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MEDAL 1997



Center in the Square  
Roanoke, Virginia

**CENTER  
IN THE  
SQUARE**

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This is an excerpt from:

# **Visions of Urban Excellence**

**1997**

**Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence**

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 98-071243  
ISBN: 1-890286-02-8

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130 Prospect St.  
Cambridge, MA 02139

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## Center in the Square At A Glance

### What is Center in the Square?

- A cultural center housing The Art Museum of Western Virginia; The Science Museum of Western Virginia; the Roanoke Valley Historical Museum; Mill Mountain Theatre; and the Arts Council of the Blue Ridge in one central location.<sup>1</sup>
- An organization that supports the arts and sciences through free rent for tenant organizations, marketing, and a variety of support services.
- The leading edge of the revitalization of the farmer's market/ market area and downtown in Roanoke, Virginia.

### Who Made the Submission?

- Center in the Square, a non-profit organization.

### Major Goals of Center in the Square

- To provide support, including free rent and other services, for arts organizations so that they can focus their resources on programs and exhibits.
- To use arts and cultural activities to support education in Western Virginia schools.
- To provide for the adaptive reuse and preservation of an abandoned but historic building in the market area.
- To increase accessibility to the arts and sciences for Western Virginians and visitors.
- To provide a destination in downtown Roanoke to support market area revival.

### Major Accomplishments of Center in the Square

- The arts organizations in Center in the Square are thriving, with numbers of visitors and quality of programs well beyond what would be expected in a city of its size.

- Center in the Square has become an important arts and sciences resource for the schools in Roanoke and Western Virginia.
- Center in the Square, and the organizations it supports, have become an important destination in Roanoke and an important draw for businesses and the city when they are marketing relocation to the area.
- The farmers' market is strong and is attracting a large and more diverse group of consumers.
- Downtown Roanoke, particularly in the area of the historic marketplace, has improved dramatically since the inception of Center in the Square. It is now a thriving destination for visitors and has a lively night life.

### Reasons for Including Center in the Square as a Finalist

- Revival of the downtown is a critical issue in many small cities.



Center in the Square, including the McGuire Building and the Farmers Market

- Center in the Square emphasizes the importance of cultural organizations and programming in the civic life of urban centers.
- The initial planning process employed an innovative and effective mode of community participation.

#### Selection Committee Questions and Concerns for Site Visit

- How do the various entities and activities interact and coordinate? Is there cooperation, synergy, joint efforts? How often do visitors come to visit more than one cultural entity?
- What is the impact of Center in the Square on downtown and its immediate surroundings? Does the activity bring economic or other benefits to downtown? Are there traffic problems?
- How has it evolved or changed over the past 14 years? How has leadership succession been handled? Has leadership change led to changes in vision or programs?
- How well is the project linked to local schools and educational programs?
- How well does the architectural/interior design work? How has it been changed over time?

#### Final Selection Committee Comments

- The Committee was impressed with the way Center in the Square used a broad, participatory process to reach out to the citizens of Roanoke in the initial planning stages.
- It was felt that more might have been done with the indoor and the outdoor space to further enhance the architecture of Center in the Square.
- Center in the Square has shown itself to be sustainable and has evolved since its inception.
- Center in the Square should continue to involve lower income and minority citizens in the management of the project.

## Project Description

### Project Chronology

**1976** The Downtown Business League raises \$100,000 to recruit business to downtown, and begins discussions that lead to Design '79.

**Fall, 1976** Mill Mountain Theatre burns, creating impetus to search for alternative arts housing. Betty Carr Muse and George Cartledge Sr. first discuss concept of bringing all major arts organizations to one site.

**1979** Design '79 is created to develop the downtown plan, rents a downtown storefront as its headquarters, and uses newspaper and television feedback sessions, and citizen workshops to produce report with recommendations and a catalog of design possibilities. One of the major recommendations is to provide a building downtown to serve as home for cultural organizations.

**1978** The McGuire Building is identified as possible site by the Downtown Business League. Ezerá Wertz buys a store to sell farm produce and John Williams opens Billy's Ritz restaurant, betting on revival of market area.

**June 1979** McGuire Building accepted as site for cultural center. George Cartledge leases building for the group, and the Southwest Virginia Center for the Arts and Sciences, Inc. is chartered (its name is later changed to Western Virginia Foundation for Arts and Sciences).

**February, 1981** Renovation work begins on the McGuire Building.

**April, 1981** Center in the Square is formed as an operating entity for the foundation. Funding support from various sources reaches \$5 million.

**November, 1981** Groundbreaking for adjacent city garage, including space for theater and Planetarium.

**July–August, 1982** Virginia General Assembly awards \$2.6 million grant for construction of Center in the Square. \$2.5 million tax-exempt bonds sold to complete financing.

**December, 1983** Center in the Square holds official opening. 40,000 people participate in opening weekend.

**1987** Phelps & Armistead Building, adjacent on Church Avenue, is purchased, adding 30,000 square feet to Center in the Square.

**1989** \$3 million renovation (50% private and 50% public funding) and expansion turns Phelps & Armistead Building into “Center on Church,” with second theater, Arts Council office space, classrooms, workrooms, shops, etc.

**May, 1990** Center on Church has gala opening.

**1995** Hotel Roanoke reopens as refurbished hotel and conference center.

**Key Participants** *(persons interviewed are indicated by an asterisk\*)*

Center in The Square

James C. Sears, Ed. D.,\* *President and General Manager, Center in the Square*

Carolyn Nolan,\* *Grants Officer*

City of Roanoke

H. Bern Ewert,\* *former City Manager*

Dr. Noel Taylor,\* *former Mayor*

Bob Herbert,\* *City Manager*

Brian Wishneff,\* *Brian Wishneff Associates (former Economic Development Coordinator)*

**Downtown Business League** *(all have been on Center Board of Directors)*

John Hancock

Frank Clement\*

George Cartledge Sr.

