

The Block and New Urbanism

The Museum Collaboration Group (MCG) strongly supports the revitalization of downtown Peoria to invite living, working and leisure, including pedestrianism. For its proposed Peoria Riverfront Museum and Caterpillar Experience—together known as “The Block”—the MCG chose to reuse the urban site of the former Sears block to help further these key principles of “new urbanism,” as well as the “green” movement on the Peoria riverfront.

Highly skilled architects incorporated concepts of new urbanism into The Block’s design within the sometimes challenging constraints of the site, including:

- 17-foot slope from Washington Street to Water Street
- the need to work with or around existing footings and underground structures left from former buildings on the site
- 100-year flood level building requirements
- high water table due to proximity to the river
- rain water runoff from future buildings and the site

New Urbanism in Peoria

New urbanism has been promoted by the City of Peoria since 2002. In that year, collaborative public design sessions known as charrettes yielded the Heart of Peoria Plan, followed by the forming of the city’s Heart of Peoria Commission in 2004. More charrettes in 2006 provided suggestions for three key Peoria areas targeted for redevelopment, including the Warehouse District near The Block site.

The concept of new urbanism was endorsed by the Peoria City Council in 2003 when it adopted the Heart of Peoria plan “in principle.” In 2007, the council approved a new land-development code known as “form-based code” that supports new urbanism by emphasizing the urban form of a development, rather than its specific use.

The Block and the Heart of Peoria Plan

The firm of Zimmer, Gunsul, Frasca Architects LLC (ZGF), with offices in Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, New York and Washington, D.C., was selected to design The Block—in part because of the group’s extensive experience in designing museums in urban settings, including their understanding of new urbanism and sustainable design.

At the time of the architectural selection process in 2005, ZGF had recently completed the design and construction of the Iowa Science Center in Des Moines, Iowa. This downtown facility near the riverfront, featuring both an IMAX Theatre and a large, domed planetarium, is very similar in location and concept to the Peoria Riverfront Museum.

The MCG and the Heart of Peoria Commission collaborated extensively, meeting seven times from January 2005 through January 2006 during The Block’s initial site planning and design. ZGF participated in two of those meetings, in January and September 2005, and used information from the meetings and the 2002 Heart of Peoria Plan in its original

2005 design. It also later revised the plans to further support the principles, including eliminating surface parking from the site plan.

The site plan for what was then called the “Museum Square Project” was presented to the Peoria City Council at a meeting on Oct. 25, 2005, and approved at its Nov. 7, 2005, meeting.

The following statement is taken from the minutes of the Peoria City Council meeting on Nov. 7, 2005:

“Mayor Ardis pointed out, in the Heart of Peoria Commission minutes, it stated ‘Chairman Pro Tem O’Brien thanked Mr. Richerson for including the Heart of Peoria Commission in the process. He said he would like the Commission’s recommendations to reflect that he saw the fingerprints of this Commission in the process, and this project had moved significantly from where it had started.’ Mayor Ardis said he understood that the Heart of Peoria Commission had performed an extreme amount of work on this project, and he felt there had been significant interest by the Heart of Peoria Commission.”

Council Member Gulley moved to approve the preliminary site plan; it was seconded by Council Member Morris and approved unanimously.

The Heart of Peoria Plan, created by architectural consultants Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. following the 2002 charrettes, recommended for the former Sears block “a plan that makes optimal use of the whole block, taking full advantage of its central location as a crucial link between the Civic Center area and the riverfront.” It made seven more specific suggestions, which are listed below and followed by a synopsis of efforts by the MCG and museum designers to support these principles of new urbanism:

1. The axis of Fulton Street must be visually received by the Museum, and the axis must be continuous, either as a street or a pedestrian passage, through the Sears Block from Washington Street to Water Street.

- A continuous pedestrian passage from Washington Street, through The Block to Water Street is central to its design.
- Traffic control issues with Washington Street present challenges to The Block’s pedestrian-friendly environment. As Washington Street is a designated state highway, the MCG encourages investigation and consideration of traffic control options by the Illinois Department of Transportation.
- Because of the location and height of existing structures along the riverfront, no direct view of the river is possible from the Fulton Street axis. However, The Block has been designed to maximize river views from all angles that permit it.

2. The Sears Block must contain a mix of uses complimentary to the Museum, specifically retail and residential, in order to enhance the vitality of the Sears Block and encourage Peoria's efforts to become a city that is active 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

- The Block design includes retail areas for shopping and dining inside the museum and Caterpillar Experience, all accessible without purchasing admission to the facilities. In addition, 15,000 square feet within The Block along Water Street have been reserved for retail and commercial development.
- After surveying existing downtown Peoria residential opportunities and those planned for the Warehouse District, the MCG and their architects concluded the best use of the former Sears block would be to provide facilities to attract people to Peoria's riverfront area, rather than compete with currently underutilized downtown residential opportunities.
- The Block will welcome visitors with sustainable green space open to all 24/7. The Block's plaza will beckon pedestrians with wide walkways, seating featuring views of the cityscape, river, sculptures and gardens. Among the landscaping will be two interpreted bioswales featuring native grasses and wildflowers that will naturally capture and filter rainwater, conserving water and removing pollutants before they reach the Illinois River. Families will enjoy outdoor play-and-learn areas with a pendulum swing, sand clock, archeological dig area and other educational opportunities.
- The Block campus will dramatically increase foot traffic to the entire riverfront, bringing thousands of people to enjoy an expanding, walkable community of shops and restaurants.

