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Subject: The Bridge Reconsidered

The Bridge Reconsidered

On Thursday, May 21, I visited with the Over the Teacups crowd at the Darlington Country Club. Over the Teacups is a title from Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., the doctor and the poet, not the Supreme Court justice. This Darlington group, all women, first came together in 1891, the same year as Dr. Holmes's eponymous publication.

I was invited to speak at their monthly luncheon, and I was invited to choose the topic. I chose The Bridge.

The Bridge hasn't had much of a profile recently, while I still claim the intellectual property rights to the idea, which is a triumphal bridge across the Congaree River in downtown Columbia.

The idea was in response to a Request for Proposals (RFP) by the City of Columbia in early 1987, declaring a deadline of May 15. The city wanted to see proposals tying together a large hotel, about 300 rooms, and the city's convention center. At the time West Columbia had a \$3 million grant secured by U. S. Sen. Thurmond for the purposes of a convention center. Problem was, Columbia was trying to take away West Columbia's \$3 million.

The Bridge was planned to connect Washington Street on the Columbia side with State Street on the west bank. Besides the hotel and the convention center, it had two levels of parking for 2,000 spaces over the Congaree, 120,000 square feet of retail space, 200 condominiums, and access at numerous points with the river below. The whole thing was only seven stories high, low enough for all the spaces to appreciate the sounds and smells of the freshwater fall line rapids. And it was placed to connect Columbia with West Columbia and to collect the \$3 million jointly along with property taxes and overall civic pride. At the time it was called the first triumphal bridge in the world in the Modern Era. Still is.

Marty Belz, owner of the Peabody in Memphis and about a dozen other hotels, was the hotel developer for The Bridge, and he wrote Columbia City Council and Richland County Council offering to not only build his hotel but the rest of The Bridge as well.

The responses to the RFP were about what anyone could expect to see in Columbia, pretty straightforward and pretty dull. The two front-runners, the two most likely to succeed I called Tweedledumb and Tweedledumber. Unfortunately offending people you're trying to influence fails every time.

The key to the project was the hotel. The Marriott on Main Street was not doing too well, but the owners of the Marriott were out-of-towners, so no one around here worried too much about how the Marriott worked out several blocks from the city's favorite convention center site, which turned out to be the actual site where the convention center is today.

The Bridge proposal was wildly popular, but still a little too wild for the city fathers. A Chamber of Commerce survey of its members revealed a 65% preference for The Bridge.

In the end the city came out fine with a Hilton developed by Windsor/Aughtry of Greenville and with a convention center at the corner of Senate and Lincoln.

Now The Bridge is coming back into play. The site over the river is so dramatic, the possibilities pursuing a first-class hotel are picking up. The nicer the hotel, the more expensive the rooms and the more property taxes are collected.

Posh hotels enjoy locating in posh surroundings. The Koger Center works well as a concert hall where the S. C. Philharmonic can sit inside its band shell on stage and send the music out to the far reaches of the hall. The seating, however, is not good for ballet or for opera or for Broadway musicals. The seats are too far back. The Philharmonic's sounds can be projected that far back, but

little else can.

And the stage is too small. Opera needs four stages. The Koger Center has one. Opera needs a stage right, left, and back in support of the performance stage.

Ballet companies love opera houses. There's something in meeting the demands for opera that also caters to ballet. Columbia has three ballet companies and no really good venue for ballet.

Charleston just stepped up to the plate and hit a home run with its renovated Gaillard performing arts hall, certainly suitable for ballet and opera and Broadway shows as well as symphony concerts. It used to be a Columbian could sneer a little at the woefully inadequate Gaillard performing arts center. Now that Charleston has finished spending \$142 million in 2015 for what Columbia got for \$16 million in the late '80s, Columbia cannot condescend one bit. Columbia needs to catch up.

When the Peace Center in Greenville was built about the same time as the Koger Center's completion, the Peace Center cost about \$15,000 a seat, which out-classed Columbia's \$7,000 per seat. Charlotte moved ahead of all of them in the Carolinas around the same time with its Blumenthal's \$20,000 per seat. Since then everything can double in cost due to inflation to reach a current comparison.

Opera houses all over the world are an outrage in construction costs, even renovated opera houses. A brief review of what's been built in the past few years in opera houses reveals the cost per seat is hovering around \$100,000.

It's hard to separate the cost per seat at the Gaillard while also studying the cost per square foot of the adjacent exhibition hall and other spaces. Still, roughly \$60,000 per seat comes close. If the Koger Center's 2,300 seats were built to Charleston standards today, the place would cost \$138 million instead of the 1989 \$16 million, or \$32 million adjusted for inflation.