Betty Carr Muse\*

Anne Hammersley

Bill Hubbard\*

Center in the Square Board of Directors

Warner Dalhouse,\* *CEO, Dominion Bank (retired)*

Dr. David Goode, *CEO, Norfolk Southern Corporation*

Bittle Porterfield, III,\* *Chairman*

Cultural Organizations

Susan Jennings,\* *The Arts Council of the Blue Ridge*

Ken Schutz,\* *The Science Museum of Western Virginia*

Joanne Kuebler,\* *The Art Museum of Western Virginia*

Jere Hodgins,\* *Mill Mountain Theatre*

Rich Loveland,\* *Roanoke Valley History Museum*

Downtown Business

Sig Davidson,\* *Davidsons*

John Williams,\* *Billy's Ritz*

Richard Kurshan,\* *Gessler Associates*

Farmers/Produce Sales

Ezera Wertz\*

Others

Former State Senator William Hopkins\*

Claudia Whitworth,\* *Publisher, Roanoke Tribune*

Architect

Timm Jamieson,\* *Hayes, Seay, Mattern & Mattern, Inc., Architects, Engineers, Planners*

### Organization and Leadership

Center in the Square's mission is to:

“Provide housing for cultural organizations in the Roanoke Valley... (as a) landlord; but a particularly beneficent landlord... By providing free space and absorbing the operating costs of that space... the Foundation frees the sponsored organizations from those mundane expenses (so that)... one hundred percent of each dollar raised by the organizations goes directly for the benefit of the community” (from “A Reinforcement and Expansion of the Basic Mission of Center in the Square,” 1997).

The goal of Center has always been to assure the stability and viability of these organizations so that they can provide better quality arts and sciences “than should reasonably be expected in a community of this size.” By putting all the organizations in one space, however, they also created a “critical mass (that) attracted public support, enthused the community and spawned economic benefits beyond anyone's wildest dream.”

Center in the Square is a non-profit organization which maintains ownership of the physical facility and uses its facility, budget, staff and services to support “basic” arts and cultural organizations. The most important aspects of that support are rent-free space for five cultural organizations, providing them with maintenance, utilities, custodial services, security and various other services. The five organizations are:

- The Art Museum of Western Virginia
- The Science Museum of Western Virginia
- Roanoke Valley History Museum
- Mill Mountain Theatre
- The Arts Council of the Blue Ridge<sup>1</sup>

Center in the Square controls the building and its services, and its board has sole discretion over decisions of tenancy (that is,

what new organizations might be added). The cultural organizations themselves are, however, totally independent in all internal decisions. They each have a board of directors which makes policy and personnel decisions. Each organization decides on its own programs and when, whether and how much to cooperate with other organizations. Joint programming between two organizations does not evolve from Center in the Square policy, but is decided by each player on judgments of mutual benefits, cost, timing, etc. The regular monthly meeting of the Center in the Square President and Executive Directors of all organizations is not to set policy or to make decisions to which all must adhere. Rather, it is a discussion and exchange of information among peers which can result in cooperation.

This loose structure evolved for both practical and philosophical reasons. When Center in the Square was created it was not clear that it could attract these, or any, important cultural organizations. Of over 50 invitation letters sent out, only these five responded positively. Organizers felt that serious organizations and competent directors would not be attracted if it meant giving up independence in making programming decisions.

In its 14 years of operation, through changes in its own directors and those of the member organizations, Center in the Square maintained continuity, and expanded its services in quality and outreach. Because cooperation is so largely based on the personal contacts among directors, each change “takes some getting used to,” but the organization has demonstrated durability over time.

The Board of Directors is a primary source of stability and continuity. The original board was made up of the influential, civic minded and wealthy individuals who helped found Center in the Square. Several have remained members for the entirety of its existence. The board, concluding that it should have more turnover of membership, has instituted a three year term limit and has added members of the minority community to increase its diversity.

### Project Context

#### The City and the Region

The City of Roanoke is located in a valley amid the Blue Ridge Mountains, in the lower part of the Shenandoah Valley. The valley served as a passage to the south, first for local Indian tribes and later for early American settlers. The barrier of the mountains limited early large scale development. Roanoke has always existed as a railroad town. The first trains came through in 1852, encouraging the development of tobacco warehouses and processing plants. The growth of the City of Roanoke can be traced to the junction there of east-west and north-south rail lines by the Norfolk and Western Railroad (N&W) in 1881. N&W set up their shops and operations in Roanoke and quickly began to buy and develop land for housing, maintenance facilities and offices. It built the Hotel Roanoke in 1882.

The downtown developed with a lively commercial area immediately adjacent to a marketplace, an area where farmers would sell their produce directly to consumers, largely in open air stalls. A market building was built in 1886 to house a meat market on the ground floor and an opera house upstairs.



19th century market scene at the McGuire Building

As Roanoke grew, it attracted a more diverse base of industry. As a transportation center and the largest city in the region it has served for more than a century as an economic and medical hub for the whole of southwestern Virginia and eastern West Virginia. As a symbol of its growth and pride, citizen groups erected an 88-foot wide illuminated star on Mill Mountain (overlooking the center of the city), touted as the largest man made star in United States. From this symbol the city took its nickname, “The Star City of the South.”

After World War II, population and development spread outward from the city and into the county. Roanoke responded to population increases by annexing adjacent county land until the state legislature halted the practice in 1978. Since then there has been continued housing development of farm lands in Roanoke County and in other adjoining counties. The city’s population is now approximately 100,000, with upwards of 250,000 living in the multi-county region. Roanoke classifies itself as “second tier city,” and prides itself on the advantages of its lifestyle, such as low crime, slow pace, and moderate cost of living.

