

Children's museum proposed for OKC's Stage Center

by Dave Rhea

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Stage Center seen from the Devon tower. (Maiké Sabolich)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Oklahoma City's Stage Center is sort of like a structural Rorschach test.

To some, it's an outdated eyesore taking up some of downtown Oklahoma City's most valuable real estate – right across the street from Devon's \$750 million corporate headquarters and adjacent to the newly renovated Myriad Gardens.

But to others, it's a community cultural landmark. It represents some of the city's earliest attempts at forward-thinking, avant-garde architecture.

One thing most everyone can agree on is that there is no shortage of opinions about the Stage Center complex.

Presently, the lingering question in the community is what to do with those peculiar buildings situated on that valuable land.

One idea sprung up separately, but almost simultaneously, in the creative minds of Tracey Zeeck and Farooq Karim.

Zeeck owns an independent public relations company called Bumbershoot PR. Since Zeeck and her husband, Andy Zeeck, became parents, she has wanted to have a children's museum in Oklahoma City.

"When we travel, that is something we always do at least one day of our trip," she said.

With extensive downtown renovations, the lack of a children's creative center as is found in other major markets, and the need to preserve a culturally and architecturally significant structure, Zeeck said now is the perfect time. She said she feels great and growing passion about making Stage Center Oklahoma City's first dedicated children's museum.

"Everybody wants to save Stage Center, and this is our one last chance to save it," she said.

Almost simultaneously and completely unrelated, Karim was dreaming along the same lines. Karim, a vice president at Rees Associates architecture firm and the company's practice leader in design and visualization, was originally involved in a feasibility study conducted about five years ago to repurpose Stage Center for theater use, he said. That was when he realized that it was almost impossible to renovate it for realistic modern theater use.

While driving to Dallas Tuesday on unrelated business, Karim said, he was thinking about the building because he was asked to lead a brainstorming session about it with Rees Associates on Feb. 9.

"I was thinking, this building just screams 'children's museum' to me," he said.

He said others at the Rees office have the same idea about repurposing the building for a creative children's center.

"Then I get this email about Tracey and about the children's museum idea, and I immediately had someone call her and say she and I need to get together ASAP," Karim said.

He also said this is the last chance to save Stage Center from destruction. The city needs a children-specific creative-recreational facility at the same world-class level as the other construction in the area, he added.

"There are things downtown that are beneficial to kids, but nothing in the heart of the city for families and kids," Karim said. "We need fine arts performance art and music, and you've already got the spaces in that building to serve those purposes."

Zeeck said there is no bad guy standing by with a wrecking ball, but time is of the essence. Considering the value of the land, the building needs to be preserved through some new viable use. Otherwise, it might be razed, falling prey to market forces.

"The bad guy is whoever has \$20 million and won't give it to kids," she said jokingly, adding that the real hurdle will be finding the necessary funding.

Her ideal situation involves someone or some organization with a lot of money becoming emotionally vested in the project.

"The (Oklahoma City) Community Foundation (the current owners of Stage Center) has no agenda for this place," Zeeck said. "They just want to do something with it that's going to keep it going."

She added that a children's museum would be easy to sustain, but not as easy to create.

With the combined passion, expertise and community network between Zeeck and Karim, this early idea could be the Hail Mary effort that saves Stage Center while filling a void in Oklahoma City.

"Like Tracey said, there is just something serendipitous about all of this coming together," Karim said. "And if nothing else, in the end, if nothing else happens other than we put this together for the kids and save that building – perfect."

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