

What might Have Been: Unbuilt Louisville

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By Steve Wiser

Towering high-rises clustered to form an overwhelming skyline. Train tunnels under the Ohio River. And a massive state capital building dominating the city center.

Sound impressive? If constructed, these and other exciting projects would have resulted in a downtown Louisville that today would rival Chicago's Magnificent Mile. Our city's history does not lack for large-scale, dynamic proposals that were announced and publicly heralded. It has, however, fallen short in implementing a number of these grand visions.



The Vencor Building is the best-known recent unbuilt project. Unveiled in 1997, this 25-story, \$60 million curved glass structure by Pei Cobb Freed Architects exhibited a world-class design. But it never went beyond the two-dimensional stage.



Another spectacular high-rise was the proposed Southern Insurance Building. Conceived by the still-in-business local architectural firm Joseph & Joseph in 1925, this structure had a distinctive domed top and a slender articulated facade. It was planned at Fourth and Market Streets, where 85 years later, at the same intersection, the Aegon Tower would rise in a strikingly similar style. The Aegon Tower, though, was supposed to be the first phase of a two-building complex. Its twin high-rise was never constructed, and a grass courtyard now exists in its imagined place.

Legendary civic leader James Guthrie championed many of our city's significant achievements in the mid-1800s: the Portland Canal, the University of Louisville, development of the L & N Railroad, and erection of the first bridge across the Ohio River, to name several. His grandest scheme was an even bigger gamble. Guthrie sought to entice state government to relocate the governor, the General Assembly and other offices from Frankfort to Louisville. He asked Kentucky architect Gideon Shryock to create a signature capital building in downtown. Shryock had just completed Kentucky's second state capitol in Frankfort, so Guthrie told him to plan a bigger and better statehouse for downtown at Fifth

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and Jefferson Streets. Begun in 1836, this mammoth structure took 24 years to build. When it finally opened in 1860, Guthrie's capital dream was no longer viable, and it became the Jefferson County Courthouse, minus the prominent dome and side porticos in the original drawings.



In 1948, another notable architect, Stratton Hammon, did an assessment of the then 88-year-old courthouse and reported that, "It is quite possible it may collapse at anytime." A modern government high-rise was designed to take its place. But this proposal never took hold and the building, refurbished and still in use today, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Across Sixth Street, Louisville's City Hall was also to have been a more imposing structure. Architect John Andrewartha won a competition in 1867 with a design that featured a large central glass atrium and flanking ornate wings. But, when completed in 1873, only the eastern one-third of the original city hall project was ever built.



Funding difficulties usually are the obstacle that slims down or kills most projects. The Vencor Tower became a casualty when the Louisville-based Vencor Corp. filed for bankruptcy. Another economic victim was the 16-story medical office building that was to be positioned just south of the Heyburn Building near Fourth and Broadway. It was designed by the acclaimed Chicago architectural firm of Holabird and Root and carried a \$4 million price tag (\$43 million in today's dollars). Announced in August 1929, just two months prior to the infamous Black Monday stock market crash, it lost out in the economic downturn.

Over the past 30 or so years, a plethora of mega-developments have been announced but never implemented. Here is a highlight list:

- In the mid-1970s, a mixed-use office and residential complex, by local architects Roger Hughes and Dan Church, was proposed at the location where the Kentucky Center for the Arts now



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stands. Its demise was due to a lack of funding.

- The initial 1978 Galleria plan (in the area now known as Fourth Street Live) contained five box-like towers, of which only two were actually built.



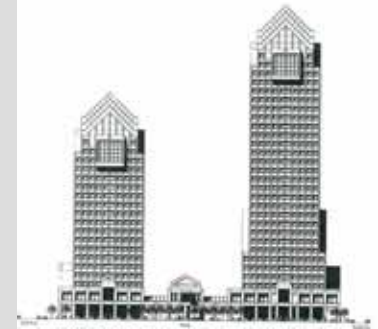
- At the southeast corner of Fifth and Liberty streets, a 30-story, \$60-million tower was publicized in 1988. This corner still sits vacant today.