Center in the Square has garnered broad support in a state not known for arts funding, and a region in which jurisdictions have often been in conflict. Roanoke City and County, for example, have built separate jails and convention centers because of their difficulty working together. It is impressive that the city, the county, and other jurisdictions many miles away use, lay claim to, and provide financial backing for Center in the Square.

#### The Deterioration of Downtown

Many in Roanoke connect the decline of the downtown business district to the growth of shopping malls, which evolved from a few neighborhood centers in the 1960s to increasingly large regional malls in the 1970s and 1980s. Shoppers abandoned the downtown and stores fled to branches in the outlying malls as downtown vacancies mounted. As one Center in the Square



director commented, “we were malled and Wal-Marted to death.” Through the 70s the market area became home to adult book stores (6 at one count), “skid row-type bars,” and prostitutes. Farmers in their open-air stalls remained, although fewer in number, and they saw business dwindle as many customers were afraid or unwilling to shop there. One farmer said the “good people would not come down.”

John Williams was an early pioneer in re-establishing an up-scale restaurant (Billy’s Ritz) in the market area in 1979. Customers there would ask for window seats so that they could watch prostitutes as they strolled by to provide an ad hoc, but quite intentional floor show. There are also many stories that indicate a pervasive sense of pessimism among many that the deterioration of downtown and the trend towards the suburbs was irreversible. Civic leaders felt that a major effort was needed to improve the area or the farmers would leave and the market area would be abandoned.

#### **Center in the Square — Development and Implementation of the Idea**

Center in the Square came from a “confluence of several events,” says former Board President Warner Dalhouse. In 1976 a small group of business and civic leaders, who met regularly to discuss local matters, became alarmed at the state of deterioration of the downtown area and formed the Downtown Business League. Their purpose was to discuss ways of reviving the area. Over lunch, they collected \$100,000 among themselves to start the process of recruiting businesses back to downtown.

In October of that year Mill Mountain Theatre burned down. Betty Carr Muse, daughter of League member John Hancock, and George Cartledge, also part of the businessmen’s group, discussed possibilities for a replacement home for the theater. They came up with the idea of bringing several cultural organizations together at a downtown site. During this same period city officials, convinced

that safe, convenient parking was critical for shoppers, were looking for ways to apply for Urban Development Action Grants (UDAG) to create a parking garage downtown.

Design ’79 brought together these concerns, elements, and interests. Design ’79 was a city-sponsored planning effort designed to seek community input and support for a plan to renew the market area as well as the broader downtown. A wide-scale effort was created to garner input. That effort included creating a storefront design center in the heart of downtown where passers-by could see and comment on plans that were posted in the window. The process was literally on display. Newspaper pieces presented ideas and solicited opinions. Most innovative (in this pre-talk radio era) was the use of a 3-hour prime time television design-athon to discuss renovation ideas and take on-air calls with viewer response. The final report of Design ’79 called this “citizen participation on a scale never before attempted in the United States.” Its stated goals were to “rekindle spirit,” recreate the downtown as a “destination point,” recycle older buildings, restore the historic market area, bolster retail sales, and develop vacant land.

Design ’79 was guided by a steering committee of 15 prominent citizens and business leaders, several of whom were from the Downtown Business League, and the city manager.<sup>2</sup> It included citizen workshops with 50 community representatives. In the end over 3,000 ideas were received and over 1,000 of them used in the plan. For example, based on public input, the committee abandoned the idea of tearing down the library and developing that site along with the adjacent park. Instead, the library was expanded and the park re-landscaped.

The major recommendations of Design ’79 included creating a bond issue to finance capital improvements in the downtown/market area, exploring the feasibility of creating a hotel-convention center complex downtown, and developing a cultural center to bring together several cultural organizations to downtown.

While there was some support for clearing out the farmer's stalls, the final plan kept the farmer's market as the centerpiece of the revitalization.

Obtaining a facility involved both the very public planning process and the private discussions of Business League members. While Design '79 recommended putting a cultural center downtown, it did not suggest a site. Several had been mentioned including the library and post office buildings. A consultant, however, suggested putting the center in the market area, to play upon and reinforce the natural strengths of the farmers market. When Business League members learned in 1979 of the availability of the McGuire Building, an abandoned farm implements warehouse in the center of the market area, Cartledge personally leased the building to hold it as a possible site. Later that year it was purchased from the owner and officially adopted for the cultural center.

Turning Center in the Square into a reality involved finding the funding to complete the restoration of the site, and convincing the cultural organizations to become tenants. Even though private

fundraising went well, banks were not willing to lend construction funds on such pledges. When it was clear that state funds would be needed, Senator William Hopkins was recruited. Hopkins was the legislator from the area and majority leader in the state senate. Although Hopkins was successful in getting his friends in the legislature to appropriate funds for the idea, the price tag continued to rise. The eventual cost of the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems alone exceeded the original estimate for the construction, requiring several additional requests for an increased level of funding. Eventually (after hiring a train to bring the governor and entire legislature to Roanoke to be wined, dined and regaled with city plans and funding requests) Center in the Square received \$2.6 million from the state for construction, which, along with bonds and private contributions allowed construction to begin.

Only five cultural organizations expressed serious interest in joining this new venture. Mill Mountain Theatre and the Arts Council were obvious candidates — neither had a permanent home. The Science Museum was in a small school house with an uninspiring collection (“a lot of things in pickle jars”). The Historical Society had a small store front collection in an out-of-the-way area. The Art Museum was in the best shape. It had use of a stately old home in the posh section of Roanoke, where most of its board and patrons lived. The Art Museum was particularly concerned about moving downtown, away from its base and to a place where its patrons were reluctant to travel, even though they might have only a few dozen visitors in a weekend. The Art Museum eventually came — as did the other four organizations — although it was said to have arrived “kicking and screaming,” enticed by an offer its board could not refuse — free rent.