3. The street frontages of the buildings of the Sears Block must be active. Water Street should have the highest level of pedestrian activity; Main and Liberty should provide support in their pedestrian connection between the Downtown and Riverfront; and Washington Street should allow a proper location for service access while remaining pedestrian-friendly. Significant gaps in the street edge, low-laying structures, service uses and blank walls at the street edge all contribute to a hostile environment unsuitable for street life.

- The Block has been designed with two faces: an urban face along Washington Street, which will guide and queue visitors into the facilities, and a natural face along Water Street, which will emphasize the natural beauty of the river and encourage pedestrianism. Main and Liberty streets, as well as the central passage through The Block, will provide highly walkable connections between these two faces.
- Bus pull-offs for groups visiting The Block will be along Washington Street. However, in keeping with new urbanism, the building has been located as close to the street as possible.
- Concealed service access for large deliveries will be along Liberty Street for the Peoria Riverfront Museum and along Main Street for the Caterpillar Experience.

All parking must be contained within the block in order to remove inactive deck facades from street level frontage.

- The majority of The Block’s parking will be underneath The Block to accommodate a City of Peoria requirement that the development replacing the Sears block provide 400 parking spaces. Caterpillar Inc. will provide security for this parking deck.
- Water Street will provide access to the museum’s preschool, where city-provided diagonal parking will allow parents to pick up and drop off their children.
- Additional city-provided diagonal parking will be available along Water, Liberty and Main streets, designed with wide sidewalks, traffic-calming corner bump-outs and attractive landscaping encouraging pedestrianism.

Residual plots for any future private development must provide an attractive footprint size and orientation and allow for efficient layout of requisite parking facilities. Access to both to Washington and Water Street is necessary; Washington is a B-grade street that will provide car and service vehicle access, while Water Street is planned to become an A-grade street offering a high quality pedestrian environment.

- The City of Peoria has pledged \$1.5 million in improvements to Water Street between Liberty and Hamilton streets to make it more pedestrian-friendly and safer, especially along the adjacent train tracks, and raise it as much as 3 feet to minimize flooding. Part of an overall Water Street upgrade project, these improvements will match those already made to Water Street between State and Liberty streets, and from Hamilton Street to the Riverplex.
- Parking needs for the planned retail and commercial developments along pedestrian-friendly Water Street would be accommodated by parking around and under The Block, as well as across Water Street.

At a minimum, the height of the building(s) must be the equivalent of two stories in order to relate in scale to the urban fabric of downtown Peoria.

- This suggestion will be met or exceeded by all buildings on the block.

All open space must be designed to be complementary to the urban context of the surrounding buildings and uses. Any natural areas, no matter their size, must be contained within hardscape and must be programmed to remain active during non-business hours while still facilitating the Museum’s needs.

- In response to citizen requests, green space will be an important part of The Block. All outdoor areas will be inviting and eco-friendly, inviting socializing, relaxing and learning.
- The Block’s outdoor campus will be open to the public 24/7, and The Block’s day and evening programming will greatly contribute to their use, as well as an increased overall activity level in downtown Peoria.

The chosen architect of the Museum must be an acknowledged master, appropriate to the scale and importance of this civic site.

- ZGF was selected after more than 40 architectural firms were evaluated under the guidance of David Chasca, Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois, Champaign, Ill.
- Over the past 40 years, the design excellence and quality of ZGF’s projects have been recognized with more than 250 national, regional and local awards. In 1991, it received the industry’s highest honor, the national Architecture Firm Award from the American Institute of Architects.
- For a comprehensive overview of ZGF, visit www.zgf.com.

Mission Green

In addition to embracing new urbanism, The Block’s design also avidly supports “green” principles for reducing, reusing and recycling waste through:

- **Recycling.** The Block established its commitment to sustainable practices by reusing an urban site—the former Sears block—and recycling more than 90 percent of the materials from the demolished building and parking deck. Many of those materials were used in rebuilding local portions of I-74.
- **Reducing pollution.** Rain falling on parking lots, streets and buildings often drains into nearby water sources, carrying with it pollutants. The Block’s bioswales will help prevent this, naturally capturing and filtering potential run-off, and putting it to good use.
- **Using energy wisely.** The Block’s design will maximize the use of natural daylight for lighting, helping to reduce energy use. In common areas and galleries not light-sensitive, energy-efficient windows will be used to maximize daylight. Outdoor lighting will be energy efficient and designed to contribute as little as possible to night-time light pollution.
- **Reusing materials.** Wherever possible, recycled materials will be used in The Block’s construction, from floors and carpets to walls and ceilings, as well as in exhibit components.
- **Encouraging smart transportation.** The Block will encourage the use of the local transit system, and provide bike racks for staff and visitors, encouraging fuel savings and reducing pollution.
- **Teaching green principles.** The Peoria Riverfront Museum will be green in spirit, too. Educational programs will share the eco-friendly practices at work on The Block and give visitors tips for “going green” at home.

Conclusion

The MCG is dedicated to new urbanism and green principles. Within the constraints posed by the site, The Block’s planners have worked consistently and tirelessly to design an inviting and functional development.

The Block will contribute extensively to revitalizing Peoria’s riverfront by turning a seven-acre eyesore that’s been decaying or vacant for 15 years into a vibrant, eco- and pedestrian-friendly center for the arts, education and entertainment. It will most certainly encourage people to live, work and play in the “Heart of Peoria.”