

Ann Arbor's Center of the City

Adam F Zemke

2 June 2021

Overall Philosophy

I approach this issue with a desire to ensure our community, including city government, moves expeditiously and optimistically towards an activated, accessible and sustainable space at the center of the city - a space that is inclusive of Ann Arbor's diverse population and history, and is seen by all residents as a welcoming and popular place at which to attend events or simply relax. To this, I believe that a key component of the success of the Center of the City is attendance and use by people - quite simply - if people don't want to use the space, it will not be a success. This has to be a metric of progress in any short, intermediate and longer term plans.

Particularly since this project was first approved by voters in 2018 and progress has stalled since, it is important that stakeholders set forth plans with reasonable milestones for movement towards enactment of a long-term park or civic center space. Equally as important is that these milestones are successfully achieved on-time.

Below I've outlined my vision for use of the space in the short, immediate and long-term time periods. I want to be clear that while use may shift a bit from one time period to the next, there can be overlap in my eyes. Further, planning for the long-term vision and use should begin immediately and overlap with any short and intermediate term activities.

Short Term Use

It is important to define the short-term phase both in terms of length and also what is necessary for utilization during this period of time. In my view, short-term usage relies upon very little alteration of the space (eg. pop-up style uses), primarily uses the space(s) for events that do not require significant planning, and sets a time period of space use for the next six months. Given that it is now the beginning of June, this takes us through all of the summer, fall and into the start of winter.

Given Ann Arbor's rich history of creative street closure designed to encourage walkable spaces for outdoor dining and engagement, I believe that the city government and relevant parties should engage in this same process of vehicle-use closure for defined (and publicized) periods of time of the surface parking portion of the library parking structure. I believe that some flexibility around vehicle closure on weekends-only, or evenings and weekends, or for extended periods of time for special events should exist - as should the defined area - be it all of the surface lot parking spaces, a portion of them, and any combined use of the surface lot and Liberty Plaza. Coupled with this, I believe that these same relevant parties should engage in an external campaign with local businesses, civic and philanthropic groups to cultivate and coordinate use of these spaces. During this phase, any vehicle-use closure should be coordinated with specific alternative uses. Rough short-term use ideas that come to mind include (seasonally-dependent and can be combined together):

- Basketball pop-ups
- A temporary roller-rink
- Other recreational activity pop-ups
- Food truck/cart pop-ups
- Beer garden-style pop-ups

- Local artist pop-ups (potentially in coordination with A2 Art Fair)
- Yoga/Zumba/etc. pop-ups
- Outdoor movie/performance showings
- Pop-up shops and outdoor markets

Some examples from other locations:

UNDSCVRD Court, San Francisco (Photo: undscvrdcourt.com)



Mark's Carts, Ann Arbor (Photo: Classic Chicago Magazine)



River Beer Garden Pop-Up, Philadelphia (Photo: riverbeergarden.com)



Intermediate Term Use

While there are many ways that pop-up activities can carry through from a short-term phase to an intermediate phase, the use of a short-term phase allows the city and relevant parties some time to plan for more 'standing use' activities that require such a lead-time. My vision would be that the intermediate phase incorporate a mix of pop-up and more standing use activities based around longer-running events - such as a winter festival, the Ann Arbor Art Fair, etc. such that community members have an opportunity to become accustomed to events in the space, and to offer feedback to help innovate. I draw an intermediate vision from things like Detroit's Monroe Street Midway and similar outdoor activity spaces - such as markets and ice rinks - in New York, Boston, and other cities.

The intermediate term phase should serve as verification of what activities gain traction in our community and which are less popular, such that long-term alterations to the space can be informed and adjusted by this feedback. I would suspect that the intermediate phase would last from at least six to nine months, allowing at least a full year of planning for a long-term vision before permanent space alterations begin, but also allowing for use of the space to continue until ground is broke.

Monroe Street Midway Roller Rink, Detroit (Photo: MLive)



Winter Market, Capitol Park, Detroit (Photo: J'ADore Detroit)



Long Term Use and Planning

Ultimately creating a vision for the long-term use of this space is what likely brings everyone to this council. I believe that combining elements from the city's past - such as the organic and planned gatherings on the lawn of the second Washtenaw County courthouse - with an eye towards creating a new central gathering space that attracts and celebrates a diverse swath of Ann Arbor residents and visitors - is what a central space needs to satisfy. While what this space will look like and be called is something that I hope we can all gain consensus around, it's my vision that it fit the following minimum metrics:

- Be and feel accessible and inclusive to all residents.
- Be designed with multiple uses in mind - meaning that it can be adapted to include a range of things from temporary pop-ups to permanent longer-running activities/events - but similarly even in the absence of events, it should be welcoming and able to be 'organically activated' by community members.
- Have it's management housed in a location of city government, or a public-private partnership, that has the will, desire and revenue stream to maintain and help plan for public uses of the space, including coordination and cadence of events and making decisions on the use of the space as the entirety of the block changes over time.
- Be something that is a gem of the Ann Arbor community - somewhere that adds value to the lives of our residents and highlights our community.

I believe that at a minimum, this geographic footprint begins with an alteration of the top of the surface lot - to make it less like a parking lot - as well as a redesign of Liberty Plaza. I also believe that it is critical to provide some connection in-between these two entities such that instead of two separate places, they essentially become one. And I believe that a master plan should be developed, with the library and private interests who own property on the block, to create a long-term vision for it's entirety.

Planning for such an endeavor is no small feat - even for just a redesign of the surface lot and Liberty Plaza - but it must begin expeditiously. We should honor the community input work completed by the Center of the City task force, begin to form structure around what the space can be used for long-term, what is necessary to manage and govern it, and be ready to hire a professional design firm sometime in the intermediate phase. We should also begin to identify funding sources for all aspects of the project in it's entirety.

While I am not wedded to any particular design, I did find this visioning exercise interesting because it helped expand my thought of what the space(s) could become. To that end, there are no shortage of examples of what can go on top of what is now a barren top surface of a parking structure. Here are two.

Grant Park Parking Structure Roof Top Concept, Atlanta (Photo: Atlanta Magazine)



Yoga on the P&L Parking Roof Top Park, Kansas City (Photo)