There is some disagreement about the role of the city in developing Center in the Square. Some people who were involved at the early stages feel that the city was not sufficiently active in promoting the project, in terms of obtaining funding or promoting public



Design '79 community meeting

support. They suggest that the city was largely interested in Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) funding and was on the sidelines for much of the early struggle. Hopkins said that the city council wanted no part of the project, which they saw as driven by the “silk stocking crowd” - not their prime constituency.

Others, including city officials, place city government more squarely in the middle of the process. Dr. Noel Taylor, mayor at the time, is quite passionate in saying that the creation of Center in the Square was a joint effort of government, business, and the community. Current city officials indicate that public opinion would not have supported direct city spending for downtown revival. Downtown was seen as too unlikely a candidate for success. Rather, they suggest, the city manager had to act “covertly,” supporting the process without risking public exposure that could have threatened the entire effort. They point to the street improvements in the market area as evidence of city action. John Williams notes that his partners took the risk of investing in their early upscale restaurant based on assurances from the city manager that the downtown would be revived.

### Current Status and Impact on Organizations

Center in the Square was, by all accounts, an instant hit with citizens as well as the tenant organizations. Forty thousand people came for the opening weekend. Billy’s Ritz saw business increase immediately by fifty percent. The Art Museum had more visitors in its first three weeks than it had drawn in any of the previous five years. Moreover, the crowd of visitors was much more diverse. One informant saw an African-American family, formally dressed on a Sunday afternoon, touring the Art Museum during the opening weekend. He had never recalled seeing an African-American visitor in the former location. “It was then that I knew we had done something special.”

Overall, attendance at the tenant organizations has increased

from six to twenty fold since the opening of Center in the Square. The Art Museum had 10,000 visitors in 1983, compared to 84,000 visitors in 1996. The Science Museum’s audience increased from 11,000 to 197,000, and the History Museum and Theatre went from 8,000 and 6,400 visitors respectively to 34,400 and 71,500 visitors<sup>3</sup>.

The organizations have also grown in sophistication of programs. Center in the Square helps in this respect in several ways. First, directors are able to focus their attention and fundraising on programs and exhibits, not rent and maintenance. Second, there is an expanded audience, in number and diversity, which increases the demand for improved and expanded program content. Third, there are opportunities for synergistic cooperation among the organizations. All of these organizations do indeed offer programs that are of a higher quality than one would expect in a city of this size.

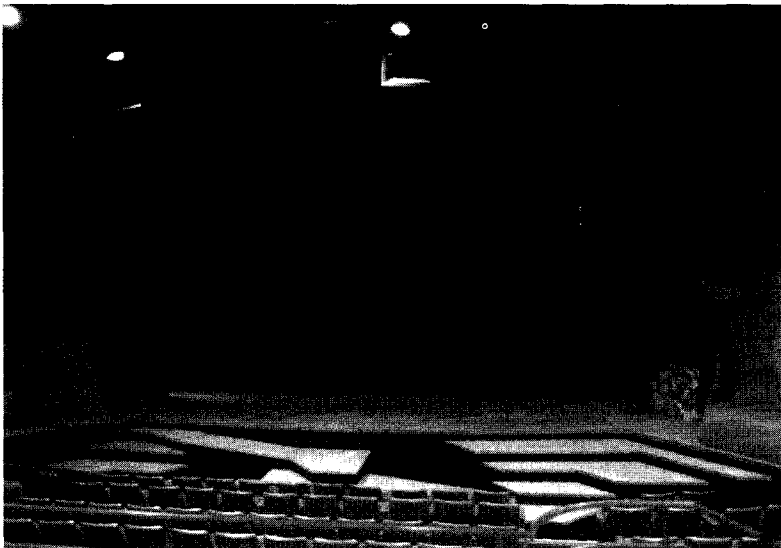
For example, Mill Mountain Theatre offers a broad variety of high quality productions for adults and children, with an emphasis on new works. The Science Museum has a large and sophisti-



Opening of Center in the Square

cated set of exhibits and will soon see its weather center become the locale for regular television weather report broadcasts. The Art Museum's collection has several small but selective areas of excellence. The History Museum has grown from a few artifacts in a store-front to a variety of exhibits, including hands-on archeological experiences.

Interaction and coordination among the member organizations is purely voluntary, although it is enhanced by proximity and the collegiality of monthly executive director meetings. Several people noted that they interact somewhat less now than in the recent past because of stresses caused by cuts in government funding for the arts. The Executive Directors say that they spend much more of their time on basic administration and program development and haven't been able to afford the time or staff for major coordination of efforts. There are, however, several significant examples of synergies, such as the summer camp program that includes use of most of the facilities.



Mill Mountain Theatre with small stage

Occasionally organizations collaborate on a specific program (such as when the Art Museum arranged a Seurat exhibit coincident with the opening of "Sunday in Park with George" at the theater). Through the aegis of Center in the Square, they engage in joint marketing and special events. There are no good data on the rate of individual versus multi-site visits.

The process of inventing Center in the Square shows an interesting interplay of public and private processes. Much of the early leadership, planning and critical ideas came from a private group of civic-minded businessmen, who knew and in some ways shaped the city. These same people, however, opened the process through Design '79 as Roanoke ran an extraordinarily public and inclusive effort that proactively sought input from the entire populace. The Downtown Business League was responsible for much of the energy, ideas, and private funding that made the Center in the Square happen and for years made up much of the board of directors. Center in the Square has recently sought to



Local Colors, an annual multi-cultural event

expand and diversify its boards, leading to much of the recent change at the board level.

Nevertheless, there is a question about the degree to which Center in the Square is “owned” by all its citizens. Some leaders in the African-American community, while being strong supporters of Center in the Square, argue that they have not been, and are not yet, fully involved in the planning of programs and events. The Center is still seen as something done by the city for them, rather than by them. Dr. Noel Taylor, on the other hand, an African-American who was mayor for 17 years, strongly feels that Center in the Square represents the whole citizenry of the area. Center in the Square has begun to diversify (three minority members were recently added to the board) and focused more resources on “Local Colors,” a Market Square ethnic celebration.

