Finding Monumentality

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*O*ne of the difficulties inherent in the design of mega-structures is scale. The sheer size of a modern arena makes it difficult for the structure to engage the surrounding urban environment and landscape. But, for over 2,000 years, these facilities have served as monuments reflecting the values of society and the culture they serve.

The cities of Miami and Orlando each support a National Basketball Association (NBA) franchise, the Orlando Magic and the Miami Heat. Each of these metropolises has produced, within 20 years, an arena worthy of examination. In fact, they offer a rare opportunity to examine the evolution of the typology of a basketball arena in a specific region or setting. The opening of the Miami Arena in 1988 marked the introduction of the NBA into Florida and it was followed immediately by the construction of Orlando's Amway Arena one year later. These two structures would be phased out within ten years; the HOK-designed Miami Arena would be replaced with the Arquitectonica-designed American Airlines Arena in 1999 and Orlando's Amway Center, designed by Populous (formerly known as HOK Sport) replaced the Cambridge Seven-designed Amway Arena in 2010. All four of these structures are very different and they respond(ed) to the city in both positive and negative ways. A critical analysis of the four reveals that problems still exist with the typology of an arena.

The Amway Arena still stands but the $58-million "Pink Elephant," as the Miami Arena had come to be called, was imploded in 2008. The Miami Arena was a disaster from the very beginning, a solid pink mass that provided only a sliver of transparency at the sterile entry which was sandwiched between the oversized base and the bulky mass housing the arena. The facility was proof that size does not equate to monumentality and that site selection is nearly as important as the building's design.

The 367,000-square-foot Amway Arena was designed to seat 17,000 basketball fans in addition to numerous other activities from ice hockey to musical performances. Like the Miami Arena, it is segregated from the urban fabric of Orlando, but it successfully embraces its location outside the city and dominates a sea of parking. The zone between the arena and adjacent structures amplifies its size and importance as an object. Like a Roman temple, it is raised on a podium that elevates its importance both formally and visually. The vertical monoliths at each corner of the arena, which are diagonally oriented in plan, give visual clarity to interior functions and serve as the major circulation and mechanical zones. In short, the vertical monoliths exert dominance over the surrounding horizontal field of open space and they strengthen the horizontal canopy that marks the building's entrance. The horizontal canopy and monumental stairway reaffirm the horizon beyond it which is the omnipresent datum for organizing the

The monumental character of the Amway Arena is corollary to its simple construction and integral relationship to the landscape. Photos by James Cornetet.

The dueling glazed forms of the Amway Center compete for attention and negate a clear focus. Photo by James Cornetet.

The "Pink Elephant, " as the Miami Arena was known, was demolished in 2008 and its site remains empty. Photo courtesy of HOK.

The monumental gateway to the American Airlines Arena is appropriate in scale and sequence as it fronts Miami's skyline. Photo courtesy of Arquitectonica.

Florida landscape. At night, the horizontal expression of this complex arena is further heightened as the large expanses of glass disappear and the horizontals of the curtainwall reinforce the horizon.

Orlando's recently completed Amway Center had a price tag of nearly half-a-billion dollars, yet it lacks the monumental character of the Amway Arena and the American Airlines Arena. Unlike its predecessors, the structure is tightly sited and bound by roads on all four sides. Its location prevents it from being read as an object in space.

It is important to note that the question of whether a large building needs space around it in order to have a monumental quality is still being discussed. In my view, the relationship between the amount of open space and the size of the monument is proportional and as this perfect relationship is reached, the potential for monumentality increases. That is not to say that a huge open site is necessary to achieve monumentality. Consider the Pantheon on its small crowded site in Rome or any of the European cathedrals that are encroached upon on all sides. In contrast some monuments require space to dominate. Imagine the Eiffel Tower in the middle