

Memories the momentum behind saving Kansas City arena

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Kemper Arena is seen through a silhouette cutout on the American Royal grounds in Kansas City, Mo., Tuesday, May 17, 2016. A Kansas City company's \$25 million proposal to transform Kemper Arena into a mecca of amateur sports competition relies heavily upon historic tax credits that aren't available unless the arena is added to the National Register of Historic Places. (AP Photo/Orlin Wagner)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — The fate of an iconic Missouri arena might be resting on the memories of a generation of Midwesterners who once flocked there for large concerts and sports events.

A \$25 million proposal by Kansas City-based Fouch Brothers to transform Kemper Arena into a mecca of amateur sports competition relies heavily upon historic tax credits that aren't available unless the arena is added to the National Register of Historic Places.

The catch: The National Register is generally for places built more than 50 years ago. Kemper is only 42 years old.

"There are provisions if you can demonstrate exceptional significance," said Elizabeth Rosin, who wrote the application seeking historic status. "That's the road we're going on."

Kemper was the first major project of renowned German architect Helmut Jahn. With a seating capacity of nearly 20,000, Kemper Arena opened in 1974 and quickly established itself as an essential entertainment venue big enough to host events that couldn't be pulled off in nearby places like Omaha, Nebraska, or Des Moines, Iowa.

It hosted the 1976 Republican National Convention where Gerald Ford beat Ronald Reagan for the party's nomination and the University of Kansas' 1988 NCAA Tournament title. Just more than a decade later, professional wrestler Owen Hart fell to his death there during a pay-per-view event. Kemper Arena also was home to the NBA's Kansas City Kings until 1985 and was a key stop during the arena-rock era for bands like REO Speedwagon and Styx.

"It was a seminal venue in the social history of Kansas City," Rosin said.

The arena is distinguished by the three external trusses that support its roof — a large section of which collapsed in 1979 during a severe storm and closed the facility for nearly a year. The glitzy Sprint Center, a 19,000-seat arena that opened in downtown Kansas City in 2007, pulled most major events away and hastened the older building's demise.

To bring Kemper back to life, Kansas City development firm Foutch Brothers submitted its proposal to transform it into an amateur sports facility in 2014. But that stalled after the American Royal — a 117-year-old horse and livestock exhibition where the Future Farmers of America was founded in 1928 and which has a lease on the city-owned building — threatened to sue.

It instead pushed to tear down Kemper Arena to make room for an equestrian center, which received a lukewarm reception from city leaders. American Royal President Lynn Parman said in an email the organization had nothing new to say about the issue.

City leaders then gave Foutch Brothers' proposal a second look, something Chief Financial Officer Todd Kobayashi said didn't come as a surprise.

"The city doesn't move quickly, and honestly, there were a lot of politics involved," he said.

Foutch's project would add a second floor to hold eight basketball courts that also could be used for volleyball, gymnastics and other sports, he said. There also would be a full-size indoor track.

If the arena fails to make it onto the National Register, the company has a scaled-back Plan B that would not include adding a second floor, Kobayashi said.

"We have to get historic designation," he said. "That's a key piece to what's needed."