

The Van Andel Arena

“This is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.”

—Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

The Van Andel Arena

October 8, 1996





Jay and Betty Van Andel

As the official campaign began, the Van Andels again proved where their hearts lie—in the middle of a city they both love. The generous gifts of the Jay and Betty Van Andel Foundation gave a more definite shape to the vision of a new arena, and truly helped mobilize this towering initiative.



The Van Andel Arena

The story of the Van Andel Arena is much more than a chronicle of construction. It is more a story of invention. An invention is that which grows from the merest germ of an idea into something tangible, something real, something that will have perpetual impact. And though an invention is often attributed to one individual, the inventor is always first to acknowledge that inspiration comes from diverse sources, and every invention relies on broad support to make it truly viable.

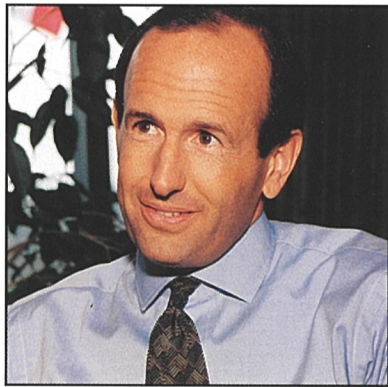
Jay and Betty Van Andel stepped forward in the earliest days of this project with donations that were both generous and inspiring. In *O, Pioneer!* Willa Cather wrote, “The history of a country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.” So it is, too, with cities. Again and again the events that shape a city’s history often turn on the thoughtful and heartfelt actions of a few. We are indeed grateful for the Van Andel’s historically grand, yet characteristically humble action — a gesture of faith made to help guarantee that the story of our city continues as an enthralling work in progress.



V

A Grand Vision

The bustling city on the banks of the Grand River was something to see. It always had been. One could never look down the maze of streets or across the skyline without taking



"An idea needs to make sense to a broad spectrum of people to work. In a city of this size and complexity, no single group has the luxury of making things happen alone."

— Dick DeVos,
The Detroit News
July 4, 1994

in at least one or two building projects adding new shape and dimension to an already stunning cityscape. The towering cranes seemed to take a permanent place among the buildings, the bulldozers and dump trucks were an ordinary part of city traffic. There was never a doubt that Grand Rapids was a city on the rise.

What kept Grand Rapids growing, what kept it from toppling along with other cities in eras when "Boomtown Goes Bust" was commonplace, what kept the legacy of progress constant was vision. The city did not grow out of a belief that "new is necessary" or "bigger is better." It grew because at the heart of this city were people with vision. Each urban renewal project, each new structure — from business buildings, to highways, to museums, hospitals and universities — was thoughtfully planned to be an integral part of a continuum. And often these projects were nurtured and raised through public/private partnerships that had yet to be seen on this



grand scale in any other city. The vision of a new arena had been kicking around for years in Grand Rapids. A premium, state-of-the-art entertainment and sports arena held a wealth of possibilities. It would be a place to host family activities, a place for professional calibre sports events, and a complement to the new convention center expansion being planned. It would also become an impetus for a complex of service and retail businesses that likely would spring up in its wake. It was a good idea, and meshed perfectly with plans for future growth. But where to begin?

As with most endeavors of historic proportions, the first strokes of the brush were made by a few who gave initial shape and color to the vision. In March of 1991, Dick DeVos invited more than 50 volunteers to form the Grand Vision Committee. This diverse group came together with the express purpose of studying the feasibility of this project and laying the groundwork for what everyone knew would be an enormous undertaking. Under Dick's leadership, the commitment of the committee grew stronger and the vision began to take hold in the community. Early in the project, Dick was quoted by *The Detroit News*. "An idea needs to make sense to a broad spectrum of people to work. In a city of this size and complexity, no single group has the luxury of making things happen alone." This philosophy not only provided a touchstone for planning, it also laid the foundation for a level of support that would galvanize a city and give substance to a vision.

