

Friday, June 8, 2012

KC architects in an arena showdown

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For Star Magazine

Brad Clark did not want to be distracted. He was going to enjoy playing golf with colleagues on this late July morning, so he turned the ringer off on his cellphone.

But after 16 holes in the dry Arizona heat, with the sun bearing down on him, Clark pulled the phone out of his pocket and snuck a glance. A missed call. Of course.

His boss, Scott Radevic, had rung him from Kansas City. Clark had a good guess what he wanted, and his intuition was confirmed upon checking his email. Radevic had sent a note asking Clark to call. This was important. This was it.

For almost a decade, Clark, a sports architect at Populous, had been working to be the lead designer for the University of Illinois' renovation of its basketball arena, Assembly Hall in Champaign. A man of grand ideas, he had seen that particular building as an opportunity to make a bold statement.

A week before Clark went to Phoenix, Populous, along with three other firms, had interviewed in front of a committee at Illinois for the right to execute a \$100 million-plus overhaul of Assembly Hall. It was a design competition that required the companies to finalize their concepts of the renovated arena down to the last seat. They were given six weeks, and Clark and the Populous team felt they had come up with a real dandy this time.

An arena within an arena was the vision. Populous would build an entirely new elliptical bowl inside the existing concrete circle, creating a layout perfect for the Fighting Illini and their fans and possibly setting a trend in the growing market of arena renovations. During two decades in the business, Clark, 50, had never seen a concept so roundly backed by his associates in the early stages.

That day in the desert, Clark was going to find out one way or the other: Would he spend the next several years in Champaign living a designer's dream, or would it all amount to nothing? He'd lost bids many times. It was the worst part of the job, although the opposite could be said of winning them. Clark liked to say that he left a little bit of himself in every one.

Standing at No. 17, he took a deep breath and dialed Radevic's number.

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That same day, Jon Niemuth boarded a flight from Kansas City to Cleveland to interview

for a project at Akron University. But, as much as he tried, he couldn't stop thinking about Illinois.

Assembly Hall was one of the most coveted jobs in the country in 2011, and Niemuth's company, a Kansas City-based sports-specific branch of AECOM, had invested more time and brainpower on Illinois than any other firm by a long shot. Because of that, it also had the most to lose.

A week had passed since Niemuth had led his team in its Champaign interview, and the buzz in architecture circles had become annoyingly persistent. A few AECOM guys were out in Arizona, where the three other short-listed firms were also represented at a conference, and it seemed everybody had some theory about who was going to bring home the prize. One person told Niemuth that a designer from another firm was wearing Illinois' colors, orange and blue, and wondered if that meant something bad for AECOM.

Yes, it was getting ridiculous. But these were the stakes, the highest of Niemuth's budding career. He'd made at least a dozen trips to Champaign since 2004, forming relationships with the university power brokers that hopefully were about to be the difference for him and his team.

At 41, Niemuth had never won a project worth \$100 million — a benchmark that, for sports architects, is like winning a major in golf or tennis. You aren't considered one of the best unless you've done it.

Sitting on the idling jet, Niemuth attempted to think about Akron. A flight attendant announced over the speaker that all electronic devices must be turned off. Just then, Niemuth's phone rang. It was an Illinois number. Niemuth's heart thumped. Should he answer and feel the wrath of the flight attendant? He decided not.

Immediately, a text message came in from the same number, asking him to call. Niemuth turned off his phone and put it away. If he'd waited this long, what was another two hours?

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On June 7, 2011, the University of Illinois welcomed the four short-listed firms to Champaign for a formal meeting to signal the start of a grueling six weeks.

As top designers from AECOM, Populous, Boston-based Cannon Design and Illinois-based BLDD gathered in a conference room, the competitive juices should have been naturally flowing. But all Jon Niemuth felt was fear.

"I was scared sitting in that room," Niemuth says. "But you don't want to show that."

Niemuth knew full well what he was up against. Populous, formerly HOK Sports, and AECOM, formerly Ellerbe Becket, are two miles from each other in downtown Kansas

City and have been fighting over the same turf around the world for most of two decades.

