



**Robert Sharoff.** *American City: Detroit Architecture, 1845-2005.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. xxi + 121 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3270-2.



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## Glorious Detroit

Surrounding and sheltering me as I grew up in Detroit were the city's glorious buildings. I visited my grandfather's law office in the Penobscot Building, ice-skated at Palmer Park, enjoyed holiday dinners at the Detroit Golf Club, rode the bus up and down Woodward Avenue past landmark neighborhoods and churches, shopped for shoes and visited my doctor in the Fisher Building, attended civic light opera at the Masonic Temple, and swam in the Pewabic pool at the Women's City Club. Later, working in the State Historic Preservation Office in Lansing for nearly twenty-five years, I helped identify, assess, designate and protect these beloved buildings and neighborhoods as the economy of Detroit declined, and I supported Preservation Wayne and others in preserving and promoting them.

We were not alone in observing the endangered or marginally used buildings in Detroit. Recently the National Trust for Historic Preservation put the historic buildings of downtown Detroit on its 2005 list of the eleven most endangered places. Wayne State University Press now has added *American City: Detroit Architecture, 1845-2005* to the many titles in the art and architecture

section of its splendid Great Lakes Book series. Author Robert Sharoff and photographer William Zbaren have created a first-ever large-format book that celebrates fifty of Detroit's functioning commercial and civic buildings and monuments spanning the period 1845 to 2005. The book presents both the glory of Detroit and its decline, in a format that will appeal to a broad audience. The book will inspire in everyone who picks it up an appreciation of Detroit's architecture and a call to action to save it.

Sharoff, who spent his youth in the Detroit area, claims he was unaware of the city's second-to-none architectural resources until a recent visit to the city afforded him, together with Zbaren, the time to walk around downtown. Sharoff is an architecture and real estate writer for the *New York Times* and *Chicago Magazine*. Zbaren is a photographer whose images have appeared in the *New York Times* and other national publications, and hung in gallery exhibitions.

Sharoff and Zbaren established criteria for selecting buildings worthy of inclusion and identified ninety buildings. That list was then reduced to fifty. *American City: Detroit Architecture, 1845-2005* owes a debt to previous

scholars and recorders of Detroit and Michigan architecture and is also informed by new research on Wirt C. Rowland, architect of Detroit skyscrapers.[1] A short but highly readable introductory essay is followed by brief entries, sometimes merely captions, for the buildings. The entries are arranged chronologically and are profusely illustrated with appealing full-size color photographs. The works of international architects, East Coast and Chicago architects, and local practitioners are represented in the book.

The introductory essay discusses the economic and social forces that shaped the buildings of Detroit. Sharoff sets the stage for great industrial development by highlighting the location of Detroit on the river that connects the city with the natural resources of the Upper and Lower Great lakes. As investors in the state's extractive industries (copper, iron ore, and lumber) poured their profits into making stoves, railroad cars, ships and pharmaceuticals, and, later, automobiles, Detroit became a manufacturing center. The economy of Detroit, as a regional trading post before 1900, grew to a world-class industrial center in the boom years from 1900 to 1929. Later, the exodus from the city to the suburbs left an empty city awaiting rebirth.

Judge Augustus B. Woodward's hexagonal plan for the city radiates out from the Detroit River with broad avenues and open spaces. Emulating Pierre Charles L'Enfant's scheme for Washington, D.C., it provided the framework for siting the buildings of downtown Detroit. Sharoff observes that the architecture evolved from small buildings directly to tall buildings with no moderate-size buildings in between. Thus, from the low-rise R. H. Traver and Schwankovsky commercial buildings on Woodward Avenue and the R. Hirt Jr. Building in Eastern Market, the city blossomed fully with the Dime, Buhl, Penobscot and Guardian skyscrapers in the financial district along Griswold Street. Nineteenth-century architecture designed by Gordon W. Lloyd, Sheldon Smith, and others followed national stylistic trends; early-twentieth-century Beaux-Arts Classical buildings were designed by Cass Gilbert, Warren and Wetmore; and McKim, Mead and White of New York as well as by Albert Kahn and other local firms working in this and other traditional styles.

Sharoff regards Rowland's Art Deco Penobscot and Guardian buildings, the former streamlined, the latter mixed with Arts and Crafts, among the city's outstanding examples. He recognizes ceramist Mary Chase Perry Stratton and her husband, the architect William B. Strat-

ton, as key figures in the Arts and Crafts in Detroit. Steeped in industrialization and interested in design, Detroiters readily accepted the handmade qualities of the Arts and Crafts. Between the Great Depression and the conclusion of World War II, building activity shut down, but city inhabitants took keen interest in Diego Rivera's famous "Detroit Industry" fresco murals in the Garden Court of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Modernism and the International Style flourished in the 1950s as the city made big plans for the Civic Center and Minoru Yamasaki created one of his finest civic ornaments, the delicate stone, steel and glass McGregor Memorial Conference Center. William Kessler's arrival in the 1960s brought to the city both his innovative architectural forms and color, and his restoration and rehabilitation expertise. Sharoff notes that John Portman's Renaissance Center marks the culmination of the post-war effort to jumpstart an economy suffering from loss of population, jobs, and property tax base.