Hockey



The Circus

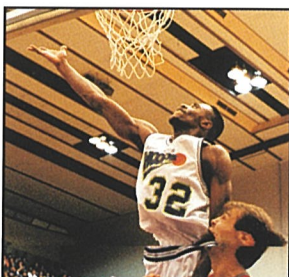


Concerts





Basketball



Gymnastics



Ice Shows



A

A Grand Action

Nearly 250 men and women stood side by side on a the pristine lawn that stretched down to the river in front of the Gerald R. Ford Museum. The mirrored glass wall of the



"One of the reasons I love Grand Rapids is because this is a city that's not intimidated by the 'bold vision,' that doesn't shrink from the 'grand action,' and that has an uncommon ability to unite in effort and support to realize a common goal."

—David Frey,
Remarks to Community Convocation
September, 1993

museum reflected blue skies, the occasional billowing cloud, and the smiling faces of the assembly known collectively as the Grand Action Committee. They had come together this day to have a photograph taken for posterity. They had organized only a few months earlier to make a commitment to the future of their city.

In the middle of a biting cold Michigan winter, February, 1993, Dick DeVos had presented the results of the Grand Vision feasibility studies (conducted by Deloitte-Touche), sub-committee findings, and collective recommendations to The Economic Club of Grand Rapids. He was especially pleased to be able to announce that David Frey and John Canepa had volunteered to share leadership responsibilities as his Co Chairs. When the last slide dissolved from the screen, and Dick concluded his remarks and set aside his notes, the applause began. And it was resounding. Not only had the Committee done their homework — seeking input from



Banquet Rooms
Meeting Rooms
Griffins Offices

every sector, listening to concerns, gauging the impact and projecting the potential — they had compiled all the information into a comprehensive recommendation for action that encompassed a 12,000 seat free-standing arena as well as a plan for major renovations and additions to the existing convention center. It was a plan so compelling that an immediate call to action was made, and within a very short time the Grand Vision Committee transformed into the Grand Action Committee. Clearly, it was time to start getting things done.

Immediately, Bob Hooker stepped forward to accept the challenge of spearheading one of the largest capital campaigns in the history of the city. A tremendous response from the community swelled the ranks of the Grand Action Committee to nearly 250. These volunteers were as diverse as the community itself, and one of their roles was to stay in touch with their friends, neighbors and colleagues to make sure the new arena was, indeed, a community project. Early in that process, committee member Judy Rose said, “We will be the public information presenters, the listeners and the sounding boards. In other words, the antenna to Greater Grand Rapids and West Michigan.” They did their work well. And as the response from various sectors of the city grew, the names and faces of Grand Action leadership and volunteers served as a poignant reminder that progress is generational, that a city is a trust, and that leadership is a valuable legacy.

By early spring Grand Action was up and running. By September 1993, they held a convocation attended by more than 250 community representatives and civic leaders to

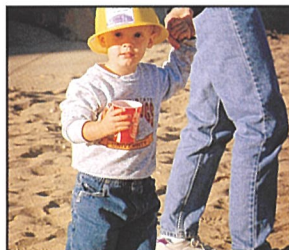


Bob Hooker, Grand Action Campaign Chair, joins John Canepa, Dick DeVos, and David Frey to lay the first personalized bricks on the arena plaza.

unveil their plan for action. And before another year had passed, they officially launched the Grand Action Campaign. With an initial goal of 20 million dollars, it was one of Grand Rapids' biggest challenges yet. Earlier in the process of building the vision, in a gesture of faith and conviction that relatively few knew about, Jay and Betty Van Andel had unceremoniously donated one million dollars to help mobilize this towering initiative. As the official campaign began, the Van Andel's again proved where their hearts lie — in the middle of a city they both love. With the Jay and Betty Van Andel Foundation's generous gifts totaling 11.5 million dollars, the vision of a new arena started taking a more definite shape.

