

Dazzling sights

Tim Romani, president and CEO of Icon Venue Group – a joint venture between US sports facility developer Romani Group and Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG) – is set to be one of the most influential figures in the industry. He talks to *Stadia* about the challenges of delivering a raft of new projects

Mark Bisson, *Stadia* magazine

What is your proudest achievement to date in the sports facility industry?

No single project, more a collection of facilities I have been fortunate enough to build for teams in all the major leagues. Comiskey Park in Chicago was my first project before I moved to Denver and did the Pepsi Center and the NFL Bronco's Invesco Field at Mile High. Having finished the Glendale arena for the NHL Phoenix Coyotes, I'm currently working on three MLS venues in New Jersey, Chicago and Commerce City in Colorado.

Why was Icon Venue Group set up between AEG and Romani Group?

Romani Group's core competency is in developing buildings. If you combine that with AEG, a promoter of sports and entertainment and live content provider, you have an overall development and building management resource that is unlike any other company out there. Having the right management expertise – the people in the trenches who understand how these buildings work – and getting them involved in the early design and programming, just makes for better buildings in how you work the operations and make money. AEG likes to know it's taking over buildings that are well thought-out and that don't compromise the overall operating costs.

What do you bring to the table?

Project control. We have at Romani Group and now at Icon an amazing set of systems and approaches in terms of how we keep building projects on budget and on schedule. With so many projects, AEG would be spreading its own resources incredibly thinly to try to get the level of project control needed to make them successful. We like to believe we're more capable than anyone else of developing projects when they need them.

What are your primary responsibilities at the newly formed company?

My ambition is to work with AEG to develop the best facilities in the world and develop them in a way that they are not only iconic in the buildings themselves but also operationally.

We want to set new standards in how venues are designed – the look, the feel, the function – but also put in place an operational team to be truly representative of the industry standard. We don't intend to pursue buildings in mid-markets but design the best in the major markets, whether it be London, Chicago, New York or Los Angeles.

Can you describe your working relationship with Tim Leiweke, AEG's president and CEO?

In 1989, while Tim Leiweke was in Denver as president of the NBA Nuggets, he and I struck up a friendship at first before he asked me to

Personal file: Tim Romani

Place of birth Bloomington, Illinois USA

Age 42

Education BS University of Illinois, 1984 and MBA, California State University, 1987

Current role As president and CEO of Icon Venue Group, Romani is currently overseeing stadium and arena projects in Chicago, New Jersey, London, Berlin and Kansas City. The company provides a full spectrum of venue development and operations services for the sports and entertainment industry, including project feasibility, financing, site selection and acquisition, facility programming, design development, construction management, sponsorship sales and servicing, venue commissioning and start-up and ongoing operations. Additionally, he is currently serving as the principal in charge for the US\$300m Colorado Convention Center expansion project.

Career highlights Executive director of the Metropolitan Football Stadium District overseeing Invesco Field at Mile High; president of the Ascent Arena Company overseeing Pepsi Center; executive director of the Illinois Sports Facilities Authority providing management for Comiskey Park; project manager for the Illinois Capital Development Board.



build the Pepsi Center. Since that time we had been saying that one day we ought to get together and do something more.

Tim Leiweke has a grand vision of bringing plans on that he wants to accomplish. He needs the nuts and bolts of management and project controls to bring these projects to conclusion. It is a great marriage – he is creating wonderful buildings around the world and is now turning to me to deliver them.

What are the immediate challenges for Icon Venue Group?

Right now our primary focus is on five projects – arenas in London, Berlin and Kansas City and soccer stadia in New Jersey and Bridgeview, Illinois. We intend to grow the Icon brand and company to take in more projects, both AEG's and others. We're working with other clubs and cultivating other deals.

Are plans for London and Berlin arenas progressing on schedule?

We hope soon to start enabling works and site preparation to prepare for construction of London's Dome Arena. Building could start in May and we are targeting March 2007 for completion and opening of the Dome. The project is moving forward on a very accelerated basis.