Think Niemuth and Brad Clark don't know each other's resumes? When Niemuth walked into the doors of Ellerbe Becket in 1995 as a fresh-faced entry-level designer, Clark had been there since 1989 and had already risen up the hierarchy by helping to secure and complete what is now QuickenLoans Arena in Cleveland.

While HOK Sports had dominated the market in professional baseball and football stadiums, Clark had helped Ellerbe Becket carve out a niche in arenas. Niemuth and Clark didn't work on many projects together directly, but they shared the same office space on McGee Street, the same creative philosophy and company Christmas parties. In short, Niemuth would have been very comfortable admitting that he wanted to be Brad Clark, and Clark would have looked a stranger in the eye and said he'd given everything to Ellerbe Becket.

"I was there for 16 years," Clark says, "and really committed myself totally to that place."

Until a better opportunity came along.

The story of how Clark and Niemuth came to be sitting in this room on opposite sides begins in the early part of the last decade, when then-Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes put the Sprint Center up for grabs in the architecture world. Word circulated that Barnes was interested in a Los Angeles firm, but the local KC firms wouldn't allow it.

Despite their constant battling with each other outside of town, HOK Sports, Ellerbe Becket and another local firm, 360 Architecture, merged for this one special project to form a "dream team" of designers. The job took years and thinned and grayed hairs, and, by the end of it, five AECOM designers had decided they really liked working with Populous, and the feeling was mutual.

Clark and the other four soon left Ellerbe for HOK, which was seen as a blatant power grab in Ellerbe's office near Crown Center and a strategic no-brainer in HOK's office in the River Market. Ellerbe sued HOK (they would eventually settle), but the damage was already done.

Niemuth kept hearing how Ellerbe's sports practice was done. All he knew was that he was just getting started.

"The day I found out about it," Niemuth says, "I said this is my opportunity. This is a huge break for me at this point in my career."

Niemuth wasn't Clark yet, but, within a year, he'd have the guy's old job. They went up against each other for the Freedom Hall renovation in Louisville, Ky., and Clark and HOK won. Illinois was just the latest chapter in a growing rivalry, and as Niemuth looked across the room and saw Radevic, Clark and Rick Martin, a Populous senior principal, he

had a bit of a gulp moment.

“They brought the guns,” Niemuth says. “They didn’t send their assistants. They’re here. And we are, too. There’s a lot of posturing. It’s like the beginning of a horse race.”

At one point during the meeting, Illinois offered the firms a chance to ask questions. The room was silent because nobody wanted to tip their hand.

They’d see each other again in 42 days, when posturing would serve no purpose.

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Inside every architecture firm in the country, before a rendering of a job is ever conceived, designers pack into a room and participate in an idea jam session called a “charrette.”

The charrette (pronounced shar-ette) is the experience through which one realizes that sports architects are very blessed individuals. Sure, the grunt work exists, straight line after monotonous straight line is drawn, but there’s a reason that Populous’ motto is “drawing people together.”

It is not a proven fact that human beings are at their most joyful when watching a live sporting event together, but it doesn’t need to be. We’ve seen it with our eyes, felt it with our hearts and heard it vibrating around our eardrums. In a weird way, it is a sports architect’s mission to bring out the best in all of us.

To get that opportunity in Champaign, Populous, the largest sports-specific firm in the world with offices from KC to London to Brisbane, Australia, would have to connect with a room full of 12 to 14 people whose role is to be critical. The charrette is about figuring out how to build that personal connection.

“There are nuts and bolts, but what we are trying to do is show that there’s a spirit behind that,” says Gabe Braselton, a Populous designer working on the Illinois project, “a soul greater than just this many seats and this many loge boxes.”

Populous’ goal with Illinois was to come up with a narrative that would be told through the design. For instance, designers decided it would be innovative to have grass mounds surrounding the outside of the arena because the Cahokia Indians (Chief Illiniwek, Illinois’ former mascot, was a descendant of the Cahokia tribe) once played their tribal games around similar terrain.