- In the mid-1980s, much fanfare was given to the \$100 million Heritage Square complex that was to be located on Fourth Street across from the Convention Center. It contained three high-rises of 14 stories, 22 stories and 30 stories. This site is now the home of the Aegon Tower.

- When the LG&E Tower was announced in 1988, a twin structure was planned just to the east, where a Marriott Courtyard Hotel currently exists. This same location, at the southeast corner of Third and Main streets, was the site for several proposals prior to the LG&E Building. Farm Credit Banks considered a high-rise here, and the Webb-Silliman partnership had plans for a 50-story, \$125-million tower in 1985.



- Also in 1985, the Continental Group from Houston, Texas, was selected by the city over other development submittals to construct the City Hall North complex at the southwest corner of Sixth and Market streets. It featured two office towers at a cost of \$48 million. In 2007, another development group proposed another high-rise project at this still vacant gravel parking lot.



While this is an impressive list of ‘what if’s’, there are two unbuilt proposals that were an even greater loss for Louisville. In 1908, acclaimed architect Frank Lloyd Wright was considered for a house project on Ransdell Avenue, overlooking Cherokee Park, in Cherokee Triangle. And, a major project that almost made it was the Reynolds’ Metals office-research center in Anchorage. A preliminary rendering was sub-



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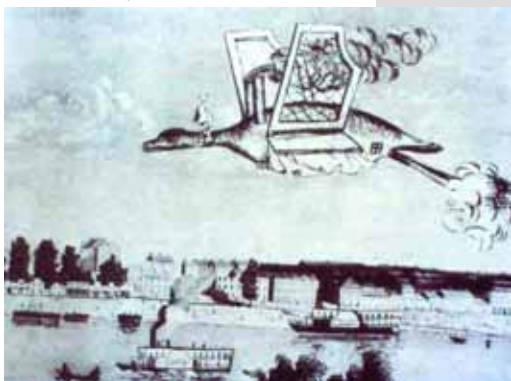
Top: Original design for the downtown Marriott Hotel



Bottom: How the downtown Marriott was ultimately built

mitted in 1957 by none other than Eero Saarinen. Saarinen was one of the Twentieth Century's top architects. His designs include the St. Louis Arch, TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport, Dulles Airport Terminal, and corporate headquarters for John Deere, General Motors, and IBM among many others. Unfortunately, the location could not be rezoned from residential to industrial, and Reynold's decided to build instead in Richmond, Virginia. This not only was a significant architectural loss, but also economic development potential as well.

Sometimes, though, projects are built but "downsized," or altered, from their initial renderings. The Shryock capital-turned-courthouse is an example. At Sixth and Chestnut streets, the South Central Bell Building became another. If you look at its roof, you'll observe a three-story "penthouse" on top. This utilitarian structure was to have facilitated additional floors that would have made this building a full 20 stories in height. Another example is the downtown Marriott Hotel which was conceptually designed with a creative exterior of masonry and a curvilinear roofline, but the resulting construction left it more generic and boxlike.



More Ohio River bridges have long been discussed and proposed. Most believe they'll never travel across a new bridge in their lifetime. But, there have been several whimsical attempts to span the river banks. In 1841, an illustrator drew up a 'flying steam duck' *left* that would carry passengers from one side to the other, while in 1861, another graphic depicted a railroad tunnel beneath the river. This was several decades before tunnel ventilation was perfected, and thus if implemented, the passengers would have succumbed to asphyxiation.

Today, our waterfront is becoming a magnificent landscape blessed with some distinctive structures, including the Waterfront Park Place condominium tower on East Witherspoon Street. However, over the past 80 years, there were numerous development attempts to revitalize this riverfront that became part of unbuilt Louisville. There were proposals by Bartholomew Associates of St. Louis in 1957; Reynolds Aluminum in 1962; and, even an effort by a Greek planner named Doxiadus in 1965. In the early 1970s, a complex that would be home for

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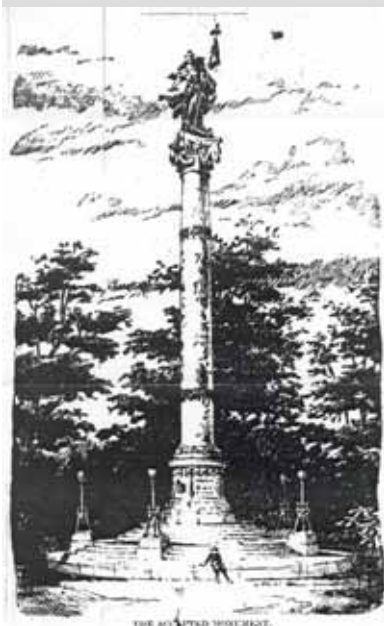
a fledgling Actors Theatre was considered on the north side of West Main, between Third and Fourth streets.



