THE RESTON TOWN CENTER, located in Fairfax County, VA, is an award-winning mixed-use project consisting of 1.3 million sq. ft. of office/retail/entertainment facilities in the initial phase of development. In praising the quality of urban design that earned a national award from the Urban Land Institute, the design jury noted that the ultimate success of its most important public space, named Fountain Square, would be dependent on the appropriate development of the open space at the edge of the square. However, until 1995, the appropriate use of the space was unresolved.

The concept for Town Center was based on a re-centering of a residential suburb. It was to become Reston’s downtown, complete with a Main Street and a plaza area for people to gather. Originally, as designed, the plaza area was limited to the space around Fountain Square, an area with grade changes.
The pavilion is 59-ft.-wide-by-96-ft.-long-by-50-ft.-high and is oriented so that its east-west axis aligns with a major hotel entrance and its north-south axis aligns with the Mercury fountain at Fountain Square and the space between the two major office buildings.

focused on an ornamental fountain. A large grass area which lay to the south edge of Fountain Square was planned to be the site of a future art museum. This was the last piece left to complete phase 1 of Town Center and the place where the Pavilion would eventually be placed.

In phase 1 of Town Center, the twin 250,000-sq.-ft. office towers at the north side of Fountain Square, a 400-room hotel and low-rise offices and street level retail were completed to form the three sides of the square. During the planning of the art museum, Town Center gained in popularity, in large part because of the large grass area where people could congregate within an “urban environment.” This undefined, and largely unplanned space, became an opportunity for seasonal amenities such as a summer concert series, a temporary ice rink in the winter, a large tent for Oktoberfest, and a great variety of informal public uses. In short, the “empty” space had become useful. It became a place where people could go for relaxation, recreation, entertainment and to enjoy being together. It became one of the main reasons why people wanted to be in Reston Town Center.

This is a case where the use of a space evolved and those responsible for its ultimate development were aware enough to understand what was happening. The client, Mobil Land Development, in a bold move, scrapped the idea of having a museum at that location. Instead, they approached RTKL Associates, which would ulti-
mately serve as both architect and structural engineer, with a concept of a flexible “pavilion” that would allow all of their “temporary” activities to be accommodated in a more permanent way.

To design a facility that would serve many diverse activities was a tall order. It had to programmatically and functionally accommodate the following:

• permanent ice rink surface with demountable dasher board
• flexible concert and performances with lighting truss and sound system
• catered parties
• special events, i.e. art shows, farmer's markets, exhibitions, etc.
• A protective glazed covering
• Shading devices
• Acoustical devices
• A method for quickly and easily opening and enclosing the entire structure

All this, with the stipulation that the final structure should be so light that the perception of the plaza space and the ability to flow through it would be unimpeded. As well, the structure would have to look active even when unoccupied. Needless to say, the solution would also have to be economical.

**DESIGN**

The structure is 59-ft.-wide-by-96-ft.-long-by-50-ft.-high and is oriented so that its east-west axis aligns with a major hotel entrance and its north-south axis aligns with the Mercury fountain at Fountain Square and the space between the two major office buildings.

When the structural framework is in fact the building itself, careful crafting of structural connections was employed to give the building a sense of detail to provide enrichment of the overall concept.

The roof trusses are supported by W14x90 and HP14x73 columns spaced 24-ft. o.c. and capped by 12-ft. bays along each
The poetic aspect of the final design involves the framework itself and the seamless integration of the other functional components. A form was developed that employs tent and sail technology. A system for a temporary fabric enclosure was developed that employs the use of metal guide channels mounted on the steel framework that allows two persons within two hours to hoist large panels of sail-like fabric to be laced into place when required by sudden changes in the weather.

**POETIC PRAGMATISM**

The goals for this project suggested an economy of means. Each element used in the project needed to have more than one purpose. Steel was selected as a skeletal spanning material that in turn would double as the framework for all the skylight, electrical system, lighting, temporary enclosures, sunshade and acoustical devices and provisions for hanging banners, etc. In essence, the requirements were similar to that of a performing arts stage without a building. This is the pragmatic aspect of the design problem that the design team faced.

The poetic aspect of the final design involves the framework itself and the seamless integration of the other functional components. A form was developed that is distinctive but, at the same time, light and graceful; repetitive trusses that taper to slender points which appear to rest lightly on articulated steel columns. The pavilion; in its lightness, its detailing and the tendency to be visually transformed by the time of day or changes in atmospheric conditions; it is a dynamic structure in a state of constant change. It is this characteristic that gives visitors a sense of anticipation with each return visit to Town Center.

As the project evolved, it became clear to everyone involved that the project would become a unique solution in its balance between poetry and pragmatism. It has earned recognition with two American Institute of Architects (AIA) chapter awards. People are ever more inventive in their use of the space. And, more than anything else, it is a place people truly enjoy, a fitting completion for Reston Town Center, itself an AIA honor award recipient.

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