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Staples Center 10th anniversary

By Todd Longwell

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Unless people worked here or they were attending a performance at the Music Center, they just never bothered to come downtown," says Carol E. Schatz, president and CEO of the Central City Association of Los Angeles, an advocacy group for local businesses.

But Lee Zeidman remembers the pre-Staples landscape vividly.

"We used to look down on the site from the 27th floor of the TCW building, just as we were starting to dig the hole and condemn some of the buildings," recalls Zeidman, who serves as senior vp and GM of Staples Center and the adjacent Nokia Theatre and L.A. Live for co-owner and operator AEG. "There were dilapidated buildings in various states of decay, different types of liquor stores on the corners. They were basically drug and prostitute hangouts."

A mere decade later, Staples has already built a storied history, with a long list of landmark events -- from the first of the Lakers four NBA championships in the building in 2000 to the Michael Jackson Memorial in July. In between, it has hosted the 2000 Democratic National Convention, concerts by artists ranging from the Rolling Stones to Barbra Streisand, entertainment acts such as the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus and various boxing matches and extreme sporting events. It also been home to the Kings of the NHL, the Clippers of the NBA, the Sparks of the WNBA, the Avengers of the now-defunct Arena Football League and the Grammy Awards.

For Schatz, the construction of Staples is nothing less than a seminal moment in Los Angeles history.

"I like to refer to it now as the B.C. and A.D. of downtown's revitalization," Schatz says. "While it was not the only thing that created this renaissance, it was a critical component, because it brought thousands of people to downtown, many of whom hadn't come here in years."

A portion of Staples' success can be attributed to the design of the building itself, which is uniquely suited to Los Angeles. Mindful of the city's "see-and-be-seen culture," the architects at NBBJ Sports and Entertainment, led by Don Meis, incorporated large glass windows that give bystanders on the street a cinematic view of people circulating around the building, up the escalators and across the indoor balconies. The city's warm winters also enabled him to include an outdoor balcony on the upper deck level with a spectacular view of the city, as well as giant TV screens on the building's exterior.

Aesthetically speaking, "it was a very conscious attempt to blur where the building stopped," says Meis, who today is a managing partner of the architectural firm AEDAS. It has also served a more practical purpose. "I've lived in L.A. a long time and I know the culture of people that will come late and leave early to avoid the traffic, so I can't tell you how many times I've been there and watched people leave their seats, get out in the plaza and watch the end of the game on the board."

Prehistory

Before Staples, the Lakers and the Kings had played at the Forum in Inglewood since its opening in 1967. Dubbed the "Fabulous Forum" by fans, the building reigned as Southern California's showcase venue for major concerts and sporting events for three decades, but by the '90s, it was beginning to show its age, cosmetically and technologically. The Forum also had no luxury suites, which had become a significant source of revenue for other teams. Moving to a new building with suites "would allow us to compete in the modern NBA, which was becoming almost an arms race," says Tim Harris, senior vp business operations for the Lakers.

But while there had been talk of building a new venue for several years, possibly on the grounds of the Forum, nothing had materialized. Then in 1995, into the picture came Philip F. Anschutz, a Denver-based businessman who had parlayed oil and gas holdings into a multi-billion-dollar empire, and fellow billionaire Edward P. Roski Jr., chairman and CEO of L.A.-based Majestic Realty Co., one of the country's largest national real estate development firms. The pair formed a partnership to buy the Kings out of bankruptcy for \$113.3 million in the fall of that year and set out to find a site to build a new arena for their new team, as well as the Lakers.

At the same time, the City of Los Angeles had been trying to interest developers in building a large hotel next to the L.A. Convention Center, which was undergoing a 500,000-square-foot, \$500 million expansion. But it, too, had failed repeatedly.

Steve Soboroff, a retail developer then serving as a senior adviser to L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan, brought the two parties together and a deal was slowly hammered out. The North Hall of the Convention Center would be demolished to clear a site for an arena and the land would be leased to the developers, an Anschutz-Roski partnership dubbed the L.A. Arena Co. for \$1 a year for 55 years. The city would also acquire 23.5 acres of land to the north and the east of the site and deed it to them with the provision that it be used to build a multiuse entertainment complex that included the long sought-after hotel.