#### Impact on the Market, Downtown and the Region

While there have been dramatic improvements in the market area, it would be unfair to suggest that Center in the Square was the sole or



John Williams at his store located in the basement of CITS

direct cause of all of these changes. Rather, Center in the Square was the leading edge of a wave of changes, and its considerable success made each of the improvements that followed both easier and more likely to succeed. These include thirteen new and mostly upscale restaurants, the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of the old market building into a food court, and a variety of new retail stores, including an Orvis store. The many restaurants in the compact area of the market, some with live music, create a busy, lively and distinctly urban street presence during the day and evenings.

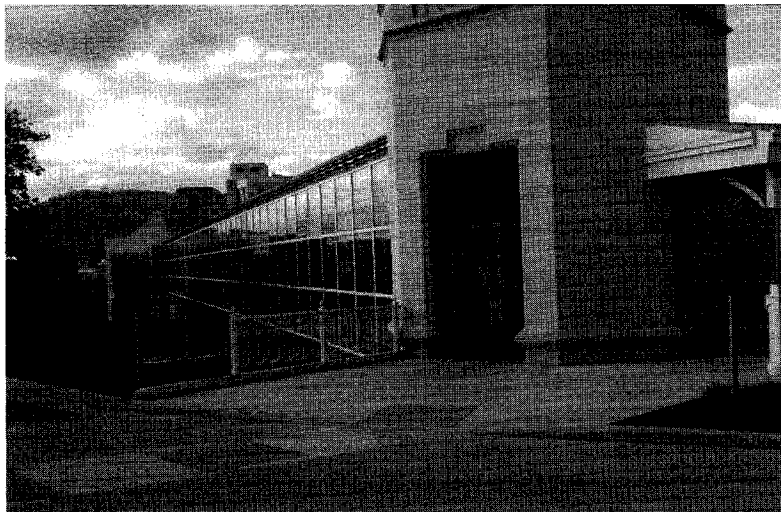
Many of the other Design '79 recommendations have been carried out. The library has been expanded and its adjacent park re-landscaped, and a number of new office buildings have been added to the downtown area, including a 21 story bank tower. While not architecturally distinguished, its visible presence on the skyline is symbolic of Roanoke's economic strength and downtown revival.

Also significant was the recent re-opening of the Hotel Roanoke. The hotel had been owned and run by the Norfolk and Western for over 100 years, but declined as the railroad reduced its presence in Roanoke. It finally closed in 1990. The grand scale of the hotel is hard to miss on entering downtown and its closing was very distressing, symbolizing the loss of something special. It was renovated with public and private investment, and reopened as a hotel/convention center in partnership with Virginia Polytechnic Institute, thirty miles away in Blacksburg. Public funding contributed \$7 million to a glass-enclosed bridge over the rail tracks that for the first time makes the hotel a part of the downtown. While Center in the Square was not directly responsible for the hotel's revival, it is an important destination for hotel guests. The strength of the market area played an important role in making the \$40+ million renovation possible.

The improvements to downtown are not complete. There remain struggling businesses in the market area and vacancies a

few blocks away. Downtown lost its last department store recently<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, about a mile north of Center in the Square an old high school has been converted by the city into the Jefferson Center, housing a variety of civic and cultural functions (one Center board member commented “they got our overflow”). The Jefferson Center differs from Center in the Square in many ways (including different funding sources and kinds of organizations) but city officials say that the success of Center in the Square made the Jefferson Center easier to promote and carry forward.

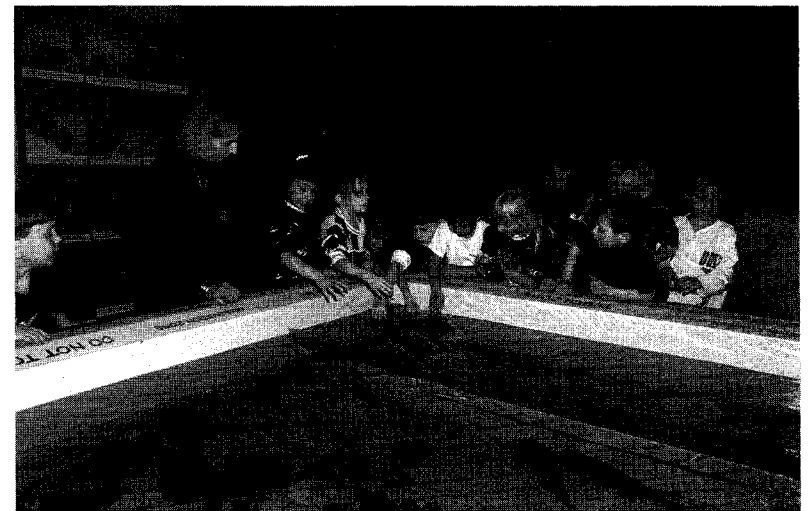
All of the facilities in Center in the Square have strong educational components, and several have children as a significant portion of their visitors. It is a regional resource, drawing visitors from as far as an hour and a half drive away. Schools throughout the area regularly bring classes there, with the Science Museum as the most popular attraction. The museums are formally presented as curriculum options in materials available to teachers in Roanoke city and county. School administrators, teachers and parents with whom we spoke make it clear that Center in the



Glass enclosed bridge connects Hotel Roanoke to the downtown.

Square is an important element in the art and science education of children in the region.

Center in the Square also plays a role in local economic development plans. In addition to the direct benefits of a growing downtown and market area, several local and Center in the Square officials stressed the importance of cultural offerings to business executives mulling Roanoke as one of several possibilities for relocation.



