“A Catalyst for Downtown”: Detroit’s Renaissance Center

by
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In 1977, the first phase of the Renaissance Center opened on Detroit’s riverfront, sparking controversy over the utility of private urban design and development as tools for revitalizing big cities. Supporters and critics of the new structure clashed over both its symbolism and its meaning for Detroit and for urban America in general. Detroit’s then-mayor Coleman Young called the Renaissance Center “a statement that speaks for itself” and hailed it as a bold rebuttal to the critics and naysayers who claimed that downtowns could not be revived. Henry Ford II, who brought together the investors who financed the Renaissance Center, called the structure “a catalyst for downtown” and predicted it would revive the area’s sagging economy.1 Critics of the project wondered what message the fortresslike complex was sending to the citizens of Detroit, and questioned the wisdom of concentrating so much activity in one building and in one part of town. Despite the critics, crowds of people visited the Renaissance Center, and it became, if only briefly, a popular destination for locals and tourists alike. The center also became the symbol for a rejuvenated Detroit, as tourist guidebooks and maps, television shows, and televised sporting events (even when they took place in the suburbs) used the Renaissance Center to symbolize Detroit.2

The Renaissance Center’s development was the result of private interests working to create a built environment in downtown Detroit that was comparable to the malls and office parks offered by the suburbs. Businesses that supported the development wanted to create a private space that could easily be controlled and monitored to fashion a safe, crime-free place for shopping, work, and nightlife. People could park, work, eat, shop, and see a movie all at one site, and the result was

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2 As any fan of Detroit’s sports teams can attest, when the Lions played at the Silverdome in Pontiac and when the Pistons play in the Palace at Auburn Hills, the dominant image used to represent Detroit during the segue between a commercial and the game is the Renaissance Center—a location some distance from both locations.
the creation of a minicity within Detroit. One major impact of the center’s configuration was that visitors would no longer contribute to Detroit’s street life or spend money in the small businesses they passed along the city’s avenues. The business interests behind the Renaissance Center’s creation also demanded that the building’s design make a statement. However, that statement contained multiple messages. The center’s “imagineering” seemed to warn many citizens of Detroit that this was not necessarily a building meant for them. It was not only physically separated from the rest of the city—making pedestrian access difficult—but also the stores inside catered to a middle- to upper-class clientele. Some critics came to see the center as a “fortress” for the middle- and upper-class whites who still wanted a downtown experience. Symbolically, the center brought the suburbs to downtown Detroit.

When it opened, the Renaissance Center comprised one tall hotel tower, four shorter office towers, and a three-story cement-block base. The site was physically separated from the city by large concrete berms, through which the main access road passed. The medieval-castle imagery in the building’s design was hard to ignore, and it is equally difficult to dispute that this image damaged the center’s reputation throughout the years. The makeover of the side of the structure facing Detroit, including removing the berms, was a top priority when the Renaissance Center was renovated in later years. This fortress for the middle class was not integrated into the city’s plans for developing the riverfront. Still, the Renaissance Center demanded the city’s attention and it affected the ways in which the city perceived its downtown-revitalization strategy, altering plans already in place and generating new schemes intended to complement the center that were sometimes at odds with the public good.

During the initial planning stages, the Renaissance Center was part of a cluster of responses by Detroit’s business class to the 1967 riots. For many Detroiters and for the national press, those riots were the nadir of the country’s urban crisis, and they broadcast a warning: What happened in Detroit could happen in other cities. No single issue was responsible for the upheavals of 1967, nor was that event unique. Detroit had been the site of other race riots, and the city had a long

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3 This term is from Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (New York: Verso, 1996).

4 June Manning Thomas describes the “privately financed RenCen as a centerpiece for allied development.” See her *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 154-57. I will discuss this subject in more detail later in this article.
history of racism and race-based discrimination in housing, labor, city planning, and politics both within the city and throughout the metropolitan area. The Renaissance Center was never intended to be the sole solution to all of Detroit’s problems. Still, the project’s focus both on the physical shape of the city and on certain social classes (which were not necessarily in need of that attention and whose members did not typically live within the city) seems to have ignored much of what was wrong with Detroit at the time and indeed what had been ailing the city for many years.

Detroit’s central business district, like those in other metropolitan areas, had declined as stores, businesses, and offices relocated to newly built suburban malls and office buildings. Racism also played a role in this “white flight,” as white Detroiter who were reluctant to live alongside African Americans moved to the suburbs. The city lost 40 percent of its population in the years from 1950 to 1990. The 1990 census estimated Detroit’s population at just over one million. By the end of the 1960s, the metropolitan region was already racially polarized, and money began to flow out of the city to the suburbs. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Detroit’s downtown central business district as well as its neighborhoods continued on this downward spiral as stores closed, businesses relocated to the suburbs, two professional sports teams moved away from downtown, and the crime rate continued to rise.

In 1970 several prominent Detroit businessmen, including Henry Ford II, financier and developer Max Fisher, and Robert Surdam, president of the National Bank of Detroit, along with Mayor Roman Gribbs and Michigan’s governor George Romney, founded Detroit Renaissance, Inc. Its purpose was to plan how to reinvigorate downtown, bring new businesses to the city, and fashion a new image for Detroit. The formation of this group was intended to signal the


6 Richard Child Hill, “Crisis in the Motor City,” in Restructuring the City: The Political Economy of Urban Development, ed. Norman I. Fainstein and Susan S. Fainstein (New York: Longman, 1983), 91. Hill states that Detroit had a population that was 91 percent white in 1940 and 44 percent black by 1970. More recent work reveals the persistence of this racial polarization throughout the metropolitan area. See Farley, Danziger, and Holzer, Detroit Divided, 14-52.
resolve of local business leaders to help rebuild the city, improve race relations, and create a sense of community after the 1967 riots. Detroit Renaissance put its main effort into physically transforming Detroit as a first step in the process of reclaiming the city. New construction and persuading businesses to move to the city became the group’s priorities. Any type of community outreach by Detroit Renaissance was directed toward building partnerships between “organizations and individuals working to stimulate Detroit’s growth.”

