

Staples: Oilers Plaza is a bold move for a cold city

Public and critics like what they see of arena district plans

BY DAVID STAPLES, EDMONTON JOURNAL DECEMBER 14, 2012



The downtown arena district plans includes a large outdoor space called Oilers Plaza.

EDMONTON - The private developers of the \$2-billion Edmonton arena district intend to make a huge bet that Edmontonians will enjoy congregating on both summer and winter days in a major outdoor space, Oilers Plaza, in front of the proposed downtown arena.

So far, at least, members of the public like what they see in the proposed design of the plaza and the district. But along with wondering if the controversial arena and surrounding district will ever get built, local urban design experts wonder just how pleasant the plaza is going to be, especially on cold winter days.

An online Edmonton Journal poll found that 57 per cent of 500 respondents “love” the proposed design, while just five per cent “hate” it, with the rest somewhere in the middle.

Architectural critics save their highest praise for the 50,000-square-foot Oilers Plaza planned to sit at the main entrance to the arena, south of 104th Ave.

The Katz Group/WAM Development project will create one of the world’s great sports and entertainment districts, the project’s lead architect Michael Shugarman said in a presentation to city council Wednesday. “Although the arena is the catalyst, the plaza is the district’s heart, its centre of energy and gathering,” said Shugarman.

Restaurants and other stores will surround the plaza. To help deal with the cold, fires in pits and warming huts are envisioned for winter days. All kinds of activities are planned for the plaza, everything from a beer garden to beach volleyball, ballroom dancing to ping-pong tournaments. Curling, hockey and skating are planned for a temporary rink big enough for 300 skaters.

The success of Oilers Plaza will come down to how it is programmed, says local architect Shafraaz Kaba of Manasc Isaac. “That to me is the key or the trigger to making active public spaces. It’s not just building it, but building the activity around it. Or having enough of the doors onto that plaza that are active, that are the cool, hip cafes that you want to sit out on the patios of, or the must-have store.”

He does see potential for the plaza, though. “It looks like it’s sizable enough to be not just a token, little pocket park.”

Local engineer Teegan Martin Drysdale of RedBrick Real Estate had feared the district would be enclosed, indoors, and open only during events and only to ticket holders, but that’s not the case, she says. “This is more open and more inviting to the public.

“There will be life in the arena district not only before and after games, but also during the day. This (plaza) will attract people multiple times throughout the day and the week.

“I think they’re going in the right direction. This is what I was hoping to see — and I maybe didn’t see it quite so clearly in the initial renderings. The arena is one huge piece to it, but it’s only accessible during very specified hours and during very big events. ...

What I like about seeing this plaza and the street level retail is that this is accessible to anybody any time throughout the year.”

Architect Anneliese Fris of Shelterbelt says the large buildings in the design drawings look too much the same. “There’s nothing about it that says, ‘Edmonton,’ and they look rather barren. ... They struck me as being somewhat unfriendly.”

Fris also wonders about wind whipping off the buildings. For the plaza to work, it needs to be heated properly and have the right kind of shelters, she says. “It could be quite a magical place. ... It could be quite lovely as a protected zone in the winter.”

She applauds the developers for devoting so much space to the outdoor plaza. “I think it’s great. The outdoor aspect is really important. That’s what we’re trying to encourage in the city, and year-round use, not just summer use. They could have glassed it in, or created an arcade, or roof, but that’s a very positive piece of this, that it is conceived as an outdoor space.”

So there is much to said in favour of what the Katz Group and WAM propose here.

You can mark me down in the group that generally likes what they see, mainly because Oilers Plaza is a bold move for a cold city. It could be a much-loved public space in our downtown, if any of this ever gets built, that is.

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