

NASHVILLE CIVIC DESIGN CENTER

The Nashville Convention Center: Where to Put a New One and What To Do with the Old One

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To build or not to build a new convention center for Nashville is an open question. Those who make their livings attracting visitors to town--or selling tourists something once they've arrived--are obviously in favor. Those who think that the city has invested quite enough in big boxes--arena, stadium--for the foreseeable future, or who question the cost/benefit ratio, are opposed, or at least skeptical.

From an urban design standpoint, the prime consideration is: If the city builds a new convention center, where will it go?

Convention center boosters say Nashville needs a structure with a minimum of 400,000 square feet of contiguous floor exhibition space, a minimum of 1.1 million square feet of gross space, and an adjacent 1,000 room hotel to stay in the game of competing for conventioners. That translates to a 15-acre footprint, with another 15 acres reserved for expansion. That's a big building. By way of comparison, the Gaylord Entertainment Center site is seven acres.



Comparison diagram of convention center sites. Yellow indicates the existing convention center footprint. Pink indicates sites chosen by a 2001 HOK & Hawkins Partners study. Blue indicates the Plan of Nashville's proposed site. Note how many streets would be blocked by the pink footprints. Drawing over photograph, 2004: Gary Gaston



Kansas City's Bartle Hall Convention Center. Instead of shoehorning its expanded convention center into existing downtown blocks, Kansas City built the structure over the downtown interstate. The center, which is 330 feet wide, rises about 45 feet over the highway and two other downtown streets. Photograph, 2002: Alex S. MacLean/Landslides

Placing such a skyscraper within the city street grid--south of the Gaylord Entertainment Center is one such proposal--would obliterate the block structure of a big chunk of SoBro, thus concentrating traffic on the remaining streets and setting up a massive obstacle for pedestrians to negotiate. A convention center is also by its very function inward looking and therefore adds nothing to the streetscape unless wrapped with other uses, making the footprint larger still.

Locating a convention center on the former site of the thermal plant has also been proposed. But this placement would block public views and access to the Cumberland River by an intermittent land use whose building envelope is, as already stated, inward-looking and therefore not functionally enhanced by a river view.

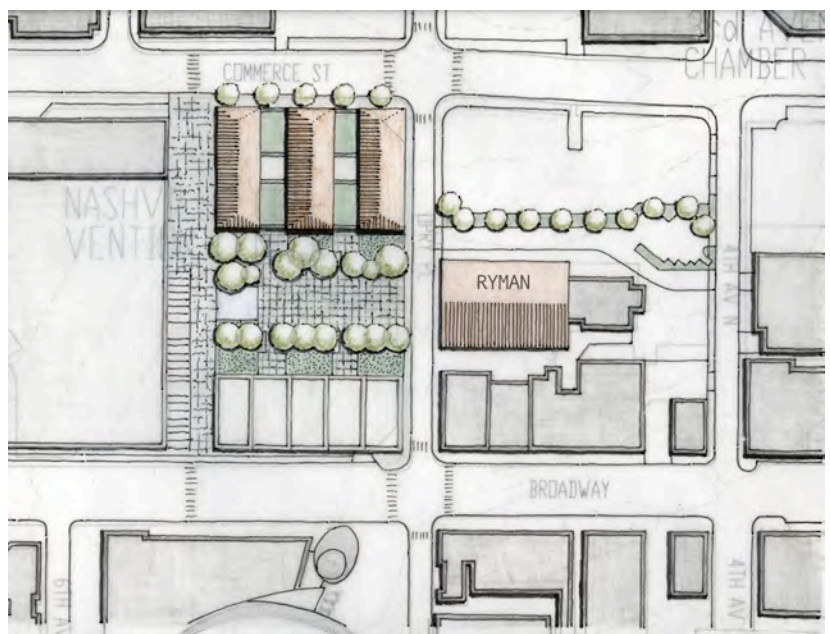
At an October 2001 urban design forum on the subject, one participant suggested that the best strategy would be to bury the convention center underground. The Plan of Nashville recommends a similar strategy.

The Plan proposes that the new convention center be placed spanning the railroad gulch, flanking what is now the Church Street viaduct. Railroad and automobile traffic can pass underneath the convention center. Messy issues such as loading and unloading can also be accomplished in an "out of sight" area that does not conflict with pedestrian or automobile traffic. At street level, the convention center can be designed in a way that it engages the pedestrian, with storefront shops and spaces that open onto the gulch.

At present this placement may seem remote. But as the anchor to the western end of downtown Church Street, the convention center would actually be integral to the redevelopment of this reviving part of the city. Convention patrons would have an easy stroll along the street to restaurants and entertainment venues to the east, such as found in Printer's Alley and on Second Avenue.

The current convention center stands on prime real estate. If the city builds a new center, the old one will be demolished. In this proposed redevelopment site plan, the Renaissance Hotel retains a portion of the old convention center immediately behind the hotel tower for smaller hotel functions.

Site plan of current convention center site showing proposed redevelopment. Note the plaza in front of the Ryman Auditorium. Drawing, 2002: Jason Hill.





The plan is oriented around a public plaza in front of the Ryman Auditorium, allowing the facade of the historic building to be viewed from a distance and providing a gathering place for natives as well as tourists. The plaza is flanked by mixed use--commercial and residential--buildings.

Redeveloped site looking toward Ryman Auditorium. Drawing, 2002:
Jason Hill

The Broadway facade of the new development extends the urban character--and the entertainment district of lower Broad one block west. The upper levels of these buildings fronting the plaza have retail and commercial space to bring activity to the open space. Buildings facing Commerce Street feature residential uses, for which the plaza will serve as an amenity.

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