Another private-public partnership, New Detroit, Inc., had formed shortly after the 1967 riots and had included many of the same people who later created Detroit Renaissance. Led by Joseph L. Hudson, Jr., New Detroit made a list of goals that needed to be achieved in order to rebuild the city. Members met to discuss what Detroit needed and tried to provide a focus for institutions in the city that were searching for solutions. New Detroit’s early months were difficult as the group’s grand plans were stalled by a lack of support from both the state and the federal government and by the realization that one organization was not going to solve all of Detroit’s problems. Two earlier lobbying efforts for an open-housing law and school aid—both endorsed by the Republican governor George Romney—failed to pass the state legislature. After stepping down as chairman of New Detroit, Hudson told an interviewer, “The poor in Detroit and elsewhere are discovering that elected officials don’t really have the power. The power resides with the middle class that keeps turning down school tax proposals, electing somewhat conservative legislators, and resisting social change. The Nixon administration has tailored its domestic programs accordingly.”

As a participant in New Detroit, Henry Ford II kept hearing from fellow board members about his company’s lack of commitment to the city. At the time of the 1967 riots, Ford Motor Company had almost no presence in Detroit. The company’s world headquarters was located in the nearby suburb of Dearborn, and in the late 1960s Ford had no workers within Detroit’s city limits. Following the trend toward suburban development (and following the cars and highways out of the central city), Ford had developed Fairlane Town Center, a mall and hotel complex near its suburban headquarters. Additionally, Ford’s brother, William Clay Ford, was planning to move the Detroit Lions football team from the city to the new, suburban Pontiac Metropolitan Stadium

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9 Widick, Detroit, 192.
(later named the Pontiac Silverdome). "They [other members of New Detroit] kept asking what Ford Motor Company was going to do about Detroit," Ford said in a 1973 interview. Lawrence Doss, the president of New Detroit, Inc., in the early 1970s, was also quoted in that interview. Doss said that he told Ford that "I felt some important physical and symbolic development was necessary in Detroit. And I told him that minority citizens and others had the feeling that the big businessmen in the city didn't care about the future of the city, because we had no development like the Golden Triangle in Pittsburgh or the underground development in Atlanta." For Detroit Renaissance, the renewal projects in Pittsburgh and Atlanta were examples of what a motivated and coherent group of businessmen could do for a downtown. With these developments in mind, Ford and other Detroit leaders started thinking about large-scale projects. Further impetus came from Robert McCabe, who was hired away from New York's Urban Development Program to run the day-to-day operations of Detroit Renaissance: "I wanted to know what they were willing to do beyond putting their names on stationery. I suggested that the best way to show their interest was to make some business investments in the city. And I said to Mr. Ford, '... that might include you.'" Challenged to contribute, Ford looked for ways he and other business leaders could make an immediate impact on Detroit.

In its 1973 report, Detroit Renaissance outlined its concern for the city and its goals:

Detroit Renaissance was established because its founding membership believed that immediate and forceful steps had to be taken to prevent further deterioration of one of America's great cities. . . . It was also clearly evident that a stagnating tax base, decaying neighborhoods, the flight of businesses and families to the suburbs, high minority unemployment, and drugs and racial tensions knew no geographical boundaries. If nothing were done, eventually the entire metropolitan area would suffer. . . . Renaissance is striving to produce the economic and physical revitalization comparable to that spearheaded by Pittsburgh's 30-year-old "Allegheny Conference" and 12-year-old "Forward Atlanta."13

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Detroit Renaissance, Three Year Report.
Although this new organization sought a multifaceted approach toward reinvigorating downtown Detroit, members agreed that they needed a dramatic, large-scale project, and the riverfront became their target site. Detroit Renaissance’s plan was the latest in a succession of schemes to develop the riverfront, which had always been an underutilized resource. As early as 1890, Mayor Hazen Pingree had suggested creating a civic center along Detroit’s riverfront, but nothing was done until after World War I, when Eliel Saarinen drafted plans for such a center. Voters approved Saarinen’s proposal, but the city lacked the funds to implement it. In 1947 the city again turned to Eliel Saarinen to design a civic center on the riverfront. Saarinen and his son Eero designed a plaza at the river’s edge that would link a variety of public buildings and open access to the river. The Saarinens’ plan was revised and scaled down in Detroit’s master plan of 1951, but many of their ideas, including opening a space on the riverfront, survived. During the next decade some of the master plan’s goals were achieved with funding from municipal bonds and corporate donations: Cobo Hall and Arena (a convention site), the City-County Office Building, the Edsel and Henry Ford Auditorium (then home to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra), and the Veterans’ Memorial Building were constructed. Although the plan’s anchor—the plaza—would not be completed until 1979, the realization of at least part of what became known as the Civic Center generated further investment, and soon other office buildings and hotels were being built in that area.

Detroit’s visionaries were not through with the riverfront, however. In the mid-1960s the city’s planning commission developed Detroit 1990: An Urban Design Concept for the Inner City, which proposed creating parkland along the riverfront eastward from the Ambassador Bridge to Belle Isle, which was home to the Detroit Yacht Club and an Olmsted-designed park. Charles A. Blessing and his team believed that the downtown section of the riverfront would be a strong location for a “unique” district in the city because of its natural form, accessibility, clear boundaries and landmarks, and proximity to the central business district. The hope was to connect the city to the river with the proviso that “access to activities on a waterfront is as important as access to the river.” The report went on to claim that rivers provide a psychological lift, beauty, and “a way to orient oneself in the city.” Blessing and his

colleagues envisioned residential buildings and parkland with piers and docks where the Renaissance Center now stands. However, these ideas for riverfront development were never formally adopted by the city, and other areas in Detroit were more in need of attention and rebuilding. The riverfront along the central business district remained a jumble of empty space, warehouses, factory buildings, and train tracks. 

Not much had changed a few years later when Henry Ford sent Wayne S. Doran, the president of Ford Motor Land Development Corporation, in search of available land. What he found was a thirty-eight-acre parcel on the riverfront. On the west, the entrance to the Detroit-Windsor tunnel separated the thirty-eight acres from the area already cleared for the downtown plaza. Besides the river and the tunnel, the acreage selected by Doran was bounded by Jefferson Avenue to the north and train tracks to the east. The land within these boundaries was then purchased from the city of Detroit, the Evening News Association (publisher of the Detroit News), Grand Trunk Railroad, International Multifoods Corporation, Ammex Warehouse Corporation, Randolph-Detroit Corporation, and the Detroit Public Lighting Corporation. The fact that there were no residential buildings made the site attractive to Ford because it meant no one would be displaced by the development. This was an important consideration, because the image of white businessmen ousting black residents to make way for a development project that would benefit businesses rather than people in the community would not only be unfortunate but also would contradict the plan’s principal intentions. Finally, the site was the right size for a large-scale development, the kind Ford had seen in Atlanta’s Peachtree Center, and he sought out John Portman, that project’s architect-developer, to design the Detroit complex.

