car underground parking garage.

The \$380 million Museum Plaza, a radical skyscraper whose design is being introduced to the public today, will add a contemporary landmark to downtown Louisville when it's completed in 2010.

"I fully expect people to be shocked by the building," said architect Joshua Prince-Ramus, 36, who will formally unveil and discuss the project for an invitation-only audience at 2 p.m. today at Actors Theatre of Louisville. "I can't think of another building that looks quite like this.

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It's going to break convention."

Designed by the avant-garde Office for Metropolitan Architecture in New York City, the structure will include glass elevators, operating at an angle, that will transport people from Main Street to the 22nd-level arts center.

"It's bold. It's ambitious. It's striking," Mayor Jerry Abramson said. "It transforms the skyline of Louisville."

A homegrown dream

Museum Plaza will be constructed on Seventh Street, between River Road and Main Street, on part of the old Kingfish restaurant site. The city owns the land and is giving it to the Museum Plaza developers.

The building is the dream of Laura Lee Brown, 64; her husband, Steve Wilson, 58; and Louisville developer Steve Poe, 50.

Wilson and Brown -- whose family controls the Brown-Forman liquor corporation -- are wealthy arts patrons who are already building 21C, a boutique hotel on the south side of Main Street at Seventh. Poe is a longtime Louisville developer and president and CEO of Poe Companies. He recently developed the 615-room Marriott hotel downtown.

The Museum Plaza building will cost \$305 million, paid for with private money and with income from the hotel, offices and the sale of condos and lofts. Poe, Brown and Wilson won't say how much of their own money is going into the project. However, Bob Gunnell, a spokesman for Museum Plaza, called their commitments "substantial."

The investors are asking the city and state to pay for an additional \$75 million in public infrastructure improvements at the site, including moving part of the floodwall, redirecting part of Seventh Street, and building a public park and walkway connecting Museum Plaza with the backs of other museums that front Main.

The investors are not asking for a direct contribution from government. Instead, they have requested that the city and state rebate part of new taxes generated by Museum Plaza for the next 20 years.

Abramson has agreed to the rebate, he said, and Gov. Ernie Fletcher is considering it.

- 85 luxury condos, starting at \$400,000
- 150 lofts, costing \$275,000 or less
- 300 hotel rooms
- 300,000 square feet of office space
- 1.2 million square feet total space
- 1,100 underground parking spots
- 10,500 people a day projected to use Museum Plaza
- 561 full-time employees needed for construction
- Construction starts in 2007
- Construction completed in 2010

SEE FOR YOURSELF

What: Starting tomorrow and continuing until mid-April, you can visit an exhibit that includes detailed scale models of Museum Plaza, along with video of the architects and developers speaking about the project.

Where: 609 W. Main St.

Hours: 3-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays and 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturdays.

Admission: Free.

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"This is the type of dynamic opportunity that only comes once in a lifetime, and we certainly want to be a part of it," Fletcher said. "We are looking at what is available for this project in terms of incentives -- just as we do with all economic development projects."

A controversial design?

Some people will be enamored of Museum Plaza's design, Abramson predicted, while others will question it.

The building will be the first skyscraper built in Louisville since the 35-story Capitol Holding Center, now called the Aegon Tower, opened in 1993. It likely will evoke strong opinions, Abramson said -- as did the Humana Building when its design was unveiled in 1982.

"I can remember the marble being selected for the Humana Building, which was pink, got everybody in an uproar," he said.

The mayor acknowledged that, when he first saw Museum Plaza's design in mid-December, he wasn't sure how to react.

"It wasn't like anything I had ever seen," he said. "It has a uniqueness that I have not seen anywhere in America. I really had to think about it for a while."

Abramson has warmed to the design, however, and now thinks it could become an icon for the city.

Early reactions

The building's design has been a well-guarded secret. A public exhibit at 609 Main -- scheduled to open tomorrow and featuring scale models of the building -- has been guarded for the past week by an off-duty police officer. Black drapes have kept anyone from seeing inside.

But on Monday night, a small group of people -- friends and family of the development team -- got a sneak preview of the building during a cocktail reception with the architectural team.

"I'm blown away by the design," attorney Jack Conway said after watching a video that depicted the building from various angles and glowing at night. "I think it's just remarkable."

Lynn Luallen, president of The Housing Partnership and husband of state auditor Crit Luallen, said he loved the architecture and the 22nd-level island. He predicted that people would embrace the unusual design.

"So it's different," Lynn Luallen said. "We need some other signatures for our city."



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He predicted that young professionals especially would be attracted to the building -- and would want to live there.

Jim King, a Louisville Metro Council member, and his wife, Debbie, reacted with awe.

Though it's a highly contemporary structure near the West Main historic district, Debbie King said she liked the dissimilarity. "I like the contrast with the traditional buildings," she said.

It's 'hyper-rational'

Museum Plaza's investors -- with the help of David Mohny, dean of the University of Kentucky College of Design -- searched Europe and the United States for the ideal firm to design Museum Plaza.

They settled on OMA, founded by noted architect Rem Koolhaas and headquartered in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Mohny has called Koolhaas "the best contemporary architect practicing today."

Though Museum Plaza's design appears radical, Ramus, the architect, said it's actually "hyper-rational."

The architectural team concluded that Museum Plaza, in essence, would be one building composed of many smaller buildings -- a city block contained in one structure.

The design reflects that, said Ramus, the partner-in-charge of OMA's New York office.