Young visitors at the Science Museum of Western Virginia

### Design and Maintenance

Center in the Square is a combination of an adaptive reuse of the McGuire Building, a large, white brick, 5-story L-shaped building with walls and columns designed to bear heavy loads, and a new, attached facility with a 320 car garage and space for a planetarium and theater. The building's historic character is considerably enhanced with restoration of its original cornice, completed in 1997.

One enters into a 5-story atrium where the addition joins the historic structure, with a circular staircase that has a landing at the entrance of each of the museums. The large and somewhat obtrusive white metal railings have a beveled top to reduce the risk of



Central staircase in Center's atrium

children climbing and falling. The railings run along the entire length of the stairway and suggest to some the homey qualities of picket fences. Each floor of the garage has a direct enclosed entrance to the corresponding museum floor. It was designed for easy access without steps, with elderly art patrons in mind. The architect notes that they were concerned originally about having too large an empty space in the first floor entry, but it is apparent now that they underestimated demand, leaving the lobby crowded and circulation difficult on some days.

The facility includes

- A three tier 407-seat main space for Mill Mountain Theatre;
- A 125-seat "black box" stage for experimental theater productions;
- The Art Museum of Western Virginia (28,000 square feet);
- The Science Museum of Western Virginia with almost 37,000 square feet of space and the 125 seat William B. Hopkins Planetarium;
- Roanoke Valley History Museum (17,000 square feet);
- Offices for The Arts Council of the Blue Ridge;
- 3 museums stores on the ground floor;
- Retail space (including the Roanoke Weiner stand, a local institution that predates Center in the Square, and Orvis, a store in the national chain);
- Indoor retail space for produce vendors, contiguous to the outdoor stalls, which are owned and controlled by the city. Center in the Square rents space to produce vendors at reduced rates to support the market.

The addition on Church Avenue, in the back of the original building, has significantly added to the amount and quality of space, although it has created some awkward connections. The Art

Museum, in particular, has a space that traverses both buildings with some labyrinthian passageways.

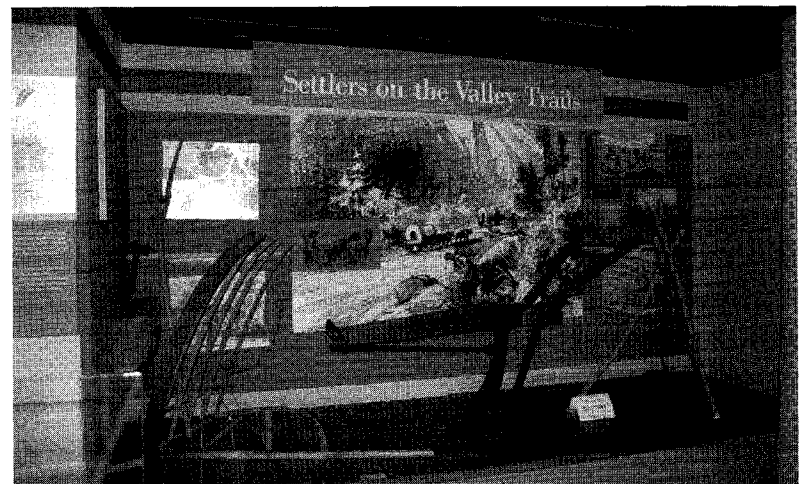
Center management plans some changes to the building's external appearance in the coming year, in addition to the cornice replacement. In particular, they are concerned that their banners are hidden from view of pedestrians by the awnings on the Orvis storefront. They will replace the banners, and other signs which they say were too conservative in the original plan, with larger and more striking ones.

<b>Development Costs</b>	
<b>McGuire Building</b>	
Purchase McGuire Building	\$250,000
Purchase land for garage	\$132,000
Foundation for parking	\$942,512
Garage Construction (incl. 2nd Theater & Planetarium)	\$6,874,640
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>\$8,199,152</i>
<b>Phelps &amp; Armistead Building (Center On Church)</b>	
Purchase	\$200,000
Construction	\$3,084,764
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>\$3,284,764</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$11,483,916</b>
<b>Sources</b>	
<b>McGuire Building (Center in the Square)</b>	
Pledges	\$4,000,000
State Grant	\$2,600,000
Bank Consortium	\$2,500,000
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>\$9,100,000</i>
<b>Phelps &amp; Armistead Building (Center on Church)</b>	
Donations	\$1,500,000
State Grant	\$1,500,000
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>\$3,000,000</i>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$12,100,000</b>

**Operating Budget**

<u>INCOME</u>		<u>EXPENSES</u>	
Grants		Salaries	\$414,432
State	\$461,915	Benefits	\$110,287
City of Roanoke	\$150,000	Travel	\$4,030
County of Roanoke	\$55,000	Contractual Services*	\$331,908
City of Salem	\$10,000	Marketing & Advertising	\$69,882
Botetourt County	\$5,000	Public Relations	\$14,755
Franklin County	\$5,000	Volunteers	\$3,300
Bedford County	\$5,000	Supplies	\$43,145
Contributions	\$320,000	Development	
Investment Income	\$120,651	Annual Campaign	\$59,386
Rentals	\$38,969	Endowment Campaign	\$173,189
Other Income	\$2,200	<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$1,224,314</b>
Special Events, Misc.	\$55,000		
	(phone commission, tours, etc.)		
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>\$1,228,735</b>		
Net Inc./Loss from Operations	\$4,421		
Depreciation	\$335,100		
<b>Net Income/Loss</b>	<b>(\$330,679)</b>		

\* includes utilities, phone, security, custodial, insurance, etc.



Display at Roanoke Valley Historical Museum



## Finances

### Development

Center in the Square was able to cover purchase and construction costs without need of a mortgage, so that yearly operating expenses could be met without charging the tenants rent. The City of Roanoke contributed to the project's development costs primarily through the application of UDAG funds for the parking structure.