Portman had spent the 1960s designing and developing the office, hotel, wholesale-mart, and convention-center complex in Atlanta known as Peachtree Center. His reputation for downtown development in that city earned him the title “one man urban renewal program.” Taking the position that downtowns were necessary and vital to metropolitan regions, Portman argued that abandoning the central city for the

16 Ibid., 91 (quotations), 93.
17 Jonathan Barnett, “John Portman: Atlanta’s One Man Urban Renewal Program,” Architectural Record 139 (January 1966): 133-40. Although Ford and others were impressed with Atlanta’s “Forward Atlanta” campaign, Portman’s Peachtree Center was not part of those plans. Portman’s ideas were not immediately welcomed by Atlanta’s business elite because he ignored the historic center of downtown, Five Points, in favor of a site eight blocks north of that area.
suburbs was detrimental to the region's health. In Atlanta, he put his own money—as well as investors' funds—into Peachtree Center, and it was his business sense in addition to his architectural prowess that made him an appealing choice to design the Renaissance Center.

Portman's success in Atlanta resulted from his three-part approach to expanding Peachtree Center. He started by building the Merchandise Mart, a wholesale and retail center with showrooms and convention space. The mart was the first phase of what would eventually become a hotel, office, and convention-site development; by the end of the 1960s Portman had added five office buildings and a hotel to the area. This mixed-use development not only reshaped downtown Atlanta but also put the city in a position to lure convention business and tourists—and the dollars they brought with them. Portman's fame among the general public, however, resulted from one element in this complex: the Hyatt Regency. This hotel featured a twenty-two-story atrium lobby with glass elevators and a revolving blue-domed rooftop restaurant. Portman's immense hotel-atrium lobby proved to be revolutionary and it eclipsed his work on office buildings and convention centers, where he also incorporated his signature motif of wide-open interior spaces.

When Portman had begun his career in the late 1950s, modern architecture and urban design were undergoing a transformation in the United States. Building styles popularized by Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, among others, were finding their way into the proposals of architects and developers for commercial buildings and corporate headquarters—especially the "New Brutalism" favored by Le Corbusier and the "less is more" philosophy of Mies van der Rohe.\(^{18}\) However, the popularity of these men's designs was based more on the image and form of the buildings they created than on the philosophies and ideals that prompted their designs. Diane Ghirardo describes this shift of emphasis as one from an architecture that would transform the world, as some pioneers of modernism had dreamed, to an architecture that would give impressive form to capital. The aesthetics of the modernist movement found a receptive audience in the upper echelons of American corporations, whose executives were seeking new images for their buildings. Ghirardo explains that the "oppositional political positions articulated by some of the major interwar exponents of Modernism disappeared, especially in the United States" and that modernist architecture "came to be associated not with rebellion but

with the power of capitalism.” She credits Mies van der Rohe’s residential towers at 860-880 Lake Shore Drive in Chicago (1948-1951) and the Seagram Building in New York (1958) for starting the trend, and lists Portman’s firm (as well as Skidmore, Owings and Merrill [SOM]; Pereira and Associates; Johnson/Burgee; Albert C. Martin & Associates; Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates; and Welton Becket Associates) as a proponent of the new style.

Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co also discuss this global transformation of architecture in the 1950s and 1960s, observing that it “marked a tendency toward simplification of the International Style.” Tafuri and Dal Co cite the buildings of SOM and Harrison & Abramovitz as the best American examples of architecture produced by large studios, a system that could create “anonymous architecture” at a rapid rate. The authors claim that although this architecture replicated the forms promoted by various modern masters, it lacked substance. Tafuri and Dal Co argue that the high demand for modernist-looking buildings required the creation of a more efficient design-to-develop process in which a building’s construction costs were more important than either its inherent beauty or its ability to lift the spirit.

Critics both inside and outside of the profession judged these types of buildings as being barely a step above those designed by developers without the aid of architects. They borrowed the form of the modern masters but not the substance and meaning of their works. This type of architecture was adapted to fit various commercial needs and exploit popular trends in the changing real-estate market. The result, William Curtis observed, is that the “American architect was constantly demoted to a sort of exterior decorator for business interests.” Ghirardo makes the same claim: “Architects gained increasing prestige for producing buildings for developers concerned chiefly with rapidity, cheapness and spectacular effect.” This, she argues, caused a loss of “faith in the possibility of transforming the world” through architecture.

21 Ibid.
22 “Only in appearance have the lessons of Mies been put to use in the all-glass slabs that have invaded the American cities.” Tafuri and Dal Co, Modern Architecture, 2: 339.
23 Curtis, Modern Architecture, 557.
24 Ghirardo, Architecture, 10.
Portman’s projects were indeed developed with rapidity and economy, and, in the case of the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Atlanta, had a great dramatic effect. Unlike the approaches of other architects at the time who designed for clients, Portman’s architectural vision was intertwined with his goals as a developer and a real-estate speculator. The buildings he created in Atlanta were not for a particular client; rather, they were a kind of advertisement for potential clients and big-city renewal projects. In essence Portman was saying, “Look at what I have created; imagine what I can build for you.” Portman’s use of minimalist designs and low-cost materials like concrete allowed him to create what was at the time considered very unconventional interior architecture. Despite his status as an architect-developer (or as a designer-client), Portman has argued throughout his career that he had loftier aims. In his view he was trying to transform the way people think about cities and the role of design in cities.

As he noted in a 1988 interview, Portman’s own architectural style sought “a synthesis that accepts much that came out of the Modern Movement, salvaging what has proven to be valid over time, while correcting those aspects to which people didn’t react positively.”25 Portman explains that too much reliance on the tenets of modern architecture had produced cold and inhuman spaces such as Brasilia, the new capital of Brazil, which was an example he returned to constantly in his interviews about what had gone wrong with modernism. Portman thought that the challenge for architecture was not to build new cities, but rather to work within the already present environment.