Above: Two riverfront development proposals. On the left is a residential project from the 1950s, and on the right is by Bartholomew Associates in 1929. Note that one building is similar in design to the Humana Building.

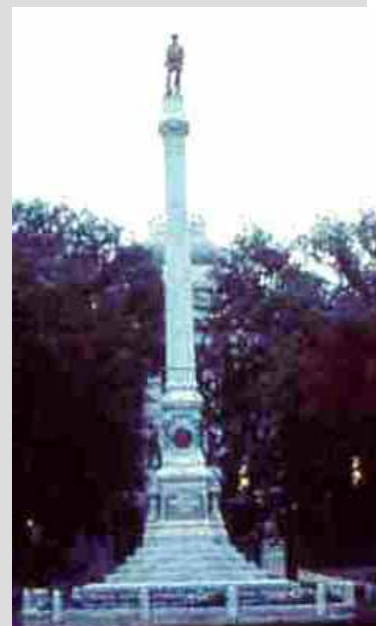
From Guthrie's state capital attempt in the 1830s to the Vencor headquarters vision of 1997, there have been numerous unfulfilled dreams and missed opportunities in Louisville. Many of these projects were superb ideas. Some became award-winning designs. But their fates proved a truth that still holds today: With numerous technical and financial challenges to be conquered, there are no guarantees. Only when they become part of "built" Louisville will today's and tomorrow's proposals add to the downtown skyline.

**For more 'Unbuilt' projects,
scroll down to the end of this webpage**



Enid Yandell was one of Louisville's most acclaimed artists and sculptors. She created the Daniel Boone and Hogan's Fountain statues, among many other notable designs. But, perhaps her best project was never built. She won the Confederate Memorial Competition, but her proposal (left) was not implemented. The design, to the right, by Michael Muldoon was constructed. Here are 3 reasons why it was not built. You decide which one is the real reason:

- 1. It was structurally unsound*
- 2. The jury was made up of women, and Enid was a woman, so there was a 'bias'.*
- 3. The Confederate men did not want a woman designed their monument.*



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This was the 'Gruen Proposal' for downtown Louisville in the late 1960s. Note the enclosed pedestrian walkway along Fourth Street. It also located the convention center, office buildings, and hotels. While this vision did not get built in this exact shape, most of the components were ultimately built, including the 'River City Mall'.



'City Center' was proposed in 2006 by Cordish Properties who manage the nearby Fourth Street Live! It is located on what is called the 'Old Water Company' block, bounded by Liberty, Third, Muhammad Ali, and Second Streets. It is still 'on hold'.

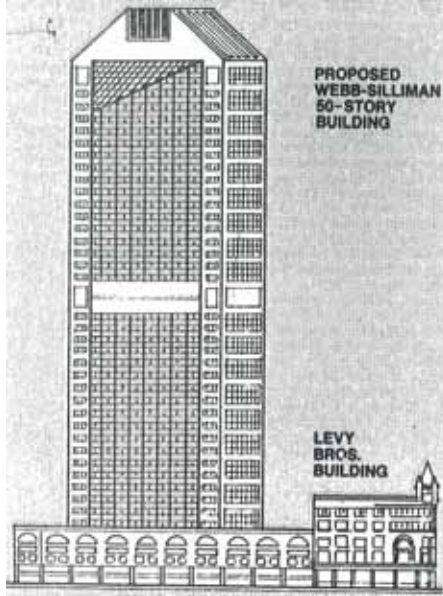


One way to get across the Ohio River is to build a tunnel under it! And, someone proposed doing just that in 1861. Trains would run below the river. Of course, tunnel ventilation was not perfected till the 1880s, so most passengers would have been asphyxiated by the time the train made it from one side to the other.