Inside, the arena within an arena would pay homage to the current Assembly Hall, built in 1963, keeping its massive concrete bones intact. The void in between the old circle and the new ellipse would turn into more space for concourses, gathering areas and revenue-generating tools for Illinois’ athletic department.

“In essence it is a jewel,” Clark says. “We’re doing something that has a real respect for what’s there today, but it’s going to be better. It isn’t trying to insert a square peg into a round hole. It’s a very crafted new experience inside what is a venerable, well-respected place.”

Not every company gets to present the results of its charrette to the “Godfather of sports architecture,” but Populous can. A few weeks after the company’s initial meeting, Ron Labinski, the founder of HOK Sports decades ago, came downtown from his Prairie Village home to meet with Clark and the Populous team.

Only Labinski can truly explain how a cowtown like Kansas City came to be the world epicenter of sports architecture.

In 1968, he was a young designer working for a KC firm called Kivet and Myers and one of the lead architects for the Truman Sports Complex, which was revolutionary at the time because it broke the trend of multisport stadiums for baseball and football.

“Arrowhead really caught the imagination of NFL owners,” Labinski says.

Labinski was onto something, and so he made a list of all the dates when the current multisport stadiums’ leases were up. He forged relationships with pioneering NFL owners like the Giants’ Wellington Mara and the Bills’ Ralph Wilson, and he ended up designing their stadiums and many others across the NFL and MLB.

In 1983, Labinski and his top sports designers left the firm HNTB to start HOK Sports. Soon, he came up with his best pitch yet, and Dolphins owner Joe Robbie was a very willing guinea pig. At that point, using club seating to generate revenue was seen only in the “skybox” mold. Labinski suggested putting suites in the middle of Joe Robbie Stadium.

“It’s a real simple equation,” Labinski says. “We had 200 suites, and the going rate on them was \$50,000 a year on average. That’s \$10 million in income.”

The success of Joe Robbie Stadium created plenty of copycats, and suddenly the money was rolling into HOK’s coffers. With one seemingly obvious concept, Labinski had given himself and many of his employees security for life.

It’s no wonder that Clark and company treated Labinski, 74, with such respect on that late June afternoon. Labinski, an Illinois graduate, bought Clark’s pitch about the arena within an arena and offered to help in any way he could with convincing his alma mater. Populous’ plan may have been a risk, but it was certainly calculated. And, from the beginning, Clark knew they’d need a “wow” factor to beat out AECOM on this one.

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In 2002, Illinois began researching the best course of action for its beloved Assembly

Hall. The university chose Ellerbe Becket to perform a handful of studies over the years, examining whether to renovate the building or build a new one, among other crucial decisions.

So when AECOM met for its charrette, Jon Niemuth and his team had hundreds of pages of data that the other companies simply couldn't match. Brad Clark had been involved in the early years at Illinois, but once he moved to HOK from Ellerbe, he lost access to a never-ending fountain of information.

And there was one idea that AECOM knew it wouldn't propose to the committee in July: an arena within an arena.

It wasn't that AECOM didn't love the concept. In fact, back in 2008, Illinois had approached the company asking it to come up with the best possible scenario if budget and schedule weren't concerns. It turned out the arena within an arena was the perfect solution.

"If they had another \$100 million, we'd be doing that scheme," Niemuth says.

Other than the sense that building an entire new bowl could cost up to \$250 million, there was one other major flaw that AECOM noticed.

"If I'm on the concourse, and I step into the bowl, there's a disconnect," AECOM designer Greg Brown says. "There's two different worlds. It's old and new. That can work, but it's not integrated."

AECOM had a major advantage over Populous, which had no knowledge that an arena within an arena had already been floated to Illinois. Of course, Niemuth also didn't know that Clark and his team had come to that brilliant answer themselves and had enough guts to pitch it as Populous' concept design with an estimated budget of around \$145 million — \$105 million less than AECOM had figured.

But AECOM couldn't waste time worrying about what Populous was doing. Niemuth and Brown's ultimate challenge was not taking anything for granted and going back to the drawing board enough to show Illinois something fresh and still better than the competition.