Portman realized that in order to control the implementation of his designs, he would have to become a developer. By doing so, and by getting involved with the real-estate and financial sides of architecture, Portman would be able to exercise more control over his own designs. Whereas most architects of that era found Portman’s dual role distasteful, Portman worked himself into a position where he could reshape downtown Atlanta.26

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26 Early in Portman’s career, other architects thought there were ethical problems with his position as architect-developer. He was called before the ethics board of the American Institute of Architects and asked to explain himself. A number of well-known architects looked down on Portman for getting his hands dirty in what they called the “business” side of real estate.
Portman’s solution to revitalizing urban cores was based on what he called the “coordinate unit.” Creating a space where people could walk from destination to destination was crucial to his approach, and Portman attempted to achieve this goal in all of his city-center designs. This idea went against the grain of an American culture whose increasing dependence on automobiles has done much to fragment cities and metropolitan regions. Portman defined the coordinate unit as a cellular pattern based on the distance a person would walk before wanting some form of transportation. He measured this distance as about seven to ten minutes walking time. Creating a coordinate unit meant creating what he termed a “total environment” or “village.” In his ideal vision people within this unit could walk to work, school, church, recreation, shopping, and entertainment. “For a coordinate unit to succeed,” Portman declared, “it must lift the human spirit; at the same time it must be economically feasible and follow a sensible, efficient plan. In addition to providing places for work, residence, shopping, and recreation, it must draw on all the elements that I have been discussing. . . . There must be a total life involvement.” In many ways, this design creates a “city within a city,” and the structure is consequently somewhat isolated from the surrounding environment.

The language Portman used to describe his plans and the goals of his architectural approach raises many questions. He tends to universalize the human experience in an urban setting. Yet Portman’s ideas of what will work for “all people” are somewhat narrow, representing his social perspective and that of his clients rather than emerging from a larger, more democratic process. Often, as critics of the Renaissance Center claimed, his design for the “urban village” isolated that village within the larger city. This created tension not only over issues of control within the space, but also over the limited way in which the publicness of the space was defined. The coordinate unit, in the end, included what Portman wanted it to include, and that always meant convention space, office space, some retail space, and hotels. These spaces were always marketed to a particular class of people and not really to the general public.

These criticisms did not worry the business interests who lauded Portman’s work in Atlanta. His buildings filled up quickly and made money. He was touted in the national press for the innovative design of

his atrium lobby for the Hyatt Regency, and although his colleagues initially questioned his dual role as architect-developer, Portman's success in this unique position won him even more supporters in the business world. This positive press made Portman very much in demand as an architect and as an investment partner in real-estate development. His ability to design and develop successful large-scale urban environments made him very attractive to Detroit Renaissance when it was searching for an architect for its signature development in Detroit in 1971.

By November 1971, Ford had spent $500,000 on options for the land and on preliminary work done by Portman. For the rest of that year and throughout 1972, Ford presented his development ideas to the city council and local business groups in Detroit. But he also made it clear that while Ford Motor Company would take the lead on the project, it could not pay the venture’s estimated $500 million cost on its own. Ford worked to convince other business leaders to follow his lead and invest in Detroit, particularly the Renaissance Center project. He started with his rival, Richard C. Gerstenberg, the chairman of General Motors. Ford visited GM's headquarters in early September 1972 and convinced Gerstenberg that the rival automobile companies could work together on a project that would benefit both Detroit and the entire southeast Michigan region. Ford’s plan was to involve all the automotive companies and businesses in affiliated industries—indeed, anyone who had ties to the industry or to southeast Michigan’s economy—in the investment team. By December 1972 General Motors announced it was investing in the Renaissance Center project and pledged to commit the same amount of money that Ford had agreed to invest. This agreement was momentous not only because of the rivalry between the auto companies, but also because at that time GM’s headquarters was located in what was called the New Center of Detroit. This was an area that was undergoing revitalization, and it was some distance from where GM’s new investment would have its most immediate impact. After General Motors announced its support for Ford’s riverfront project, other companies quickly followed and within four weeks two-thirds of the money needed to fund the first phase of construction had been raised.29

The list of investors would eventually grow to fifty-two businesses, including all of the American automobile companies (American Motors, Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors), firms whose parts and labor supported them, and other Detroit-based companies.

Detroit's business leaders were willing to invest in Ford's idea because of the general belief that if anyone could make something happen, Ford could. At that time Gerstenberg told a reporter: "I just don't know anybody else but Henry who could put this thing together." Other businessmen whose companies invested in the project praised Ford's vision and lauded him for coming up with a plan that was both a profitmaker for them and a benefit to the community. However, despite this excitement, concerns lingered about how the Renaissance Center would affect the rest of the city. One investor, Jonathan P. Rye, CEO of F. Joseph Lamb Company, explained his initial apprehension: "My only worry was whether this would hurt the rest of downtown—what it would do to the David Whitney Building, for instance, and other buildings. Then we looked at what has happened in Boston. Their Prudential Center is up, and it is going so well that a whole new feeling is spreading to the land around the center. Other buildings around the Prudential Center are being torn down and new ones are going up, to get in on what the Center has done. And that can happen here in Detroit."

Although many people in Detroit's business community came to support the plan, the Detroit City Planning Commission’s director, Charles Blessing, did not approve, citing the Renaissance Center’s isolation from downtown and other projects envisioned in existing riverfront plans, particularly the Civic Center. However, as June Manning Thomas notes, both Blessing’s and the City Planning Commission’s power had steadily diminished. By the time a new city charter was approved in 1973, neither Blessing nor the commission could halt the Renaissance Center (or any project). Blessing specifically disapproved of the way the Renaissance Center’s design closed the structure off from the city, isolated itself from the Civic Center, and would not be a part of the existing fabric of the city. His objections went unheeded, and the "then largest private investment group ever assembled for an American urban real estate venture" moved forward with its plans.

