

A Point Of Entry

“Form follows Function” or “Function Follows Form” two opposing positions for Architectural design but often lost outside the architectural community. That is because architects often forget to define design criteria with real world results like “more clients” or “profitability”.

As an Architect and father of a mite, I am surprised by how many Ice Arenas ignore what they are selling. I have yet to find a family, go out of their way to buy nachos or rent skates at an Ice Rink. However we all know those who travel, an hour each way, each day, to Skate. Skating - Kids in Hockey Gear - Little Girls Twirling on the Ice, Parties, and a Fireplace overlooking the Ice - Romance – Entertainment - that is what we sell. And I will ask you, how many rinks do not show you what they sell until the very last moment or not at all?

The Entry to our facility is our first impression to the world. Do you remember when your mom said, “You never want to make a bad first impression, if you want a chance at a second date?” That first impression means success or failure. If a mom feels threatened for the safety of her children, you will never get a second chance. If a dad wants to start his son or daughter with a strong hockey program, it will happen if he sees a hockey scrimmage rather than a vacant concession stand and a wall full of skates.

Your entry is your marquee and must begin by serving all the clients that will use your facility.

Once, when speaking to an Eastern League Hockey owner, he told me, “I sell at least seven things to a spectator before he sits down to watch the game.” This is a principle which must be followed by everyone who wishes to be successful. Though, a mayor, a private owner or a team promoter may look differently on what they are selling.

The first item we sell to a “spectator” is that we care for their comfort. When they approach the entry, it is well lit, clean and easy to maneuver. It is covered in locations that experience bad weather. Did you ever wonder how many moms want to “lug” two hockey bags from across the parking lot, in the rain? None.

The Entry must have a two lane drive thru and sidewalks... (No matter the signage someone will park and block a single lane drive thru.) It must be built with headroom for a bus and allow turning radii that allow bus entry. It must be safe for pedestrians, with clear traffic, pedestrian lanes and traffic bumpers to protect the building and people from a run-away vehicle.

Secondly, our client must see and experience the excitement and activity. This can be accomplished by letting a client see kids, parties, adults in hockey gear, people skating – all BEFORE they enter the building. This can be done by how we design the lobby and interior of our entry. An Entry never means a door into an eighty foot corridor.

Thirdly, the Entry must be grand, not in cost but impression. In many areas of any ice arena we control sunlight, space and volume (energy cost, mortgage and maintenance costs). And in this entry you want to demonstrate that your arena is successful.

The entry needs to be open to all areas of the facility. When someone begins entering through the doors you need them to see into the arenas, the public lobby areas and party rooms with “crackling” fireplaces. Here is where we have fun with the height of the building, opening the lobby into a second floor if we have one. We can play with light and color to make the area, clean and airy. People (judges, skaters, travel teams) come from all over the nation, and comment on how closed in and dreary their local facilities are. I often wonder how safe parents feel leaving their children in a “Quonset Hut” facility with dark and cave like entries. The people that visit continually comment on the open and “airy” spaces we provide. And you realize that when someone goes out of their way to make a comment, you know that you have made an impact.

You will notice that you cannot get by with only one door or even two exiting from an Ice rink. National codes require a minimum of 1 door exiting the building for each ice surface. If you add spectator seating, you may increase the required exits. You will also require an entry into the facility. This entry should be an automatic door and a minimum of 42” width. If the budget allows an airlock is advisable for the comfort of everyone within the building.

The entry is also a point of control. An office and ticket area must be adjacent to the entry. This allows you to monitor those entering the building and ticket patrons as the daily schedule changes. There are several ways to handle the monitoring of “paid” skaters, but they all require a control point at the entry.

The personnel at the ticket window would also be able to answer the phone in the office, get you a cup of coffee and give you a rental skate. Personnel account for your largest cost each month. This cost cannot be controlled if you have these tasks divided across the facility. You should be able to operate a typical dual rink facility with two employees, and only add staff as your attendance grows.

If your program calls for a Pro Shop, it should also be located adjacent to the entry. This “Sporting Goods” store needs to sell to everyone within the community. It is no longer acceptable to operate a “mom and pop” shop as it is not wise to ignore the many clients beyond “niche” skating groups. Anyone who wants to buy a hockey jersey should come to the Ice Arena Pro Shop not a convenience store. Windows and displays into the entry will also help you serve your patrons who may not know what you have to offer and services you have that can improve their sport.

When a patron enters your building they need to find answers fast. With the technology we have today - the internet, scheduling, announcements, etc. can all be posted “LIVE”. A kiosk or area needs to be allotted with flyers, schedules, etc. to help moms and dads with their task. Brochures that explain hockey and available programs. – Signs that direct you to your locker room or monitors that display competition standings should be

available. These areas are not manned unless you have large weekend or event crowds that demand more than you can provide graphically. This area can take advantage of simple items like flyers or more robust solutions with internet web sites, interactive information, led. signage

The lobby must be clean, airy, durable, exciting and inviting. This can be accomplished by the way the entry is shaped, how it is situated and what it's built from. Color, texture and materials all play a very important role in an inviting entry. Remember that while our kids are all "angels", they carry a stick or blades on their feet. The wear upon the building can dramatically affect attendance and your maintenance budget.

