

UNCONVENTIONAL CONVENTION CENTERS: INTRODUCING LOCALLY DRIVEN  
CONVENTION CENTER PLANNING

by

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(Under the Direction of Stephen Ramos)

ABSTRACT

Convention centers are commonplace in municipalities of all sizes in the United States. Local governments consider these facilities as essential to economic vitality, yet the substantial investments required rarely translate into tangible results. The proliferation of such centers and the fallacy of their anticipated benefits is perpetuated time and again in The American City, resulting in wasted public monies and the abandonment of essential local character.

This study examines the paradox of unsuccessful convention center planning against the continual call for new center proposals. Traditional planning patterns and their failures are explored in the context of three case studies, and an in-depth analysis of Memphis' convention industry is provided. Finally, a new methodology called Locally Driven Convention Center Planning is proposed. Based on the three pillars of accountability, research, and cooperation (ARC), this new methodology is proposed to reduce the failures of traditional convention center planning.

INDEX WORDS: convention center planning, tools, locally driven convention center planning methodology, convention industry, Memphis, music

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## DEDICATION

*To Mom, Dad, Kati and Mano. And to all the Locals.*

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I am thankful for all of my inspiring professors who made their valuable contributions to this study. I am thankful for Mano for all his advice regarding the English language.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **1. Observation**

Two experiences inspired me to focus on convention center planning as a Thesis topic. First, as a conference attendee in 2013 in Tampa, FL., I made some personal observations concerning the convention facility there. The grounds were nicely manicured. There were several fashionable restaurants incorporated into the facility. Hotels were strategically located in the immediate area. However, the overall atmosphere seemed sterile, empty, and without distinctive character. Many conference attendees, like myself, are weary of chain restaurants serving highly processed fare, yet access to establishments that reflect local character and healthy options was not convenient. We were forced to walk through several blocks of industrial-use space. After which, emerging from the matrix of the convention center, we reached an area which finally seemed more local. Surprisingly, the restaurant we picked was packed with attendees of the conference. I realized that it wasn't only me who was searching for something beyond what the convention center offered. Many attendees desired to experience something local. Something more than what we were able to see within the facility. Something that perhaps filled the expectation of adventure that naturally accompanies a visit to another city.

The second day, having more time, we started walking even further than before. After 20 minutes we saw local people walking, talking, and performing routine errands. Many local restaurants were very inviting. Suddenly I felt lifted. It was apparent that big, empty, homogenously sterile, and manicured spaces, after sitting in dark rooms listening to

presentations, may be stealing energy and inspiration. The character of these spaces is uninviting. When I attend conferences I wish to see something more. I believe many attendees think similarly. Conference after conference we grow tired of the same “adventures”, which is to say, no adventure at all. Having a layover in Heathrow or Charles de Gaul is as far from experiencing London or Paris as attending a conference is from experiencing the city it is held in. Just as airports are single-function oriented (with a reason) and look remarkably similar the world over, convention centers are the same (without good reason).

The second experience inspiring this topic occurred during my visit to Memphis in August, 2014. I was not a conference attendee this time; simply a tourist. I chose to visit Memphis because of its legendary music: blues and jazz. Our hotel was located right next to the Cook Convention Center. During our first walk, I made observations on the convention center and I found a lot of similarities with Tampa. It was a much smaller center but shared the same ineffective integration into the local downtown area. However, something more troubling was associated with this site. Violent crime was frequent in the immediate vicinity. A substantial number of homeless people were constantly observed. Local people were conspicuously absent. And the Cook Center was empty and devoid of conference attendees. This last may have been the result of the summer off-season, but even during a heavily attended conference, one could see the same problems as in Tampa.

After this second experience, I began to think about the commonalities in my observations. I explored the literature on the subject, and I began to see a pattern of failed policies in convention center planning in the U.S. More importantly, I began to see a potential solution to these policies in incorporating local elements and input from the local stakeholders most affected by these failures.

## **2. Why convention centers?**

Convention center planning is a very exciting theme. It holds many surprises and potentials. Various misconceptions lay behind convention center planning. After my observations and some initial research, I realized it parallels the crucial problems with today's urban fabric and the failure of Homo Faber ('Man the Maker'). Though we have amazingly potent tools to alter and form our environment, it seems we have forgotten where we are going, and what is our cause or motivation as urban citizens.

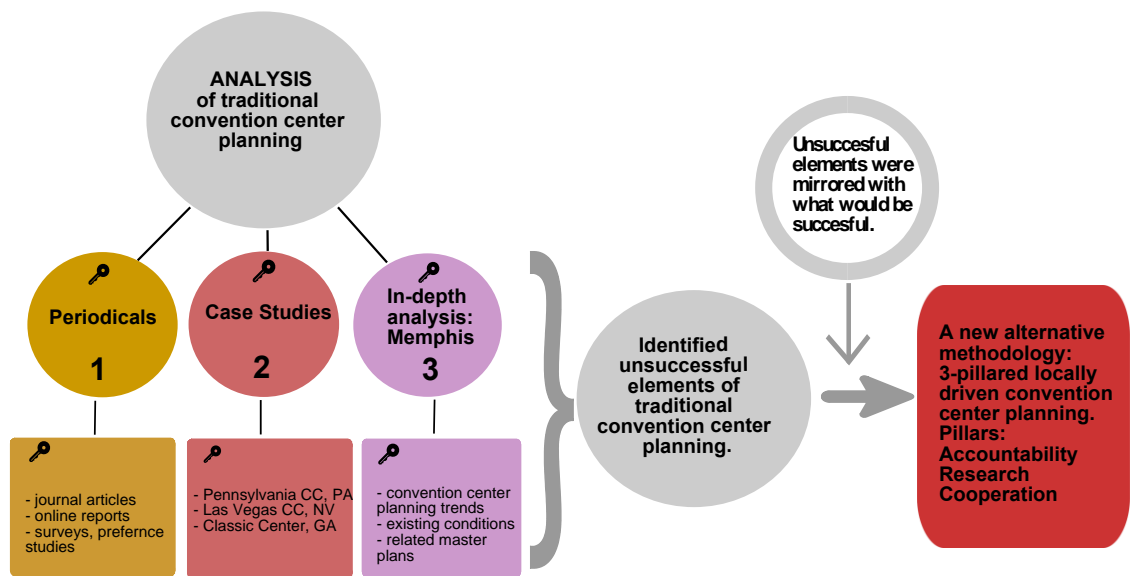
## **3. Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to strategically examine the misconceptions of convention center planning in the US, to open up new perspectives, and to provide suggestions for a new alternative approach. I invite the reader to challenge the now century-old patterns, and to see that time has long passed for parroting the same buzzwords that have been proven to be wrong principles, design elements, and planning strategies for convention center planning.

## **4. Methodology**

This study explores an alternative for traditional convention center planning. This alternative approach will be able to cope with the failing elements of traditional convention center planning. Thus the research question is: How can we cope alternatively and successfully with the failures of traditional convention center planning? In order to find the answer, current and historical convention center planning trends are reviewed. The unsuccessful elements are identified through a comprehensive literature research and real time case studies of Philadelphia (PA), Las Vegas (NV), Memphis (TN), and Athens (GA). The comprehensive review of Memphis' Cook Center shows the complexity of issues related to convention center planning. This research forms the basis for a new alternative methodology. This new methodology is called

Locally Driven Convention Center Planning. It is based on three pillars. The three pillars are: Accountability, Research, and Cooperation (ARC). This methodology is proposed to correct the failures of traditional convention center planning, resulting in facilities that retain a sense of place, an integration into a unique city image, and a healthy locally-driven convention business. Healthy and sustainable economic development requires a basis in research and knowledge, rather than exclusively profit-oriented economic development.



**Figure 1.1. Illustration of methodology.** Created by Author.

## 5. Locals

In this study ‘locals’ are defined as people who share the same environment, from homeless to the mayor. It does not distinguish between race, ethnicity, sex, income, or any other way. Locals are those who care for a place and use their shared environment for living on a daily basis.

However, the term locals may also apply to those who live elsewhere, but have substantial connections to the community. These connections may include shared history, birth, family and more. Within this definition, the scale of the shared environment is allowed to vary from small

communities to cities. Like it or not. Locals *are* stakeholders in urban development. Regardless of financial contribution to any specific development, it is the locals who own, rent, or otherwise operate the real estate at or surrounding the site of development. It is the local population that forms the community that will gain from, lose by, or even be displaced by new development or

## LOCALS

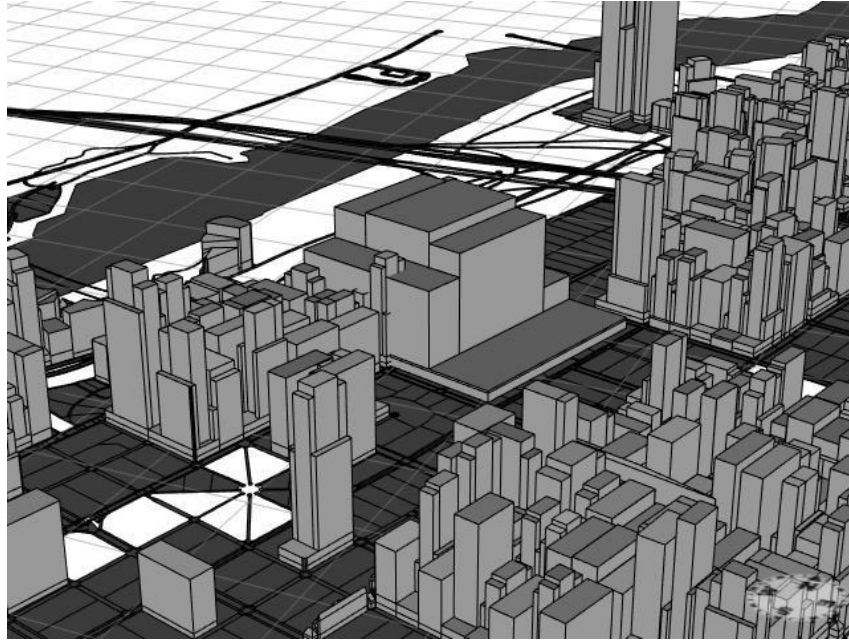
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**Figure 1.2 Illustration of Locals.** Created by Author.

expansion in their neighborhood. It is the locals who built the area, and whose shared history most contributed to the atmosphere that makes the area desirable to build in. To ignore their right to input as stakeholders, is akin to the Europeans forgetting to ask if they were welcome in the land of the Native Americans. Yet this is business as usual, where only those with substantial financial resources deserve an opinion. Those who can only afford to invest love, sweat, and commitment count for very little. By treating locals as stakeholders it may be that obstacles are more easily overcome through genuine gestures of good will and therefore the tendencies that have contributed to loss from financial investors could be reversed.

Local economic development can be imagined as a fair, locally grounded activity where the venues of convention industry and local businesses can cooperate and be beneficial to each other. However, it should not be exclusive in any way, and concepts of scale should be re-examined. For example: a locally registered business owner who owns several restaurants and/or hotels should not take all the lead. Small players should have a chance to contribute. Artists, for instance, stereotypically cannot afford rent to maintain boutiques, or do not have a space for seasonal, temporary display, say to sell their products. Here an economic development can be achieved if we plan our convention centers so that representatives of the local community at all levels can be represented. Relocation of artists and smaller industries as in Philadelphia should be avoided. Rather, their incorporation into the planning of the convention center which naturally fit it the cities biorhythm should be encouraged. Today, convention centers are bad transplants in city bodies. They occupy space without contributing to the body's healthy function.



**Figure 1.3. Illustration of any big-box convention center with fragmented and grey urban environment.** Created by Author.

## 6. Foreword

*"Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work." —*

Daniel Hudson Burnham

This is one of the most misinterpreted and misused quotes in the history of planning and urban design. As planners, we should re-evaluate our interpretation of this quote and challenge ourselves to “*Make big plans; aim high in hope and work*”, not only in scale of buildings and developments, but in their quality as well. Our cities today are reflections of America’s short adolescent history and its unhealthy relationship to The Land. We must ask ourselves: Why has historic (city) spatial planning failed? How has it fostered social, cultural and economic isolation?

In order to understand our cities' bio-rhythms, we have to go beyond just the physical form and the surface. The underlying natural and cultural history deserves careful consideration; and the light must be made to shine on past planning failures. Why are so many of our urban centers empty and un-walkable? Why are our downtowns gathering places of criminals and homeless people? I also propose we question today's trends of walkable/pedestrian-friendly design and other buzz-word planning principles such as 'public realm', 'vivid', and 'benefit of local people'. I argue that these concepts have lost their potency. They have been reduced to catch-phrases in the toolbox used for selling master plans and design proposals.

Just because it looks good on the blueprint does not mean it will be the appropriate solution. Are coffee shops and complete streets enough? Are they just quick romanticized solutions, which will alleviate some symptoms but not solve the deeper problem? What do we need to revitalize our cities, engage people and build healthy communities? What *can* planners do; and what *should* they do? These are difficult questions to address, and probably there is no single answer.

Before examining Memphis as a case study, it is important to understand today's urban fabric through the lens of general (city) planning history. For example, Genius Loci or "sense of place" is a complex concept embodied by a collection of tangible and intangible elements. It includes a 'spiritual' component that eludes direct definition, but that all humans can relate to on a primal level. It is directly attached to planning strategies, philosophies, current political views, and policies. It is also inseparable from attitudes and motivations we hold as professionals and individuals. Therefore, it is vital to understand these underlying elements.

Different authors and examiners have a somewhat varied, but frequently cynical and critical opinion of historic urban planning failures. Environmentalists, conservationists, historic preservationists, capitalists, Marxists, sociologists, and architect-planners have all offered their

criticisms and analyses of these failures. Their criticisms are usually black-and-white, expressing displeasure, and occasionally even didactic in tone. What would be the 'out of box' attitude for a planner today? We could interpret the colorful palette of opinions as demonstrating that planning has affected multiple strata of society. Everyone has a vested right in planning by simply being a citizen of Earth, and by sharing space and resources from local to global scales. We can quote thinkers from thirty years ago (or more), and they still are still just as relevant (e.g. Jane Jacobs). Today we have the same problems as people had 100 years ago with only slightly different forms.

Planning history reviews commonly focus on the level of urban form evaluation. These reviews can present false and one-sided opinions. An example of this is the notion that in the past we had more ties and values to land than in the present. There have been those who have acquired vast tracts of land for profit espousing the belief that the land is their individual private resource. Widespread public recognition and concern over compromised natural resources has exposed this failed principle and it's potential for abuse. "The idea of land as the physical container for community values " was almost destroyed along with the concept of "land as public trust "(Cliff 1985, 170). Discarding the public's ownership of natural resources has created a fragmented world where ties to the land have not been sustained or such connections have clustered in rural environments where daily routine still sustains it.

The past failures "of the architect-planner to build images of the city reflect the refusal to allow the past to be experienced with the present in a new constellation. In consequence our modern cityscapes show little awareness of their historical past." (Boyer 1986, 42). Imagine the scenario where a neighborhood is disrupted by the construction of a new spaghetti-like interchange through its middle. The simple phrase of a child whose playground is destroyed

might be, ‘Why can’t they go around it?’ The architect-planner was perhaps trapped on the surface of functionality and could not connect to something more eternal and substantially beautiful. The work they produced lacks harmony and respect for other elements already present. It has placed the man as Homo Faber in absolute domination, enabling the illusion that he can alter his environment without any attachment to land and nature.

This is a false image, because no man exists without the land providing. Even ignoring the obvious basic requirements for water, food, and breathable atmosphere, there is a spiritual connection to places that only the most cynical observer could deny. Else, why would homesickness exist? Why would so many philosophers equate the destruction of arable soils with insanity? America was the land where the abuse of free will with accompanying capital exploited the natural resources. It was an inviting promise for people from around the world, the land of dreams and possibilities. It was a wonderful and novel idea, but not a perpetually sustainable one.

An ethical understanding must accompany any free will, activity, and capital investment. ‘Ethical’, in this case, should be understood mainly on the level of local values as long those values stand strong for freedom, tolerance and for other novelties. The old saying is ‘just because you *can* do something does not mean you *should*’. Extreme poles should not be allowed; and one should not profit personally by causing harm to others. It is foolish to blame modern city planners because they were bold enough to embrace rapid change and allow the technical age to flourish. The problem comes with viewing the world in terms that are black and white, or in “copy-pasting” solutions. Specifically, what works for one place might not work in another. One of the problems is allowing current lifestyles or fleeting trends to entirely reshape old city patterns in downtowns, riverfronts, etc. Profit-motivated corporations have been allowed in some

instances to clean out established everyday neighborhood patterns, replacing them with sterile environments where the true character and ‘sweat’ of the city is no longer allowed. Corporations like Walmart and McDonalds receive a lot of the blame, but ‘We the People’ sustain them willingly. The problem and solution must lie somewhere else, perhaps in our motivation and attitudes.

The technical age’s smooth lifestyle is king; where an effort to incorporate common design characteristics have resulted in homogenous and creatively sterile environments. Proven and successful functional elements developed over our entire human history and understood on an almost genetic level have been discarded for the flashy and shiny. People moved in to suburbs to preserve ‘quality of life’ in the industrial era, than moved back into cities disillusioned. This is where we are today.

The planner’s real responsibility is to let the past and the present to coexist. Yet, as a professional community, planners have failed to exhibit any real sense of continuity with the past or in going forward. “Planning has been an integral part of the urban real estate game, not its impartial judge”, (Cliff 1985, 170). “Architects and planners had given up trying to understand the structure and morphology of urban form and the overlaying historical and interpretive elements, they thus inserted new functional components randomly into the existing fabric” (Boyer 1986, 42). Modernism “by divorcing the practice of building from the history and traditional meaning of building” became destructive and resulted in a “crisis of the human habitat” where cities are “ruined by corporate gigantism and abstract renewal schemes, public buildings and public spaces unworthy of human affection, vast sprawling suburbs” (Kunstler, 1993 59-60). Every piece of America has been parceled, labeled and prohibited for free access. People’s rightful connection to their own natural resources has been cut off. The newest

generation will never experience freedom in its highest value: Earth as a free place to inhabit and wander. Instead they have to clean up the Consumption Era's waste. Such a legacy is corrupt and shameful.

“The disciplinary mainstreaming of Urban Design has transformed it from a potentially broad and hopeful conceptual category into an increasingly rigid, restrictive, and boring set of orthodoxies (Krieger, Saunders, and ebrary Inc. 2009, 273).” Compartmentalization, regional polarization and exclusive separation of functions as well as income-based housing plans have caused segregation and alienation. “The huge increase in ‘no growth’ and ‘slow growth’ policies suggests that no group, not even the wealthiest suburbs, is fully satisfied with status quo.”

(Buchwald 2003, 171). In Europe, many urban centers successfully manage the co-existence the historic and the new, creating impressively multilayered and realistically functional cities.

Maintenance of historic structures provides necessary temporal continuity and ‘sense of place’ that is unique, desirable, livable, and visit-able. The city is for people to live in, to be able to inhabit with mass transportation and walkable distances. Sprawl is appropriately minimized.

“These cities did not develop based on plans but rather through a process that often took many hundreds of years, because this slow process permitted continual adjustment and adaptation of the physical environment to the city functions. *The city was not a goal in itself but a tool formed by use*” (Gehl 1987, 43).

During the Renaissance, and later in the 1930's, the basis of city planning underwent radical periods change. Throughout the Renaissance it was a direct transition from freely evolved to planned cities; when the city was not just for everyday function but was also a piece of art. In the 1930s, in the age of functionalistic ideas and technical inventions, new buildings reduced social activities. During the 1950's and 60's, it became obvious that such a narrow basis for

urban planning had harmed the city as a whole (Gehl 1987). “The extent and character of outdoor activities are greatly influenced by physical planning. Just as it is possible through choice of materials and colors to create a certain palette in a city, it is equally possible through planning decisions to influence patterns of activities, to create better or worse conditions for outdoor events, and to create lively or lifeless cities (Gehl 1987, 33). “Changing the face of a city is a matter of blueprints, of dollars, of cubic feet of concrete, of cranes and bulldozers. Changing the heart of a city is more difficult, and more importantly, there is no simple way to bulldoze attitudes, to pour old feelings into plywood forms and let them harden in better shape” (Buchwald 2003, 33). The problem is always greed and the urge to possess. We can look everywhere on Earth and see that regardless of race or ethnicity; greed is everywhere. The pioneers and their heirs cut down all the forests and literally destroyed half of the continent. One of the keys is always in the attitude we hold, our scale of right and wrong, and our innate relationship to land.

