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Admiring the Eighth Wonder of the World, circa 1972.

Making A Dome Deal

BY BRUCE C. WEBB

Harris County's problem of what to do with its mothballed Astrodome continues to simmer after six years without a permanent sports team tenant and two years after the Houston Rodeo decamped for Reliant Stadium, the higher-tech neighbor that looms up next door. A failed pitch to secure the 2012 Olympics games—a bid bolstered by the number of stadiums, three of them indoors and air conditioned, already in place in Houston—probably gave the Dome its penultimate chance for survival.

What to do with the Dome was the subject of a lively 2001 Rice Design Alliance charrette, a spirited AIA "Call to Voice" website (www.aiahoutx.org/dm_call_voice.cfm), and more than a few speculative articles and commentaries in the local press. The Dome can still inspire the imagination. Suggestions for its reincarnation include turning it into a housing development, a shopping mall, an entertainment center, a nature center, a historic museum, a science museum and planetarium, a theme park, an extreme sports venue, and, ignominiously, a multi-deck covered parking garage. But no proposal has had much staying power, and skeptics worry that the real plan might be to keep making (and shooting down) proposals until the public gets tired of hearing them, then quietly demolishing what was once the pride of the city.

The county delegated authority over Reliant Park to the Sports and Convention Corporation, a private entity, thus entrusting decisions about the public domain to an organization that has little public accountability. This didn't matter much in building Reliant Center, as the decisions were relatively non-controversial, but it will likely have more impact when the Sports Corporation decides how to deal with the Astrodome.

The Sports Corporation went fishing for ideas for the Dome by issuing a request for proposals, but with disappointing results: only seven applications came in, some say because of the short, six-week period from the announcement to the deadline for receiving proposals. In addition to having a compelling idea, bidders were required to have a record of successfully handling multi-million dollar projects and a business plan and financial backing to insure the viability of their proposal. Two proposals met those criteria and were given closer scrutiny. One was from the Texas Medical Center for a research and development center for human performance; the other, the winning proposal, came from an entity called the Astrodome Redevelopment Corporation, an eclectic collection of entertainment entrepreneurs and designers led by Bryan-based Trajen Aerospace. Their proposal envisioned a space theme park, a

standard formula for selling an idea to Houston's public by wrapping it in promises of high tech space age wonders. (The high tech scoreboard promised to Astrodome fans when adding more seating resulted in the removal of the much loved original—a "wonder" that turned out to be as tame as the ubiquitous Diamondvision—and proposals by a consortium that included George Lucas to recreate the Albert Thomas as a space age, high tech entertainment center are cases in point.) Those promises always seem to end up being neutralized by reality. What the city actually gets is usually cheap, dumbed-down, and delivered as the best deal that can be made under the circumstances.

There were other proposals, home-grown ones, submitted to the Sports Corporation, among them a multiuse entertainment complex suggested by a music major from Lee College, and an intriguing idea to create an enclosed site for public events such as the Houston Festival, a proposal that had the advantage of requiring little or no work on the Dome, but had little prospect of generating much revenue either. Big players such as Disney, Cordish Company, Six Flags, and tyro local entertainment promoter Tillman Fertita passed on the opportunity to make a bid.

Details of the winning scheme remain sketchy. What is certain is that the proposal has

a lot of wiggle room to it. What began as an entertainment complex has metamorphosed into a 1,000 room hotel, with perhaps a space-themed park or some other attraction in the center.

It's difficult to do anything with an old sports stadium other than turn it into another sports stadium, so the Astrodome is not a developer's dream project. Almost any revenue earning conversion could be had for less money and less effort in brand new, purpose-built form. Parking problems are a thorny issue, as is an abject context that is not a very felicitous setting for a luxury hotel. Hotels surrounding the Astrodome have had a dismal performance record; only two years ago, three hotels on Reliant Park's periphery, among them the Hotel Astrodome, which housed Judge Roy Hofheinz's legendary Celestial Suite, were foreclosed.

The Sports Corporation's main interests are pragmatic, befitting the "bidness" fixations of Houston politics. The primary goal comes down to engineering a conversion of the Astrodome into "a more productively used asset" while using as much private funding as possible. And doing this without much regard for the public's concerns other than the desire to avoid any tax increase. As policy questions are pushed away from politicians, the public's concerns and involvement get muted.

Rather than seeking ideas for the development of the Dome and then finding the financial means to support the best one, the Sports Corporation sought to award a firm that had a good idea and had already assembled the financing to realize it. (Astrodome Redevelopment Corporation is backed by, and even located in the offices of, the Gulfstar Group, a unit of former gubernatorial candidate Tony Sanchez's International Bank of Commerce).

In the end, saving the Dome comes down to a matter of public desire more than need. It's really a question of what is fundamentally worth saving about the Dome. Just as Roland Barthes was able to reduce the Eiffel tower to a single abstraction, the Astrodome, arguably an inellegant object of comparison, can be summed up in terms of the ineluctable, irreducible, platonic space inside of it. The challenge is to conserve rather than erase the Dome's phenomenal properties. The few renderings and descriptions of the proposed hotel-theme park scheme are not encouraging in this regard. To restore some of the former magic to the place one might find a vision in Barthes' paean to the qualities of the Paris landmark, about which he wrote: "One can dream there, eat there, observe there, understand there, marvel there, shop there, as on an ocean liner (another mythic object that sets children dreaming) one can feel oneself cut off from the world and yet the owner of the world."

To get a developer, a businessman, or a group of county politicians hell bent on trying to turn a moribund architectural artifact into a profit center to appreciate this is difficult indeed. Until then, it might be a better alternative for the city to pay the estimated \$500,000 a year to keep Houston's biggest room available for occasional uses and better ideas. ■