

Taking the Show Under the Road

Computer-aided design helped ensure that the theater built beneath I-64 would not encroach on easements needed by the highway department for road maintenance. Construction was complicated by a narrow margin—10 feet—between the top of the building and the highway. The theater was built around some of the highway's giant structural piers, which lighting techniques have made into dramatic lobby features.

In an effort to make the best possible use of valuable urban land, a new 10-screen cinema—Union Station Cine—has been constructed underneath a major interstate highway in St. Louis, Missouri. The theater was built on a formerly unused site whose value was enhanced when the adjacent St. Louis Union Station reopened as a retail complex in 1985.

St. Louis Station Partners, owners of the property, did not want one single-story building that would “eat up an acre of land,” and so decided that the logical solution was to put the 45,000-square-foot building under the highway—a location whose maximum use would otherwise have been as a parking lot. With the use of computer-aided design, Mackey Associates, a Missouri-based architecture, planning, and interior design firm, developed plans for the theater which is part of a new office and entertainment complex known as Power House Place, developed by Garrett A. Balke Inc.

Because of the cinema's unusual siting, many technical and aesthetic issues had to be addressed. According to project designer Bill Wischmeyer, “Just to place it was a feat. We had to balance the right-of-way to maintain the bridge structures and ensure the height and width needed for movie

projection,” he explained. “We also had to allow for the horizontal and vertical easements reserved by the Missouri Highway Department for regular inspection and maintenance.

“Since we were building next to a freight-yard and underneath the highway, we rec-

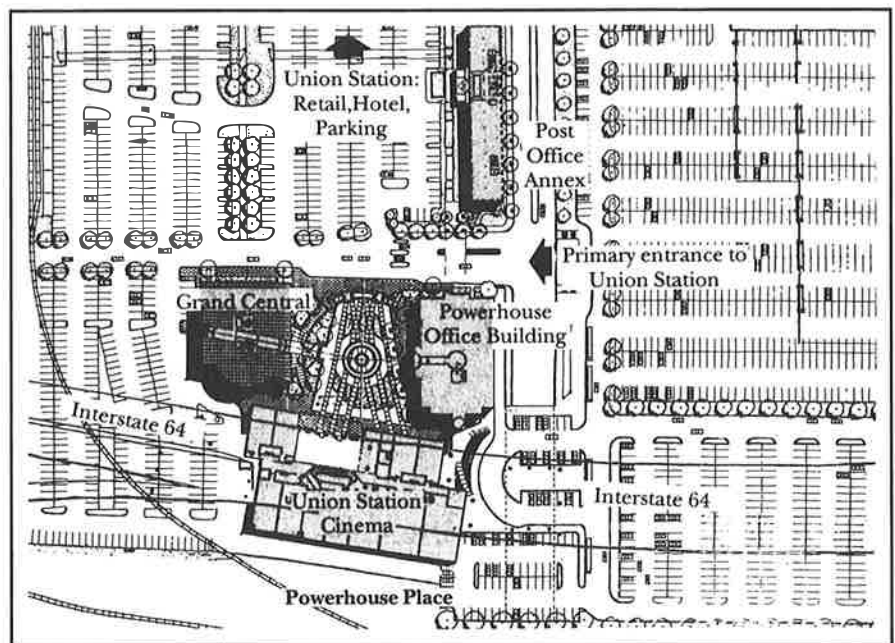
ognized that noise posed specific problems,” said Wischmeyer. “Working with Engineering Dynamics International, we were able to meet the requirements of two auditoriums equipped with high-performance sound systems, by adding significant mass to the building to prevent highway noise from entering.

“We used double thick concrete block walls and added eight inches of concrete to the roof. Noise tests have shown the interior to be more quiet than the typical movie theater. Even though two huge-cylindrical piers that support the viaduct extend through the theater lobby, acoustical measurements have proven it quieter than a standard theater,” said Wischmeyer.

Architecturally, the cinema relates both to the highway and Union Station. A low building, it gains height by its relationship to the highway structure and breadth through horizontal two-tone gray brick bands. It is sparingly but effectively accented in red-glazed brick. The entrance canopy is a modern version of Union Station's original butterfly-shaped shed.

A 3,000-square-foot lobby, three times the conventional theater size, has the scale of a terminal concourse. The giant, unadorned structural highway piers that penetrate the roof, are downlit to become dramatic, sculptural lobby features.

As demand for new development continues to be strong and land values increase, the need to transform “undesirable” sites—



Power House Place, a new \$20 million office and entertainment complex anchoring St. Louis' Union Station renovation (1985), has one 60,000-square-foot office building—Power House—in place and construction is scheduled to begin this summer on the second office building, Grand Central.



Layout of the courtyard plaza at Power House Place is based roughly on the old track lines, the pathways fanning out as "tracks in concrete." The courtyard is bounded by original signal bridges.



The \$6 million, 42,000-square-foot tenplex Union Station Cine seats 2,300 moviegoers. Since it was necessary to go down into the ground, the theater has a steeper slope than normal (all the better to see over the head of the giant who sits in front of you). The trestle in the foreground is one of the original structures on the property, retained to foster the development's railroad atmosphere.

deserted industrial land, land under free-ways or near rail tracks, and the like—into commercial and residential environments will become obvious. With Union Station Cine, Mackey Associates has confronted the challenge of such a transformation directly, using the visual strength of the highways to enhance the appearance of its building. (IRWA)

This solution was submitted by Mackey Associates PC, an architecture, planning, and interior design firm with offices in St. Louis and Kansas City, Missouri. Copyright Urban Land, June 1989. Reprinted by permission.



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