Rebuilding of lost connections between the past and present and in the same time preparing for the future will be hard work. “T.S. Eliot wrote that *‘one can be classical, in a sense, by turning away from the nine-tenths of the material which lies at hand and selecting only mummified stuff from a museum...or one can be ‘classical’ in tendency by doing the best he can with the material at hand.’*” What becomes important now is the texture of memories already embedded in the city and how the architect-planner uses these elements to structure and reorder the city with a classical tendency (Boyer 1986, 43).” Planners need to be bold and dare, not to produce constant economic growth, but growth of sustainable transactions between locals regionals. In this way, they might better create “a city that strives for social justice and ecological balance, a city that is capable of thriving in a global economy while nurturing

neighborhoods with integrity, a city that welcomes immigrants from all over the world while maintaining a sense of community” (Metcalf 2002, 5). All these will lead towards a livable city and create a sense of place.

The Congress for the New Urbanism views “disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community building challenge” (Buchwald 2003, 277). “Florida’s “people climate” held that the secret to building better, more vibrant locations was not just attracting companies with handouts and tax breaks, but rather building a people climate that could attract diverse human talents that drive true prosperity (Florida 2012, ix). The author wrote ” I was roundly derided when I critiqued the conventional menu of downtown renewal through stadium complexes and generic retail districts and malls and countered instead that a simpler, less expensive path to revival was to improve neighborhood conditions with a smaller investments in everything from parks to bike paths to street-level culture that would make people’s everyday lives better, improve the underlying quality of place, and signal a community that is open, energized, and diverse” (Florida 2012, x).

## CHAPTER 2

### CONVENTION CENTER PLANNING REALITY

#### 1. Convention center history

In human history people always had an instinctive urge to gather and discuss and share knowledge and experiences. This activity evolved from gathering around fire and meals to a more structured activity. This would be markets, ports and so on. The core of this activity has really changed during the industrial age and with the boom of transportation and spread of automobiles and airplanes. A convention center or conference center is a large space for meeting and displaying



*Figure 2.1. The Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace, 1851*

Source: [http://archexpo.net/en/contenu/great-exhibition-crystal-palace-1851#.VSFNf\\_nF-Sp](http://archexpo.net/en/contenu/great-exhibition-crystal-palace-1851#.VSFNf_nF-Sp)

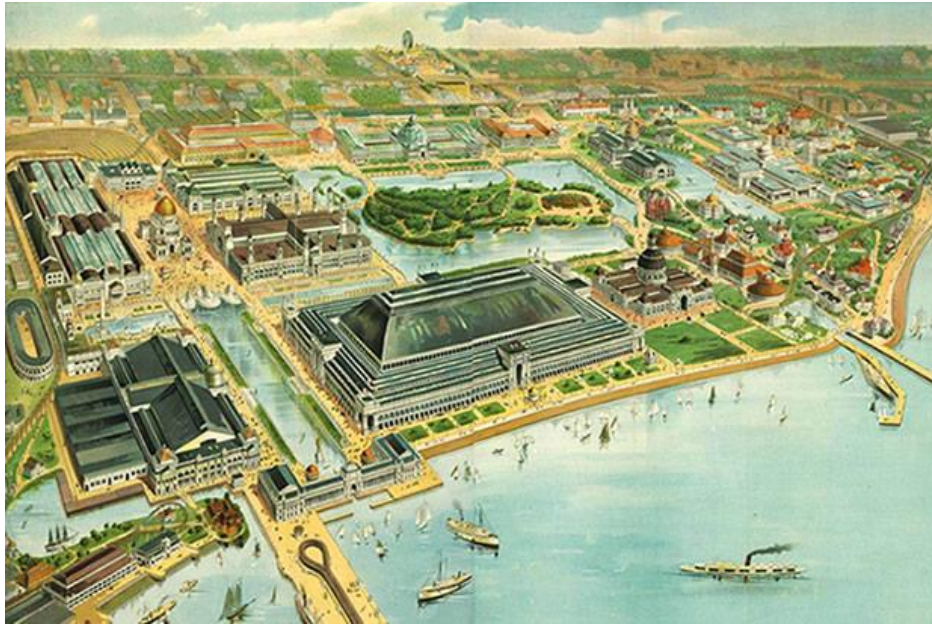
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goods, new technologies, and sharing of knowledge. Humans have always gathered and shared information and knowledge at meetings and markets. This has evolved to take on different forms. From one-room meeting spaces we evolved to today`s convention facilities. The first universal exhibition was in 1851 between May 1 and October 15 in London. Joseph Paxton designed the Crystal Palace for this occasion. It was made of glass and metal, located in Hyde Park. It was a new modern building and a new technology. It had 14,000 exhibitors from foreign countries (40) and the British Empire. The exhibitors were divided into four sections: raw materials, machines, manufacturers and works of art.

In 1893 the World`s Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago. It marked the movement of the Classic City. Daniel H. Burnham was the architect and Olmsted, the famous landscape architect helped him in preparing for this event. This World`s Fair, like the one in England “was intended as an international showcase of the products of industry. But unlike the earlier fairs, which had produced technologically innovative structures – notably the Crystal Palace and the Eiffel Tower – Burnham and his Beaux-Arts trained colleagues wished to put the architectural stamp of Neoclassical grandeur, rather than modernity upon this one” (Rogers 2001, 352). They got ready with a series of buildings and plazas. However, many of the buildings were destroyed during a fire.

In the 1950s and 1960s a number of cities began convention hall developments like New York City, Cleveland, Atlanta and Baltimore as a strategy for urban renewal or downtown revitalization. These centers were soon replaced and/or expanded. During the 1980s and 1990s convention center industry boomed. “A massive convention facility was no longer simply a means of accommodating an occasional national political gathering or a symbol of local pride. It

was touted as a key element in local economic development” and this continues today (Sanders 2014, ix)



**Figure: 2.2. Sketch of the location of World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893**

Source: [www:history.com/news/7-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-1893-chicago-worlds-fair](http://www.history.com/news/7-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-1893-chicago-worlds-fair)

## **2. Convention center literature review**

Convention center planning can be seen as an engine for bolstering local economy and as a revitalization opportunity for downtowns or other parts of cities and metropolises. Because such centers host thousands of people year-round there is a belief that having this element in a city is a must. There are an extensive number of proposals for expansion and renovation of these centers across the country. However, based on the majority of existing convention centers histories, the likelihood that these new proposals will live up to expectations is very low.

Hundreds of cities, from big to small, expect that their new convention centers will bring economic benefits and urban regeneration (Tabak 1994, Sanders 2005, Sanders 2002, 2014, McNeill and Evans 2004, Kovalski 2005, Ryan 2013). Large single-building structures such as

stadiums and convention centers, show a paradoxical case of single-building megaproject proliferation (Ryan 2013). In 1998, 178 of 463 cities with over 50,000 population constructed new convention centers. Many of these have been built in close proximity to the cities' downtown areas (Judd 2003, Ryan 2013). Over the years, meetings and convention revenue grew from \$2.5 billion in the early 1970's to \$115 billion today. The estimated total effect of this industry is \$315.4 billion with \$3.84 million full time jobs (Astroff and Abbey 2002; McNeill and Evans, 2004). Based on these kinds of figures, the convention industry appears to be one that can provide enticingly substantial revenues to local governments. However, the returns are frequently eroded by the high cost of initial investment.

Despite the rather dismal historical evidence on returns versus investment for municipally owned Convention Centers, the belief that each will pay off continues to persist, as if every city that plans such a facility will be *the one* to beat the odds. It is worth considering then, in the context of this review, how municipalities generate the initial investment capital for building these centers. Common tools a city may draw upon for achieving the goals of building and expanding of convention centers can include tax incentives, bonds, and public-private partnerships. During the 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s new convention center proposals had to run the gauntlet of voter review and approval. This practice was short-cuttled in the 1980s when state and local governments adopted new financing and development strategies which resulted in a separation of voters from the planning process. At the same time, a shift occurred from general-purpose local governments' administration of the centers to public authorities or state governments. Funding was sourced less from general taxes and increasingly from dedicated visitor-based revenues (Sanders 2014). The effect was to place the control of convention center investment in the hands of singularly profit-minded stakeholders whose

priorities have become more important than alternative public investment priorities. Public-private partnerships usually support big mega-projects. Often these are characterized as mixed-use projects, which require incentives, financing, and entity participation (Harris et al.). Most city owned convention centers are funded through bond issues and repaid with automobile rental and hotel taxes (McNeill and Evans 2004). They can stimulate planning and development but management must play an active role if city wants to remain competitive (Carey 1988).

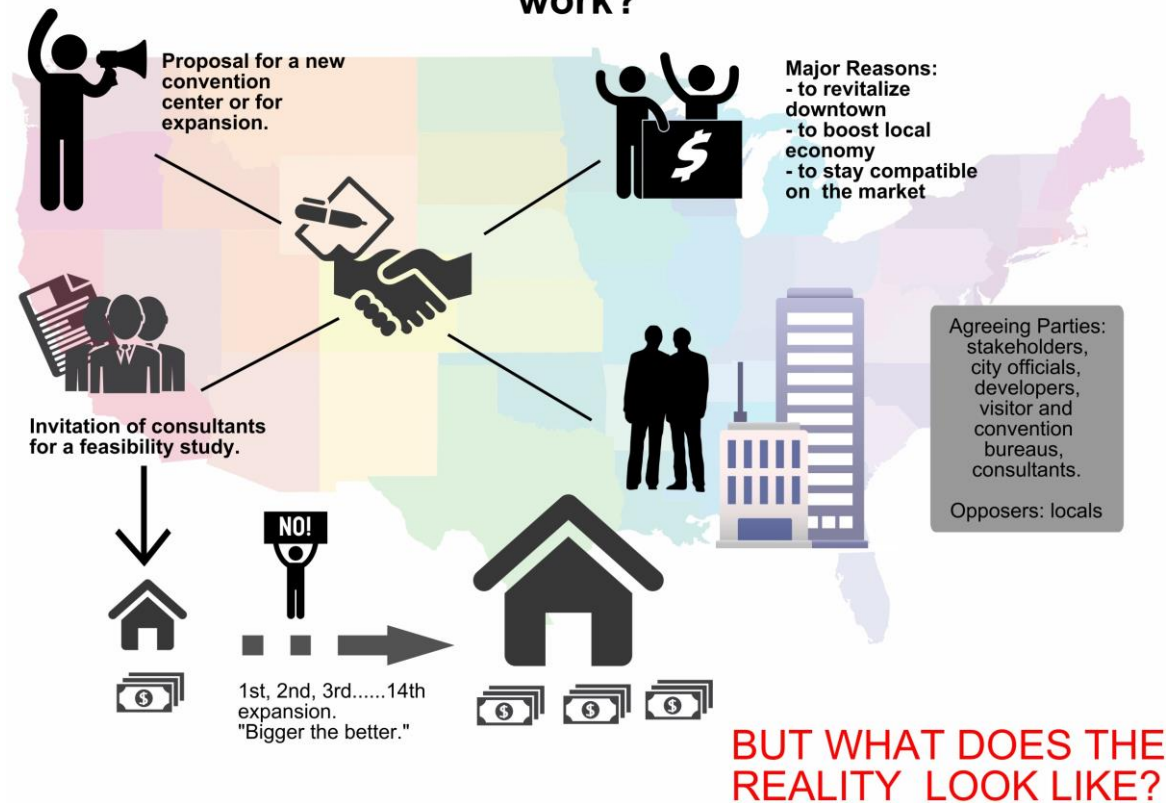
***Table 2.1. Top ten largest convention centers in USA.*** Source: Travel & Tourism Market Research Handbook, 2013, p 222. Table created by Author.

<b>Ten largest convention centers ranked by available exhibition, and meeting space</b>	<b>Square feet</b>
1. McCormick Place (Chicago, IL)	2,670,000
2. Walter E. Washington Convention Center (Washington, DC)	2,300,000
3. Orange County Convention Center (Orlando, FL)	2,100,000
4. Las Vegas Convention Center (Las Vegas, NV)	2,000,000
5. Georgia World Congress Center (Atlanta, GA)	1,500,000
6. Kentucky Exposition Center (Louisville, KY)	1,200,000
7. Sands Expo and Convention Center (Las Vegas, NV)	1,200,000
8. Ernest N. Morial Convention Center (New Orleans, LA)	1,100,000
9. Hawai'i Convention Center (Honolulu, HI)	1,100,000
10. Dallas Convention Center (Dallas, TX):	1,000,000

In 1987, Kansas City officials saw convention center expansion as a catalyst for downtown revitalization when a developer promised to include a 25-story World Trade Center and an 800-room convention hotel along with expansion of the convention center (Tabak 1994).

“To city officials, the beautiful architectural sketches were like a full banquet set before the starving”(Tabak 1994, p 30). The expanded convention center development promised new jobs, a new hotel and revitalized local economy. Projected jobs had a mean annual salary of \$14,000. City called for a referendum on whether or not to increase hotel, motel and restaurant taxes in order to pay for convention center costs. The tax initiative was passed after a huge advertising campaign, which guaranteed a profitable return on the investment.

### How does traditional (current) convention center planning work?



*Figure 2.3. Simplified mechanism of traditional (current) convention center planning.* Created by Author.

The center's projected operating cost was \$6.5 million. Marketing costs came to \$2 million. Annual debt service totaled \$13 million, and the expanded center brought in just \$3 million a year. The unfortunate reality following the expansion was that, instead of the promised windfall,

Kansas City was facing \$18 million in losses (Tabak 1994). In the intervening years, similar scenarios have been repeated many times over in city after city. Naturally, one might inquire then as to who the decision making parties are, and by what process these parties enter into the building or expansion of convention centers.

Participants of the convention industry are the city officials, meeting planners, exhibitors, convention visitor bureaus, conference attendees, and to minimal extent citizens of the city as well. Citizens of the city are significantly considered only when it comes to funding a new center or expanding an old center. It is fairly common-place for a city to call on a referendum for changing hotel taxes. Otherwise the involvement of the average tax-paying citizen is limited to some nearby businesses, or to arts centers which may run jointly with convention facilities. Meeting planners in general are responsible for pre-meeting activities, on-site activities and post meeting, and their preferences are very important in today`s convention industry. Exhibition space, meeting rooms, technology, glamour, entertainment, accessibility, cost, parking, hotel room availability, and city image are very important for them. Exhibitors are business owners or business representatives who exhibit their products and services. Important elements for them include rent pricing, loading docks, accessibility, exhibition space, and conditions. Convention and visitor bureaus represent the host location. They are quasi-public representatives, and are responsible for driving local economy, marketing community industry and building community pride (Kim, Jang, and Morrison 2011). These groups` preferences are driving forces, and some studies have examined these preferences, including:

a) Kim et al. (2011) researched local businesses owners` preferences for choosing convention centers for their next events in Central Virginia. Out of 610 targeted persons, 105 responded to the questionnaire. Factors which were believed to affect local meeting planners`

choices, in this case local business owners, were used to rank their preferences of service/reference, price, location and facility. Price and facility were found to be the most important factors for choosing convention centers rather than service/reference and location (Kim, Kim, and Weaver 2010).

b) A more detailed study by Youngsun (2009) shows that tourists visiting convention centers are “somewhat” heterogeneous. Therefore differentiated marketing strategies should be stressed. Segmenting convention markets and understanding visitors’ motivations are important. In this study, 258 questionnaires were evaluated. Participants were convention center visitors in Gwangju South Korea. In order to research tourist destination image, 14 factors were grouped into 5 sets: facilities, food, cost, recreation and cultural attraction. Cultural attraction (historical attraction, events and local festivals, movie/drama destination) was found to be the strongest motivator. Second was the recreation (nightlife, recreational facilities). Facilities (attractive location, hotel room and transportation availability, ease of access) was reported to be third most important. Fourth was food (food level and food diversity), and fifth was the cost (travel cost, price level). Factors related to visitors’ motivation and preference were also assessed. ‘To escape’ was foremost among these, followed by ‘knowledge’. Least important were ‘exploration’ and ‘socialization’ with little differentiation (Youngsun 2009).

c) The study of DiPietro et al. (2008) examined three main professional event planning associations concerning their preferences for convention center elements. The survey involved questions relating to the largest event that the respondents had planned in the previous year, the type of event, the number of attendees, the number of guest rooms used on the peak night, square footage of exhibition space utilized, and the location where the event took place. The respondents were also asked to rate destination selection variables and how important they were

at the time the destination decision was made using a Likert-type scale where 1 = not at all important and 5 = extremely important. The dependent variables in this study were destination selection variables. They included ease of accessibility by air, ease of accessibility by roads, choice of restaurants, variety of nightlife, number of first-class hotel rooms, brand name hotels, amount of dedicated exhibit space, image as a desirable place to visit, reputation of hosting successful events, safety and security, support services for events, overall cost, and perceived value for money. The limitation of the study was a 5% response rate from the three associations. The 209 respondents that participated in the study represented three different professional associations International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE), Meeting Professionals International (MPI) and Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA). The participating member distribution between IAEE (37 members), MPI (117), and PCMA (55) was 17.7%, 56.0%, and 26.3%. Accessibility by air, exhibition space, perceived money for value, desirable destination image, services, reputation and overall cost were among the most important factors (DiPietro et al. 2008, 267).

These studies show that accessibility was equally important for both meeting planners and visitors. Meeting planners had high preference for exhibition space and good facility condition. Visitors' highest preference was the image of city, and the attractive location with cultural attractions. The distinction between meeting planners and visitors preference implies that all players are important and market segmentation is necessary. However, locals as participants in the convention-industry-game is an underrepresented concept that has not been studied appropriately.

'Locals' are referred to in literature and media those retailers and other business owners who get a profit out of convention centers; and 'locals' are frequently mentioned as beneficiaries

of convention business in the form of new jobs. The reality is that visitors spend their money in hotels, restaurants, and stores owned by national chains possessing the wherewithal to place themselves in the direct vicinity of convention centers (Tabak 1994) rather than truly locally-owned businesses. The ‘real’ locals realize very little income from the industry year-round. Any income they receive is often limited to the lowest paying room-service, cleaning, or other unskilled service jobs.

The reality of the convention center industry is very controversial and misleading. If convention centers “cannot come close to breaking even why do so many cities want them? One factor is civic pride and civic boosterism” (Tabak 1994, p 30). City officials see a resource in visitors’ spending. They see an opportunity to form or reform their city image, which may be driven by a natural competitiveness between city officials. They can be motivated to stay ‘in the game’ when a nearby city’s center undergoes expansion. This kind of competitive motivation can lead to lack of diligence in researching the true feasibility of center construction and/or expansion. “The feasibility studies with their impressive tables and charts are clearly designed to impress the officials who order them. They don’t withstand scrutiny” (Tabak 1994, p 33). Construction companies, nearby hotels, restaurants, and retailers are the boosters of convention centers. These players stand to gain the most on big capital projects. However, transparency and thorough research during the decision-making process may lead to rejection of convention center projects, especially if these players get wind of tax increases (Tabak 1994)

Kansas City’s feasibility study supported the building of new hotel, but hospitality experts said that the heaviest convention center traffic will not support a major new convention hotel, and that existing downtown hotels were already troubled. Tampa, Florida was a step ahead of Kansas City to finance a 900-room hotel with \$137 million in city bonds (Tabak 1994).

The phenomenon of belief by cities that further investments are needed to ensure convention center success was explained by Clark's study (2006). Members of the panel, people with a minimum of 15 years of convention business experience, explained how this phenomenon continues to be supported. Political careers are at stake. Adding new elements buys time, and decisions to build centers are not demand-based. City officials can get caught in the cycle of inter-city competitiveness. As previously mentioned, there is often a lack of good market research. This and fear of voter reprisal can lead to insufficient bond requests for initial investments. Bonds to build a building often must be voted on, and politicians are afraid to float bond requests and thus lower-quality centers will be built. This will lead to a situation where additional elements and expansions are requested later, which requires more public money (Clark 2006).

Clark's study also highlights major reasons of *why cities commit constantly to build new convention centers even though more public money will be needed to make the center successful*.

The major reasons were:

- Convention centers are often “me too” decisions (i.e. another city has one, therefore we need one too)
- Poor and/or politically-based decision making
- Not taking a holistic approach
- Poor and inaccurate feasibility studies
- Lack of long term perspective by elected officials
- Uninformed architects
- Lack of consultation with meeting planners
- Not recognizing that all cities *cannot* maintain successful convention centers

- The city may not be a good tourist destination
- Lost leaders
- Lack of public understanding

No single model works for further investments and cities should consider the following elements before building new centers: a holistic approach; a good, well thought out master plan for the city; and due diligence by officials. New convention centers entering the market have to compete with others who have lot more experience. The “build it and they will come” idea has long since expired. To be successful, centers need to be filled 365 days a year, not just at seasons (Clark 2006). The retail sector often represents less than 15 percent of a city’s commercial space but a large part of a city’s image and ego is derived from it (Carey 1988). In spite of growing evidence that the promised benefits of convention centers have never appeared (Sanders 2005, Sanders 2002, 2014, Tabak 1994), new centers are popping up or being expanded across the country. There is a sort of arms race for ‘more and bigger’ that allows planners to conveniently ignore the realistic ability of a city to support and sustain a new or expanded convention center. These centers can contribute to, but cannot substitute for a vital city by bringing thousands of visitors to distressed downtowns (Tabak 1994, Sanders 2005, Sanders 2002, 2014, Ryan 2013). They cannot transform a downtown core and solve the problem of poverty, deterioration, and population loss (Kovaleski 2005).