The structure has four legs below the island and three towers above it. All seven structures, each with varying functions, intersect on the island.

Think of it as a chair, Ramus said. One leg will contain the hotel, another lofts, the third a vertical elevator, the fourth the angled glass elevator. Two towers will have luxury condos, the third an office tower. The lofts will be in one of the legs and the museum will be in the "seat."

The University of Louisville is negotiating with the investors about moving its Master of Fine Arts program into Museum Plaza, said James Grubola, chair of the Hite Art Institute. He said the university doesn't "know the price tag yet."

The island will be the spot in Museum Plaza where the public will be able to mingle, whether they are residents, university students, office workers or museum visitors.

The island is expected to have several gallery spaces that can expand or shrink as needed for art installations. It also will contain a swimming pool, shops and restaurants; a hotel bar; and entrances to the residential areas and

office tower.

The galleries will be able to be altered so they can spill into other spaces on the island, Ramus said. An artist, for example, might want to use the pool for an installation -- or the hotel bar as part of an art piece.

Unlike some architectural firms, which design buildings and then try to squeeze in the building's various uses, OMA starts with a building's purpose, then designs everything around it, Ramus said. That's why OMA's designs often don't resemble what many people think of as conventional structures, he said.

A conventional building would not have worked at the site, Ramus said -- there simply wasn't enough space at ground level to put a museum, along with the access points needed for the hotel, condos, lofts and offices.

"Conventions are not necessarily the best solutions to things," Ramus said. "They're just the most common solutions to things."

Several concerns

Abramson had several initial concerns about the design, which he said have been allayed since he flew to New York City in January to meet with the architects.

The mayor worried about Museum Plaza being out-of-context with West Main Street, with its four- and five-story, historic, cast-iron-facade buildings.

When he visited, the architects showed Abramson a picture of the Eiffel Tower -- a controversial project when it was announced -- that was also out-of-context with traditional Paris.

Abramson said he got the message.

Because Museum Plaza is so contemporary and so large, and it's north of Main, Abramson believes it will separate itself from the historic district.

He said he also worried that Museum Plaza would block the Ali Center, which is just east of the Museum Plaza site.

Studies by the architects showed that the western facade of the Ali Center -- which features ceramic tiles that, when seen from afar, depict Muhammad Ali's face -- will be partly blocked by Museum Plaza. However, the entire facade will be visible to drivers on Interstate 64 eastbound as soon as they are 400 feet from the Ali Center.

Abramson said that Museum Plaza will bring thousands of people to the area daily -- which will create synergy between the plaza and Ali Center.

Ramus said his firm will work with the Ali Center to ensure that the two

developments complement one another -- and share a common plaza.

"There will be a lot of discussion about how it (Museum Plaza) interacts with the surrounding buildings, just as there was with Humana," Abramson said. "And we have to let the conversation go forward. But I know for a fact that the architect is sensitive to the Ali Center."

Michael Fox, president and CEO of the Ali Center, called Museum Plaza "bold, courageous and creative."

He said he will work with the architects and investors to address any concerns about the impact on the center.

"We are confident that the project's final design will present minimal sight obstructions" to the Ali Center, Fox said.

Economic impacts

Museum Plaza will contain 1.2 million square feet of space -- about twice the size of the Aegon Center on West Market Street and 153 feet taller, making it the city's tallest building.

About 300,000 square feet of that will be office space.

"That's part of the beauty of this mixed-use concept," Poe said. "We are not going to flood the marketplace" with office space.

Poe also said he believes the lofts -- priced at \$275,000 and below -- and luxury condos -- \$400,000 and up -- will easily sell. Sales of the lofts and condos -- along with the leasing of office space -- will begin in 90 days.

"We are four years out, and anybody involved in downtown housing will tell you there is less supply than demand," Poe said. "Two or three years ago that wasn't the case."

Craig Greenberg, 32, an attorney for the Museum Plaza investors, said projections show that about 10,500 people a day will use Museum Plaza -- office workers, tourists, hotel visitors, condo and loft owners.

Funding and construction

Museum Plaza will be built to withstand earthquakes -- it "will be a very stable and solid structure," Greenberg said.

Construction on Museum Plaza is expected to start in early 2007 and be completed in 2010, Greenberg said.

A park and pedestrian plaza, also paid for by the city and state, would connect Museum Plaza to the rear of the museums along West Main, including the

Frazier Historical Arms Museum, the Louisville Science Center and the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft.

The government would issue \$75 million in bonds for the improvements, with the annual debt to be covered by rebating 80 percent of the new state and local taxes generated by Museum Plaza, Greenberg said.

Local school taxes would not be part of the rebate, he said.

"We are not seeking funding for the private-development pieces of this project, like the hotels and condos," Greenberg said. "From day one, it's net positive to both the city and state because they are collecting at least 20 percent of the taxes."

Museum Plaza will become its own vibrant community, Greenberg predicted.

"This will be a 24/7 environment," he said. "Part of the goal of this project is to give the revitalization effort downtown and on West Main a big boost."

Brown and Wilson also expect the building to help transform Louisville, in terms of art and architecture, much as new museums designed by star architects have done for other cities -- from the Milwaukee Art Museum, designed by Santiago Calatrava, to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, designed by Frank Gehry.

Abramson agreed.

"The fact that a world-renowned architect is designing a building and he's drawn here by local citizens ... to me is a tremendous reflection of confidence in what is going on in Louisville."

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