

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Portland's Crandall Arambula revitalizes downtowns across the country

By Brian Libby
For the DJC Magazine

Considering the reputation Portland enjoys as one of the best-planned cities in America, it should come as no surprise that a local firm is counted among the nation's leaders with respect to designing, strategizing and planning for the revitalization of downtowns.

Founded six years ago, Crandall Arambula has assisted local government and business leaders in numerous American cities with a task many want accomplished but few know how to do. Places like Knoxville, Tenn., Racine, Wis., Lincoln, Neb., and Oak Park, Ill., have all turned to the firm to transform blighted, under-utilized central cores into vibrant areas for shopping, housing, recreation, arts and offices.

The firm is led by George Crandall and Don Arambula, who met at the local architecture/planning firm Fletcher Farr Ayotte, where Crandall was a partner when Arambula, a Los Angeles planner



*Crandall Arambula's vision for the Portland Harbor Drive Development.
Rendering courtesy of Crandall Arambula*

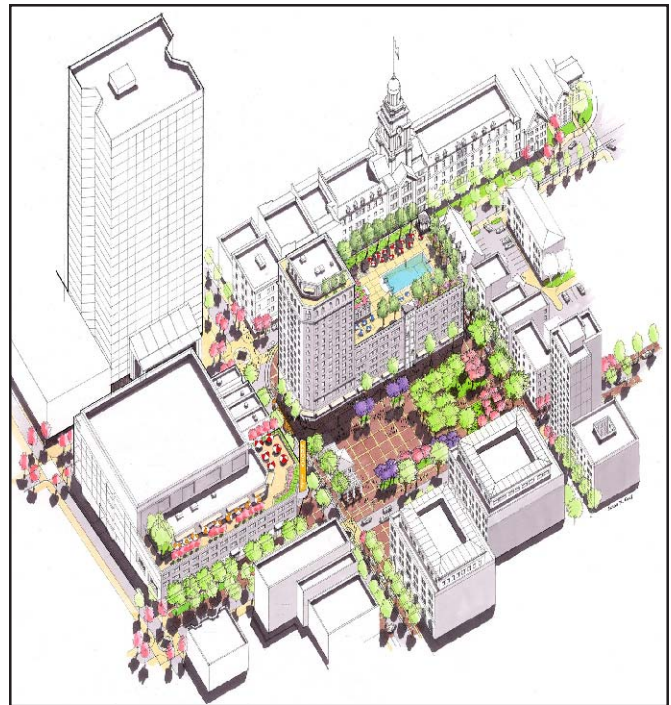
with expertise in rail and other mass transit, came calling in search of firms to associate with.

“I quickly realized that nobody in town had Don’s talent or experience,” Crandall recalls. Arambula soon joined FFA, but eventually the two decided to venture out on their own in order to focus specifically on downtown planning. And Crandall’s name was already a familiar one in local architecture and planning circles, having come to the city with Skidmore Owings Merrill. He also led the urban design team for the second Central City Plan in 1988 and served as a longtime chair of the influential Urban Design Committee at the American Institute of Architects’ Portland chapter.

Crandall says the reason he and Arambula decided to form their own firm was strictly practical.

“There’s an inherent conflict when you’re in an architectural firm working on these kinds of projects,” he explains. “Clients suspect that you’re really after the next architectural commission. And these urban design projects are often very political. So we just said, ‘Let’s get away from the architectural work altogether.’ Let’s just focus on revitalizing cities.”

This is clearly an era that has seen a return to America’s downtown areas. But as it says on their Web site, Crandall and Arambula believe a downtown without a plan is like a symphony without a score. “You’ll go into cities where you never thought there’d be loft developments, and you see it happening,” Arambula says. “But it’s piecemeal, and it’s not enough to affect a region’s growth. What we’re trying to do is to make some substantial changes so that energy is catalyzed in the downtown and there’s a significant impact in terms of getting people there and



Crandall Arambula has worked on projects nationwide, including the Knoxville, Tenn, Church Avenue Square. Rendering courtesy of Crandall Arambula

coordinating investment. Rather than just cherry picking a project here or there and seeing some modest change, we want something significant.”

And while some argue that it’s not the role of government to invest in development — that instead this is the role of the private sector — it turns out that private developers end up being some of Crandall and Arambula’s biggest fans, because the firm’s goal is for every dollar of public investment to stimulate \$6 or \$7 in private investment.

“Development is an unsure thing. Why would you want to develop downtown unless you think it’s a worthwhile investment? Preparing revitalization strategies makes a developer’s return-on-investment more certain. It’s all about setting the stage for development to become easier and more effective,” Arambula says.

One of the firm's most significant early projects was a downtown revitalization plan for Racine, Wis. Vacant lots dotted the central core and new projects were rare. Crandall Arambula set about converting a multi-block parcel of these vacant lots into a series of park blocks similar to Portland's, with retail intertwined, all as part of a Main Street plan that included a park along Lake Michigan, integration of 500 housing units, street improvement, public squares, and building and tenant improvement programs. To date, more than \$200 million in private development has followed.

For all of the expertise that is associated with regional planning and architecture, there are few who seem able to make that middle connection: designing selected clusters of blocks that can stimulate an entire neighborhood or downtown urban center. Not only is that true in Racine or Knoxville, Crandall and Arambula say, but also in the Portland metro area.

"Portland has a good regional plan that's designed from 10,000 feet above," Arambula explains. "We never get down on the ground and test whether or not those plans would actually work. We've got a real good policy at the front end that says we should have regional centers with a mix of housing and jobs, and then we've also got some good implementation codes that say, for example, 'We want one and a half parking spaces per housing unit,' which is precisely the kind of detail you need. But what is lacking is the design piece, which says how you physically make it happen. Without design, you can't implement anything. You don't know how to go from policy to implementation. It's a big gap and this region is in denial that we need a design component."

Take the Beaverton Downtown Regional Center Development Strategy, which Metro formulated in July of 2004 as a pilot for implementing compact, mixed-use areas of high-density housing, retail and employment that are pedestrian-oriented and connected to light rail as well as other mass transit, all as part of the 2040 Growth Concept. Dominated by automobiles and without the pedestrian-friendly environment or high-density housing suitable to stimulate a healthy downtown area, Beaverton is precisely the kind of place that needs the firm's city planning expertise. But after a request for proposal went out, Crandall Arambula declined to participate because its two principals believed the opportunity to affect real, positive change was not there. In particular, they cited Beaverton and Metro's overemphasis on research and study with little or no design outlined in their scope of work. Crandall calls this "analysis paralysis."

Instead, as Crandall and Arambula expressed in a February letter to Metro president David Bragdon and councilor Brian Newman, "To change the existing conditions in Beaverton and stimulate economic development, specific framework plans must be prepared that organize retail, employment, housing, cultural facilities, and public amenities into places where people want to live, work and play." In other words, Beaverton and Metro were, in the firm's estimation, getting stuck evaluating the issues without ever getting busy on a tangible strategy to design and implement a solution.

Arambula was a key participant in a regional center development plan that has already proven

tremendously successful: Orenco Station in Hillsboro. The difference between Orenco and Beaverton, he says, is “We did a physical plan that prescribes specific locations for land uses that were innovative and viable in the market place. A lot of design went into the Orenco area.”

Meanwhile, though, the firm has still been busy with numerous Oregon projects, be it the Portland Downtown Retail Strategy, regional planning in Eugene, the Milwaukie Downtown Plan, the Interstate Avenue Corridor, or numerous other projects. If our area is to continue its reputation as a leader in urban design, it will likely be with George Crandall and Don Arambula’s help.

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