Cities see “escapism” as a driving force and the created ‘full’ environment of convention centers makes these projects desirable for visitors who focus on “escapism”. The proliferation of these single-building projects shows a cultural-economic shift from industrial economy to leisure economy. Facing a shrinking industrial economy, cities from Baltimore to San Francisco transformed their waterfronts and former factories into shopping centers. They have created

festival marketplaces and tourist meccas (Ryan 2013, Judd and Fainstein 1999). “David Petersen, the dean of feasibility business, called convention centers the ‘barometer of center city health’ in a 1992 article for Urban Land magazine (Tabak 1994, p 34). However, convention center managers say caution is needed because “success is not only predicated on the facility”, supporting structures are also needed to draw national business (Krieg 1996).

In Indianapolis the convention center had its desired impact. Tips for this success included: reviewing assets and liabilities (local and regional amenities, transportation, labor force and municipal services); find out what meeting planners are looking for and study competition; integrate physical planning with convention center business and agencies responsible for promoting tourism; examine the facility; the advantages, disadvantages and risk of various ownership and financing options and targeting of specific shows; survey trade show and convention visitors, their needs and interests; take a close look at the city with the eye of a business traveler; and coordinate convention and leisure promotion efforts. (Krieg 1996).

With increased competition, many cities invest in additional amenities such as publicly-financed hotels. Many centers also offer free rental space and big discounts, so this undermines efforts to make the proposed income (Kovaleski 2005). Downtown megaprojects like convention centers clean out and destroy existing downtown spaces, and expansions must destroy more of these downtowns. Such destruction is what happened with Philadelphia’s convention center expansion (Ryan 2013, Sanders 2014).

To be successful, centers need to run their own shows. Las Vegas, Anaheim, and Orlando already have a sizable hotel industry and distinctive appeal. These cities are successful on their own, and convention centers are just icing on the cake because they already invite a large number of visitors. Convention schedules are seasonal, with most conferences occurring during

Fall and Spring. There is a big gap between seasons, which can cause city areas relying on convention business to remain empty for long periods. This disrupts the urban fabric, and can require additional tax support or public money to bail out area businesses (Tabak 1994).

Convention developments are risky and many cities should plan and think realistically. “Emotional hopes must be balanced with probable realities” (McNeill and Evans 2004, p 27). Small and medium-sized cities frequently participate in an “economic development gold rush to build convention centers” without understanding the cost and benefits, but this triggers euphoric reactions (McNeill and Evans 2004, p 39, Sanders 2014).

McNeill and Evans’ case study at Flagstaff, Arizona divides convention center planning into three phases with essential parts to each. The three phases are education and preparation, design and implementation. The study used local business, university, and political leaders to determine the appropriateness of a convention center complex developed by a public private partnership. The phase of preparation and education was the most important and defined the next two phases. This first phase had strong elements including the mandatory condition of shared vision, avoidance of euphoric hopes, clear bid selection and negotiation process from the beginning, planning only what is needed and avoiding “too much” infrastructure, and having open strong leadership (McNeill and Evans 2004).

The numbers that disprove the overly positive ‘myth’ of convention center investments are very extensive. They are derived from hotel occupancy and facility bookings before and after investments in “more than enough” cities across the nation. The numbers are real. However, misdirection on the part of development consultants has been just as real. Sanders (2014) found that, Charles H. Johnson, the same consultant who assured Chicago and Illinois officials of the benefits in expanding McCormick Place, would later provide the same advice for St. Louis.

Johnson further forecast similar opportunities for new convention centers in Charlotte and Richmond, a bigger one in Austin, and one in Boston. The same consulting firm who advised the Georgia World Congress Center Authority on expansion made a similar recommendation for convention facility impact on economy in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Indianapolis and New York. The findings were: more space would bring more business and more jobs (Sanders 2014).

“Why are center consultants not held accountable for their forecast errors? How is it that these failed public projects are followed not by expressions of outrage and apology, but by calls for even more? Why is it that governors and mayors, business and civic leaders have promoted, built, and continue to call for more convention center spending in the face of facts of non-performance and an evident glut in the national market? Though the phenomenon of the boom in convention center development has been widely recognized, there is no agreement among scholars as to its roots and causes, on the interests of the elected officials who sustain it, or the interest of civic and business leaders behind it (Sanders 2014, 12-13).” Tables 2-4 provide an in-depth analysis of hopes and realities related of convention centers in Baltimore, San Antonio and Austin. The list of cities is very long. Many cities have the same problems.

**Table 2.2 Nr. of conv. attendees before and after the expansion of Baltimore CC** (Sanders 2014, p 151). Table created by Author.

<b>Baltimore</b>	In April 1997 the new Baltimore Convention Center opened with three times bigger exhibit space.		Response of Baltimore officials and business leaders
Year	Number of attendees	Promised attendees by Convention Center Authority: <b>452,000</b>	
1990	217,884	Economics Research Associate Consultancy: <b>330,000</b>	In May 2011 business leaders called for another expansion, justified by another consultant study. City officials undertook the financing and ownership of a 754-room hotel.
1991	<b>233,461</b>		
2001	<b>234,394</b>		
2004	221,586		
2010	218,603		

Two simple rules should mitigate the damage of mega-projects like convention centers.

One: Mega-projects should never replace the remaining urban fabric. They should be sited to permit “hugeness” without damage (Ryan 2013, p 11). However, such thematic inclusions are not necessarily equivalent to incorporating a true ‘sense of place’ or genius loci.

**Table 2.3 Nr. of convention attendees before and after the expansion of Austin CC** (Sanders 2014, p 155-159). Table created by Author.

<b>Austin</b>	The new convention center opened in July 1992 with reasons of a new downtown center. The expanded Austin Convention Center opened in 2002.					
Year	Number of attendees	Hotel rooms used	Promised attendees by Coopers & Lybrand (1988)	Promised attendees by Charles H. Johnson consultant (1995)	Promised attendees by Charles H. Johnson consultant to <b>double the convention center</b> (1997)	City financed Hilton hotel opened in 2004.  In 2008-2009 against the failures the city calls for ‘Immediate’ convention hotel development like it happened in San Antonio, Dallas, and Orlando.
1993			117,300	-	98 events, <b>329,000 attendees and 332,600 room nights</b> , spending impact from \$47 million to \$104.2 million a year, 2462 new jobs. Calls for new hotel rooms in downtown.	
1996			-	<b>150,000</b>		
1997			204,500	-		
2000		141,788	298,000	<b>314,000</b>		
2001		142,896				
2002	147,648	147,648				
2004		190,220				
2005		149,253				
2006		161,776				
2007		144,570				
2010		189,681				
2011	142,161					

And two: “ the apparent necessity of downtown mega-projects to serve monstrous hybrids of guardianship and commerce must be tempered by a respect and deeper appreciation of the other functions of downtowns and of cities themselves (Ryan 2013, p 12). Maintaining the existing

urban fabric can mean that values and heritage are being incorporated into centers to attract more visitor revenue.

**Table 2.4. Nr. of convention attendees before and after the expansion of Henry B. Gonzalez**

CC (Sanders 2014, 189-192). Table created by Author.

San Antonio	The expanded Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center opened in 2001 with 440,000 square feet.			
Year	Number of attendees	Hotel rooms used	Promised attendees by Andersen & Company 1990	Promised hotel room, economic impact and number attendees by Andersen & Company 1991
1987	Average 251,000		336,966	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <b>728,000</b> attendees</li><li>- +108,000 annual spouses or companions</li><li>- <b>800,000 to 900,000</b> hotel room</li><li>- <b>\$18,4</b> billion economic activity between 1994-2016</li><li>- <b>5960</b> new jobs between 1994-2016</li></ul>
1988	Average 251,000			
1989	Average 251,000			
1990	Average 251,000	361,200		
2001		Average 290,000		
2000		Average 290,000	<b>586,000</b>	
2002 to 2006	Average 278,234			
2008	310,000	Average 290,000		
2009	250,000-CSL International report 277,022-HVS report	Average 290,000		
2010	341,392	Average 290,000		
2011	273,284	310,000		
“The failure of the 2001 expansion to yield anything close to the promised increase in convention business did not deter San Antonio leaders from seeking to boost the city’s convention activity through more public investment. In May 2005 the city sold \$250 million in federal empowerment zone bond to finance the construction of a thousand-room headquarters hotel adjacent to the center...” p192				

Rogers wrote, ‘Genius of the place, (is) the spirit that interacts with the human mind, eliciting emotions, fostering perceptions, simulating both memory and curiosity’ (Rogers 2001, 233).

To date however, construction and reconstruction of sites is most frequently motivated by the anticipated resultant financial income (Markeviciene 2008):

- a) Aesthetic and cognitive spectating becomes compromised by “tourist floods”. High visitor densities do not encourage long stays, and popular heritage sites are less available for aesthetic reflection and contemplation, offering little more than a brief glimpse and photo opportunity.
- b) Usual visiting and gazing ... tends to be replaced by *participatory* leisure time activities, such as “living history events” (reenactments, etc.), which are gaining more and more popularity. “Reality” or “aliveness” often makes no difference in this case.
- c) Another shift is an emergence of *heritage communities*...They tend to be sustaining historic sites for dweller/participants, rather than visitors. In addition, a genius locus is gaining in value as an attribute of a day-to-day life environment.

Markeviciene (2008) also summarizes that “the sense we make of external things is based in what we see outside and on the patterns located in our minds. Future generations may revive patterns, which we have put aside or forgotten. Heritage conservation acts as an irreplaceable mediator...it collects and safeguards the treasury of the past in the full richness of its authenticity. It makes a cradle for potential traditions that may revive or emerge on the basis of preserved frameworks, returning integrity to a fragmented and deconstructed contemporary life”(Markeviciene 2008, 9). Genius loci sites cannot be ready-made. These sites are mainly shaped by nature, human creativity and interactions, and the passing of time by mutual feedback relationships. Markeviciene calls them

“happy accidents-unpredictable integral entities that are difficult to define and to plan”, and their loss will result the loss of spiritual ties to the environment. The broken or clogged up connections might be restored; those which have been destroyed by heartless developments and industrial investments (e.g. riverfront ‘revitalization’). By revisiting these places and re-examining them, by not forgetting the past failures, and also by resisting disproven practices; sustainability in planning can be achieved. Problems with urban fabric and ‘sense of place’ cannot be solved with coffee shops, complete streets, and other buzz-word popular approaches. They are instead boxed into a new form with new labels (i.e. community, or sustainability oriented design). Often, these efforts mean no harm and are genuinely intended to help, but we must recognize there is no single formula to be applied in all situations. What works for one place it does not work for the other. How every human breathes air, there is universal air for planners as well. And yet the potential for combination of varieties in planning approaches is amazingly wide-ranging. Therefore, why should we reduce ourselves to one combination when we have countless opportunities for uniqueness and local preservation?

Simplification and homogenization in urban planning is fatal to local character. It causes alienation; obesity, segregation, and more. Planners, designers, architects and landscape architects directly can affect the landscape and environment. They are the bridge between the public and the environment. They create forms, gathering places, homes, and to some extent, history as well. Khakzand’s study investigated the value of socio-cultural aspects in the environmental design progress. The importance of this study is that it directly focused on environmental designers and their value system. Human activity, perception, and behavioral patterns were associated with genius loci and derived

from Alexander's (1977) patterns language. In this study, 129 environmental design graduates and students from various Tehran universities were surveyed. The survey consisted of 49 questions. Each question had three dimensions: socio-cultural, ecological and aesthetic. The research method contained hierarchical components with specific individual indicators. Pattern is defined as "cultural forms based on historical and vernacular aspects". It showed that at different locations environmental designers have different priorities. In this case Iranian environmental designers did not pay attention to ecology (correlation coefficient 27 %) as much as designers do in West, but this research method can be implied globally. He successfully showed a relationship between Alexander's pattern language and environmental design. The most powerful correlation relationship was between the socio-cultural elements (correlation coefficient 87%) in landscape and environmental design, "...it can be claimed that pattern language is also based on socio-cultural aspects and emanates from people and the spirit of space." "As can be concluded from the pattern language approach, framing environments are by definition vernacular. They are created in an integral manner and evolve within a defined locality A vernacular aspect which evolves locally but is driven by outside forces, provides a potent opportunity to explore tensions and meanings embodied in the forms and styles that environmental designers and landscape architects employ in design" (Khakzand 2014, 301). I believe his conclusions are not just important for environmental planners, but can be applied for all planners with further research and focus group oriented approach.

## **2. Convention center case studies: pros and cons**

**2.1. Tier description:** Convention centers can be owned by convention visitor bureaus, by non-profit organizations, and/or by public-private ownerships. The accepted de facto elements of a good and successful convention center are as follows: bigger is better, easy accessibility, walkable distance from hotels, proximity to an international airport, entertainment and recreational resources, a good city image, excellent service, parking amenities, mass transportation, and modern audio-visual amenities. While successful convention centers must have these qualities, they may still vary in scale, exhibit space, and in other amenities. They can be located in first, second and third tier cities. First and second tier cities have designated convention centers, third tier cities do not have to have a designated convention center. The convention space can be a part of another facility. There is no official tier designation, a first tier city to one meeting planner may be a second tier to another.

As of March 2, 2015 Destination Marketing International Association on <http://blog.empowermint.com> describes the characteristics of first, second, and third tier cities. According to Karen Gonzales, senior vice president of membership and operations at Destination Marketing International (DMAI), there are general characteristics which apply to each tier, but in reality it is all about perception. First tier cities with convention centers have big centers. Second tier cities have medium-sized centers. Third tier cities have small convention centers. She emphasizes that it also depends on attendee groups, whether a large group or small group will be attending the center. Characteristics of first tier cities with convention centers include:

- A large number of chain-convention hotels, luxury and large variety of hotel rates
- Rich dining opportunities
- Entertainment and attraction options

- Reputation for world class service
- Suggests an element of attraction, prestige, and desirability

Second tier cities don't have characteristics of first tiers. Being a second tier city does not equate to less quality. It may mean limitations on space and hotel room. However, this is related to attendee groups because they can vary greatly in number of attendees. Facilities in second tier cities can be as good as those in first tier cities, and they can have a more dynamic booking and pricing flexibility due to the recession. Generalized characteristics of second tier cities include:

- Smaller city population
- Smaller convention center
- Less direct airlift
- Opportunity for better value

Second tier cities can provide a distinctive experience for the attendees when they possess the entire city instead of being one of multiple conventions taking place in first tier city. They can provide a new and electrifying change in contrast with the well-known, sometimes overexposed, first tier cities.

Third tier cities mean smaller convention space, but not less quality or cost. Characteristics include:

- Problematic air travel connection
- No stand-alone convention center
- A smaller conference center, or meeting and exhibit space enclosed within a hotel rather than a dedicated facility
- Distinctive leisure travel appeal
- Regional market drive

**Table 2.5: City image elements in one sentence long self-description` of the top 25 CC.**

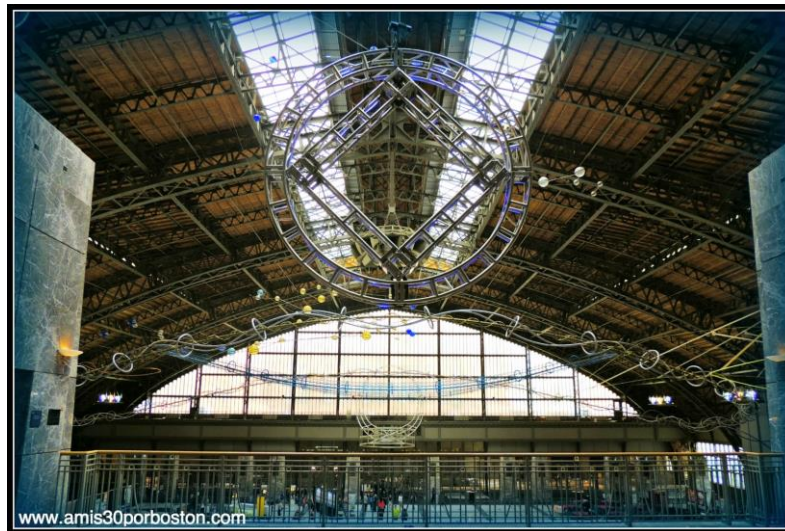
Source: [www.meetingsource.com/convention\\_centers.htm](http://www.meetingsource.com/convention_centers.htm). Table created by Author.

Convention center and location	Walkability Downtown	River, lake	Nr. of attendees	Exhibition space	Recent/planned expansion	Attraction, entertainment	Other
McCormick Place Chicago, IL		X	X				
Las Vegas Convention Center Las Vegas, NV				X			
Washington Convention Center Washington, DC					X	X	
Orange County Convention Center Orlando, FL					X		
Georgia World Congress Center Atlanta, GA				X		X	
Dallas Convention Center Dallas, TX	X					X	
The Moscone Center San Francisco, CA	X						
Nashville Convention Center Nashville, TN	X				X		
San Diego Convention Center San Diego, CA				X		X	
Ernest Morial Convention Center New Orleans, LA	X						
Colorado Convention Center Denver, CO	X					X	
Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center San Antonio, TX	X	X					
Phoenix Convention Center Phoenix, AZ				X	X		
Los Angeles Convention Center Los Angeles, CA	X					X	
John B. Hynes Convention Center Boston, MA	X			X		X	
Pennsylvania Convention Center Philadelphia, PA	X			X	X		
Minneapolis Convention Center Minneapolis, MN			X				
Austin Convention Center Austin, TX							X
Jacob K. Javits Convention Center New York, NY							X
Washington State Convention & Trade Center Seattle, WA				X	X		
Renaissance Conference Center Detroit, MI	X						
Convention Center of Tampa Tampa, FL	X	X					
America's Center Convention Complex St. Louis, MO	X			X			
Riverside Convention Center Riverside, CA							X
George R. Brown Convention Center Houston, TX	X			X		X	

As of March 2, 2015 [meetingsource.com](http://meetingsource.com) lists the top 25 convention centers, and leading second tier cities along with a sentence-long destination image projection. The author of this study sees these destination image projections as being very important. They directly show vital marketed elements such as being part of city downtowns, walking distance from downtowns, new or

recently expanded convention centers, or a new shiny and glamorous entertainment facility. MeetingSource.Com in establishing the top 25 convention centers and leading second tier cities, used the reports of the Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), the National Business Travel Association (NBTA) and the Institute of Business Travel Management. In Table 5 the top 25 convention centers' sentence long descriptions have been summarized. They clearly strive to seem better and more glamorous than the each of the others. Nearly every sentence-long description states that the center was recently expanded or will be expanded, they are walk-ably close to downtowns, and they are near new downtown hotels, attractions, and entertainment.

## **2.2. Case study one: Pennsylvania Convention Center, Philadelphia, PA**



**Figure 2.4. Pennsylvania Convention Center.** Source: [www.amis30porboston.com](http://www.amis30porboston.com).

The Pennsylvania Convention Center is a disappointment for Philadelphians. It provides a case study typical of previously discussed failed convention center planning elements. In this case, there was a lack of stakeholders' accountability, the “me too” and “arms race” attitude was present, the feasibility study for expansion was weak, and the historic urban fabric was discarded

against the locals' wishes. In the end, a unique sense of place was destroyed and replaced with a single-functioned mega-project.

Philadelphia was founded in 1680 on a grid with narrow streets and narrow alleys. The pre-war downtown, named Center City, has two- to four-story row houses and commercial buildings which are only 15-20 feet wide. "It is a delightful place for urban living, at least for those who do not own cars and do not need private outdoor space"(Ryan 2013, p. 6). Sixty percent of the Center City still has this delightful historic fabric, with human scale, shops, diverse land uses and mixed populations from homeless to wealthy. The other forty percent contains the railroad station, lower-income housing, old industrial elements, City Hall, and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. By 1990, only a fragmented part of 'urban delight' remained here. Between 1988 and 1993 the Pennsylvania Convention Center (PCC) was built on four city blocks, behind the abandoned Reading Railroad Terminal. PCC is owned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and since 2013 is managed by SMG. SMG was hired to deal with the center's difficulties of making enough impact on the region's economy. Almost as soon as it had been completed, the idea and proposal for expansion appeared. In 2002 the expansion cost was estimated to \$464 million. By 2007, it was over \$700 million. The project was justified by anticipated tax revenues, jobs for construction workers, and convention attendee spending. In 2004 the Philadelphia legislature voted \$400 million from slot-machine funds and revenue provided from new hotel tax. The expansion started in 2007 and ended in 2011. The structure's appearance is a dramatic, "mammoth" structure not fitting in the urban environment. It is unlikely that it will be the "chief economic engine" of Center City, and active streets like the ones in Chinatown do not need it to flourish. It's expansion destroyed crucial urban elements like independent business, mixed uses, old buildings, and diverse populations (Ryan 2013). Locals

protested against the expansion in 2008. A 2004 agreement to preserve two of the buildings between the Convention Center Authority and the Pennsylvania Historical Society and Museum Commission was broken by the state agency in charge of construction. All buildings in question were demolished except a 22-story skyscraper. Several arts organizations and three dozen artist's studios and industrial firms were relocated.