Work to clear the riverfront site began in November 1972. At the ground-breaking ceremony, Wayne Doran called the new, as-yet-unnamed project "a landmark to renewed hope and pride in the city of

30 Ibid., 5.
31 Ibid., 6.
32 Thomas, Redevelopment and Race, 144-46, 154-56 (quotation 154).
Detroit." He tempered his optimism by calling on the citizens of Detroit to stop being their “own worst enemies” by believing that the city could not be saved. Like the other speakers at the ground-breaking ceremony, Doran discussed the commitment needed to ensure the success of this project and emphasized the private sector’s responsibility to urban centers: “We cannot allow the cities to deteriorate. Either businesses will . . . revitalize the cities or government will move in and do it, but they’ll do it with tax money—your tax money.” Doran’s statement was a rallying cry for businesses to take charge and fund revitalization efforts before federal, state, and local governments developed their own schemes for Detroit. Doran told businesses that if they were willing, they could shape and control the city’s rebirth, just as Ford was doing with his plans for the Renaissance Center. Only by participating in revitalization could companies ensure that their interests would be served.

The belief that private interests and the market could solve urban problems and revitalize a city’s business district prevailed among people like Portman, Doran, and Ford, and indeed some in city government shared this view as well. Mayor Roman Gribbs expressed hope that the Renaissance Center was only the “beginning of a vast revitalization of our riverfront which will stretch from bridge to bridge.” Within a few months of the ground-breaking ceremony, a number of other building projects were announced. An article in the Detroit News proclaimed, “Downtown renaissance is underway” and mapped out the developments, which included a new Internal Revenue Service building, a new federal office building, a domed stadium and office-apartment complex, and the “Ford office-hotel-commercial-apartment complex.” Although many of these projects were influenced by the success of the plan to build the Renaissance Center, Ford’s project dwarfed all others in terms of its size, cost, and promise.

Phase one of Portman’s plan for the Renaissance Center was to build a single, contained structure modeled on his coordinate unit concept. The full multistage plan contained office space, a hotel, a shopping mall, convention space, and residential buildings—a critical

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
mass of the activities most desired by city planners, business groups, and tourist bureaus. In its entirety, this project was too massive to build all at once. Portman wrote that he saw the Renaissance Center as a chance to develop the coordinate unit on a “more comprehensive scale”—which he felt was a necessity given downtown Detroit’s needs. “If anything were to be done in Detroit, however, it needed to be done in a hurry. The city does not have fifteen years to build up a coordinate unit step by step. We are counteracting weakness, not building on strength. The first stage had to be large enough to justify its own independent existence.”37

Phase one would comprise four office buildings and one hotel. All the structures would be built on a large concrete base that would house all the buildings’ lobbies as well as a three-level mall. In phase two, eight more office buildings would be added around the center. During phase three, apartment buildings would be constructed along the riverfront.

What Portman designed for Detroit was a variation on the cylinder theme he had used at several sites, most notably at the Peachtree Center’s Plaza Hotel in Atlanta and at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport Hyatt Regency. Later, Portman would design a smaller version of the Renaissance Center for Los Angeles’s Bonaventure Hotel. In Detroit, the hotel tower is a 73-story cylinder with reflective glass on its exterior walls—in other words, a copy of the Peachtree Center’s Plaza Hotel. Although Atlanta’s hotel is one story taller, it had 1,120 rooms when it opened, compared to 1,404 rooms in the Detroit hotel. Surrounding Detroit’s tower are four 39-story octagonal-shaped office buildings, which are also sheathed in reflective glass and provide 2.2 million square feet of office space. All five buildings rise out of a 14-acre base that contains an eight-story atrium. Three levels of this atrium were devoted to a mall that included stores, restaurants, and a movie theater. The lowest level of the atrium had a one-acre indoor lake and served as an integrated lobby for the office buildings and the hotel. The two upper levels of the mall were connected to the hotel and office buildings by aerial walkways/pedestrian bridges. The remaining levels of the atrium were dedicated to convention space and connected to the hotel. All entrances to phase one of the project were located in the base, which is surrounded on three sides by roads and had a parking lot on the fourth side that faces the river. Parking garages were also located across the surrounding road, on sites where the office buildings comprising phase two were supposed to be built. Large two-story concrete berms that housed the heating and cooling units separated the complex from the

city. In an effort to make this transition space less of a barrier, these berms were softened with foliage.

Both critics and supporters of the Renaissance Center agreed that the structure was a dramatic addition to Detroit’s skyline. To supporters, the center symbolized the city’s rebirth and the business community’s successful start on reviving downtown. To critics, the center represented a new symbol of division and segregation. Physically, the Renaissance Center was separated from the city by Jefferson Avenue, the berms, and the roadway surrounding the structure’s base. This arrangement allowed people to drive into downtown Detroit from either the Lodge Freeway or Interstate 75 and exit onto Jefferson Avenue, drive between the berms and into one of the parking garages or the parking lot on the riverside, park, and then enter the Renaissance Center. Visitors who parked their cars in the garages could enter the center via a pedestrian walkway, without ever having to go outside. Pedestrians were not so fortunate. They could cross Jefferson Avenue, but only in two stages as the street is quite wide. Sidewalks were located on either side of the driveway next to the berms. Once through the berms, however pedestrians were faced with a windowless, signless concrete wall in which there were only two small unadorned and uninviting entrances.

Once inside, visitors were greeted by John Portman’s open interior. However, not everyone found the open spaces inviting or even navigable. As one Detroit News columnist remarked, “We enter the front doors of the hotel, and we’re immediately lost. That’s another John Portman trademark. He figures if you can find your way simply from point A to point B, you’re not having enough fun. He’d rather hire a large force of tour guides and information people, and have you ask.”

Many other visitors had similar experiences. At the center of everything were the indoor lake and the hotel’s public spaces. Around the periphery—on three levels—were stores, restaurants, and elevator lobbies for the office towers. Each commercial level circled around the center, but only the second level was connected to the hotel lobby by a bridge. Access between the levels was achieved via elevators and escalators. However, proceeding by escalator from the first level to the third level required that one first take an escalator to the second level and then hunt for a second escalator to the third level, which in many cases was nowhere near the first escalator.

Portman probably thought these aspects of his interior architecture offered playful diversions, but visitors often found that even walking from point to point on one level was confusing. The curving walls were designed to entice people to keep walking and “see what came next.” For many visitors, however, this design element obscured their destination and made quick visits and easy exits difficult. Portman’s whimsical approach, although perhaps fun for visitors with lots of time, frustrated people who could see their destination on another level but could not figure out how to get there or who thought (wrongly) that their objective was just around the curve or on the same level they were currently traversing. The Renaissance Center’s interior design expanded upon ideas Portman had used for the Hyatt Regency in Atlanta. Like that hotel’s lobby, the interior of the Renaissance Center was designed to be a place where a person could sit and relax. But because it was on a much larger scale, Portman wanted the center to offer a comprehensive and unique environment where people could be entertained by the structure’s architecture. Thus, the center would become an attraction in its own right as well as an incentive for people to go downtown.