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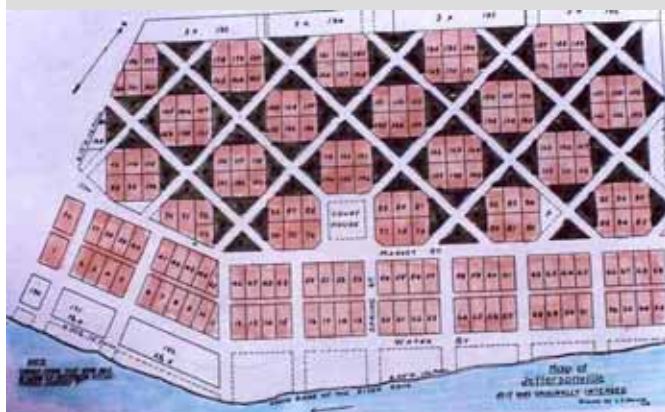
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Numerous office towers were proposed for the corner of Third and Main Streets, where the LGE Tower currently exists. On the left is a 50 story structure proposed by the Webb Development Company of Lexington in the mid-1980s.



A Botanical Garden was planned near the intersection of Hurstborne Parkway and Shelbyville Road in the late 1980s. Roberto Burly Marx, a world renown landscape architect, was the designer of this scheme.



Jeffersonville's original urban street system was laid out by none other than Thomas Jefferson, for whom the town is named for. The layout is similar to Savannah, Georgia, where the intersection featured green space. But unlike Savannah where there were central park squares, Jefferson placed his parks on the diagonal corners. Unfortunately, the city developed faster than this plan could be realized.

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Developer Todd Blue is proposing to build 'Iron Quarter' (upper left). But to do so, he may demolish many historic buildings (lower left) in the process. It is located at First and West Main Streets.



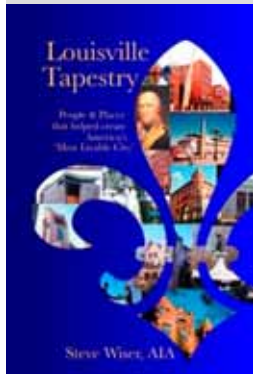
Museum Plaza is an ambitious, creative project proposed near West Main and Seventh Streets. It was proposed in 2007 and has been 'on hold' since late 2008.

Steve Wiser, AIA, is a Louisville architect and historian who has authored several books including: "Louisville Sites to See by Design"; "Louisville Tapestry"; "Louisville 2035"; and, "Modern Houses of Louisville". His email address is WiserAIA@Hotmail.com and website is www.WiserDesigns.com

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Interested in learning more about Louisville architecture and history? Then purchase one or all 3 of the following items prepared by Steve Wiser:



“Louisville Tapestry: People & Places who helped create America's Most Livable City”, 144 pages, over 100 b & w images, 2009.

Cost: \$15 (includes shipping and handling)

From the Olmsted Parks and landmark architecture, to fascinating tales on notable businesses and personalities, this book explains how the city evolved to its current state. Great for both native Louisvillians as well as new residents!



“Louisville Landmarks & Legends”, 25 minute DVD video, over 200 color images, 2008

Cost \$10 (includes shipping and handling)

This DVD features Louisville’s legendary business leaders and landmark businesses such as Col. Sanders, John Schnatter, J. Graham Brown, Al Schneider, and Tom Simons, along with landmark businesses like Humana, UPS, Hillerich & Bradsby, and Churchill Downs, among many others. In 25 minutes you learn many important aspects of Louisville!



“Louisville 2035”, 144 pages, over 100 b & w images, 2008

Cost: \$8 (includes shipping and handling)

What will look like in 25 years? This is Steve Wiser’s conjecture of how the city will evolve. It also contains many historical backgrounds on the city’s past developments and civic leaders. Several of these proposals have already started to happen! Find out more in this intriguing futuristic vision.

To order, mail a check payable to “Steve Wiser” at P O Box 7034, Louisville Kentucky 40257.

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