Once again, private leadership and government came together to make things happen. Through a series of public meetings, presentations to organizations, and an innovative "brick-by-brick" campaign, foundations, businesses, civic leaders and thousands of colleagues, neighbors and friends throughout the community took stock in their city, recognized the potential, and joined in so vigorously that the campaign goal was exceeded by two million dollars. As the Grand Action Campaign was picking up steam, the Downtown Development Authority swung into action, and raised nearly \$56 million in public funds through the sale of tax exempt bonds. The city had seen great collaborations before, but success on this grand scale was awe-inspiring.

The architectural firm of Rossetti and Associates had already developed the plans that would turn a dingy expanse of asphalt into a stunning multi-purpose facility that would beckon all of West Michigan. Just six months after the capital campaign was officially launched, a ground-breaking ceremony took place. A sign on the corner of the building site gave a glimpse of what the finished arena would look like. Still, to most, it was hard to imagine. The crumbling parking lot just didn't appear to be a likely site for so august a structure. But as the ground was prepared, the foundation was laid, the supports were raised and the framing was swung into place, the transformation seemed to take place almost overnight, and the image of something grand became clearer and clearer. This would be a building that could change the texture of the city forever.



E

A Grand Entrance

The first thing you notice as you approach it from the north, across Fulton Street, is the size. It's huge. It's a mammoth reminder that we are no longer what we've been tagged as



"Last, but in no way least, I would like to thank all of you. Our Celebration on the Grand has often included a specific accomplishment – the Ford Museum, the new public museum, and a long list of public and private enterprises that contribute every day to the economic well-being of West Michigan. You are all part of a rich tradition of publicly-initiated and supported growth in this area. You're the real reason we're all here today."

— John Canepa,
Remarks to the Community
1995 Celebration on the Grand

for years: a big small town. We are a city, with all that designation implies.

The second thing you notice is the curved expanse of glass offering a stunning reflection of the surrounding city and the bricks that lie at its foundation. A fitting vision, for this towering arena is very much a creation of all it reflects, and the bricks that pave the way to the open doors are carved with the names of thousands of individual supporters. It is a touching reminder that we are still a community, with all that designation implies.

And now this community gathers to celebrate!

A grand vision realized is cause for a grand celebration, and this one will last for weeks. There is a builder's bash for the men and women on the construction crew who, quite literally, laid the foundation and raised the rafters. There is an appreciation luncheon for the Downtown Development Authority, Grand Action, and all the others who helped lay groundwork of another sort. A special reception has been arranged for



E

the underwriters of the celebration, whose generosity has made this Grand Entrance possible. And there is an open house and a series of spectacular initiation performances for the entire community which lent invaluable support throughout the process. This flurry of concerts, sporting events, family entertainment and exhibitions is truly a grand celebration, and offers a sampling of things to come.

When people reminisce about being part of this celebration, when they recall the anticipation, the exhilaration and the historical significance, they will have much to remember. They'll talk about joining the thousands of visitors who streamed in from around the state to take their places in one of the 12,000 seats or 44 suites that wrap around the 30,000 sq. ft. floor. They'll remember strolling around the concourse reveling in all the activity, participating in all the excitement. Maybe they paused at the Sports Hall of Fame, along walls of the grand concourse, to read tributes to 29 local sports legends, including Buster Mathis, Sr., Connie Wisniewski, Mickey Stanley, Marian Ladewig, Paul Goebel, Sr., Terry Barr and Gerald Ford. They probably wandered down to the ground level to visit the Business Hall of Fame, noting the familiar names of charter members — Meijer, Frey, Hunting, Gillett, Van Andel, DeVos — as well as more recent inductees whose contributions to this city's history are forever chronicled here as another reminder of the potential for achievement.