Although the city did not have “fifteen years” to wait for change as Portman noted, Detroit would have to wait four years after the
ground-breaking ceremony for the first stage of phase one to be completed. As the date for the center’s opening neared, Detroit’s newspapers were cautious about whether this structure could save downtown. With headlines like, “Savior or Not, RenCen Will Be Fun,” and “Renaissance Center: It Is Offering Hopes, but Few Guarantees,” the papers tempered the enthusiasm being expressed by city hall and business leaders. At the Renaissance Center’s opening ceremony, Mayor Coleman Young said, “Today is a great day for the city and for cities all over America. This is a monumental statement that speaks for itself. Our cities are indeed alive and on the upsurge. There is no better answer to the doubters.” The doubters Young was referring to, however, did not question whether cities were worth saving or whether cities could once again thrive. Rather, these critics of the Renaissance Center and other structures like it doubted that these buildings were the right way to create public and democratic spaces.

Some of Portman’s supporters saw his concept of a city within a city in a positive light. But a number of critics judged his designs more harshly, charging that his creations often resulted in developments that isolated themselves architecturally, economically, and socially from the surrounding cities. This inward design redefines the space so that whoever manages it controls every aspect of this new city within a city. Nature is brought indoors, natural pedestrian paths through the city are bent or contorted to fit the architect’s designs, the buildings create new gathering places at the expense of the surrounding city’s other points of interest, and almost every aspect of a visitor’s experience takes place indoors. Outside, many of these buildings present a blank concrete “face” to the world, with only one or two entrances. This facelessness appears to spurn the public, not invite them to enter. In addition, the blank concrete wall reveals nothing—it prevents people from “reading” the building and understanding what it has to offer. Bruce Wright remarked on these difficulties when he noted, “Unless one knew what was inside to begin with, he’d have no idea what the center has to offer. A bundling together of glass tubes, though aesthetically pleasing, does not express ‘shopping.’


41 The architecture critic Paul Goldberger charged that the Renaissance Center’s design precluded integration into the rest of the city: “The towers are set on a multi-story base, which turns a massive wall to the rest of the city. . . . It wants to stand alone, and fails to do the crucial thing that all good urban buildings must do—relate carefully to what is around them.” Quoted in William G. Conway, “The Case against Urban Dinosaurs,” Saturday Review, May 14, 1977, 14.
And inside the same communication problem is encountered: where to find anything?"^42

The fortresslike architecture and the structure's separation from the fabric of the city were combined with heightened security to create a safe and sanitized environment for a predominantly white middle- and upper-class clientele. In some ways, Portman's design simply reproduced the enclosed suburban shopping mall in a downtown location. Convenience and safety were the key elements at work in mall design, and the Renaissance Center was partially a response to the malls of Detroit's suburbs. Ford and the other investors in the Renaissance Center especially prized this promise of safety, which is not surprising because they saw the structure as a response to the 1967 riots. Thus, the Renaissance Center became a sort of sanctuary for its mostly white middle-class patrons. For critics like William H. Whyte, this promise of safety went to new extremes: "So, in spirit as well as form, the suburban shopping mall is transplanted to downtown, and security is raised to the nth degree. These complexes abound with guards and elaborate warning systems. Ports of entry from the outside are few in number and their design is manifestly defensive. Where the Renaissance Center faces Detroit there is a large concrete berm athwart the entrance. It's a wonder there isn't a portcullis. But the message is clear. Afraid of Detroit? Come in and be safe."^43

Other critics have noted this safety theme in Portman's designs. In her discussion of "defensive urbanism," Nan Ellin shows how trends in gated-residential-community design were translated into defensive architecture for urban areas. In Ellin's opinion, "the epitome of the fortress impulse is found in the work of architect/developer John Portman, which combines housing, retail, and offices in central city megastructures" that turn their backs "on the surrounding citi[es]."^44 Such structures occupy a place within the city, but through a variety of means limit the openness of their public spaces—lack of places to sit, lack of parking, lack of explicit signage, few entrances, and general inaccessibility.

The Renaissance Center's isolation and over-the-top security affected its image. Ford envisioned the structure as the catalyst for downtown development and a revived central business district, but now it seemed that only a certain group of people would benefit. Roger Williams

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observed that “critics have called Renaissance Center a Noah’s Ark for the white middle class. They note the easy access for motoring suburbanites, the on-site underground parking, and the cluster design—with formidable abutments on the side facing downtown—that accentuates the fortress feeling.”45 The argument about the Renaissance Center’s image became more contentious as one Detroit City Council member called the center a “capitalist plot against the city,”46 another insisted that this sensation of safety was essential, and Portman maintained that his design was vital in order to make people feel it was not dangerous to visit Detroit. Whatever the argument, the Renaissance Center came to be seen as a place where many Detroiters were not welcome.

Much of Portman’s design for the other two phases of the Renaissance Center remained unbuilt, including the residential component that might have changed the public face of the complex and certainly would have provided more activity at the center in the evenings and on weekends. Still, he insisted that the design of phase one was necessary to create the type of urban environment people wanted. In a 1977 interview Portman responded to critics of the Renaissance Center: “Cities, and certainly Detroit, have at least the image of being unsafe places. To reverse that we have to give people city environments where they feel safe.”47 Creating a safe environment meant parking garages connected to the complex by covered walkways, visible security, and a contained environment free of the perceived danger of the streets. In addition to safety, convenience and entertainment were also focuses of Portman’s design. In the same interview, he contended that “you can’t make people come into or stay in the city. You have to create circumstances that attract them.”48

Initially the center’s target market found the building attractive and exciting. In late 1977 it was reported that the hotel was booked for business until 1985.49 And people who lived near Detroit and in greater southeast Michigan wanted to see the new building and experience this new wave of urban design. Despite the initial crowds and interest, however, the Renaissance Center could not survive unless it attracted more than curious weekend tourists and convention business.