Philadelphia's media and locals continue to decry the center's failure. On March 10, 2014 Philadelphian Bradley Maule writes on hiddencityphila.org: *"an expanded Convention Center meant economic growth. Oh, youthful optimism... it's difficult to view the PACC expansion as anything but a failure: an economic disappointment, a missed opportunity for Mayor Nutter's green team, an urbanist's nightmare. Taxpayers all across Pennsylvania spent nearly a billion dollars for Philadelphia to enlarge an already iffy Convention Center, justified by promises and lofty expectations."*

*"Rest in peace you fine old building. Let's hope you get the restart in death you never truly got in life."* January 25, 2008



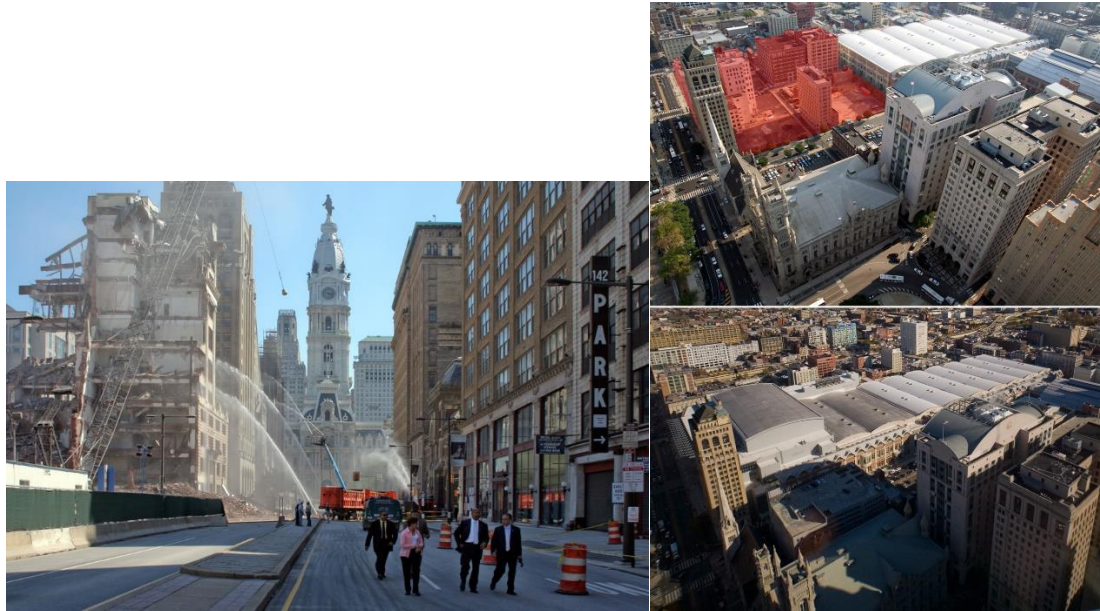
**Figure 2.5. Opposing Philadelphians of new expansion of the Pennsylvania CC.** Source:

<https://ruins.wordpress.com/2008/01/25/rest-in-peace-you-fine-old-buildings/#comment-11914>

The new convention center in 1988 was justified by a PKF report which predicted 346,000 convention attendees and 664,800 room nights by 2001. The best year of the center's was in 2002, with 573,875 hotel room nights. By 2007 the room night occupancy was 336,000. Following its major expansion in early 2011, it was still only 311,810, only half of what the PKF projected decades earlier (Sanders 2014). The convention facility's official website [www.paconvention.com](http://www.paconvention.com) describes that the center's adjacent matrix was enhanced with the 'unveiling' of Lenfest Plaza on Cherry Street, which links three internationally acclaimed art institutions. This plaza provides outdoor seating, and has easy access from the convention center to museums. With the new expansion, four new hotels opened with about 700 rooms total. Just blocks away from the center is Temple University which plans to spend \$1.2 billion to develop the North Broad Street corridor including a library, science research building, high-rise residence hall with campus dining and retail space. The center's official website states "all of the growth ignited by the PCC is creating a sparkling new hub of activity". On May 30, 2013 Tom Ferrick reports on [axisphilly.org](http://axisphilly.org): *"The newly expanded Pennsylvania Convention Center is turning out to be a dud. With a capital D-U-D. The \$1.3 billion facility has failed to attract the convention business promised by those who lobbied for the expansion that nearly doubled the size of the facility to 974,000 square feet. The \$780 million expansion — paid entirely with taxpayer dollars — was billed as the key to growing the hotel, restaurant and hospitality sector of the local economy. A larger convention center, it was argued, would allow the city to attract bigger conventions and run two smaller ones simultaneously. Two years after the expansion opened, amid much hoopla, it has yet to live up to expectations. Worse still, the future looks grim."*

*"...current convention center management has had to offer subsidies to associations — in the*

*form of lower rent and other savings — in an attempt to overcome buyer reluctance. It spent \$5 million on such subsidies last year...”*



**Figure 2.6. Demolition of urban downtown fabric that was opposed by local people.** Source: <http://hiddencityphila.org/2014/03/expanded-convention-center-economic-failure-urbanists-nightmare>

### **2.3. Case study two: Las Vegas Convention Center, Winchester, Nevada**

The Las Vegas Convention Center is a leading first tier city convention center, and presents a case study of a successful plan. It is adjacent to the Las Vegas Strip, and has 3.2 million square feet which consist of about 2 million square feet of exhibit space, and 250,000 square feet of meeting space. It is in walking distance from 100,000 hotel guest rooms. According to the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority the center had a \$45.2 billion impact on Southern Nevada's 2013 economy, which is 47 percent of the region's gross product. It is among the top five of successful centers, but it has experienced downturns.



**Figure 2.7. Las Vegas Convention Center.** Source: <https://www.wtca.org/locations/world-trade-center-las-vegas/news/las-vegas-unveils-plans-for-global-business-district-and-expansion-of-world-trade-center>

Why is it so successful? Its success lies in Las Vegas innate character. The city is a gambling and visitor mecca. Day or night, the lights are on. It has easy access from McCarran International Airport, and the Las Vegas Monorail connects 8 resorts and the convention center. A huge range of spas (~40), golf courses, and a big variety of dining options are available for visitors. It is a spot-on example of a ‘come and play’ place. The convention center is a beneficiary of the city’s unique genius loci. The frequently decried theme park here is not a burden, but rather a distinctive and original element.

The Las Vegas Convention Center is owned by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. It is a public-private partnership. The fourteen board member is elected by county governmental bodies. Funding is provided by room-tax on all hotels in the county and through the revenue created from the center and Cashman center (Krieg 1996, Sanders 2014). In 1991 the old building was deconstructed to create another 200,000 square feet of meeting rooms and exhibit space. LVCC opened in 1959 with 40,000 square feet. After several expansions to date, it

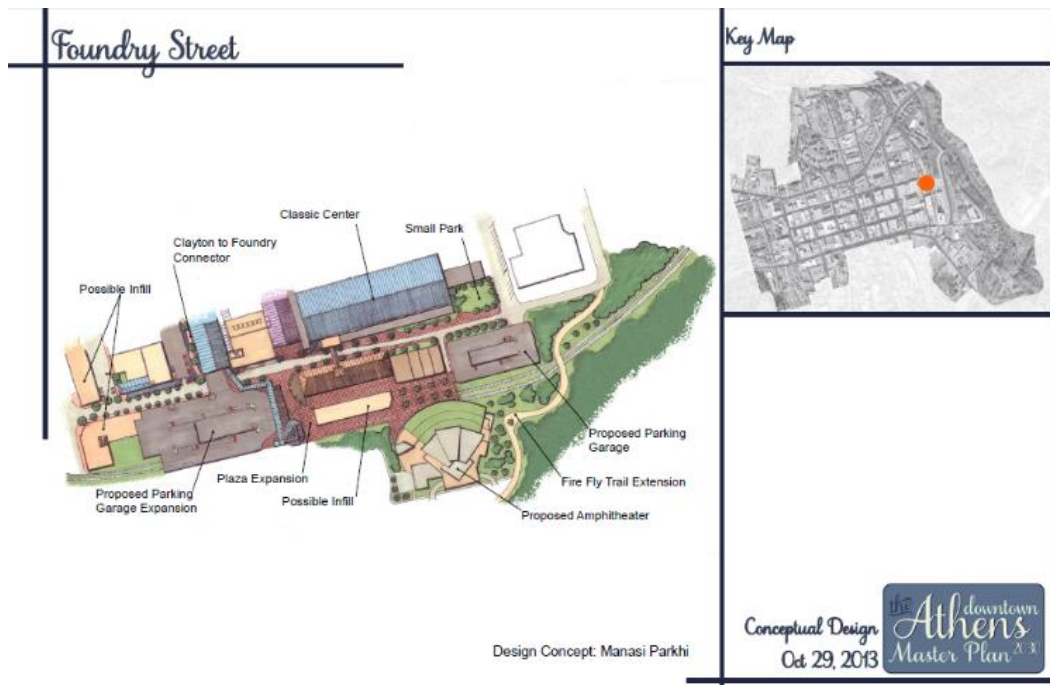
boasts 1.94 million square feet of exhibit space. The site was well chosen. It was built outside of the city limits along The Strip, where land in the 1950s was cheap and there was enough space for expansion. The convention center reinforced the explosion of casinos in the nearby area. By 1964 they were planning expansions which included a concert hall and stadium. In contrast to other convention centers, attendance grew from 744,968 in 1990 to 1,267,482 in 2000. However, in 1998, Manny Cortez, president of Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, argued that the center required expansion because they had people standing in line and there wasn't enough space to satisfy their need. In 2011 the expanded center had 1,279,383 convention and tradeshow attendees, and 1,212,038 in 2012. Both years were unfortunately lower than in 2000 (Sanders 2014). This shows that even successful centers should proceed with caution when 'expansion' is recommended.

Nevertheless, as of March 3, 2015 Velotta and Stutz on ReviewJournal.com reports that on February 17, 2015 another expansion can be expected. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority are planning to buy the 60 year old Hotel Riviera on the Strip for \$182.5 million. *'MGM Resorts International Chairman Jim Murren said he supports the transaction because it allows the convention authority to have a presence on the Strip. The Global Business District, he said, will give Las Vegas another boost in its competition for convention business with Chicago; Orlando, Fla.; and other cities. This is really going to be bad news for other convention markets,' Murren said. "I love this deal because it will create an attractive corridor from the Strip to the Convention Center. It's going to help bring people down to that end of the Strip."* In Las Vegas the Convention Center industry fits in the city in a more healthy way, and has not taken away crucial elements from its citizens. It does not copy ideas, and it stays unique. Thematic activities seem normal and natural on Las Vegas Strip. Gambling, nightlife, and

escapism all make sense here. Overall, the convention center industry has never destroyed important existing urban elements. It went through continuous expansions, about 14 of them, and made the return. However, Sanders shows that stakeholders and public representatives could act more responsibly and be more accountable. The latest proposal is quite alarming. The decision of new expansion shows it is more about the “ego-game” pitfall observed in other markets rather than reason and logic.

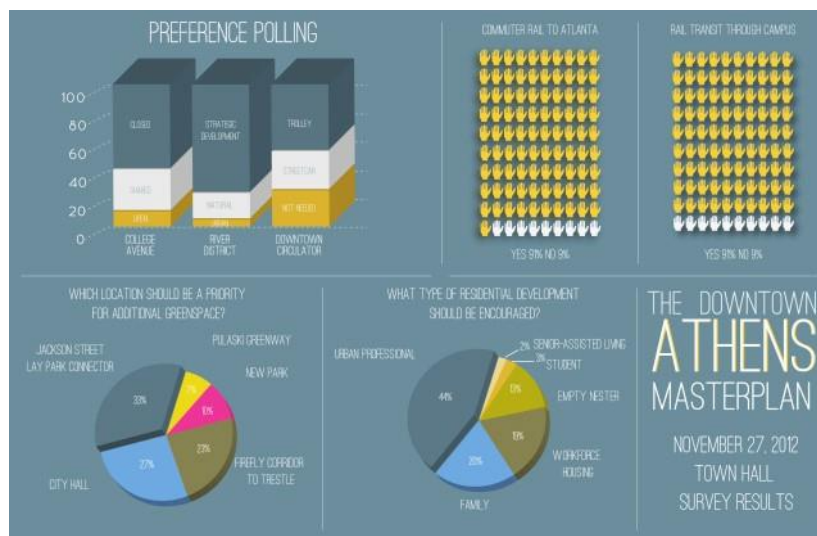
### **2.3. Case study three: Classic Center, Athens, Georgia**

Athens is a vibrant college town in its fullest term. It would be a second tier city. The University of Georgia (UGA) with about 30,000 students a year defines the character of the city. The University of Georgia Campus is within walking distance from downtown and the Classic Center. UGA is one the oldest universities, it was founded in 1785. As of March 3, 2015 [classiccenter.com](http://classiccenter.com) states that the Classic Center has 56,000 square feet of exhibit hall and a new 8,000 square feet atrium. It has 3,000 banquet seating, 6,000 theatre seating, and 2,100 performing arts seating. A parking deck attached to the facility has 644 spaces. Complementary Wi-Fi access and in-house catering is offered. The facility is in walking distance to 1,500 hotel rooms. This particular case study is important because it was recognized that the Classic Center is only 2 minutes’ walk from heart of downtown, where mainly 150 local businesses create a unique genius loci. Still the convention center is alienated from the rest of the city. New residential housings popped up in the landscape around the center in less than 5 years, and other multi-use facilities promote sustainability and walkability for everyone who wants to live close to Downtown. This creates a livable and lively city. Athens is famous for food and music.



**Figure 2.8. Athens Downtowns Master Plan in context with the Classic Center.** Source:

<https://downtownathensmasterplan.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/12>.



**Figure 2.9. Survey results - Downtown Athens Master Plan.** Source:

<https://downtownathensmasterplan.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/3.jpg>

There are live music concerts almost every night at several locations in downtown. Convention attendees can wander and enjoy the night and day life of Athens and immerse themselves in an

authentic atmosphere. Athens has an inarguably authentic sense of place, one which has not been ‘copy-pasted’ from other successful places.

The key solution for Athens to resolve the center’s alienation from its surroundings is the Athens Downtown Master Plan, created by a UGA student planning team with Jack Crowley in 2014.

The team also had certified professionals like planners and landscape architects. The plan has key elements that help to shake up things by directing people there with a light rail. The tracks exist today, what remains is for the city government to provide funding to find the best solution and possibly engage in a public-private agreement with the owner of the rail-track. Another key part is that it is not a streamlined master plan. It was not created by an outside company. Instead, it was created by people who knew and cared for the city and had a unique vision. According to a conversation with Jack Crowley (March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015) the local community was involved through a well thought-out process. This educational and research phase did last for 18 months. They used new media outlets such as social media (Facebook) and older media to spread the word of the new plan. They also went to the local farmers market, and reached out to communities which were under-represented. One of these was the Hispanic community where they used translators. They had an open session at the Classic Center where everyone who wanted to participate was welcome to. They used a technology, where people could type their ideas and it instantly appeared on a big screen. Approximately 6000 people participated and the study benefited everyone. Students were able to have a hands-on experience and the city had a lot less expense than contracting a professional company. Thus the master plan encompasses the communities’ main visions and safeguards locals’ interest. It shakes up the existing center’s rigid environment by including mass transportation, an art district, and a possible farmers market. There won’t be an outsider and an insider, but a melting pot for visitors to immerse in local flavor and for locals

to benefit from the convention business by bringing them closer to the center. This makes the center more inviting for locals. In years to come, the convention center may expand but won't damage the city's urban fabric in its truest meaning. It can't take over huge space, but becomes a team player rather than a monstrous entity.

### **3. Summary of case studies:**

Three types of convention center planning were represented here. They were chosen with reason. The Pennsylvania Convention Center provides an example of some of the worst in of destructive convention center planning. The Las Vegas Convention Center, with its original entertainment character, provides insight into a mix of successful and unsuccessful planning moves. The Classic Center in Athens, Ga., shows a small city center with promising solutions.

Both Philadelphia and Las Vegas show archetypically unsuccessful elements of convention center planning such as a lack of accountability and transparency from stakeholders, shallow feasibility studies, and "me too" expansions entered into solely for the purpose of remaining competitive. The first tier city of Las Vegas has been expanded 14 times; and there is a new expansion on the horizon announced last February. However, the planning history in Las Vegas is less destructive than the case of Philadelphia because the Las Vegas Convention Center created its own niche from the very beginning in 1958. The city image of Las Vegas, gambling and night life, promises a "live in the moment" experience; and the whole city is built upon this. That is its innate genius loci. It is not upsetting and not destructive. In the case of Philadelphia, the opposite is true. The Pennsylvania Convention Center is perceived by locals as a mammoth in the heart of downtown. The city's centuries-old historic image has been eroded by the center despite the center's own self-promotion as city-image builder.

Looking at the 25 destination image projections (Table 2.5), where convention centers' self-promotion is examined, the language used is as homogenized as the experiences of attendees has become. Amount of square footage is the only tangible distinguishing characteristic between centers. Therefore, true distinctiveness of character appears only to exist when a city has its own distinctive image. When the center integrates into an existing and healthy city image, it can be successful. However, this idea is not embraced by the industry. Unsustainable and continual expansion is the most popular reaction to market and other pressures. The result is short-term planning and reduction of healthy urban life patterns. Locals pay the price for in the long-term.

The race for more exhibition space seems very paradoxical when we compare costs and promises made during the consulting phase to the realities of the returns following expansion. Almost all the centers throughout the nation are having trouble keeping their business alive and have failed to meet these expectations. The question then remains: Why perpetuate the cycle? How much is enough, when local citizens are dissatisfied and alienated from substantial areas of their own downtowns? These single-purpose nature of these large structures are exclusive and offer no avenue for locals to re-inhabit their city centers.

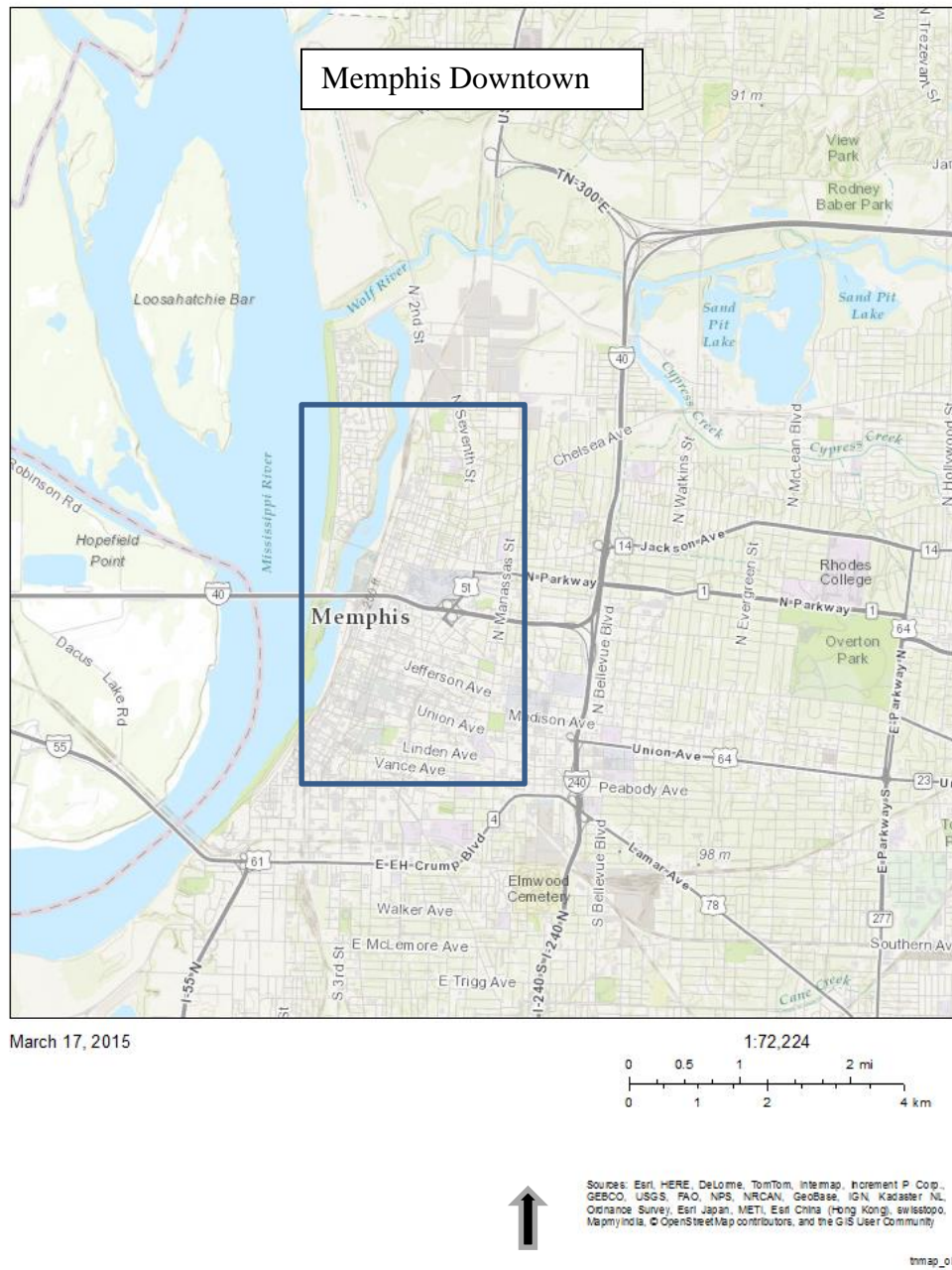
What convention planners, city officials and other developers ignore is that there is no distinctive image without sense of place. There is no sense of place without local citizens. In many cities locals are being excluded from their own spaces and histories. In some cases, they can only enjoy the benefit of visitors by cleaning thousands of hotel rooms. Many conference attendees realize the promises of unique experiences are not real. In fact, the convention business may have peaked two and a half decades ago. If we look at booking numbers, we see that the promises of attendance made for every expansion over the last three decades were

perhaps impossible due to competitive effect of so many simultaneous and continuous expansions in every market.