Based on its understanding of the people on the committee and what their priorities were, AECOM went conservative in comparison to Populous. The company knew that Assembly Hall was an architectural marvel when it was built and had become a symbol of Fighting Illini pride.

AECOM chose integration of old and new as its theme and elected not to touch the upper seating bowl, in direct contrast to Populous, which was going to excavate those seats to create an airy space for the renovated concourse. AECOM focused all of its efforts on the bottom half of the arena, where it would work within the constraints of the circular frame

to create better basketball viewing.

“When you do design competitions,” Niemuth says, “it’s a lot more about discipline. It doesn’t matter if we love it. The second I allow myself to love it, I’m missing the point. It’s their project. Not ours.”

AECom’s design wasn’t sexy. But neither was losing.

III

July 19 came quickly. Sports architects may perform works of wizardry in their craft, but they can’t slow time. The moment was here, and Brad Clark and Jon Niemuth felt fortunate to be living in it.

Clark, who grew up in Wichita, went to Kansas State University in 1979 thinking he’d be an electrical engineer. But he attended one meeting for potential students, and five minutes was all he needed to hear. He roamed Seaton Hall and stumbled into the architecture department. That was more like it.

“Engineering was more technical, dry, less creative,” Clark says. “With architecture, in some ways you’re an artist except you’re asked to be functional.”

The most interesting thing wasn’t that Clark chose architecture for his major, it was that he felt he had to make a decision at 18.

“I just felt like I had to commit to something, to be really invested in it,” Clark says. “The idea of general studies just to figure out what you like probably would have been the smart thing to do, but it piqued my interest enough. I got lucky.”

Niemuth spun the wheel, too, as an undergraduate at Wisconsin-Milwaukee. A native of Oshkosh, Wis., he was comfortable with a pencil in his hand but went to school thinking he’d major in business.

“But I wasn’t sure I could sit through the business classes,” Niemuth says.

To say that this is a field for dreamers doesn’t quite sum it up. There’s too much detailed work in between the conception of the idea and the building dedication years later to live with your head in the clouds. Still, when it came down to it, Clark and Niemuth chose architecture for days like July 19.

AECom was first up in the morning. It had performed like the team that started with an edge, getting 90 percent of its PowerPoint presentation completed with two weeks left and rehearsing it over and over. It was not going to leave anything to chance in Champaign.

“For Illinois, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime project,” Niemuth says. “If you put yourself in their

shoes, they want to be inspired. If I'm an athletic director, this might be the thing that culminates my career."

Niemuth and his team walked into the convention room, turned off the lights and hit play on a two-minute, 30-second video that would set the table for the whole three-hour interview session. "How You Like Me Now" by the Heavy, a jazzy tune, blared from the speakers as AECOM simulated a walking tour of the inside of the renovated arena.

The camera passed by fans sitting in comfy chairs and sofas in the enlarged concourse and zoomed into the club seating area, where hypothetical donors leisurely watched the Fighting Illini.

The purpose was to grab the committee's imagination from the beginning, and AECOM reinforced its momentum by revealing models for an in-person look at its vision. As Niemuth watched the committee gather around the models, he liked what he was hearing.

"They said, 'You know, they didn't really change the building at all, but it's really, really different,' " Niemuth says. "At least we had accomplished what we wanted to."

When the AECOM team left the room, the Populous team was waiting in the hallway for its turn. They were liable to run into each other any time back in KC and share a conversation, but in this setting, few words were spoken.

Clark and his team walked into the room and followed Niemuth's lead by starting with an intro video. AECOM very well could have stolen Populous' thunder, but at least the clips had an opposite vibe.

Populous, as it had done throughout this competition, took a more romantic route, trying to appeal to the committee's emotions. A soft, mood-setting instrumental played as Populous showed pictures of the original Assembly Hall's construction and a quote from the architect, Max Abramovitz. The four-minute video eventually picked up speed, changing the music to the Killers' "All These Things That I've Done."