48 Ibid.
Unfortunately, there was not enough interest to fill the office towers, and the center only became partially financially successful. The office towers were 90 percent leased or committed, but this was only after Ford Motor Company moved seventeen hundred employees from Dearborn to downtown Detroit. Thus, Ford became the center's largest tenant.\(^{50}\) Henry Ford reiterated in a variety of interviews that the center was meant to "provide a catalyst for the development of downtown" and, initially, it appeared that the center exerted a positive influence on such development. In 1977 an estimated $207 million in private funds and $396 million in government funds were invested in fifty-three projects involving both new buildings and the expansion of older ones.\(^{51}\) By 1979 the property values of buildings adjacent to the center had increased by 50 percent, the dining population in downtown Detroit grew by 40 percent, other parts of Detroit were being developed, and downtown office occupancy was strong at 84 percent, despite the 2.2 million square feet of office space the center had added two years before.\(^{52}\) The main downtown areas that received the most benefit from the Renaissance Center's initial success were the Civic Center and Cobo Hall; the warehouse district, which became a site for nightclubs and bars; and Greektown, which was home to many restaurants and cafes. Areas immediately around the Renaissance Center were also being cleared for future development.

The rest of the city, however, was feeling negative effects from this shift of development activity to the riverfront. Hardest hit in Detroit were second-tier or older Class-B office buildings; these buildings were in decent locations and had good management, but they were somewhat dated and perhaps did not offer clients innovations available in newer structures. Their tenants were either leaving the city for $7.00 per-square-foot rent, plus free parking, in the suburbs or were moving to the Renaissance Center to take advantage of its only slightly more expensive charges.\(^{53}\) *Business Week* quoted one unnamed developer who estimated the cost of building the Renaissance Center's office space at $100.00 per square foot, while the management company was renting space at $9.50 per square foot. "These weren't equity positions, they were charitable

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50 Darden, *Detroit*, 51-52.
contributions," this source said. Soon, investors began admitting that they had been "pressured" into supporting the center. Anonymous sources told the Detroit News that "it was little more than a sophisticated protection racket," and "the logo of the Renaissance Center should have been a twisted arm." American Motors vice president Richard Calmes remarked that "no one [of the investors] was counting on a return. Everyone knew this was a corporate commitment to a social goal." One downtown landlord complained that the rest of Detroit would soon be empty and told Business Week, "If they wanted to spend $400 million, they should have put in small projects around town. They've got a walled fortress there."

The Detroit News's editorial board cautioned it was too early to start thinking about the impact of the center: "A realistic assessment can't be made for another 10 to 20 years." The newspaper's editors found some positive results, including the center's ability to draw people to the city and Ford's commitment to make the center work, but they worried about other areas of downtown that were losing office tenants, restaurants, and small businesses. In addition, the News's editors were concerned about the shift of downtown workers to the Renaissance Center since "precious few outside or suburban businesses have been attracted to the towering river complex."

Other criticisms of the development took what might be called the working-class point of view. Denise Jacobs, a community activist laid off from her job at a metal-stamping plant, had this to say: "RenCen really doesn't appeal to the average person in Detroit. It's too expensive. Everything [in the stores] is just sky-high. It's an eyesore that was basically built for the mayor. It's not going to alleviate the main problem here, which is skilled laborers who can't get a job. We can have all the maid and busboy jobs in the world, but these are minimum wage jobs." These low-paid jobs were not going to help laid-off autoworkers, whose former wages and benefits had been generous enough to allow them to support families.

54 "Detroit's Downtown Gets a Tonic," Business Week, August 9, 1977, 52.
57 "Detroit's Downtown Gets a Tonic," 52.
59 Ibid.
The Renaissance Center's Phase II Office Towers in 1997

During 1977 the *Detroit News* reported that the downtown tax base had dipped for that year: "A random sampling of downtown tax rolls found not a single operating building with an assessed value that went up for 1977," including some prestigious property near the Renaissance Center.61 This was a minor concern to most business and civic leaders because they had always predicted that it would take some time for the center to have a positive impact on the local tax base. But by 1980 the Renaissance Center was losing large amounts of money—$9 million in the first quarter of that year—with forecasts that these losses would grow.62 The center's management team requested a lower tax assessment on the complex for 1980.63 Despite these difficulties, phase two of the complex began, with financing from David Rockefeller, but the center's financial situation and leasing problems meant that only two buildings of the proposed eight were built and all preparations for phase three were postponed indefinitely. Even Ford could not find a way to help the struggling center, as layoffs at the Ford Motor Company in 1980 led the

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firm to cancel a planned transfer of workers from its Dearborn offices to the Renaissance Center's phase-two office buildings. It became clear that the center's ambitious plans would not be completely realized.

The Renaissance Center did not become the "catalyst" for the city that Henry Ford II had envisioned. The initial warm reception it received from business interests and some politicians was not enough to ensure its success; the structure failed to appeal to workers, shoppers, and Detroiter. Struggling financially and failing to sustain enthusiasm among ordinary Detroiter, thanks in part to its architecture, the center went up for sale in 1982. Potential buyers had difficulty assembling financing for such a large purchase, however. The Renaissance Center was too risky an investment, and its value was decreasing. In January 1983 the center's assessed value for the tax rolls was $97 million, although one group of appraisers estimated the property to be worth between $250 million and $320 million. There was very little chance that the original investors would make their money back or that a new investor would be able to turn the property around in enough time to make it worth his or her effort. When they failed to sell the property, the five major mortgage holders—Aetna Life and Casualty Company, the Travelers Corporation, John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, the Equitable Life Assurance Society, and the Ford Motor Credit Company—retired the loan and became part owners of the center. The mortgage holders, calling themselves Renaissance Center Venture, would now have a 53 percent interest in the complex, leaving the original investors with a 47 percent share. Ford's interest dropped from 65 percent to 31 percent, and the team of fifty investors saw their portion dip to 16 percent. The deal prevented foreclosure, but the investment potential the complex once offered was severely diminished.


At this stage, glass had replaced concrete on the wall of the base, but the berm remained.

Looking across Jefferson Avenue at the Renaissance Center's Entrance, Spring 1997

A few years after the new financial structure was put in place, the new (and old) owners attempted to "fix" the center's flaws. Earlier studies by outside consultants had repeatedly noted that access to the building and the area surrounding it was confusing and that many people did not know there were shops inside.\(^{67}\) Once indoors, many visitors reported that they often got lost. This group included a storeowner, who later moved his shop to the suburbs.\(^ {68}\) Even Mayor Coleman Young admitted getting lost in the building.\(^ {69}\) Renovations to make the Renaissance Center more inviting and accessible were undertaken during the mid-1980s. In 1985 the Millender Center apartment-office-retail complex opened opposite the center across Jefferson Avenue.