"(Riordan) wanted to see the area around the Convention Center cleaned up and to have it deliver on its economic promise, which was to attract out-of-town guests to come to large, citywide conventions," says Ted Tanner, executive vp real estate development for AEG. "To

use an arena as a catalyst for doing that was a pretty bold move."

The City of Los Angeles contributed \$71.1 million for the arena's construction, \$58.5 million of which would be covered by a portion of future event parking fees and ticket taxes, leaving it on the hook for \$12.6 million, a relatively small public subsidy for an arena build at the time.

A large portion of the arena's eventual \$400 million price tag was financed by corporate sponsorships. In the mid '90s, developers would typically sell the naming rights for an arena to a single entity (e.g., Coors Field in Denver). The L.A. Arena Co. took the concept a step further and had NBBJ design variety areas that could be branded by different companies, such as the exclusive Chairman's Room (initially sponsored by Bank of America; now sponsored by Wachovia). In the end, 10 companies (Home Depot, American Express, Anheuser-Busch, Bank of America, DirecTV, McDonald's, Cingular, Pepsi, Sempra Energy and Toyota) signed on as "founding partners," committing to \$2.5 million-a-year, five-year deals giving them the right to brand portions of the building. In addition, the office supply company Staples reportedly paid \$116 million for the privilege of having their name grace the building for 20 years.

Breaking ground

Once the financing was in place, progress on the arena moved forward at a breakneck pace, with construction beginning in early 1998.

"Staples Center was built in 18 months, from shovel in the ground to opening night," Zeidman says. "We were actually building it and designing it at the same time. We would literally make changes in the field and NBBJ would go back and redraw it. And there was no ability to have any delays, because we had the Lakers, the Kings and the Clippers, and they had nowhere to go back and play."

Compounding matters was the fact that the Clippers didn't sign on to play at Staples until the arena was under construction, mandating another on-the-fly redesign. The prospect of three professional sports teams with concurrent seasons sharing the same home arena also created a potential scheduling nightmares.

"There was this fear that we were never going to get a weekend date and we were going to end up playing on Monday nights," says Carl Lahr, senior vp marketing and sales for the Clippers, who had been based at the L.A. Sports Arena since 1984. "But the people at Staples were always confident that they could work it out."

Show time!

The first superstar to take the floor at Staples wasn't Shaquille O'Neal or Kobe Bryant, but Bruce Springsteen, who kicked off a four-night stand at the arena with his reunited E Street Band on Oct. 17, 1999.

"We did a Springsteen show, then a hockey game, then we did another Springsteen and another hockey game, back and forth," Zeidman recalls.

The changeovers went off without a hitch, but some felt the building wasn't ready to rock, including Springsteen. From the stage, he criticized the corporate nature of the building and its

three levels of suites. He also didn't like the sound. Staples took notice of the latter complaint.

"Right afterward, we spent \$1.5 million to look at every hard surface in the building and put acoustical treatment on it to improve the sound," Zeidman says. "And keep in mind that you don't want to have an acoustically perfect arena, because you're not going to get the kind of loudness you want for a sold-out NBA Finals game or a hockey playoff game."

For the Lakers, life at Staples was charmed from the beginning. Their first season in the building, the team won its first NBA title in 12 years.

"It was a rebirth," Harris says. "The fans were sad, then we come into this new palace. We win the championship. It really all came together in perfect way."

Staples has also won its share of titles. It was named "New Major Concert Venue" (2000) and "Arena of the Year" (2000 and 2001) by Pollstar magazine and has been nominated each year since its opening. But staying on top hasn't been cheap. AEG president and CEO Tim Leiweke estimates that \$50 million has been spent on capital improvements over the years, including \$20 million for a major renovation this summer. It's also committed \$2.5 billion to the construction of the adjoining multi-use development L.A. Live, which completed its first phase of construction in 2007.

"You have to acknowledge that there is no building and no design that's going to be completely timeless," Leiweke says. "Technology changes, customers need change. But part of what has been a huge positive that has kept Staples Center still one of the top two or three buildings in the world is the fact that the whole entertainment district was built around it and it gives it a very fresh and exciting feel. When people come to Staples Center, our hope is there's still a real buzz."

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