Sharoff weaves Cranbrook Academy of Art into the story by telling of Eliel Saarinen and the European artisans that the Finnish architect brought to the institution. Many of these skilled craftsmen embellished downtown buildings. For example, painter and sculptor Geza Maroti, who came to Cranbrook in 1927 from Budapest, Hungary, decorated the interior of the Fisher Building. The firm of John Scott and Company is known across Michigan for its designs of government and institutional buildings: the Michigan School of Mines Building (Hubbell Hall, demolished in 1968), the Gogebic and Chippewa county courthouses, and the Marquette Prison, for example. Some Michigan architectural historians would therefore take issue with Sharoff's statement that John Scott's main claim to fame was hiring and then firing architect Albert Kahn.

Regrettably, Detroit's Scott Fountain and the Belle Isle Conservatory are not discussed in the context of Frederick Law Olmsted's Belle Isle, the city's landscape jewel in the Detroit River. Also omitted is discussion of the relationship of Orchestra Hall to the new Max Fisher Music Center that supports it. Another opportunity that Sharoff missed was an adequate treatment of nineteenth-century regional building materials. Materials tie buildings to place. Trenton limestone, perhaps quarried on Kelley's Island in Lake Erie, rises in the exterior walls of Fort Wayne and merits recognition. The orange-red brick of the Lighthouse Supply Depot was probably manufactured from clay found near Detroit. The red sandstone on Lloyd's Traver Building was quarried on the shores of

Lake Superior at Marquette and shipped down the Lakes.

It is refreshing to see twenty of the fifty entries, that is 40 percent of the book, devoted to buildings from the recent past. Sharoff and Zbaren recognize William Kessler's marvelous contributions to Detroit architecture and happily conclude with TMP Associates' exciting new Cass Technological High School. Appropriately, restoration architects are acknowledged.

Knowing that the historic name remains a constant and reveals something about the intent of the designer, Sharoff and Zbaren refer to most buildings by their historic rather than current names. Yamasaki's Michigan Gas Company Building says more than Yamasaki's One Woodward. The association with the gas company might even trigger recollections of the blue flame that flickered at the top when the structure was first put into service. Stanford White's State Savings Bank explains the Beaux-Arts Classical design better than White's Savoyard Centre. Here faintly visible window mannequins hint at the clothing store now within. Historic preservation successes are evident with the adaptive reuse of names such as the Light Supply Depot, L. B. King Building, Fyfe's Shoe Store Building, and the Women's City Club.

William Zbaren's clear and meticulously composed color photographs do a superior job of illustrating the book, with a few exceptions. Photographing architecture in Detroit where Balthazar Korab has set the standard did not intimidate this photographer. (Korab, of Troy, Michigan, is the widely published architectural photographer who studied architecture at the Parisian *École des Beaux-Arts* and apprenticed with Le Corbusier and Eero Saarinen.) For the Guardian Building, detail trumps context. Showing the colorful ceiling tiles of the Guardian Building's banking room sacrifices a dramatic full view from the lobby of the staircase to the former banking room with the tiles and window beyond. Readers expecting muralist Diego Rivera's North Wall Automobile Panel are treated instead to a perfectly framed detail of an infant. The image of the Isamu Noguchi fountain without its spray seems to suggest a view of Detroit as "out-of-

order."

The authors make conscious exceptions to their entry selection criteria with the inclusion of the residential projects of two modern masters, Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and for the Michigan Central Railroad Station. The reader yearns to learn about the factories, clubs, hotels, houses of worship, and houses that fell through the criteria sieve. While *American City* does exactly what Sharoff and Zbaren intended, we now hope for an equally beautiful companion volume concerned with additional building types.

#### Note

[1]. Wayne Andrews, *Architecture in Michigan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982); Kathryn Bishop Eckert, *Buildings of Michigan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Silas Farmer, *History of Detroit and Wayne County and Early Michigan: A Chronological Cyclopedic of the Past and Present*, 3d ed. (Detroit: S. Farmer & Co., 1890); W. Hawkins Ferry, *The Buildings of Detroit: A History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980); Grant Hildebrand, *Designing for Industry: The Architecture of Albert Kahn* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1974); Eric J. Hill and John Gallagher, *AIA Detroit: The American Institute of Architects Guide to Detroit Architecture* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003); Thomas J. Holleman and James P. Gallagher, *Smith, Hinchman and Grylls: 125 Years of Architecture and Engineering, 1853-1978* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978); Eliel Saarinen, *The Search for Form in Art and Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1985); Wirt C. Rowland Exhibit Catalog (Clinton, Michigan: Wirt C. Rowland Committee, Historical Society of Clinton, 2004).

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