Select only materials that can take heavy abuse. Do not use products like gypsum board or "Dryvit" on the interior of your building. These products will not hold up to the daily wear and tear and will affect your "bottom line". Do design your building look like a prison, "cinderblock" walls are durable but invite abuse. Masonry products, metal panels, glass are all good products that hold up to the yearly abuse.

Look to where kids "toe pick" surfaces. Change materials that can withstand staining at the concession stand but withstand nervous kicking with a skate. Rubber and Plastic Lumber are two great materials which can solve problems before they occur. Change the types and materials of doors to withstand or hide the scratches caused by skates and hockey sticks.

Rubber flooring can't be beat. And remember there are different types of flooring, each with their own pros and cons. If you find yourself using only one product you might consider looking again at your options. There are floors which are very handsome and durable such as the recycled rubber equestrian flooring used in many rinks. There are the solid colored and patterned rubber floors and those with dots and squares. Logo's can be cut into the floor giving you a very professional appearance and advertising you can sell in your entry. Note that floors which "glue and seam" are ideal in areas such as your party rooms and restrooms. If you use color in your flooring make it special by using it in special places not all places.

Always remember what you are selling and how to focus your attention to what you sell. Just like any billboard or display you want your client's attention always drawn to your product. With the way you light, paint and texture your entry and lobby draw attention to the kids and the activity on the ice and in the party rooms.

The lighting of the building is largely forgotten. You can greatly compliment your design by efficient use of your lighting budget. The budget is not taken lightly, as good design is cost effective design. If your entry is poorly lit you lose business. If your arena is poorly lit you create a liability. If your lobby lighting is poor, garish, sterile you ignore the comfort of your patrons.

The use of light though a fireplace instills the romance of a traditional Ice Arena. Play with lighting levels in your lobby so your eyes focus on kids skating. Invite natural light

into the lobby, this promotes a healthy and controlled source of light. Get loud with arena disco lights so when you enter the lobby you see the rhythm and pounding of the music, before you even enter the arena.

Know always that your clients are not just the kids. Your clients are community groups, schools, churches, parents, etc. And parents are part of most all these groups. I was told by a figure skating coach that her main complaint with teaching was when parents hired her to do a job and then, interfere during lessons. This results in lost patrons and dissatisfied employees who cannot do their job.

A part of this problem is the architect's responsibility. In so many facilities we have a parent arriving at 4:30 am, sitting along side the rink, freezing, miserable and bored, and then "helping" the instructor. In this scenario there is no place for the parent to relax, drink a cup of coffee in a climate controlled environment, and watch their kids. What about parents that watch a mite or adult hockey game. An Ice Arena needs a climate controlled lobby which is more than a small window onto the arena.

This lobby is a part of the entry, a natural extension. The lobby's focus must be the Ice arenas and be open to party rooms and any other areas that draw patrons into the building. If you have shooting rooms or a rock climbing wall they should all be a part of the lobby.

The lobby must be situated where the spectators are never looking though the back of a dasher board but they can always see the entire sheet of ice. The lobby should not be two-story without terracing. The higher the lobby, the less you can see when you step away from a window. Your designer must cut sections through your spectator areas to assure you can see "what you came to see".

Within your lobby you will have tables and chairs, benches, lockers, hockey lockers, vending machines, video games, internet kiosks, telephones, information areas, etc. Make sure you have a place for all these needs. Curved walls and undulating spaces are wonderful design elements, but not at the trade of success. Until you custom make curved lockers, they are flat and need flat walls. Textured surfaces are wonderful within the building but make sure your program addresses smooth surfaces for mounting telephone booths, etc.

Know who is in your lobby and again how your client functions within the lobby. First, they typically wear skates. Stairs and skates don't mix. Sometimes adults and skates don't mix... Do not invite liability into your facility by having patrons walk with skates onto stairs. No matter your signage, it will happen. A ramp is the easiest cure, meeting not only your skater's needs but also National ADA (American Disabilities Act) requirements. Your lobby is also the connection to the other areas of the facility. An elevator is required by the ADA if you have a second story or mezzanine

There are many areas which serve your lobby. They are offices, concessions, skate rental, Pro Shop Mechanical and Janitorial rooms, restrooms, skating offices and party rooms. I will grant you that they can make a great deal of money, especially if you focus your

client on those spaces. For example, the client for the concession stand is not the person walking into the arena but the person skating or sitting in the lobby. A sound design will not focus the entry on the concession stand, but make sure the concession stand is visible from every area of the lobby and arena. These areas serve the people in your lobby who have either come to skate or to watch skaters.

You build an Ice Arena to be successful, no matter how you measure that success. Your Entry and lobby serve your clients and help introduce them to the excitement you have to offer. Always make a good first impression and never forget who your client is.

Eric Milberger is a practicing architect specializing in Ice Arena design for the past 17 years. He is president of a 45 year young architectural firm. Eric's focus on the family and what makes a project successful has led to his working on projects across the United States. One of his favorite stories, was when he took his 3 year old daughter to one of his rinks for the first time, and she said, "Wow daddy, did you build this?" That, and the delight in her eyes is what make success truly successful.