Populous' theme was "Hold onto history," which was ironic considering that AECOM had maintained more of the original structure. During one stretch of the movie, Populous peeled away the existing seating areas and sequentially replaced them with the new bowl. As AECOM had learned in 2008, there was no question that was the best design. But how feasible was it?

Clark felt as if their presentation had the committee hooked by the end of the interview. But when one member said, "You certainly have given us something different to consider," Clark didn't know what to think.

In his mind, different was usually a positive. The question was, would the folks at Illinois share his outlook?

III

Jon Niemuth's plane landed on the tarmac in Cleveland. He finally could make that phone call and discover his fate.

The Illinois insider had good news. AECOM had won the bid, but it wouldn't be official until the next day. That was fine, because Niemuth couldn't celebrate anyway with the Akron interview in the morning. Populous would eventually beat AECOM to conduct a feasibility study of Akron's basketball arena, but knowing that result wouldn't have bothered Niemuth one bit as he returned to the Cleveland airport and pulled up at a terminal bar.

Illinois had been his top focus for years, and he and his team had found a way to beat industry top-dog Populous.

"I don't even know how to describe the joy," Niemuth says. "It's the biggest thing I've ever won. The greatest high I've had professionally."

Niemuth had three hours to kill in Cleveland, and, when the bartender asked him whether he wanted a 16- or 22-ounce beer, he chose the 22. He texted and called his teammates on Illinois, his wife, anybody who would listen to him. Sitting alone in that dinky bar, Niemuth thought about Doug Brown, his former boss and mentor who had worked on Illinois before dying of cancer in 2009. This was for Doug, and the celebration was only beginning.

"It was worse than Mardi Gras," Niemuth says. "We kept having one party after another. We had a barbecue at my house, we had an office party. My liver is still recovering from it."

In design competitions, the firms never find out the exact results. But The Star obtained an official document of the judging through a public records request.

A day after Cannon Design and BLDD completed their interviews, the Illinois committee met with all of the presentations still fresh to make a final decision. Thousands of dollars and man-hours had been invested from all sides, and a subjective process would come down to cold, hard numbers.

Each of the key members of the committee would rate the firms in five categories: experience with similar projects (10 percent), design (35 percent), project management (40 percent), chemistry (10 percent) and other (5 percent).

When the ratings were added up, AECOM finished with a total of 379.30, followed by Cannon at 361.05, BLDD at 321.30 and Populous at 311.10.

Clark and his team had not finished higher than third in any category. They were docked considerably for their project schedule and cost estimate. Apparently, for AECOM, the

beauty was in the details.

Across the country on that golf course in Arizona, Clark received the bad news from Radecic. He finished up his round with a 79 and headed back to the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Phoenix with Rick Martin, who was also feeling the pain.

Clark and Martin changed out of their sweaty clothes and went straight to the hotel bar, where Martin took down a vodka on the rocks and Clark opted for his staple, a Sierra Nevada. The only explanation they'd received as to why they lost was that their cost estimate was lacking, which miffed them because that's normally not the reason a company wins or loses a design competition.

"I wouldn't do anything different," Clark says. "With a competitor that had been there doing studies over the course of a number of years and had countless meetings with athletics and campus people, we felt like our idea had to be bold."

Populous knew it was asking Illinois to take a leap and trust that, having done projects like Wembley Stadium in London and the new Yankee Stadium, it could produce something truly remarkable. It tried to provide the committee assurance the arena within an arena could be executed at that price, but it clearly hadn't succeeded.

As the number of drinks mounted in the hotel bar, Clark and Martin were confronted with the worst possible reality of the creative process: Their idea wasn't good enough, and it would probably never see the light of day.

"It will pretty much disappear," Clark says.

The two expensive models that Populous made will gather dust in a storage area on the Illinois campus, and AECOM's models will rise from the ground years down the road. Niemuth will get to execute his \$100 million-plus project, and Clark will be forced to forget about Assembly Hall and come up with a new idea.

"You just invest so much personally and professionally," Clark says. "It's hard to move on. But the reality is you don't really have a choice about it. We're not doing the project, so we're going to do another one."