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SQUARE FEET

## A Waterfront Revival in Columbus, Ohio



The Columbus Arch was part of an old railroad station near the new Arena District, a riverfront development.

By KEITH SCHNEIDER

COLUMBUS, Ohio—A decade ago, a 75-acre area along the Scioto River less than a mile west of this capital city's downtown was an industrial no man's land, consisting of barren railyards, old warehouses and a shuttered 19th-century penitentiary. But that was before Nationwide Realty Investors, an affiliate of Nationwide Mutual Insurance, turned the area into the Arena District.

The district, a \$750 million mixed-use neighborhood of housing, offices, retailing and entertainment, has attracted some of the city's most prominent architecture, law, real estate development and advertising firms and is regarded as one of the Midwest's most successful urban redevelopment projects.

Late in October, the Columbus City Council approved the development plan for the Arena District's final phase: a \$250 million project to add 450 units of housing, 300,000 square feet of office space in two buildings, an 80,000-square-foot grocery store, an eight-level garage with 1,600 spaces and as much as 40,000 square feet of retail space.

As for the financial crisis that has gripped the credit markets, Brian J. Ellis, the president and chief operating officer of Nationwide Realty



Nationwide Arena hosts the Columbus Blue Jackets, an N.H.L. team.

Investors, noted that in the 11-year history of the Arena District's development, the company had contended with what he called "down cycles." Though the current crisis is more severe than the others, Mr. Ellis said, the company's strategy is to "build with the market."

"What's happening now may affect the speed at which we complete this final phase," he said in an interview. "But we continue to see strong demand for the office space and housing. We continue to command the highest rental rates in the city."

Indeed, at annual leasing prices of roughly \$25 a square foot—compared with about \$20 downtown—97 percent of the 1.4 million square feet of office space is occupied in the Arena District's three- and four-story brick buildings.

Their design pays homage to the old warehouses and factories that once stood here. They now house some 5,000 workers, including more than 100 employees of SBC Advertising, a top Midwest firm, which leased 30,000 square feet at 333 West Nationwide Boulevard, the district's newest office building.

About 1,000 people live in the 525 housing units in the Arena District, and much of it is leased or sold. This includes North Bank Park, a 20-story condominium building along the river with striking views of downtown, which Nationwide completed in December 2007. The two-bedroom two-bath units sell for \$350,000 to \$1 million, and nearly 50 percent of 88 units have been sold.

Thousands of people from outside the area regularly attend games of the Columbus Blue Jackets of the National Hockey League in the 18,500-seat Nationwide Arena, which was the catalyst for this redevelopment, and they spend time before and after the hockey games and other events in 14 restaurants and bars in the district.

The area also includes the handsome and welcoming McFerson Commons, a pocket park that connects to the Scioto Mile, a \$39 million promenade and riverfront park that the city started to build this year.

Nationwide is also developing Huntington Park, the new 10,000-seat baseball field for the Columbus Clippers, a Triple-A franchise of the Cleveland Indians. The \$50 million stadium, which covers eight acres, is owned by Franklin County and is to open next spring.

"The district has become an experience," Mr. Ellis said. "As each piece of the project is put in place, the experience of living in an urban neighborhood or working here or playing here improves."

Such a view is a departure from the strategic vision that Columbus, and many other major Midwestern cities, embraced for much of the last half century. Though it is Ohio's largest city, with nearly 750,000 residents, Columbus's growth long came through suburban development and annexation. The city is now spread across 225.9 square miles, almost six times its 39.9-square-mile jurisdiction in 1950.

Columbus was so bent on pursuing suburban-type development that it supported highway construction that sped people out of downtown to the suburbs and scraped away historic buildings for parking. In 1989, it opened a windowless mall in the heart of downtown.

That approach proved disastrous. Even now, much of downtown is empty at night. High Street, once the city's retail and business spine, has 152,000 square feet of vacant office space and 12 acres of vacant lots and parking, according to the city. In October, the city began demolishing an overhead walkway to the City Center Mall, which the



The Condominiums at North Bank Park are part of the Arena District's new housing.

city now controls and where just 10 of 100 original stores are still in business.

Nationwide Realty helped Columbus envision a new approach to land use. The Arena District, a partnership between the city and the company, which has developed almost everything in the decade-old district, was to be an answer to Columbus's downtown woes, and it seems to be succeeding.

The mixed-use district embodies three influential theories of urban redevelopment of the last decade: energetic and walkable street and neighborhood designs, as advocated by prominent architects who call

themselves "new urbanists"; urban settings that let creative young professionals weave work and play, as advanced in the writing of Richard Florida; and sports venues, which some experts see as essential to civic economic health.

The Arena District's popularity has prompted Mayor Michael B. Coleman to accelerate a plan for the city's depopulated downtown that he introduced in 2002. Four years after it closed as a historic department store, the one-million-square-foot Lazarus building reopened in 2007 as an office building.

Nearly 2,000 people work there, and it has spurred housing development. About 4,700 people have moved downtown into almost 4,000 units of housing built since 2000, and 1,000 more units have been approved for construction.

Mayor Coleman said his target was to attract 10,000 people to live downtown, and in March he committed to spend \$20 million to develop 86 miles of bike paths and lanes, with both to be completed by 2012. "Let's take advantage of our flat city," he told a group of supporters earlier this year. "Flat is good."

The 54-year-old mayor has also started planning a new streetcar line that would tie downtown to the Ohio State University campus, to the Arena District and other parts of Columbus. "Downtown is the engine that drives our economy and the epicenter of life as we know it in central Ohio," Mr. Coleman said. "We are making progress."

Since 2000, according to the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation, \$2.2 billion has been invested in commercial, office and residential development in and around the city's core. More than a third was spent in the Arena District. "Our idea was to make this a 24-hour neighborhood," Mr. Ellis said. "And that's what it's become."