\(^{68}\) Marcia Ming, "RenCen Revival," in *ibid.*, February 7, 1988, C1.

\(^{69}\) James R. Campbell, "RenCen Completes 'User-Friendly' Renovation," United Press International wire report, June 13, 1988, accessed through Lexis-Nexis. See http://lexisnexis.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/us/Inacademic/results/docview/docview to access this report. Unfortunately, this website can be accessed only by employees or students of institutions that have purchased the appropriate Lexis-Nexis services.
Avenue. A pedestrian bridge connected it to the Renaissance Center, giving pedestrians above-the-road access between the center and the city. The Renaissance Center was also given a stop on the downtown monorail, the People Mover. Between 1985 and 1988, the owners of the center spent $27 million to improve the building. They hired a firm to poll metro-Detroit residents and visitors about their impressions of the center and what image they had of the building, hoping that users might generate ideas. The Jefferson Avenue-side concrete face of the base was removed and replaced with twenty-eight-thousand square feet of glass to let in more natural light. Windows also replaced the concrete wall around the exterior, allowing visitors to see the outside and giving them a view of the Detroit River. Stores were moved to occupy only the first and second levels, and a second-floor entrance was created to accommodate the new People Mover monorail station. Entrances were more clearly defined, and a Renaissance Center logo was placed above the Jefferson Avenue entrance. Finally, color coded guides—such as a yellow-tiled floor—were put in place to help people navigate their way around the center.70

70 It should be noted that similar renovations were made to the various Portman centers throughout the country.
Renaissance Center retailers welcomed the renovations because it meant their stores would be easier to find and that there would be some coherence to the mall’s layout, which might result in a better shopping experience. After participating in the Detroit News’s Renaissance Center scavenger hunt in June 1988, one visitor told a reporter, “I’ve been here before and it was much more difficult. Now, with the lobby opened up, it’s much easier to get around.” These renovations helped make the Renaissance Center a more logical and user-friendly space and gave the structure much-needed openness, but for the next several years the complex still had trouble both attracting retail tenants and maintaining a high level of activity beyond office workers and intermittent convention crowds.

In May 1996 General Motors surprised the citizens of Detroit when it announced that the company would move from its headquarters in the historic Albert Kahn-designed General Motors Building to the Renaissance Center. Even more surprising was the purchase price: $72 million for a complex that cost $350 million to build. Days after the purchase, spokespersons for GM began discussing renovations to the center. The local newspapers wasted no time in reminding their readers what was wrong with the center, and there was no shortage of Renaissance Center visitors, tenants, and employees who were happy to list the structure’s many flaws. Knocking down the massive fortresslike berms that housed the heating and cooling systems and that separated the center from the rest of the city topped many people’s wish lists of Renaissance Center renovations. Edward Francis of Kessler and Associates told the Detroit News, “This building says, ‘This is a fortification. Be careful when you enter.’ That’s the wrong message. The barriers should be the first thing to be removed, no matter what the cost.” Even GM’s vice chairman, Harry J. Pearce, the executive behind the automaker’s purchase of the center, jokingly told reporters he was thinking about handing out handheld global positioning units to help visitors navigate the center. The Detroit News

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74 King, “Move Signals New Beginning.”
polled area architects, asking which renovations they would advise at the Renaissance Center. Recommendations included: more and wider views of the river from public areas, an exterior public zone for activity along the riverfront (rather than the existing parking lot), and residential and marina components for the structure. In addition, many advised recruiting a variety of retailers for the mall and making them more visible, as well as changing the confusing circular pattern of the center’s lobby to one incorporating more straight lines.75

The new owners paid $500 million for renovations to the mall and office buildings and another $100 million to refurbish the conference hotel. Over the next few years GM continued to broaden its real-estate holdings in the vicinity of the Renaissance Center. Eventually the company purchased the Millender Center, a hotel-residential-retail complex across Jefferson Avenue.76 And in 2001 General Motors acquired the two buildings constructed during phase two of the project, renaming them River East Center. General Motors hired Skidmore, Owings and Merrill to redesign the center to its specifications.77

The renovation that was most symbolic of all that had gone wrong with the Renaissance Center began in March 2002, when workers began to remove the large concrete berms that separated the center from the city. When the berms were demolished, Detroit’s then-mayor Kwame Kilpatrick remarked: “For my whole life, I’ve thought of these berms as a barrier. It wasn’t intended that way, but that’s how it was perceived.”78 Don Starr, speaking for Portman, repeated the oft-used defense that the berms only housed the heating and cooling systems and served to buffer street noise. Portman, he said, was “very philosophical” about the renovations as “times change.”79 The transformation of the new glass atrium entryway and the front façade and the alteration of their relationship to the sidewalk created a much stronger connection between the building and the rest of the city. This connection was enhanced by the trees and the widened pedestrian area, which took the place of the berms. The

75 Konrad, “Wants Friendlier RenCen.”
76 A pedestrian bridge over Jefferson Avenue connects the two buildings, both of which have People Mover stations.
77 In 2000 General Motors contracted with local mall developers Taubman Centers, Inc., to consolidate the retail business in the Renaissance Center, the Millender Center, and the River East Center into the Riverfront Shops.
79 Quoted in ibid.
The Renaissance Center, May 2008

building opens itself to the street in a more inviting manner and offers at least the promise that it will be part of larger plans for public activity in downtown Detroit.

Structures like the Renaissance Center were designed to assuage specific concerns related to the times in which they were built. These developments were supposed to provide the convenience and safety that companies, workers, and shoppers were finding in the suburbs. They were designed to redefine the city both physically and imagistically at a time when the negative reputation of cities—the “urban crisis”—was driving
people away. During more than three decades, the Renaissance Center has seen a number of changes. The demand for alterations and the recent large-scale renovation of the structure grew out of an ongoing critique of the design and the structure's viability as a contributor to the built environment of Detroit. The massive renovations undertaken by General Motors have peeled away many of the flaws that kept the center from being properly woven into the urban fabric of Detroit.

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