This year, there is a new center proposal in Greenville, SC., a proposed expansion in San Diego, one in Las Vegas, one in Nashville, and the list goes on. How did the industry get to this point? Where will the anticipated number of attendees come from? The illogical rule has become, “because they did not come, let’s build more”. Ryan (2013) called this the ‘metastasis’ of convention centers. Indeed, the prevailing models for convention center planning are unhealthy, unsustainable, and spreading throughout the industry like a disease.

## CHAPTER 3

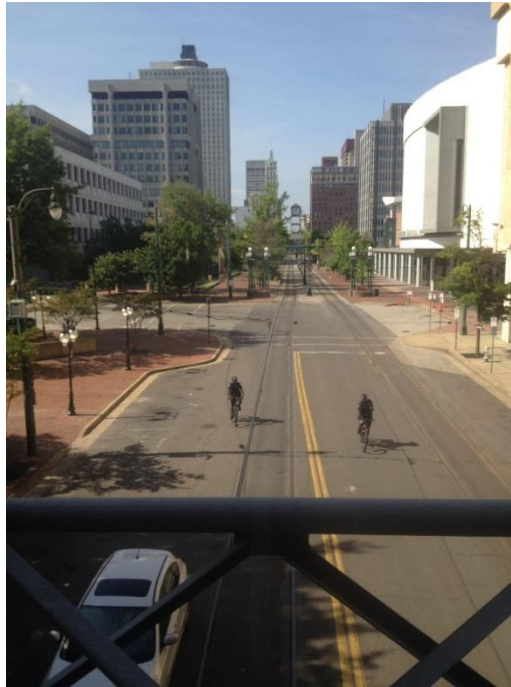
### CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: MEMPHIS



**Figure 3.1.** Map of Memphis Downtown and focus area. Created by Author.

## 1. The Memphis Cook Convention Center and Downtown Memphis

The Cook Convention Center was built in 1974. It is located in Downtown Memphis, and it is adjacent to the Mississippi River. There has only been one expansion in 2003. As part of the expansion, the Cannon Performing Arts Center was built along with a ballroom and additional meeting rooms. The Convention Center directly connects with a walking bridge, over North

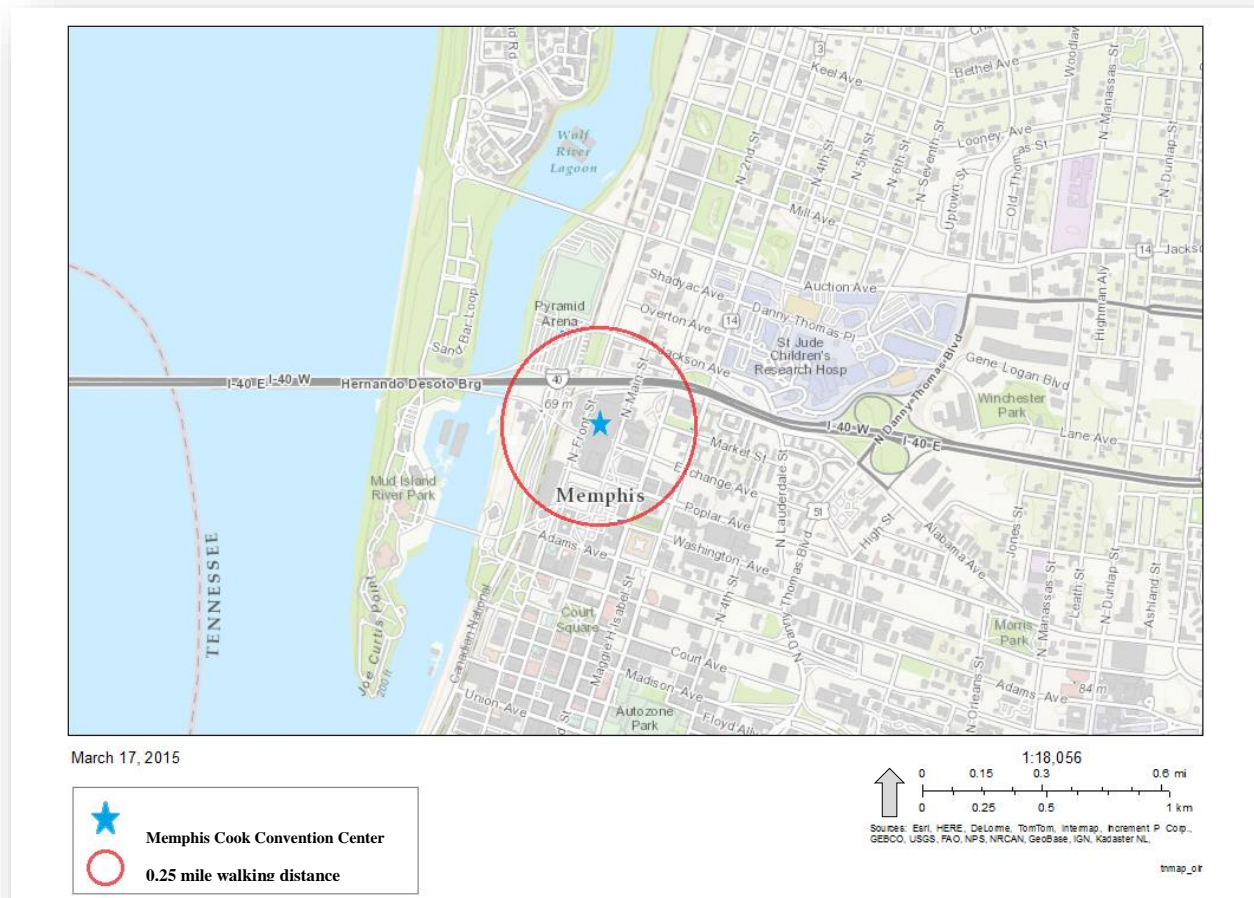


*Figure 3.2. Memphis Downtown with the convention center on the right.* 2014. Created by Author.

Main Street to the 600 room Sheraton Memphis Downtown Hotel. The convention center is connected by the MATA Historic Trolley, which runs along the river and provides immediate access to main downtown destinations, like Beale Street, and Riverwalk. The Cook Convention Center fits into the second tier facility description, with 350,000 square feet meeting and exhibit space. This consists of a 125,000 square foot exhibit hall, 31 meetings rooms, the 2100 seat Cannon Center for the Performing Arts with an additional 28,000 square foot of ballroom, and the 35,000 square foot Special Exhibit Hall. The center has on-site parking for 910 cars and 6

covered loading docks. It is easily accessible from I-40 and is only 20 minutes from Memphis International Airport and directly connected to the historic Main Street Trolley.

Walking distance from Cook Convention Center (0.25 mile)

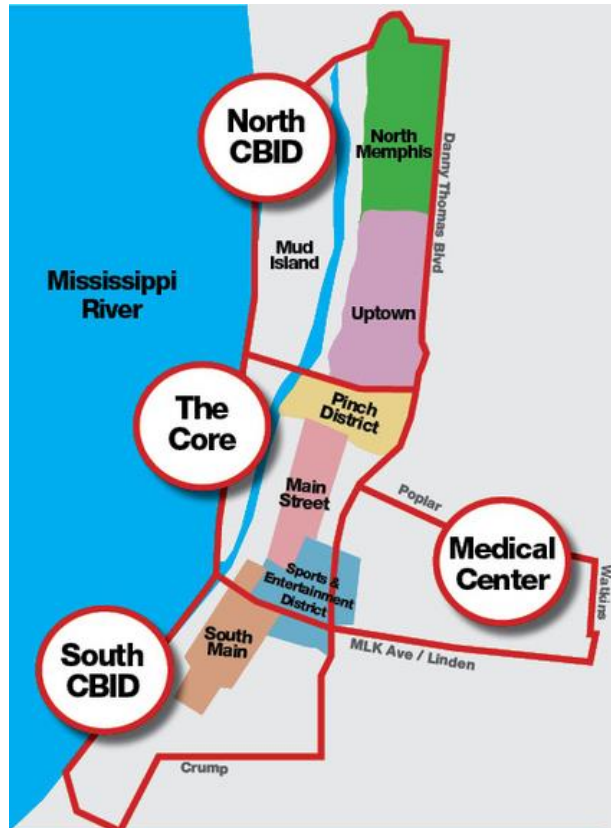


**Figure 3.3. Map of Memphis Cook CC and 0.25 walking distance.** Created by Author.

The heart of Memphis is Downtown, and the adjacent Mississippi River. Downtown Memphis has been going through major revitalization since the 1970s. The Cook Convention Center and its matrix are part of the Central Business Improvement District (CBID), which consists of:

- Downtown Core: Pinch District, Sports & Entertainment District
- Medical District: Victorian Village, Medical Center

- North CBID: North Memphis, Mud Island, Uptown
- South CBID: South Main, South End



**Figure 3.4. Memphis Downtown Central Business Improvement District.** Source:

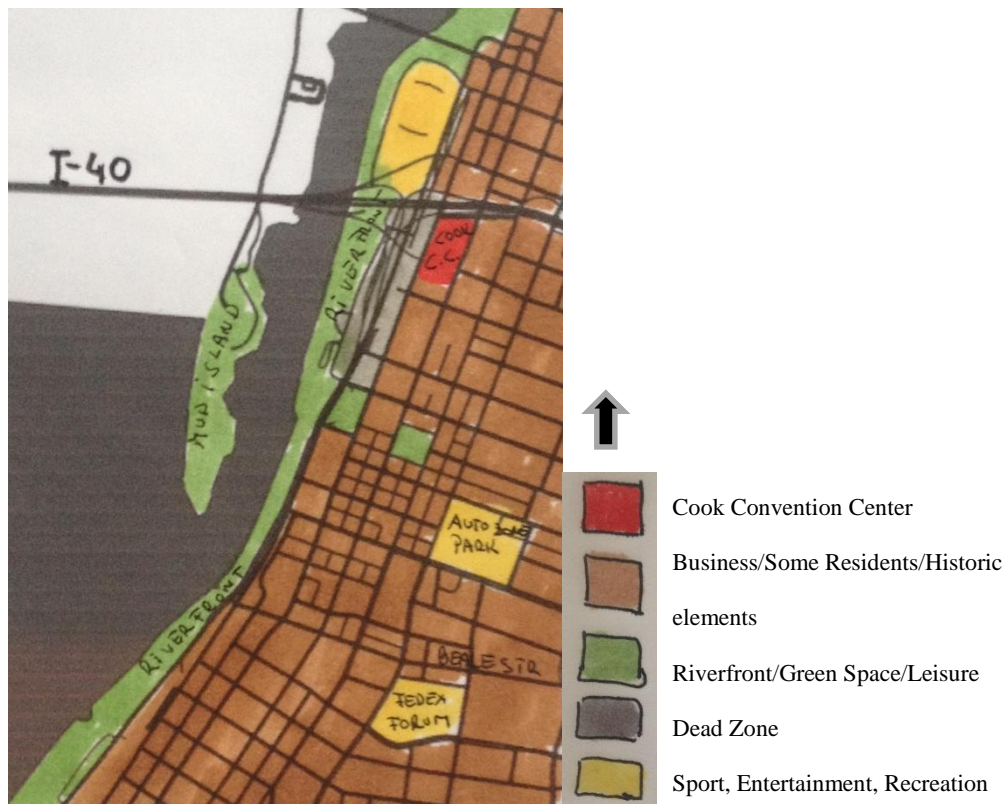
<http://www.downtownmemphiscommission.com/about.html>

The District lays between interstate 40, interstate north 55 to south, and I-240 to the east. It hosts several hotels, the convention center, AutoZone Park, and historic districts. It consists of 193 acres of office space, 23 acres retail space, 3600 hotel rooms, and 13,400 housing units. As of 15 February, 2015 the Downtown Memphis Commission on its website listed Downtown Memphis demographics data where the residential population is 24,300; households number 12,200; students-12,800; employees-63,300; and visitors-4,000,000. Average and median household incomes for the CBID are \$56,609 and \$35,678 respectively.



**Figure 3.5. I-40, Mississippi and the Creative Performing Arts Center to the right.** Source: © Airphoto-Jim Wark. Used by permission.

Connectivity, accessibility, and location are crucial for convention centers; and it is a rule of thumb that *all* convention centers will be expanded eventually, and more than once. Today`s convention center planning dictates the trend of continuous expansion which requires extra space. This fact too often means loss of valuable downtown spaces, riverfronts, and lakeshores. Expansion needs space for extra exhibition space, hotels, parking decks, and other entertainment facilities. City officials, poorly performed feasibility studies, and unrealistic promises follow proposals. Plans lack accountability and rarely account for post-expansion costs in lost urban fabric or displacement of locals from their downtowns.



Not draw on scale.

**Figure 3.6. Memphis Downtown and the Cook CC with description of functions.**

Source: Created by Author.

Memphis is typical case of this contradiction of “for the benefit of locals we must expand” versus continuous failures. These failures have very obvious symptoms and can be seen in more than one city. In the case of Memphis’ Cook Convention Center the symptoms are:

1. S1. Convention center planning is single layered, exclusive (fosters alienation among locals and the part of the city it belongs to).
2. S2. Convention center planning creates abandoned, sterilized urban environments.
3. S3. Convention Center needs expansion to revitalize downtown.
4. S4. Convention center planning weakens city image and local’s city pride.

It is clear that traditional convention center planning does not make sense anymore, and appropriate changes need to be addressed. Stakeholders parrot the phrase “for the benefit of

locals” during planning phases, yet locals are rarely invited to participate. Even in the case of a positive financial outcome, as in Las Vegas, the cost in terms of local exclusion negatively affects local city image, pride, and urban fabric.

Could the planning process be made more environmentally and community friendly by including locals from the beginning? This is especially important when a center is located in a downtown area. Based on past failures, involvement of locals appears to be a crucial but historically overlooked component in planning. Convention centers should function as integrated parts of a city’s center, finding opportunities to fit into the urban fabric, rather than disrupting or dominated it. In the case of Memphis, the center and the new recreational mecca the Pyramid, dominates the riverfront. With future plans as they stand, it will dominate the landscape, leaving little room for anything else. Where are the small players? Why does economic growth and expansion always mean mega-structures like sports stadiums, convention centers, malls, and entertainment venues?

A 2008 report found on [smartcitymemphis.com](http://smartcitymemphis.com) stated that in 1998, the consulting firm Price Waterhouse was contracted by the city to make recommendations for expansion or renewal. After months of analysis, the consultant’s recommendation was unequivocal: do not expand. Rather, the consulting firm recommended that the city build a new convention center near the Peabody Hotel and Beale Street. Quoting the 2008 report, “Essentially, the conclusion was based on a simple premise – build where the people are rather than try to make them come to the uninviting area of the convention center. In a world characterized by stylish, airy, light-filled convention centers, Memphis Cook Convention Center is a throwback to another age. Its expansion – setting aside the fact that it cost twice its original projection and took twice as long to complete – does little to offset the gloomy interior and the gloomier meeting experience in the

convention center. In truth, the Cannon Center for the Performing Arts – as much of an upgrade as it was from the old auditorium – is equally meager when compared to similar halls in other cities. It is hard to imagine at this point how local government could find enough revenues – about \$30 million a year – to pay off \$500 million in bonds to fund construction of a new center. Most sources – hotel-motel taxes and the tourism development zone – were essentially maxed out with construction of the FedEx Forum.”

Other newspaper articles and reports discuss the expansion and renovation of the Memphis Cook Convention Center. The following article provides information regarding the reaction of local businesses to the news of moving the center closer to Beale Street.

“The city of Memphis has issued three requests for proposals to study the options of building a new convention center or expanding the current one, which critics say is poorly situated to compete for future business... The city is seeking consultants to study ways of financing a new convention center... The city also wants consultants to look at national events and convention markets, and to report on designs for an expansion or new facility... Business and civic leaders have targeted tourism as an important piece of local economic growth... Memphis is facing stiff competition from Nashville, which has plans to invest more than \$1 billion in a new convention center that will total more than 1.2 million square feet. "The competition for meetings and conventions is fierce, and the stakes are high," said Jeff Sanford, president of the Center City Commission and a member of the committee. A report from Housing and Community Development last year said the expansions "will undoubtedly cause many of our current conventions to select Nashville over Memphis."

The Convention Center process has been plagued by controversy. Beale Street merchants have said they believe the city is seeking to regain control of the street as collateral to raise money for

a new convention center. After the merchants made their claims last summer, Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton dissolved the Convention Center feasibility study group and removed himself from the process. The committee was reorganized under the umbrella of the Cook Convention Board. Herenton has said that if the committee recommended a new convention center, the area between Beale Street and AutoZone Park could be an ideal location. Federal investigators are looking into Herenton's plan to move the Greyhound station across from AutoZone Park to a location near Memphis International Airport. Herenton privately held an option to buy the Greyhound land and eventually made more than \$90,000 on the deal ” (Maki 2009).

The Memphis Cook Convention Center is not successful and the city continuously provides the funds to sustain it. According to a MemphisInform.com which is maintained by an organization of concerned citizens and taxpayers of Memphis, on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 the budget reports for 2008-2012 of the Cook Convention Centers were provided to the public. These reports come from Kevin Kane, president and CEO of Memphis Convention Bureau, and can be accessed at <http://www.memphisshelbyinform.com/2013/12/04/the-convention-center-and-kevin-kane/>. In 2007 the center`s net loss was \$3.5 million dollars. The author also reports a face to face discussion: “After discussions with Kevin he promised me that he would get the 2008 through 2012 statements to me and that since 2007 the losses have been cut at the convention center. He sent the statements later and the 2012 loss at the Cook Convention Center was cut to \$2.8 million dollars. We discussed the future of convention centers in general and the new costly one in Nashville and the old Cook Convention Center and the possibility of a new one for Memphis. He said that all convention centers lose money but the purpose is to develop tourism for the city and make money on tourism generated sales taxes and hotel, motel, and car rental taxes.” Memphis, as with other cities, follows the principle of using impressive convention and

sport spaces as a catalyst for economic growth. Solutions of this type only temporarily eliminate economic and social problems. In the long-term, these projects negatively impact the lifestyles, local memories, and identities of those present in the city; and they act as the city's premier consumption sites. They function as the city's key symbolic spaces and define the city's image.

"Memphis's NAFTA corridor is used to position the city as *the* global distribution center.

Through focusing on those strategies, institutions, and actors responsible for contouring and regulating contemporary city space, it becomes clear that "there are sections of the populations—the unemployed, the underemployed, women, the racialized or otherwise discriminated against—who are institutionally excluded from the high table of global feast" (Brah, 2002, p. 37)(Silk 2004).

The increasing role of private investment and the efforts, particularly for aspirant cities such as Memphis, to ensure they are plugged into new spatial units and forms may well shape future urban development. The urban core begins to look exactly like every other city.

Multinational stores replace local shops. Unsubtle signs of Disney-fication emerge.

Gentrification removes long-term residential populations and destroys older urban fabric, and the city loses some of its marks of history, tradition, and distinction (Harvey 2001, Silk 2004).

"Somewhat at odds with the image of Memphis as the world's distribution center and the aesthetically oriented spectacular space of consumption—the Memphis entertainment district replete with a new NBA stadium, a retro ballpark, a mall, a place of play, and managed heritage—there is a need to address the unevenness of capital development within a given space. Indeed, the image of Memphis, hawked by public/private concerns, not surprisingly, bolsters and supports such uneven capitalist development" (Silk 2004, 364).