### Operations

The largest portion of the operating income — almost \$700,000 — comes from the contributions made by various governmental agencies. These funds include large contributions from the state, city, and county, as well as smaller amounts from neighboring jurisdictions. The fact that so many jurisdictions contribute shows the value they place in the Center. This support is largely in recognition of the benefits for local schools.

Not in the budget is the almost \$1.7 million of uncollected rent and services from the tenant organizations. The Art Museum, for example, lists in its annual report “donated premises” valued at \$357,510, out of a total budget of \$1.1 million. The value for the other organizations of the donated rent is also approximately one-third of their annual budget.

## Current Projects and Future Plans

The management of Center in the Square has a number of plans for growth to support cultural institutions in Roanoke. In the near term they expect to expand beyond its current site. A purchase agreement was recently signed on a historic downtown hotel just one block from the current facility. After significant renovation, this hotel will serve as a dormitory for Mill Mountain Theatre actors, will house a children's drama enrichment program, and will provide significant retail space on the first of its three floors.

Planning is also underway for the construction of an 80,000 square foot addition to Center in the Square that will house new facilities for the Art Museum and for Mill Mountain Theatre.

Two more organizations have recently been added to the Center's family — the ballet and the opera companies. Both represent what Center in the Square sees as basic cultural institutions, and are in need of support to maintain their viability. Since space in the complex is limited, Center in the Square pays the rental fees that the ballet and opera companies incur at their current homes, giving them most of the same financial support as its other tenants, although they don't have the benefit of a central location.

Center in the Square has also begun to raise funds for an endowment, which would provide a cushion should public arts funding be reduced in the future. They have pledged for about 25% of their \$12 million goal, and are confident of achieving the rest in the next few years.

Center in the Square and each of its individual organizations have a variety of plans for programmatic expansion, including adding to public activities at the Market Square (such as the Local Colors ethnic festival we attended), and increasing contacts with school districts.

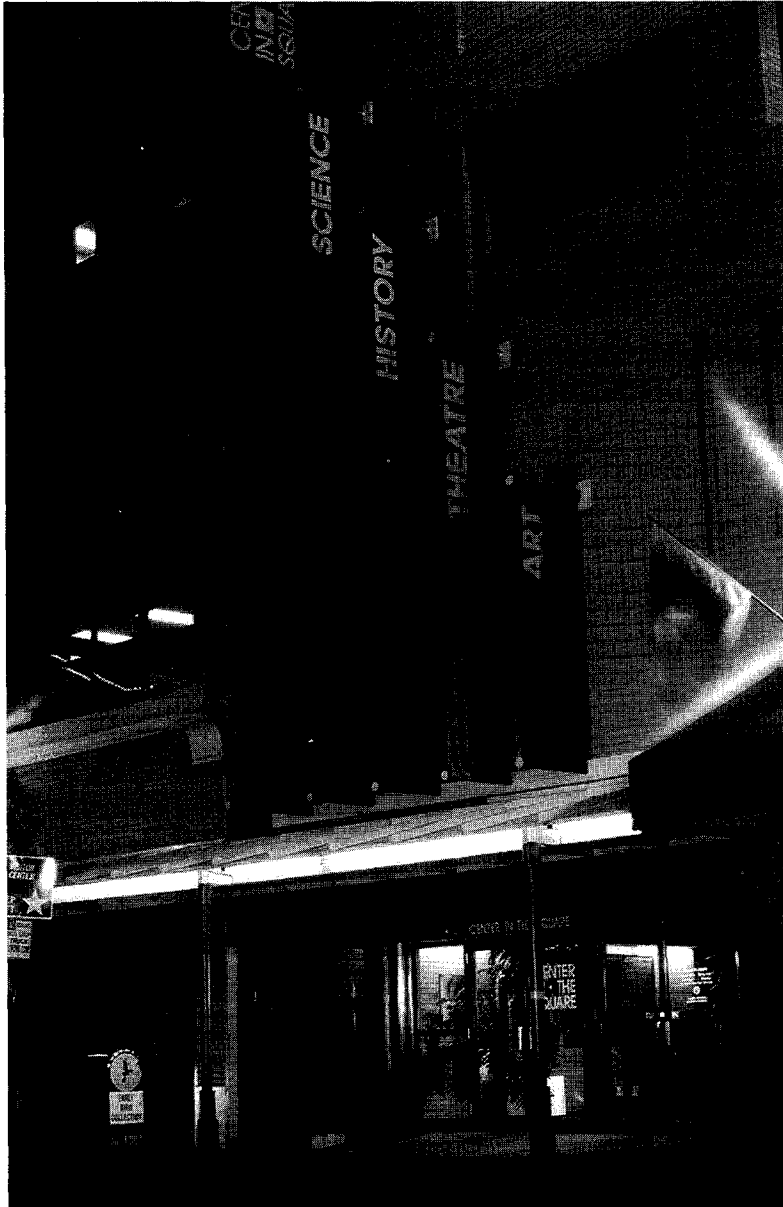
## Assessing Project Success

### How Well is Center in the Square Meeting its Goals?

- *To provide support, including free rent and other services, for arts organizations so that they can concentrate on programs and exhibits.*

Center in the Square is meeting this goal well. The Center and its tenant organizations are on sound financial footing.

- *Adaptive reuse and preservation of an abandoned but historic building.*



Entrance to Center in the Square

Center in the Square has done a good job creating a functional and well used space out of a warehouse building. There are some design concerns particularly in circulation space and signage (the latter is being addressed in current plans).

- *Easy accessibility to the arts for citizens and visitors.*  
The most easily quantifiable success of Center in the Square is the multi-fold increase in attendance by all of its tenant organizations. The arts in Roanoke and its surrounding region are of better quality, more easily reached, far better used, and visited by a broader and more diverse audience. Center in the Square has recently added minority board members, but still needs to increase its outreach to the minority community.