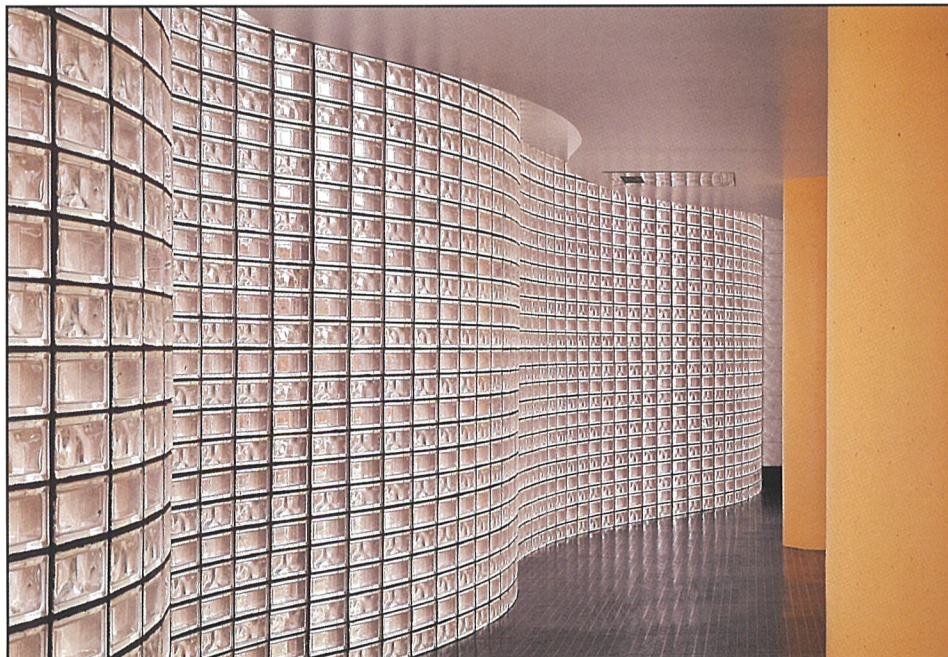
These Grand Opening Days will be remembered always as a very special celebration — encapsulating all we anticipated from the beginning and, like the arena





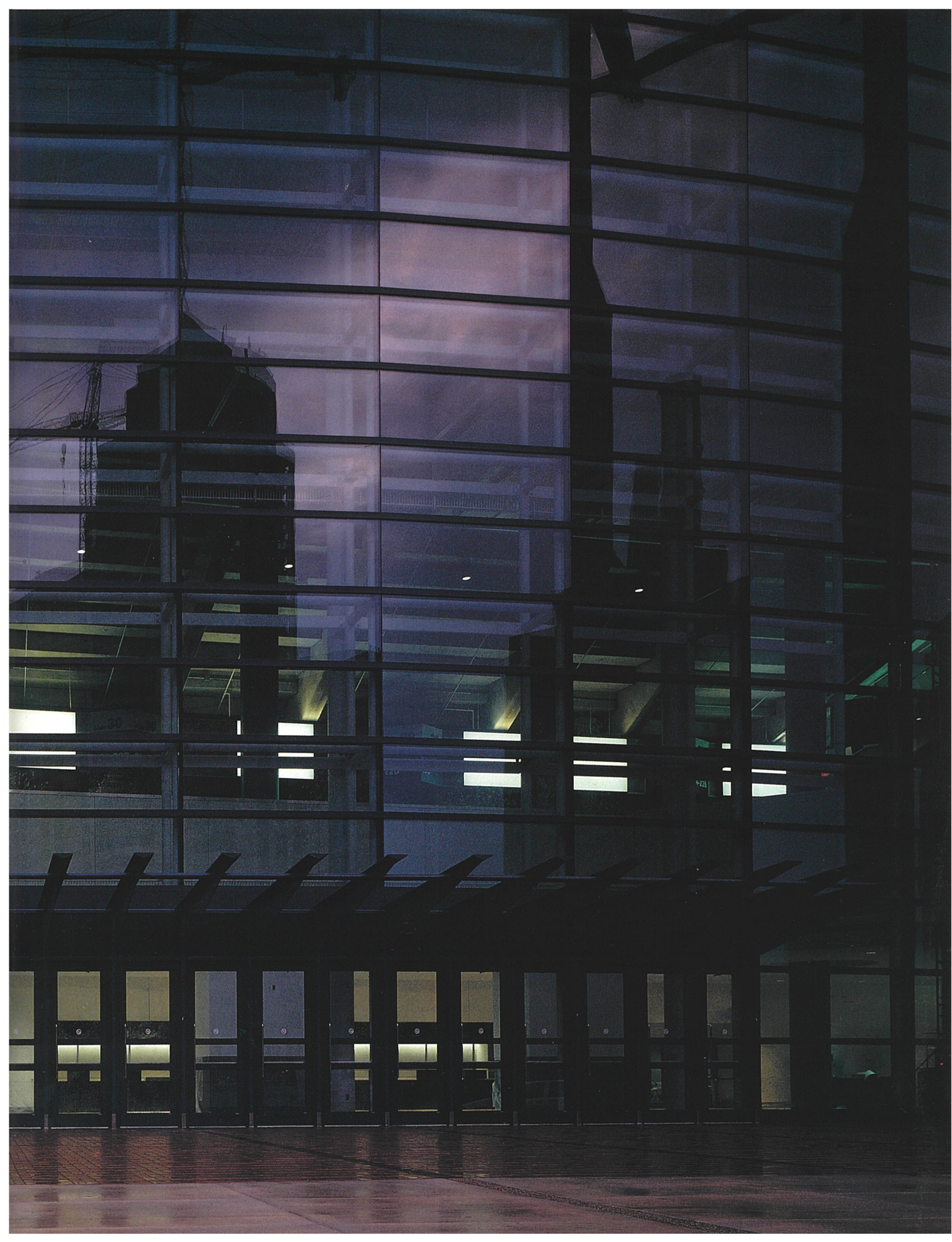
itself, exceeding all our expectations. We're not likely to forget the way the ice glistens as Olympic gold medalist Kristi Yamaguchi skates before us with flawless elegance. We'll cherish our sense of amazement as technology transports us into another universe with the explosive action fireworks and a laser light show. And the brilliance of the nationally renowned Grand Rapids Symphony will remind us again and again of what treasures are to be found in this city. We'll recall looking forward to the action-packed debut of the Griffins, to joining an audience of 12,000 enjoying venerable singing star Neil Diamond, and to the Hoops' first game in their new home. We'll remember being thrilled, and maybe a bit overwhelmed. We'll remember clearly our realization that the completion of the arena gives us more than one reason to stand up and cheer.