The Memphis Cook Convention Center is directly connected by the trolley to other parts of downtown. It is also within walking distance from the Pyramid, the river, and the Main Street Mall. This declared image of walkability would be very nice if it weren't for the reality that violent crime is unusually high. This connectivity is unusable at night for the average pedestrian. The city is also home for many criminal organizations. Police cars are visible only on Beale Street. In fact, many violent crimes have occurred in the downtown area within a block from the famed Beale Street. Locals have long abandoned the city core. They have no reason to be present, and they know how unsafe it is.

Another major issue affecting the urban fabric is the placement I-40. Located where it is to the north of the Convention Center and south of the Pyramid, it creates a dead zone along the river and right behind the convention center as well adjacent to the Cannon Art Center. This dead zone has parking lots, unused structures, and the makes the river inaccessible. The convention center is in walking distance from Pinch district and Uptown, and accessible by trolley as well. A longer walk and trolley can take visitors to the Entertainment and Sports district, which is on Main Street's south end. Another POI can be the historic Victorian Village Museum which is accessible by trolley. So there is a high degree of potential connectivity from the convention center to other parts of downtown. What is needed is an increase in accessibility to the river and improvements to safety for locals and visitors.

There is no foundation remaining for a healthy city image. Blues, soul, jazz, and BBQ. The artistic heritage and soul of Memphis, where did it go? Where is the sense of place for this city? How can Memphis create a healthy city image and an original and distinctive experience for convention attendees? Sense of place is consistently overlooked in city after city. However, next to money, it is the key element driving the promises, developments, and expectations related

to planning. It is the declared and expected element of convention planners and attendees that has nonetheless failed to materialize.

## **2. Review of important downtown master plans**

Master plans directly affect convention center planning, either positively or negatively. As of December 27, 2014, the Downtown Memphis Commission listed on its website its own master plans for each district. The most significant plans are:

- Uptown Community Redevelopment Plan for Pinch District & Wolf River Harbor
- Victorian Village Redevelopment Plan
- Memphis Medical District Master Plan
- CBID Streetscape Master Plan
- Memphis Main Street Development Plan

In 2001 a \$150 million private and public reinvestment and re-use of The Pyramid initiative urged for a new master plan for this area. In 2001 the ***‘Community Redevelopment Plan and Update for the Pinch District and Wolf River Harbor’*** was approved. As a consequence of this plan, the Uptown area was rezoned, but the Wolf River Harbor area was not. Pinch District is one of the earliest settlements of Memphis. It was settled between 1790 and 1820. It is 23 acres with 10 square blocks. Today it consists historic commercial buildings, the Pyramid, new condos, parking lots, and vacant lands. The historic urban fabric has been greatly altered by building of I-40 with several exits, and the Pyramid, and the Convention Center with the Cannon Performing Arts Center. They created a dead zone. (Image credits in progress)

The master plan guiding principles include the creation of sustainable urban neighborhoods, promotion of walkability and connectivity, provision of a quality public environment, reinvention and reinvestment in the Wolf River Harbor, and promotion of diversity

through a mix of uses and varied housing options. The plan recognizes the opportunities for the Pinch area. All of these seem reasonable and thoughtful, considering its adjacency to St. Jude Children's Hospital. It is within a short walk from the Convention Center, Canon Center, and Civic Plaza. The Pyramid redevelopment is nearby, as is creation of a historic building inventor. Infill development is planned for a number of the surface parking lots.

One controversial challenge is the stated limited accessibility from I-40, because the interstate already provides several direct exit ramps to the Convention Center, the hospital, and the Pyramid. The challenge should be viewed as an opportunity to redesign the monstrous interchange that currently dominates the riverfront here to provide increased access for visitors and locals to the river. (See pictures in previous chapters). The remaining challenges are reasonable and routine. These would likely include placement of overhead utilities, narrow and damaged sidewalks, extra wide streets, and poor alley conditions. The plan seeks to maintain mixed use and uptown hospital districts to create a neighborhood center overlay in the pinch district. It proposes increased building height in the mixed use district, and improvements to streetscapes, including the creation of wider 14 ft. sidewalks with trees, cross walks, restored alleys, and more.

The ***Wolf River Harbor Redevelopment Plan*** addressed the mitigation of major harbor pollution, vacant land dumping, and the removal of unclaimed boat and salvage yards. The 3 miles of waterfront here will be conserved. A greenway will be constructed with new bike lanes, mixed use and a mix of high and moderate density residential plans. The plans appears progressive and thoughtfully prepared. Brownfields would be transformed, and historic warehouses repurposed. Room is planned for small lot single family homes, Uptown

development, and there is still potential for a public greenway along the harbor with sustainable neighborhood development.

The **Victorian Village Redevelopment Plan** envisions existing museums, surrounding medical institutions, and popular district restaurants as magnets for tourists and Memphians. The study recognizes the poor streetscape infrastructure, incompatible land uses, and underserved public spaces which are causing unattractive and unsafe places. The development recommendations will support the improvements of density by infilling with single and multifamily residential homes. Connectivity and unity is supported by the recognition of existing architectural styles.

The **Memphis Medical District Master Plan** is outside of the study's focus but it is important to note that the plan's overall project goal is to position the district as Memphis' premier medical and educational center for years to come. It supports density, mixed use development, mass transit, and walkability.

The **CBID Streetscape Master Plan** is a detailed document about streetscape improvements of the Central Business Improvement District focusing on the "public realm". Guidelines include the importance of scale, trees, color, and maintenance. The plan lists 11 goals:

1. Enhance connections among districts, downtown neighborhoods and attractions.
2. Improve the attractiveness of the downtown public realm and create safe and comfortable streets and open spaces.
3. Recognize the river as the city's "Front Door" and treat the adjacent public realm accordingly.
4. Recognize Court Square and Confederate Park as important downtown public spaces.

5. Recognize Main Street as the core of many of downtown's neighborhoods.
6. Recognize the alleys adjacent to the Main Street Mall as an integral component of the public realm.
7. Identify and enhance significant gateways and approaches into the downtown.
8. Implement design solutions that recognize and enhance the unique character of Memphis.
9. Achieve streetscape environments that can be maintained effectively.
10. Accommodate art within the public realm.
11. Concentrate the highest investment and the initial investments in areas where it will make the most impact.

Finally, the **Main Street Development Plan** intends to create a vibrant, healthy and inclusive place to live, work, learn, and visit. It proposes to create a Main Street for a wide variety of people by celebrating the history, culture, beauty and uniqueness of Memphis, while providing a source of local pride.



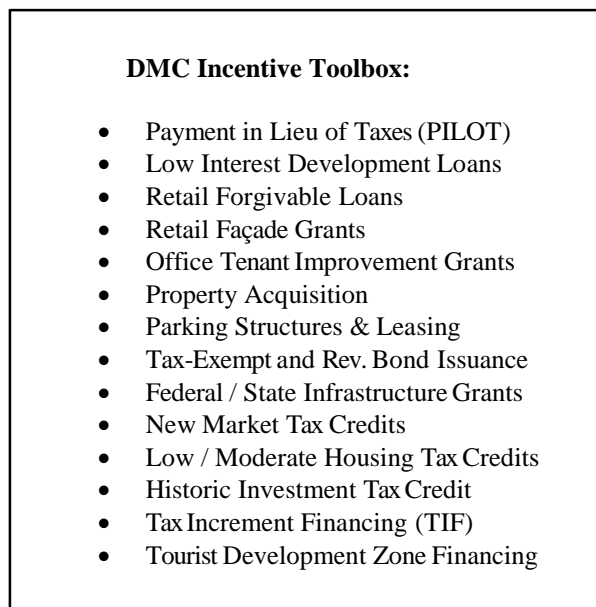
*Figure 3.7. Main Street with historic streetcar line and stops. 2014. Source: Created by Author.*

There are six guiding principles to this plan:

- a) Making Main Street the spine for a new Downtown neighborhood that connects and invigorates area attractions and activities. Activities: program events and design guidelines for streetscape, urban art, park and open space initiatives for redevelopment existing squares and parks.
- b) Develop catalytic demonstration projects through public/private partnerships. Activities: initiate land assembly procedure, real estate development of Court Square Neighborhood (CSN), new high school and middle school for CSN, post office and improvement of regional library, public facility under Confederate Park, Real estate development on Gayoso to Union block, explore the integration of an urban college campus into the Beale Street Gateway.
- c) Create regional and neighborhood scale retail. Activities: attract local retailing investment at cross streets to Main, short time parking at Jefferson, Madison, and Union. Reorganize intersections for local resident and employee use (Adams, Court, Monroe and Gayoso). Create a federally funded transit oriented parking deck at intersection of Main-Madison. Install a parking facility under Confederate Park which supports the post office, relocated library, and other institutions.
- d) Utilize federal grant assistance to enhance Jefferson, Madison and Union as pedestrian oriented retail street. Activities: taking actions on the above listed goals.
- e) Initiate public policy to enhance and encourage transit ridership. Activities: developing shared parking policies and facilities for transit ridership support, increasing timing efficiency for the trolley, extending the trolley line from Main to the Medical Center, exploring potential rail extensions from South Main to LeMoyne-Own College Area.

- f) Develop a strategy for marketing Main Street and guiding all aspects of community.

Community Development Tools are offered by the Downtown Memphis Commission (DMC): *Payment-in-lieu-of-taxes Program*: Real estate based, “freezes” property taxes at the predevelopment level for a predetermined period of time. The PILOT Program can be offered for redevelopment projects within the Memphis Central Business Improvement District (CBID) and for high-impact projects inside the parkways. To be eligible for a PILOT, the value of the building renovations, site improvements or new construction must be equal to or greater than sixty percent (60%) of the total project cost. PILOTs granted through the CCRFC are not entitlements, but are reserved for projects that would not be financially feasible in the absence of the PILOT incentive.



**Figure 3.8. Downtown Incentives.** Source: <http://www.downtownmemphiscommission.com/>.

Figure created by Author.

*Development Loan Program*: Low-interest (3%) fixed loan program for property redevelopment.

*Downtown Retail Incentives:* Forgivable loan and Façade Grant program to encourage retail recruitment and retention.



**Figure 3.9. Memphis Pyramid.** Source: © Airphoto-Jim Wark. Used by permission.

*Downtown Office Occupancy Incentive:* Grant program designed to recruit and retain high occupancy rates for Downtown office.

*Parking Development & Bond Issuance:* Parking development as a catalyst for private investment with bond issuance.

**Memphis ‘Bass Pro Shop’ Pyramid:** the website of Wide Open Spaces accessed on December 19, 2014 reports that Bass Pro Shops has leased the Pyramid. It will open in April or May 2015. The center will feature ranges for shooting and archery, aquariums stocked with 1,800 fish, pools with live alligators, a waterfowl heritage center, and a bowling alley that will appear to be underwater. There will also be a 100-room hotel decorated to look like cabins in a cypress swamp. As of March 17, 2015 wreg.com was accessed and on February 2<sup>nd</sup> a job fair was held for the new Bass Pro and 600 jobs were advertised in various areas including servers, salespersons, concierges, maids, fisherman, etc. A public-private partnership is further intended to elevate the historic Pinch district.



**Figure 3.10. Bass Pro Shops in Memphis Pyramid.** Source: Memphisflyer.com and Bass Pro Shops

### 3. Conclusion

Memphis' unique image owes a tremendous debt its music and river. There is also the collective memory of the struggle of African-Americans from slavery to physical and social freedom, the assassination of Martin Luther King, and of course, Elvis. There is a connection to the river



**Figure 3.11. Memphis Arts Council Map** Source: © Randal Birkey Illustration. Used by permission.

The map emphasizing art, music, and theater as well their centers in Memphis Downtown and adjacent areas through music and everyday life. There are happy *and* sad pieces together. Every city has a main core, a center that often overlaps with a downtown core, as is the case of Memphis. The ‘spirit of a place’ leaves an area if we gradually sterilize it by relocating the people and erasing the history which gave a home to it. The Mississippi River, “Father of Waters”, has been inspiration and source of recharge for Memphians. For most of the city’s history, the river provided food until this practice was made unsafe by industrial and agricultural contaminations.

The river is dirty and compromised. The riverfront at many locations is dangerous, especially at night due to extremely high crime. Alternatively, sections of the riverfront are reserved for the wealthy, as is Harbor Town. One strip of the riverfront has been reimagined and greened up. Next to the new visitor center there is a nice example of land art, but the connection to history and the sense of place is missing.



**Figure 3.12. Reimagined Mississippi riverfront** (to the left). View of Mud Island and Downtown Memphis (to the right). 2014. Created by Author.

On Beale Street, in the B.B. King Blues Club, a singer asked if anyone were from Memphis. When no one raised their hands, she further asked if any in the audience were from

Tennessee. The result was the same (author's personal experience). Beale Street is an 'attraction' within the city of Memphis, with no connection to history, and no connection to the locals' experience.

Memphis was, and still is a music center. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city became famous for its innovative strains of African-American music such as gospel, jazz, blues and soul. In a comment posted on the blog of Memphis Music, a Memphian who is now a music teacher in Minneapolis writes: "I remember growing up in racially tense times in Mississippi and in Memphis, TN. I remember a lot of murder and violence and hatred and cloudy days. But the music scene in this troubled town gave me a hope for something better and not just for race relations. A better day for everything. "



**Figure 3.13. BB King Blues Club on Beale STR. 2014.** Source: Created by Author. (Nixon)

Perhaps Memphis should emphasize the city's sense of place through the music culture, embedded as it is in the local mentality, and as a main element of genius loci. Statements like the one above illustrate the legacy of Elvis Presley, B.B King, and Muddy Waters.



**Figure 3.14. Downtown Memphis captures.** 2014. Source: Created by Author.

There is a continuous progressive turnaround in case of Memphis Downtown. The city has recognized mistakes of the past and taken steps to redirect its future. The proposed plans address goals of sustainability, mixed use, and complete streets, reaching the “public realm”, calling for infill development, promoting cash flow, encouraging investment incentives, and reclaiming the riverfront. The language in these plans embraces positive and inclusive themes. However, once these plans have been accomplished, there is still the danger that Memphis’ Downtown will be just like any other downtown where profits from amusements and events are increased, but the texture of the riverfront and downtown remains shallow and single-layered. Consumption in its myriad forms will be realized in the form of an adventure-music-museum and sport facility between the Pyramid and the AutoZone Park. There will be clean up efforts along the river, which is more of a necessity than a progressive idea. Infill, installation of street furniture, and mixed use are all good ideas.

Question: will it be effective? Looking at downtown areas today, such as Main Street, some of this work has been accomplished. On a regular afternoon, right at the conference center, when there is no significant amusement like a baseball game or tradeshow, the streets are empty. Even with amusements present the number of people is very limited for this size of city. It is very likely that Memphians will remain alienated and excluded from the core. It won’t be for or

about them. Take the example of a young musician, doctor, or other young professional. For most, it will be too expensive to open a craftsman shop, a bakery, or a practice. There is no link for them to create, live and be. The danger is that Main Street will be for the amusement of the visitors; where history, music, and heritage can be explored in minimal surficial forms.

They can walk on the reclaimed riverfront if it is safe enough and little else. It is a place for the privileged where “public realm” means no public at all, it means “the ultimate destination for faceless visitors” who are invited primarily to ‘consume’. This outcome should upset the local. Why can we not provide and *plan space for* people who have little more to invest than their membership in the community, or artistic talent. What of those locals who have only a small amount to invest, but not enough to compete with national chain-scale investors? The elements these local players can contribute are the urban fabric and the sense of place. Why is this important from the view of *genius loci* related to convention center planning? Because Memphis is a typical case, where the convention center is taking up a significant space of downtown and the matrix around it: hotels, roads, restaurant, and atmosphere. There is minimal individual scale and there is no *genius loci or sense of Memphis*.

Try to imagine cleaning out Istanbul using the approach of the American City. Remove the bazaars and little shops, the bargaining merchants, locals drinking Turkish Tea etc. Reduce this famous and historic city to a grotesquely caricatured theme park based on itself, and what would remain? A place that a certain type of traveler visits would remain. But it would assuredly be a place where adventure is swapped for sterility, and a place where the real Turks would never go again. If the suggestion seems like hyperbole, do not take affront. Instead, visit Beale Street today and identify one artifact of authentic historical relevance without a trace of

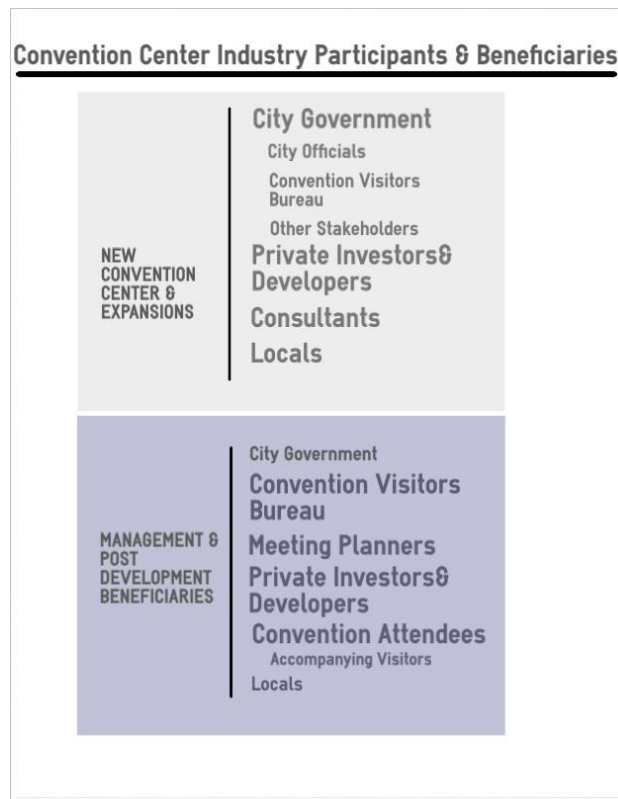
commercialism. Or better yet, try to find a local there. That is the hard part, finding an ice cold alcoholic beverage until 3 a.m. seven nights a week is much easier.

## CHAPTER 4

### PROPOSED METHODOLOGY FOR ALTERNATIVE CONVENTION CENTER PLANNING

#### 1. Methodology of locally driven convention center planning

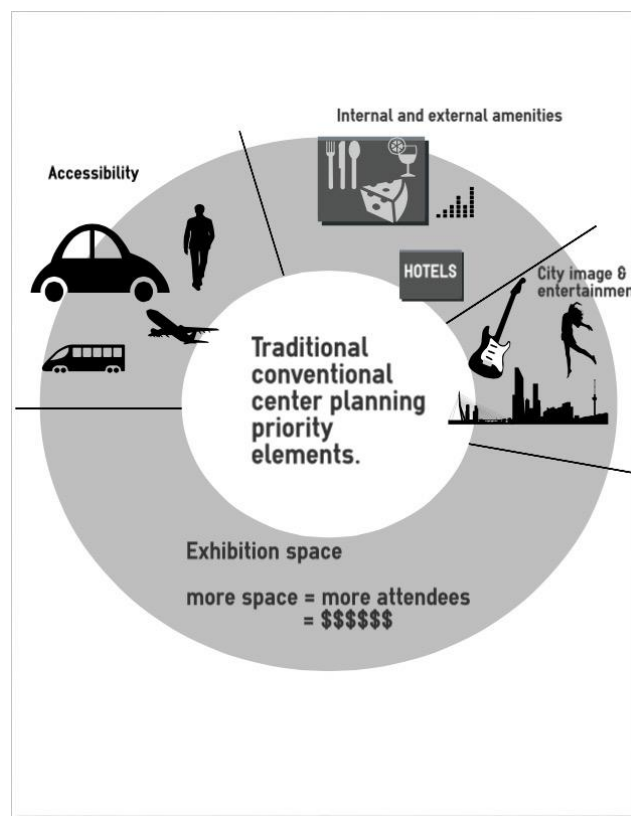
The fiasco of past and current city-owned convention center planning cannot be ignored anymore if effective change is to take place. The problem is not in the call for development, but in the cyclical execution of bad development.



**Figure 4.1.** *City owned convention center industry participants and beneficiaries.* Created by Author

Lack of accountability on behalf of stakeholders and consultants towards their voters, citizens, and customers has been identified as one of the areas of this problem that deserves more

scrutiny. Traditional convention center planning is exclusive, fostering abandoned spaces, and alienating local communities. It is single-layered; and in most cases it fails to realize the promised benefits for local communities. Other drawbacks of unsuccessful new convention centers and their expansions are the associated tax increases, and the absence of self-sustaining convention industry which calls for continuous bail-outs and money infusion from local governments.



**Figure 4.2. Traditional convention center planning priority elements.** Created by Author.

Convention centers won't disappear from our urban cores. It is more likely they will continue to expand. The good news is that urban planning in general has become more community friendly and environmentally aware. It is time to embrace this directional shift within the context of convention center planning as well. Therefore, this thesis introduces a methodology for incorporating much needed ideals into the realm of convention center planning.