In Berlin, there are issues that have to be taken care of before it moves forward, mainly on the finance side, including naming rights and other major partnerships. As soon as they are in place, the light will go green and we will start flying very quickly with it at the design phase. It will take 24-26 months to complete from the start of construction.

How will the development of Kansas City's Sprint Center draw on the success of the five-year-old Staples Center?

The lesson we have learnt from the Los Angeles Staples Center is not to be afraid of thinking bold. If you begin with the notion of integrating all of the revenue-generating opportunities in the design, you end up with a building that can support a very broad and grand vision. The Sprint Center is being managed to budget and



[Clockwise from top left] The Dome Arena, London; Sprint Center, Kansas City; Chicago Fire's new stadium plan; the Staples Center, Los Angeles

we are working with AEG to develop new paradigms in sponsorship dollars and revenue. To have a sponsor like Sprint [the global integrated communications provider] involved from the very first day gives us the platform to develop technologies and create an arena with all the bells and whistles and an identity unlike any other arena.

The building is also at the epicentre of architecture in the USA, with three pre-eminent firms coming together as the Downtown Arena Design Team – HOK Sport, Ellerbe Becket and 360° Architecture. Don't think for a second that they aren't interested in making this their marquee. We are developing some really interesting ideas and innovations in technology but I'm not prepared to announce anything. Too many buildings over the years have tried to integrate technology for technology's sake. But we will integrate technology only if it enhances the fan experience.

Describe the status of new stadium schemes for the Chicago Fire and New York Metrostars?

The MLS Chicago Fire has broken ground on its stadium in Bridgeview, Illinois, with mass excavation and foundation works taking place. The whole project should start to come out of the ground in March/April and be completed in spring 2006. In New Jersey, the design captures the right geometry for great soccer viewing. We are looking at two different sites, with Harrison being one. If we end up putting all the components together for that location, there could be a 2006 opening. But more likely it will be March 2007. We are also working with other cities that AEG has an interest in such as

Washington DC. And there are two other cities where we are looking to develop stadia, which haven't been announced.

Do you have plans for the MEN Arena in Manchester, UK following AEG's purchase of the building?

I'm sure AEG will be looking at how they can market it and at the way it functions and operates and will take the venue to a higher level. Icon has not been asked to look at it

We want to set new standards in how venues are designed – the look, the feel, the function

from a physical standpoint. It's an existing arena, so the focus is on enhancing operations.

In which areas does Icon Venue Group plan to pursue new business?

We don't pursue a tremendous amount of properties. Those we do are all strategic and deals that make sense. There are two dozen types of deals we're evaluating at the moment. The emphasis is on the quality not the quantity of them, so we'll look for the best of them. We were pursuing a new NFL stadium deal in Los Angeles over 18 months ago before a decision

was made to withdraw from it. Since then we have moved into other operations and no longer play an active role in looking at a stadium there. We are not planning to return unless someone does a deal and asks for our assistance.

What are your ambitions for the company over the next few years?

My ambition is to get the five AEG projects under complete control. I know we are in a position to deliver them on time and on budget. In five years' time, there's no question we will be an industry leader as a developer and operator of sports facilities. We're interested in producing buildings to the highest standards. What you will see developing in London with the Dome Arena over the next two years is a perfect example. All around it will be elements of an entertainment destination that nobody in the world has ever seen before.

Which non-AEG sports venues do you most admire for what they have achieved?

In a general sense the most interesting and exciting are arenas not stadia because they are multifunctional. Of this type of venue, the Staples Center is head of the class. It's a work horse. There are over 300 events held at the venue each year, including everything from the NBA All-Star Game to the Grammy Awards. When a building operates that kind of diversity, it goes to the top of the list. Worldwide, what we are going to see is sports and entertainment venues that will set new standards in a lot of ways – architecture, form and function. For the Beijing 2008 Olympics, for instance, there's the Olympic Stadium and aquatic centre. ■