When this Grand Entrance is over, when the last echo of applause has died away, when the spotlights have been extinguished and the house lights dimmed, when the last celebrants have reluctantly left the building and the vendors have packed up their wares, something magical will remain. In the air there will be whispers. Pale visions will fleet through the darkness. Wisps of music will dance in and out of the rafters. Over the course of the celebration, each visitor will have carried into the arena his or her own vision for the future — circuses, ice shows, hockey and basketball, concerts — and with those expectations, they will have generated a pulse. The people will have brought their arena to life.









Epilogue

Even as the arena comes alive with activity, a new vision is taking shape — across the street, around the corner, down the block. The renovation and expansion of Grand Center convention facilities are well into the planning phase, already engendering community support, already a part of the forward momentum. During the construction of the arena, adjacent buildings which had been vacant or deteriorating were purchased, renovated and converted into shops and offices, lofts and apartments. Within months of the grand opening it is anticipated that at least a dozen new restaurants, clubs and retail establishments will open within a five block radius of the arena. And new businesses and retailers have started to take another look at Grand Rapids, recognizing it as a city where people make things happen. The resulting commerce will provide compelling reasons to come downtown in the evening, and will offer a variety of incentives to stay downtown.

No great project begins simply on the architect's drawing board. Neither does it end as the last brick is put in place. The truly grand achievements are those which are part of a continuum — representing both accomplishment and potential, becoming both a landmark and an impetus. The Van Andel Arena is such an achievement.



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"This is an achievement of historic significance. It is the culmination of a community vision, the result of an extraordinary public/private sector partnership. This is the kind of "grand action" that has become a tradition in our community."

—Mayor John Logie



“Let us, then, be up and doing... still achieving, still pursuing...”

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *A Psalm of Life*