The methodology is called ***Locally Driven Convention Center Planning***. It recognizes and attempts to correct traditional convention center planning failures. It stresses new approaches of accountability, cooperation, and research. These three elements are the fundamental pillars of the proposed methodology.

Traditional convention center planning relies on elements which have led to disastrous results. Figure 4.1 shows these elements which are internal and external amenities, city image, entertainment, accessibility, and exhibition space. Internal and external amenities consist of hotel rooms, technologies, and restaurants. Accessibility includes airports, mass transportation, parking decks and walkability. The most important element is exhibition space because convention industry participants believe more space means more attendees, more exhibitions, more income, and thus greater economic development.

## **2. Locally driven convention center planning elements vs. traditional convention center planning elements**

***Table 4.1. Traditional conventional planning vs. locally driven convention center planning.***

Created by Author.

<b>Traditional Conventional Center Planning</b>	<b>Locally Driven Convention Center Planning</b>
<b>Exclusive</b>	<b>Inclusive</b>
<b>Takes advantage of city image</b>	<b>Promotes city image</b>
<b>Limited or no sense of place present</b>	<b>Sustains and fosters unique sense of place</b>
<b>Euphoric</b>	<b>Objective</b>
<b>Lacks of local pride.</b>	<b>Local pride is present</b>
<b>Lack of accountability</b>	<b>Accountable</b>
<b>Weak feasibility studies and plans</b>	<b>Cooperative plans with local communities</b>
<b>Destructive</b>	<b>Promotes sustainability</b>
<b>Few or no community programs</b>	<b>Support community engagement programs</b>
<b>“Big box” architecture</b>	<b>Open and various architecture</b>
<b>Single use</b>	<b>Mixed use</b>
<b>Profit oriented economic development</b>	<b>Knowledge based economic development</b>

*Inclusive vs exclusive:* today we can observe that convention centers are isolated from the rest of the urban fabric. They create abandoned places and dead-zones. This can be changed by using community-based development, recognizing the key urban patterns, and planning and designing accordingly.

*Promotes city image vs. Takes advantage of city image:* convention centers usually advertise themselves through local specialties like food, music, and history; but they do not promote a city image which makes locals proud and gets them involved. Instead they mishandle the spirit of the city and dilute it with shallow entertainment options. There is no healthy balance between the share they take and the benefit that local people should enjoy.

*Convention centers sustain and foster sense of place vs. limited or no sense of place present:* By careful and locally driven design, planning, and research, convention business can foster ‘sense of place’ rather than dilute it.

*Objective vs euphoric:* by avoiding euphoric promises and setting expectations within the ‘real’, many negative impacts can be avoided. Plan only what a city can handle and if needed grow gradually. Be objective.

*Local pride is included vs. lack of local pride:* locally driven convention center planning involves local people. It researches their needs and analyzes the ways it can connect to the city as a whole. At the same time, it fulfills its duties and entertains visitors. Through the involvement of locals, planning and design will be carried out in harmony with the will and expectations of the community. This inclusive approach represents a distinct change from traditional convention center planning.

*Accountability vs lack of accountability:* locally driven convention center planning will be successful if stakeholders and developers are accountable for their work. If ethical practices are

demand and the empty promises of great economic improvements are more closely analyzed, the worst pitfalls in convention center planning can be avoided. Do not forget that city-financed convention centers serve the public purpose and not the opposite.

*Cooperative plans with local communities vs. weak feasibility studies and plans:* make your plans with the community. See how conventions, local activities, gastronomy, urban space planning, and more can be interconnected.

*Promotes sustainability vs. promoting destruction:* a locally planned convention center industry will serve local communities and connect to the city where today it more frequently fosters alienation.

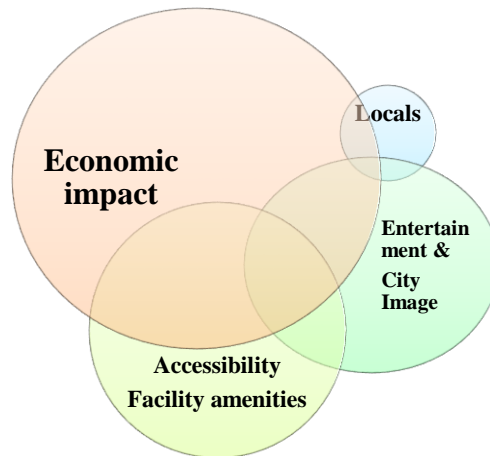
*Support community engagement programs vs. few or no community program support:* Convention centers usually exist in isolation in a city; but getting and supporting local activities can directly affect locals and indirectly have a positive tradeoff for their visitors.

*Open or various architecture vs “big box” architecture:* No matter how amazingly glamorous a big box is, it is still just a big box with long walking distances and mundane fabric. Open up new convention centers and their expansions architecturally, and use a variety of solutions to improve integration into the urban fabric.

*Mixed use vs. single use:* who said only conventions and poor coffee shop/restaurants are allowed to be in a convention center? Use imagination. Explore local architectural layers. If the center is in a historic district, use architecture which recalls historic examples. Instead of chain restaurants, invite local charm, taste, and more around and into your convention center.

*Profit oriented economic development vs. Knowledge based economic development:* knowledge based economic development invests in intellectual resources. It also recognizes that resources

like ‘quality of life’ is a form of capital which can be driving force for other economic developments.



***Figure 4.3. Bubble diagram of traditional convention center planning priorities and needs.***

Created by Author.

A convention center is tied to city image, accessibility, and economic impact. These are interconnected, and influence each other. City image is a key element for convention centers. What creates an authentic and healthy image is a living city with unique sense of place. Sense of place is sustained through everyday activities of citizens and to a somewhat lesser extent, its visitors. Local activity in downtown areas where convention centers are located must be restored, because it has been destroyed through previous urban planning strategies. Past and current convention center planning belongs to these urban strategies; and future planning related to convention centers will have to approach these issues holistically. Stakeholders should be responsible for their decisions and be held accountable in making realistic projections. Locally driven convention center planning holds promise because it would involve locals to share their visions and needs. Instead of hiring consultants, and founding future expansions on weakly performed feasibility studies and plans, the local community could create its own plan for

convention planning, as in case of Athens, GA. It could host its own shows and involve local coffees, on-site restaurants, etc. Convention centers would not dominate the landscape. Instead, they would become a supportive backbone of local economy which is inclusive rather than exclusive. A convention center is tied to city image, accessibility, and economic impact. These are interconnected and influence each other.

**Table 4.2. Key points of Successful Convention Center Planning.** Created by Author.

<b>Key points of Successful Convention Center Planning</b>	
<b>Key 1:</b>	Unique sense of place = healthy city image = healthy local city life. Support this with convention center planning strategies, and become a team player rather than the “the big box”. Thematic sites are destructive for the majority of locals thus do it with sensibility.
<b>Key 2:</b>	Bigger is not better.
<b>Key 3:</b>	Demand for accountability.
<b>Key 4:</b>	The grass is always greener on the other side. Not True! The power is in locally driven convention center planning. Make locals proud and work with them, because it is for them.
<b>Key 5:</b>	Cooperate and research. Be bold and creative!

## 2.1 The three pillars of locally driven convention center planning: accountability, research and cooperation (ARC)



**Figure 4.4. The three pillars of locally driven convention centers.** Created by Author.

The three pillar system was conceived of after the analysis of convention center planning and industry as a whole. It is clear that stakeholders frequently don't stand for what they say.

**Table 4.3. Summary of important ARC elements.** Created by Author.

<b>Accountability</b>	<b>Research</b>	<b>Cooperation</b>
Stand for your word	Healthy local life = unique sense of place which lead to healthy city image.	Explore local possibilities
Avoid euphoric promises	Study preference of locals.	City - partnership
Avoid catchy feasibility studies.	Study your city's public life and layers: history, culture, art, architecture and urban form.	Create locally driven plans
Build trust between locals and convention business.	Use a combination of tools and methods: Power of Places, New Media, Ethnography	Create peoples blueprint

Instead, they demonstrate the euphoric-style decision making pattern. They are often quick to embrace weak feasibility studies made by various private consultants. These studies lack a necessary thoroughness, but they provide the basis used to justify the decision of a new center or an expansion of an old one. City officials place too high a hope on new development returns. Table 4.3. summarizes the steps and options for those who are ready for change and want convention center planning through locally driven convention center planning.

### **Accountability**

The pillar of accountability is very simple. It demands that stakeholders, city officials, and those who held their status as representatives of the government must stand for what they say and realize that their decisions have consequences. Their interest is the public's interest; and they have to be accountable towards the public. This is true when it comes to convention center developments and expansions as well. They must squander municipal resources for continuous expansions without incorporating the other two elements of local cooperation and research into realistic market growth.

## Research

The pillar of research is the most important element for successful locally driven convention center planning; and it is tightly tied to the pillar of cooperation. The two should be executed jointly. Intuitively this process will increase the involvement of locals in the process of studying the city's public life and local activities in the context of convention centers. One can ask: why would it be important to study local life? The answer is that convention center developments are conceptualized as revitalization strategies and economic boosters, but in reality they frequently miss the proposed economic return. This can negatively affect urban fabric, local life, and sense of pride. Thus turning to the method of locally driven convention center planning is very advisable. Input gathered from the 'stakeholders' with the most to lose is an idea long overdue.

It is very important to equally involve everyone in the process of planning. This includes not just the nearby business owners, but everyone from the city, especially if the center is located in downtown areas. Convention centers and their immediate areas often lack a distinguishing character, are single-layered, and worst of all, avoided by locals. One center and its environment is just like any other, only distinguished by size and technology. This is not true if the center is in a city which has a strong city life and character. A center can enjoy that as can be seen in Las Vegas and Chicago. If we imagine a good place as a multilayered, multifunctional, and pleasant place, we find that these environments have architectural, ecological, socio-cultural, and economical layers. In case of convention centers, the economic and architectural layers are dominant. Locally driven convention center planning will overcome these problems. It can suggest change for existing layers as well extend the number of the layers to create a melting pot for locals and conference attendees.

The pillar of research is responsible for studying and determining what is necessary to reach the stated goal above. Healthy local life promotes a unique sense of place which leads to a healthy city image. Sense of place varies from place to place along with our shared value system. The substance of these elements is a combination of our values, nature, social attitudes, income, race, ethnicity, poverty, etc. There is no sense of place without people. We the observers create that sensation in us that we call 'sense of place'. It is a form of hubris to oversimplify complex relationships and apply them repeatedly from Austin to Los Angeles. We can identify main elements, but the variety of patterns is immeasurable. It is foolish to bleach out unique local environments and replace them with standardized patterns, and label them as required convention developments. The solution lays in density, multiple functionalities, safety, healthy local activities, and more. The tools for locally driven convention center planning are similar to the tools which have been used for downtown revitalization plans, community development planning, and more. Therefore, anyone who wishes to engage in this process should study projects which are similar to their needs.

### **Research Tools:**

"Towns and buildings will not be able to become alive, unless they are made by all the people in society, and unless these people share a common pattern language, within which to make these buildings, and unless this common pattern language is alive itself "(Alexander et al. 1977, x). Gehl and Svarre (2013) in their book '*How to study public life?*' have summarized research tools for analyzing public spaces and activities. The question of how many, who, what, and where can be answered by counting, tracing, tracking and mapping. Also, new media offers new and groundbreaking tools for studying local life and activity. Understanding local biorhythms will help convention centers to be more sustainable and become more a part of the

city. Understanding convention attendees' needs as well local compatibility to these needs will serve both parties. But in reality, city-owned convention centers are public entities. Just like public universities, they can explore channels for becoming inclusive towards the public.

Convention centers are 'big boxes'. Their inherent nature to date has been largely exclusive and closed. They could be opened up architecturally and connect to city's fabric in a natural way where boundaries blend and complementarity exists between the convention industry and local life. Here, instead of abandoned places, new city life would flourish. In the case of destroyed historic elements, what has been lost could be incorporated and rehabilitated. Music and food have been used to accommodate the visitors need, and help local business to thrive. Upon closer inspection, most 'local businesses' are in fact chain restaurants or high-end eateries.

The innate secret of 'good places' is that a large variety of elements can be found from cheap to expensive, and from alternative to common. There is an unwritten rule of traditional convention planning that glamour and shine is a must. It is a misleading rule. A hidden, less attractive place can offer very surprising experience. How many times does a visitor to a new city ask the taxi driver to take them to a place the locals go? These places may avoid 'mainstream' elements, instead offering their own unique charisma and flavor of any kind of music, art, or food. One thing is for certain, the sense of adventure/escapism is authentic; and the homogenized sterility so blandly accepted by the convention industry is refreshingly absent. This could be further explored by letting smaller businesses enjoy the economic benefits of convention centers. These open convention centers could have room for small businesses. However there is no single solution at this point. Each city should explore their resources and the willingness of locals for involvement. At the beginning, it may be that locals' bias can be expected due to the lack of trust in the motives of convention centers.

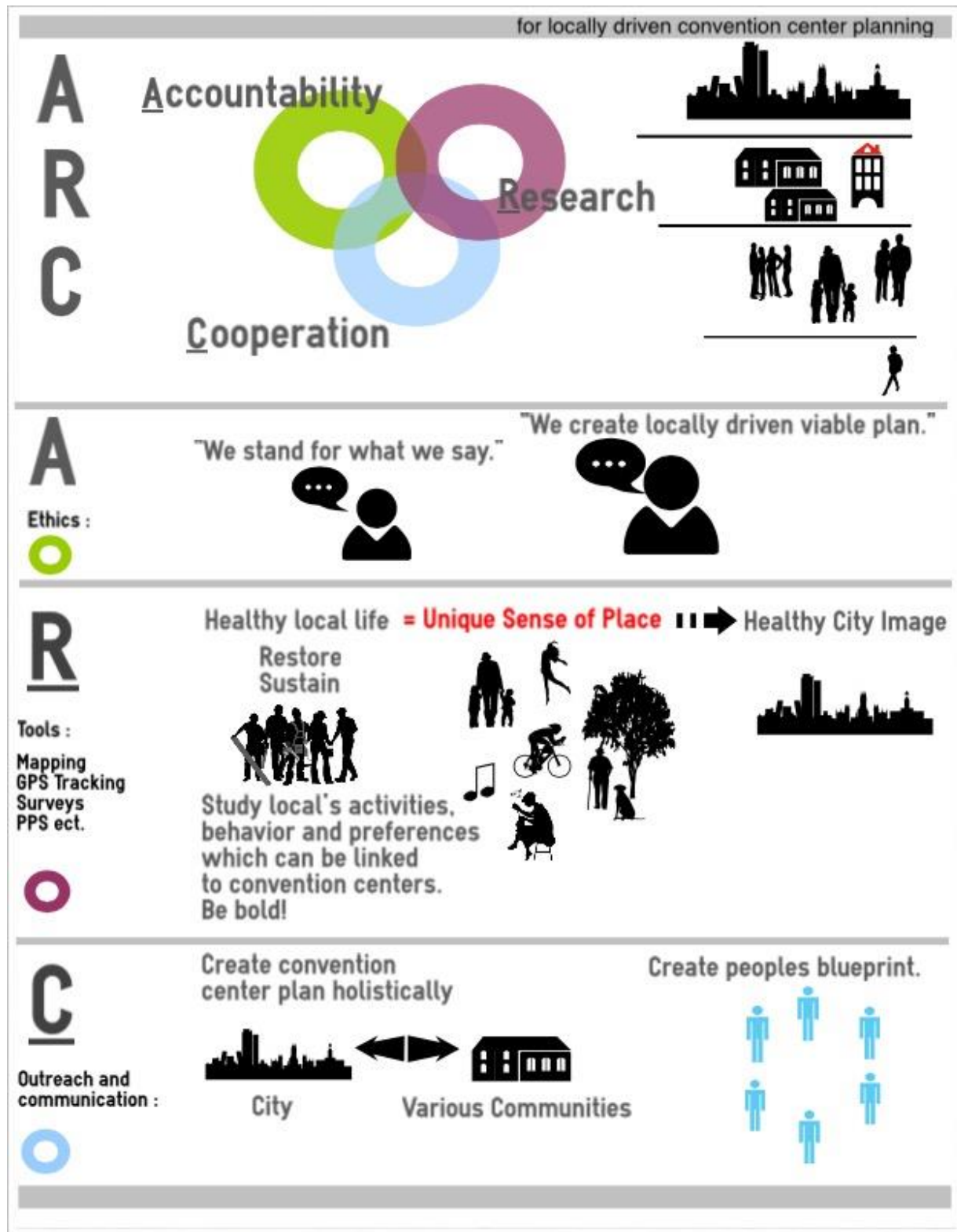
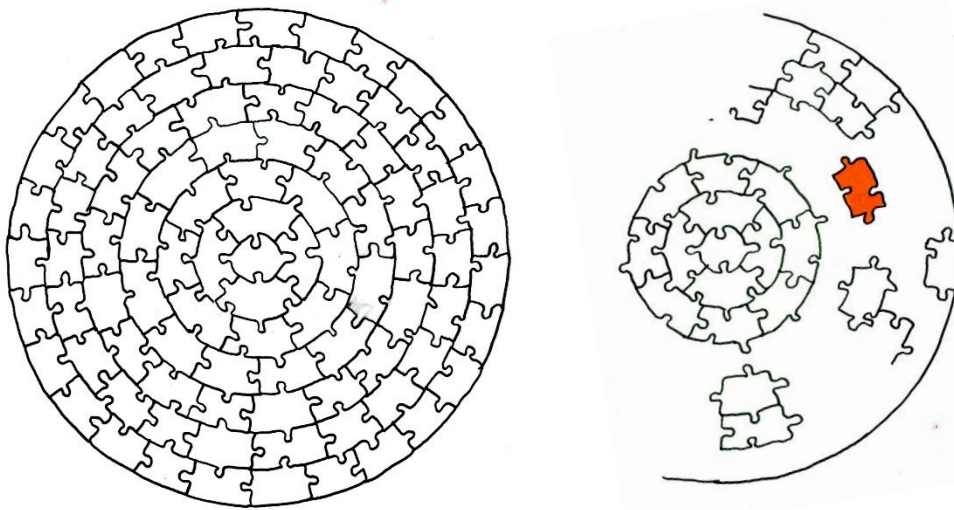


Figure 4.5. ARC Infographic. Created by Author.

Alexander's pattern language (1977) is well known, and can be used as a tool. The patterns are cultural forms based on historical and vernacular aspects and they are not isolated entities. Each of the patterns can exist only if it's supported by other patterns; patterns of the same size that surround it, the larger one in which is embedded and smaller ones, which are embedded in it (Figure 4.7). This concept emphasizes that when we build/plan/design something we cannot simply do it in isolation but we need to repair the world around it and within it, because then the larger world at that place becomes more sound and more whole. As we make it, it will naturally become the part of a bigger picture (Alexander et al. 1977).



**Figure 4.6. Illustration of interconnected and broken patterns.** The highlighted puzzle piece can be imagined convention centers with broken links to their surroundings. Created by Author.

Alexander's 253 patterns together form a language and can create entire regions in a million forms. The language can be used on the scale of regions, towns, neighborhoods and buildings. These patterns are continually evolving in their nature. This language can be offered for people to decide what combination of patterns they want in their environment and help creating a unique sense of place where locals are involved in the planning process from the

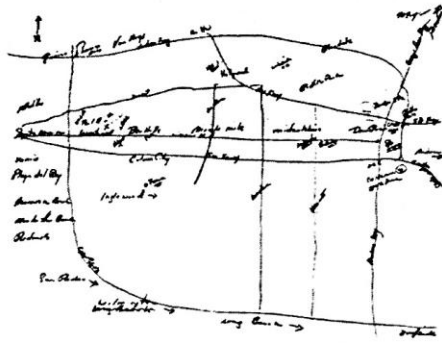
beginning. This easy to follow and concise language can inspire local planners to create their own language by adding or taking away patterns. Again, there is no single solution or formula which can be applied uniformly. Instead, exploring the potential for uniqueness is encouraged.