#### **Response to Selection Committee Questions and Concerns**

- *How do the various entities and activities interact and coordinate? Is there cooperation, synergy, joint efforts? How often do visitors come to visit just one versus several?*  
There are examples of cooperation and synergy from having these organizations together, but these are not the main reason for their coming to the Center in the Square, and do not represent a large part of their programming.
- *What is the impact of Center in the Square on downtown and its immediate surroundings. Does the activity bring economic or other benefits to downtown? Are there traffic problems?*  
Center in the Square has had a major impact on the revival of the market area and downtown. It cannot be credited with sole responsibility for the improvements, but it was called the lynchpin effort and one of first in series of related changes leading to the turnaround of the area. Center in the Square has also been credited with helping to attract companies relocating to the area. Streets in the area get congested occasionally, but traffic problems are not overwhelming.

- *How has it evolved or changed over the past 14 years? How has leadership succession been handled? Has leadership change led to changes in vision or programs?*

Center in the Square has continuously grown, both programatically and physically. It has expanded into new buildings and the tenant organizations have grown in the size and ambition of their programs. They have a number of plans for future expansion. Through several changes of directors, Center in the Square has come to recognize that fundraising and public relations are the two most critical aspects of the position.

- *How well is the project linked to local schools and educational programs?*

Center in the Square has become an integral part of the school programs for Roanoke City, Roanoke County and many more distant schools. The Science Museum and Art Museum, in particular, have become important supplements for school programs. The largest number of visitors are children in organized groups.



Farmer's market at Center in the Square

- *How well does the architectural/interior design work? How has it been changed over time?*

Center in the Square is not groundbreaking or exciting architecturally but the design works for its purpose. The interior court, while too small, provides good visual access to all areas and floors (although signage needs upgrading and the entry to the theater is hard to identify). The facility offers good access to the garage.

### Impact on the Neighborhood

As noted above, the impact on the neighborhood has been positive and significant in scope. The most immediate and significant effect seems limited to the three or four block area around the marketplace. The downtown area beyond that has shown signs of improvement, although there are still a number of vacancies. There have been improvements at the other end of downtown (the Jefferson Center) and one goal is to fill in development between these two anchors.

### Quality of the Physical Place

Center in the Square is an open and inviting cultural center that is very well used (especially by school children), and is located in the midst of a now-thriving and bustling market area. It is an important cultural, entertainment, and tourist destination in Roanoke. The marketplace area has been transformed from a dying and deteriorating place to one of restaurants, music, retail and a vibrant day and night street life. The mix of farm stands, restaurants, retail and museums/theaters in a very compact space has created a significant urban attraction for Roanoke.

### Values

- Center in the Square is a statement that the arts are a basic and important element of community life, not an expendable luxury.
- Preservation played a role in this project. This was not just by maintaining and restoring the McGuire Building, certainly

not the most interesting structure in the area, but in the preservation and invigoration of the farmers' market and the market area.

- Center in the Square also represents a significant democratization of the arts. As a southern city, Roanoke was institutionally segregated until the 1960s. The cultural institutions were clearly the province of the white establishment — by location and patronage. Because of their current location downtown and their outreach to the schools, these art and science organizations have more fully reached the diverse population of the region.

### Sustainability and Replicability

Center in the Square is 14 years old, and has shown that it can sustain itself over time and through periods of cutbacks in arts funding. Officials have difficulty imagining a situation that could force them to ask tenant organizations for rent. It has announced a \$12 million endowment campaign as a hedge against future cutbacks in government funding.



Market stalls adjacent to McGuire Building

The revival of downtown Roanoke has not gone unnoticed by other “2nd tier cities,” many of whom have similar problems. Many have sent officials to visit and several (including Buffalo, New York and Charleston, West Virginia) have initiated more formal attempts to study or model Center in the Square. Asheville, North Carolina developed a downtown cultural center based, in a significant part, on Center in the Square, although it is not nearly as successful.

### Selection Committee Comments

The Selection Committee was impressed at the way Center in the Square made use of a broad and participatory process to reach out to the citizens of Roanoke for help in the initial planning stages. They appreciated the scale of the effort to bring arts to downtown Roanoke as a way to improve the quality of, and access to, these crucial amenities, as well as to support the redevelopment of the area.

The Selection Committee was somewhat critical of the aesthetic quality of the design, feeling that more might have been done with the indoor and outdoor space to enhance the area. They also noted that, while the facility has served the whole community in many important ways, lower income and minority citizens were not a significant part of the early planning process, and remain under represented on the board of directors, despite the fact that steps are being taken to address this concern.

All in all, the Selection Committee felt that Center in the Square has shown itself to be sustainable, and has evolved and improved since its inception. It continues to increase then number of arts organizations under its umbrella, and actively seeks ways to reach more people (usually children) with the arts and sciences. It has had a significant positive impact on the revival of the market area and downtown Roanoke.

**Endnotes**

- 1 (On July 1, 1997, the Western Virginia Foundation for the Arts and Sciences, operating as Center in the Square added two organizations to its family — Opera Roanoke and Roanoke Ballet Theatre, Inc., making a total of seven beneficiary organizations. The two additional organizations are located in the Jefferson Center.)
- 2 Design '79 was funded 40% by the Downtown Business League and 60% by the city.
- 3 These figures include all visitors served, including programs taken off-site, such as to schools.
- 4 City officials argue that this loss was part of a larger trend and that the Center in the Square presence delayed the closing. There are several plans for the reuse of this large facility.

**References**

*Blueprint 2000: A Vision for the Cultural Community of the Roanoke Region of Western Virginia: final Report and Recommendations.*  
*The Arts Council of the Blue Ridge, 1992.*  
*Roanoke Design '79, City of Roanoke, 1979.*  
*White, Clare. Roanoke: 1740-1982, Roanoke Valley Historical Society, 1982.*

**For More Information**

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