Cognitive mapping provides a powerful tool for describing how individuals perceive the urban environment. Each individual can draw his/her sample in categories of existing conditions within a “what if” condition. For example, if we would like to create new places or restore existing ones. Then these maps can be compiled and examined. “Whether one uses territorial histories, or cognitive mapping or some combination of the two it is possible to identify historic urban places that have special significance to certain populations fighting spatial segregation of different kinds. Territorial history will point to a church where major civil rights meetings were held, or a local newspaper that crusaded for fair housing...There are also sites of assassination, lynching, massacres and riots...the motel where Martin Luther King was shot. The Lorraine Motel in Memphis, is now a national civil rights museum...”(Hayden 1995, 39)

The Los Angeles City Planning Commission in consultation with Kevin Lynch performed an exemplary pilot study in 1971. They produced a series of five composite maps of Los Angeles constructed from maps drawn by distinctive samples of 25 respondents each, in five different locations. Respondents belonged to ethnically, racially, religiously, and financially different classes in these five destinations.(Hayden 1995, Downs and Stea 1973) The maps are showing that people living in different parts of the cities as well as in different groups perceived the city very differently. A very exciting and to date under-represented approach to planning for researching current trends, behavioral pattern, attitudes, and existing conditions is *new media*. New media uses tools like smart phones and tablets to provide internet access and instant entrance to the virtual global interface. Many things we do offline can be carried out online as

well. We react to the virtual reality. We cry, laugh, get angry, sense it, and build it in our decision-making process as well. This can take place through online libraries, virtual realities and so on. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Senseable City Lab has developed strategies using new media in researching urban city life and their citizen's activities. One is called Tweetbursts which explores digital collective responses to major events. As of March 12, 2015 on [senseable.mit.edu/tweetbursts](http://senseable.mit.edu/tweetbursts) the method was described. During the 2012 Masters Tournament in Augusta, Georgia, more than 40 million Masters-related tweets were posted in only four days. Complex mathematic analysis was used by the Senseable City Lab to analyze the digital data and study people's behavior during this event.

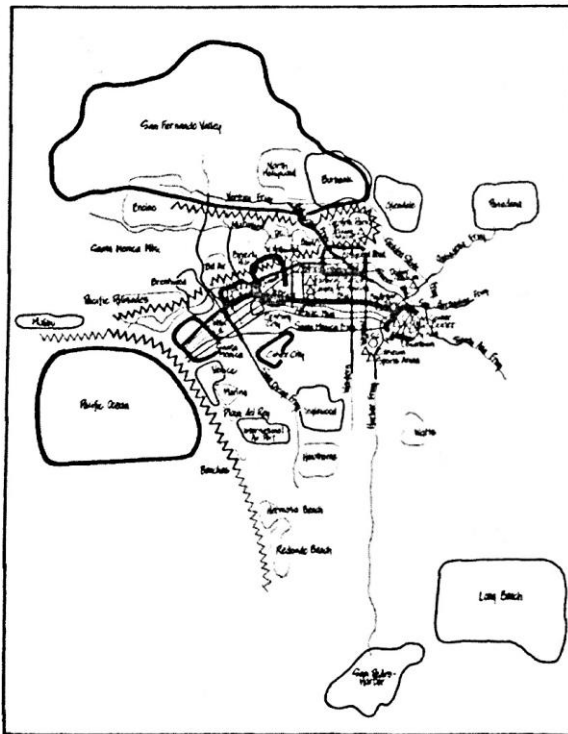
The analysis showed that reactions followed a daily rhythm, and 'emotional' tweets tend to be shorter. Digital data is the digital footprint of people's daily activities and promises substantial possibilities in unravelling its secrets. Another project carried out in Singapore by MIT was called Data Drive. "Although a small city-state, Singapore generates terabytes of data per day. As devices become smaller and enter every dimension of human life, large amounts of data are generated that allow us to sense the city around us in new ways" said Carlo Ratti, director as of March 12, 2015 on [senseable.mit.edu/datadrives](http://senseable.mit.edu/datadrives). Data Drives used public and private transport data, mobile telephone usage, electricity consumption, weather data, and road conditions. In an interactive interface (i.e. a giant iPad) Data Drives help people discover their city and see how people are moving throughout the day. They may gain perspective on how Singapore connects to the world through Changi Airport, find the relationship between weather conditions and road incidents, or learn how friends talk to friends and how people connect.



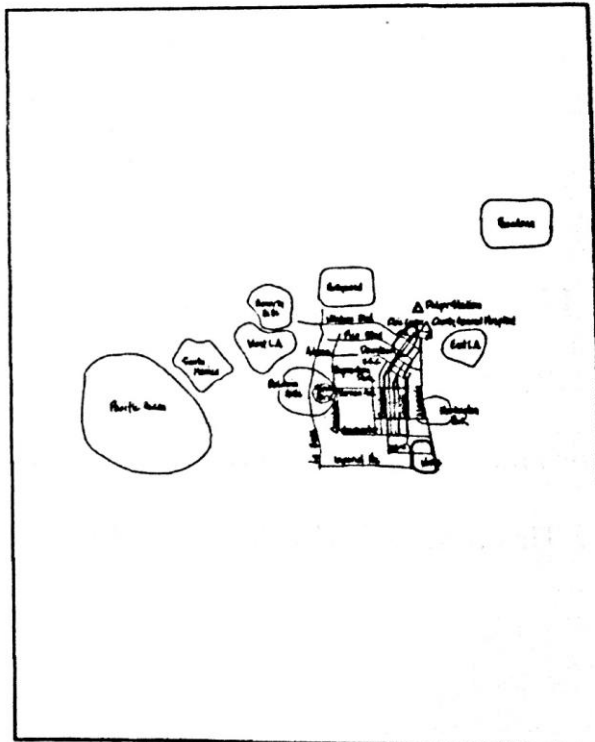
**Actual citizen's map: Westwood**



**Actual citizen's map: Avalon**



**Composite citizen image: Westwood**



**Composite citizen image: Avalon**

*Figure 4.7. Individual and composite maps of citizens from different neighborhoods of Los Angeles. (Hayden 1995, 28).*

## Cooperation

Planning has taken a major shift towards community based planning. Also it has been widely recognized that sustainability is achieved through engagement of local communities. Convention center developments are used as revitalization strategies for downtowns where the success is predicated wholly on the concept that a convention center will bring people to the city

through its events. Therefore, distressed cities or cities without character will be mitigated, and restored.

Convention center developments are closely related to downtown revitalization plans. There is extensive literature on how to create successful plans across the nation. The key is to open up convention center planning for a change, and engage with the city and community as a whole instead of doing this unilaterally. There are many ways a convention center can be different than another. By opening up and doing something other than big boxes, it will be beneficial. Using the Research element, the results can be incorporated in a plan where needs can be met. Locals could provide a unique sense of place through everyday life activities. A plan could be made by the city instead of by consultants. A convention center could help local communities to expand and sustain the city image (e.g. by supporting local musicians to perform and live). Instead of empty slogans, they would build city image and help locals to engage with unique local life after a tiring day where continuous concentration needed.

### **3. Using locally driven convention center planning for Memphis with ARC -**

#### **Research and Cooperation**

One great asset of Memphis is the City and Regional Planning Program at the University of Memphis. The SWOT analysis summarizes main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Two of the elements that make up the three pillars of locally driven convention center planning, cooperation and research, can be appropriately applied because both have been started here with local communities. Resources with direct contextual relationships with the convention center may not exist, but there are ways where the Cook Convention Center's interest can be linked successfully to local activities and city life. Instead of profit-oriented economic development, knowledge-based economy can be exercised.

## SWOT Analysis for MCCC and Adjacent Area

<u>STRENGTHS</u>	<u>WEAKNESSES</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Music</li> <li>- Location</li> <li>- Mississippi River</li> <li>- Direct connectivity to DWT through historic trolley</li> <li>- " A willing to get involved community "</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exclusive</li> <li>- Abandoned dead-zones</li> <li>- Lack of pedestrian connectivity to river</li> <li>- Crime</li> <li>- Riverfront is poorly facilitated</li> </ul>
<u>OPPORTUNITIES</u>	<u>THREATS</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Architecturally 'open' convention center</li> <li>- Becoming inclusive</li> <li>- Involvement of locals</li> <li>- Pedestrian connectivity to the river</li> <li>- Hosting local businesses on site and near-by through affordable rent</li> <li>- University-convention center partnership for planning and sustainability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New expansion based on 'me to' principle</li> <li>- Further debt accumulation</li> <li>- Lack of accountability</li> <li>- Refusing to face failing convention planning strategies</li> </ul>

**Figure: 4.8. SWOT Analysis for MCCC and adjacent area.** Created by Author.

As of March 10, 2015 [memphismusicmagnet.org](http://memphismusicmagnet.org) describes a neighborhood revitalization concept. Memphis Music Magnet (MMM) is an “innovative and art based” strategy for the neighborhood of Soulsville, and it is exercising knowledge economy which uses amenities like music and quality of life. “It’s about creating a neighborhood where music and art tell stories, activate spaces, reclaim vacant buildings, create interaction, and connect neighbors new and old.” The recommendation would be from this study is that the convention center could promote programs like MMM. They would be supporters instead of sole users of city image. This would introduce a new layer to their activities, building local pride and trust. These programs could be advertised and visitors could go to these areas, where local unique sense of place is present.

Another great cooperation and research study is the Youth Neighborhood Mapping Initiative by Santo et al. (2010) developed at the City and Regional Planning Program at the University of Memphis. This university-community study recognizes youths as stakeholders, and emphasizes their engagement in community development decisions. These urban teens expressed their perspectives, and shared their story through maps, photography and blogs. This provides another avenue for convention centers to support youth activities and display their stories and works in convention halls where strolling attendees would be exposed to their various work, studies and more.

Project for Public Spaces has done extensive work with public involvement. PPS.org has the guidebook for making great public spaces and great source for case studies if anyone wants to make great places and involve locals in the same time.

### **Architectural revitalization of Memphis Cook Convention Center and the adjacent ‘dead zone’:**

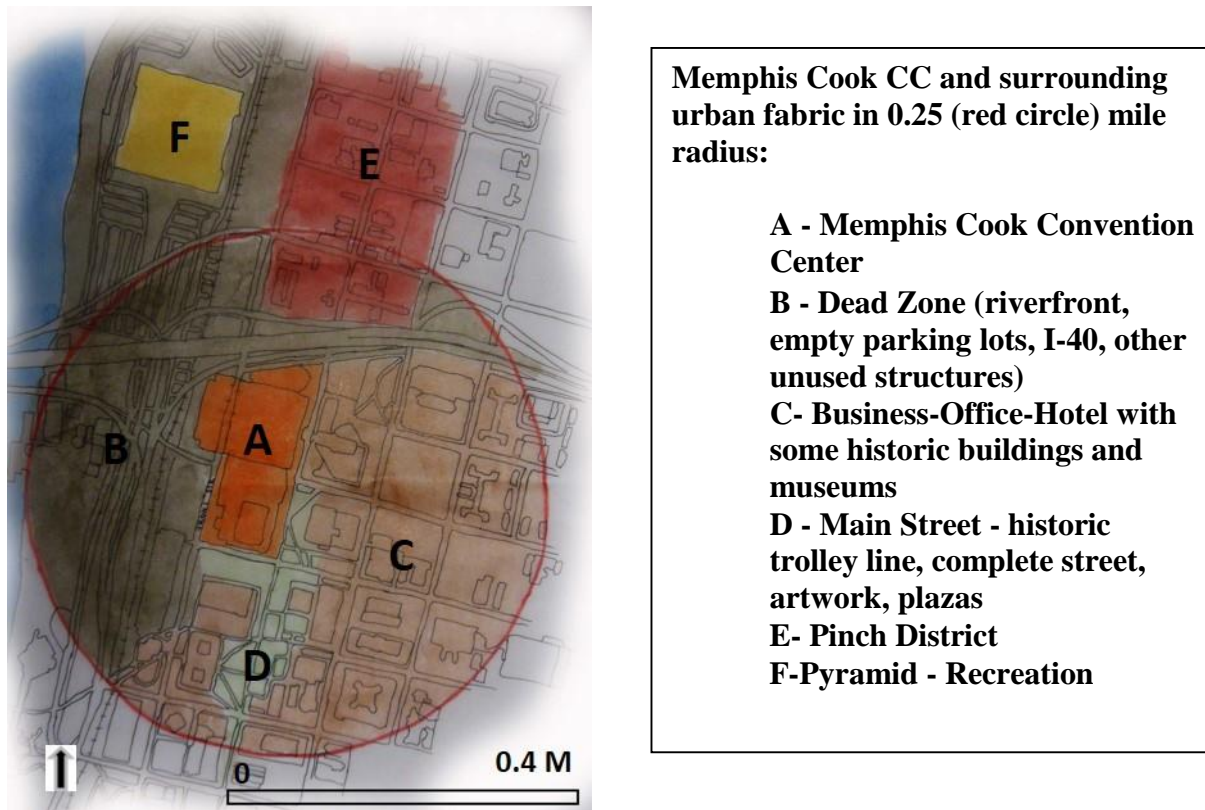


**Figure 4.9. What makes a great place?** Source: [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org).

Recommended steps:

- connect attendees to the riverfront by direct access
- open up the convention center architecturally
- move the I-40 exit away from the riverfront
- help activities which help locals to inhabit the dead zone around the convention center
- plan more than just a greenway or a strip of landscaped walkway, or plaza
- emphasize mixed use and multilayered functions, day to day life activities

The Memphis Cook Convention Center has been expanded only once its history, but it is very likely it will be expanded very soon. There is a possibility also that the center will be moved to another site. Moving the center would not be reasonable. Rather they should work on restoring the lost urban fabric, but a new restoration of the building would be reasonable. The existing downtown plans discussed earlier will bring density to downtown, especially in Pinch district, which is in walking distance from the center. The Mississippi River is an asset here as well. The advice of this study would be to create a direct connection with the river. Open up the center for locals to inhabit this area, and do not give it away solely to corporate entities. The theme would be local in every aspect, real, and executed by them, not by the center. The pillars of research and cooperation would be used here. This calls for revitalization of the riverfront and inviting locals to inhabit the riverfront adjacent to the center. The case study of Greenville, SC shows that a central business district with a long-term vision can thrive, be vivid, and be full of life. Memphis can be compared to Greenville (SC) in that both have a central business district. Both have a river passing through. Both had a successful industrial history which has collapsed, negatively affecting the city on many levels.



*Figure 4.10. Cook Convention Center and surrounding area in walking distance, highlighting functions.* Created by Author.

Grenville had a successful textile industry, and Memphis had successful cotton and hardwood lumber industries. The key to Greenville's success was in bringing residents to downtown, creating mixed use, and creating opportunities for public and private investments that occurred along with the long-term vision of the master plan.

An urban historical parallel can be drawn between Greenville's Main Street and Memphis' Main Street. In Greenville, the four-lane Main Street was cut down to two, trees have been planted, and plazas have been added in 1970s. In part of the revitalization efforts Memphis Main Street today is a wonderful pedestrian friendly area where only the historic trolley passing by. It has plazas, and in the 1980s Greenville revitalized the retail sector and later mixed use was introduced. If we look at Downtown Memphis it has great possibilities to become vital and vivid.

The key lays in exploring residential use, and affordable spaces for locals to come and start businesses.



**Figure 4.11. Greenville Riverfront.** Source: [www.greenvillesc.gov](http://www.greenvillesc.gov)

Congress of New Urbanism has created an in-depth guide for transforming dead malls into communities called *'Malls into Mainstreets'* (2005). Malls, like convention centers, are 'big boxes' in nature. Along with stadiums, they have similar negative effects to the urban fabric as convention centers. Thus the suggestion they make for mitigation of abandoned and dead zones around these facilities is applicable for convention centers as well. They suggest incorporating public amenities into the project which connect the community to it both physically and socially. Successful case studies to turn to for integrating exclusive Memphis Cook Convention Center with the cities' urban fabric:

- *Winter Park Village* (Winter Park, Florida) broke up the mall's superblock design, and integrated the site with existing neighborhoods and streets.
- *CityPlace*, (West Palm Beach, Florida) reintroduced the street grid, and connected housing with the mall project.

- *Belmar*, (Lakewood, Colorado) carefully considered the placement and shape of buildings to create public spaces what attracted people to the site.

*(Congress of New Urbanism, Malls into Mainstreets, 2005)*



**Figure 4.12. Plan of Belmar (Lakewood, CO).** Source: <http://www.vmwpp.com/projects/plan-belmar.php>

#### **4. Conclusion for using locally driven convention center planning in Memphis**

Memphis remains an authentic music city. There are festivals year around for celebrating its musical heritage, such as the Memphis International Jazz Festival, the International Blues Festival, and the Memphis Music and Heritage festival. The city is celebrating ethnicity and nationalities through the Memphis Greek Festival, Memphis Italian Festival, and India fest. In reality, Memphis has a vibrant, varied, and active pool of locals. Yet the downtown area does not embrace and celebrate this fact. There are sports events, agriculture related exhibitions, and shows. Many festivals for arts and heritage preservation are on the schedule. Yet the streets remain empty. The Memphis Cook Convention Center could function as an agent between locals

and other regions on a national level. It should endeavor to benefit everyone. During off-season and slow periods the center should become involved in as many creative ways to support heritage, pride, and local business as it can conceive of.

The dead zone behind the Memphis Cook Convention Center and also the outdated center itself present exciting opportunities for renewal. The city should explore the possibility of reaching out to University of Memphis and/or becoming involved with the City and Regional Planning Department. Removing the I-40 exits from the riverfront would free up space. Just as Olmsted designed the landscape for the first Chicago World's Fair and provided plenty space to connect to the nature, the dead Mississippi riverfront could be reimagined as well. Audubon, the famous naturalist, ornithologist and painter described the Mississippi riverfront as a lagoon with colorful birds and abundant number of species. Today we see only the plaque and turf grass as along with the dirty riverfront. Maybe a design contest would bring new ideas for a new and green convention center which would connect to the river as well would ensure spaces for small scale local businesses through cheap rents or through other possible venues. The riverfront right behind the convention center is within walking distance. For this reason, moving the center to another location would not be recommended. Consider instead building a Music River Broadway which would have floating docks and boats for enjoying music, food, and a rejuvenated river. However, it is important to imagine as a small scale development for people with low and average budgets. This should be explored through the introduced locally driven convention center planning and knowledge-based economic development. Targeting people who might want to start a business and thus a well-designed open center which allows cut-through for walkability purposes and avoids unnecessary space is recommended. The extra space could be transformed to something what is enjoyable for strolling and spectating, which allows people to

‘run into each other’. Since the author has not been able to find a convention center similar to this concept, solutions will required more exploration.

## **5. Takeaway message**

Convention center planning is often perceived as an engine for bolstering local economy and as a revitalization opportunity for downtown or other parts of cities and metropolises. The proposals of these centers and their expansions start with a statement “for the benefit of locals”. In reality, locals have been minimally incorporated in the planning process and in the convention industry in general. The current status of convention center planning need urgent reevaluation from behalf of professionals, stakeholders and other participants. Successful case studies are very sparse and almost are not present. Convention center businesses lack self-sustainability and continuous financial bailout needed from behalf of cities. Still there are continuous proposals for new expansions. These expansions destroy valuable urban fabrics and disappoint citizens.

This study identified unsuccessful elements of traditional convention center planning and introduced a new alternative way to include locals as stakeholders. The new methodology called Locally Driven Convention Center Planning. Cooperation with locals will help to build a new, balanced convention center industry where locals will be proud and connected to the convention industry.

## **6. Future Research**

This thesis aimed to introduce a conceptual solution to unsuccessful trends in convention center planning. This concept is Locally Driven Convention Center Planning. Though deeper examination is required, it is not within the scope of this study. Therefore, future study should involve the analysis of local preferences and mapping the relationship of cities, convention centers and local communities. Future research should also include transition from big-box

architecture to a more welcoming and multifunctional place aesthetically and socially. Future research would also involve specification of elements that would make the city and convention centers better blend with each other. Is it food, art, and entertainment? It also would include a study of attitude changes between the white collar and the new creative class described by Florida (2012). What has changed? Why is it so important that conference rooms be darkened and closed off? Does it really help people focus better? What could be economically viable for convention centers and for locals? One visit to Memphis is not enough to fully explore the City's fabric. Thus the author believes Memphians know the most about their city and possibilities to successfully connect to resources or bring these resources to the table for convention center planners and stakeholders. The 'sense of place' or the substance referred to herein can be glimpsed in visionary examples such as like Madrid's Atocha Railway Station, which resembles a botanical garden, or an open street *within* a building. We can see approaches in designs of malls and airports but design and implementation should be considered carefully. Today's mall designs are still sterile and single functioned. Layers here consist the chain merchants, fast food etc.



**Figure 4.13. Madrid Atocha Railway Station.** Source: [http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2011/08/28/article-2031034-0D8A450000000578-277\\_634x372.jpg](http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2011/08/28/article-2031034-0D8A450000000578-277_634x372.jpg)

The frequently referenced European city models and places as case studies show also the key elements. These cities and places on all scales have been freely evolved and shaped. This free evolution by locals and visitors triggered ways to imagine and shape places that one-sided designing cannot create. Thus the question is, how can we allow a free evolution of space, and in what circumstances? How can we change the architecture inside and outside when “empty space” is the greatest asset of convention centers? But many visits show that big empty space is not a required recurring theme everywhere, such as in hallways and other connecting channels.



***Figure 4.14. Ways of using waterfront in Venice (left) and in Bangkok (right).*** Source: Szimona Kiraly. Used by permission.



***Figure 4.15. Amsterdam.*** Source: Szimona Kiraly. Used by permission.



***Figure 4.16. Urban space used by locals in Venice (left) and Bangkok (right).*** Source: Szimona Kiraly. Used by permission.

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