

American City

## **Detroit Architecture 1845–2005**

Text by Robert Sharoff  
Photographs by William Zbaren



A Painted Turtle book  
Detroit, Michigan

# Contents

Preface	viii	Guardian Building	56
Acknowledgments	x	David Stott Building	60
Introduction	xiii	Fisher Building	62
		Horace H. Rackham Building	64
		Coleman A. Young Municipal Center	68
<b>American City</b>		Turkel House	70
Fort Wayne	2	McGregor Memorial	
Lighthouse Supply Depot	4	Conference Center	72
R. H. Traver Building	6	Lafayette Park	76
Wright-Kay Building	8	One Woodward	80
R. Hirt Jr. Co. Building	10	First Federal Bank Building	82
Chauncey Hurlbut Memorial Gate	12	Frank Murphy Hall of Justice	84
Detroit Cornice and Slate Company	14	Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls Building	86
Wayne County Building	16	Kresge-Ford Building	88
Savoyard Centre	18	SBC Building	90
Belle Isle Conservatory	20	Renaissance Center	92
Harmonie Centre	22	Horace E. Dodge and Son	
Dime Building	24	Memorial Fountain	96
L. B. King and Company Building	26	Detroit Receiving Hospital	98
Michigan Central Railroad Station	28	Coleman A. Young Community Center	100
R. H. Fyfe’s Shoe Store Building	30	Cobo Hall and Convention Center	102
Orchestra Hall	32	One Detroit Center	104
Detroit Public Library, Main Branch	34	John D. Dingell VA Hospital	
Cadillac Place	38	and Medical Center	106
Women’s City Club	40	Charles H. Wright Museum	
Bankers Trust Company Building	42	of African American History	108
James Scott Fountain	44	Compuware Building	110
Buhl Building	46	Cass Technical High School	112
Detroit Institute of Arts	48	Index of Buildings	116
Fox Theatre	50	Index of Architects, Architecture Firms,	
Penobscot Building	52	Designers, and Artists	118
Park Place Apartments	54	Bibliography	121





## Introduction

by Robert Sharoff

Detroit at its peak in the first half of the twentieth century was where the future was happening. The only comparison today would be to cities like Seattle or Palo Alto or even Hong Kong or Shanghai. “Come up to Detroit and see how we make things hum!” said a character in *Dodsworth*, Sinclair Lewis’s 1929 novel set in the modern business world. A new invention as well as a new manufacturing process—respectively, the automobile and the assembly line—were being perfected here. Both had a profound effect on modern civilization.

Both also altered the city, transforming it from a regional manufacturing center to the industrial hub of North America, if not the world. New products and processes meant not only new buildings but also new kinds of buildings. Put simply, good design was good business. And good business, ultimately, translates to money. Detroit in the 1910s and 1920s was an extremely wealthy city. The result was the country’s first high-tech metropolis.

It is tempting to equate the birth of Detroit with the automobile industry. The truth, however, is quite different. Detroit—in American terms—is a very old city.

The founder, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, was French, as were the fifty-some soldiers, farmers, and fur traders who arrived by canoe one morning in the summer of 1701. “The banks of the river are so many vast meadows where the freshness of . . . beautiful streams keeps the grass always green,” he wrote. “These same meadows are fringed with long and broad avenues of fruit trees which have never felt the careful hand of the watchful gardener. . . . On both sides of this strait lie fine, open plains where the deer roam in graceful herds.”

The city’s first building, appropriately enough, was a church, Ste. Anne’s. The parish, though not the building, still exists. It is the second oldest continuously operating Roman Catholic parish in the United States.

For the next sixty years, Detroit was a French city, as evidenced by the numerous French street names such as Beaubien, St. Antoine, Rivard, and Lafayette. Many of these streets represent the boundaries of what were called “ribbon farms.” In order to give each farmer access to the river, land was subdivided into long strips—some as narrow as 200 feet—that began at the waterfront and extended back for miles.

In 1760 the British arrived after defeating the French in the French and Indian War. The population at that time—including those on the outlying ribbon farms—was about 2,000 residents. The British had a brief run in Detroit—thirty-six years—before being routed by General “Mad Anthony” Wayne in 1794. “The town itself,” wrote Wayne, “is a crowded mass of frame or wooden buildings, generally from one to two and a half stories high, many of them well furnished, and inhabited by people of almost all nations. . . . The streets are so narrow as scarcely to admit carriages to pass each other.”

On the morning of June 11, 1805, John Harvey, the town baker, knocked out his clay pipe on his boot and inadvertently set fire to a pile of straw, thus igniting a blaze that—within three hours—consumed the entire city. Surveying the destruction, Father Gabriel Richard, a priest at Ste. Anne’s, murmured, “We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes” (*Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus*). Years later, these words became the city’s official motto.

Shortly afterward, Augustus Woodward, a federal judge who, as far as we know, had no training in either architecture or urban planning, proposed a new plan for the city. A friend of Thomas Jefferson’s, he had lived in Washington, D.C., when it was being transformed under Pierre Charles L’Enfant’s ambitious master plan. He envisioned something similar for Detroit. The plan—basically a series of interlocking hexagons at the heart of which were elaborate public

Detail, Detroit Public  
Library, Main Branch



squares, or “circuses,” connected by broad boulevards—ultimately proved too rigid and impractical to be widely implemented.

Still, the portion of it that did get built—- basically the downtown area from Grand Circus Park to the Detroit River—has a unique charm. Walk around downtown Detroit and the buildings seem to dance before you. Streets curve and angle in from all directions, and there is a profusion of oddly shaped blocks. Instead of a skyline of orderly façades, you see the front of one building next to the side of another next to the angled corner of yet another. The view is expansive and ever-changing.



“Detroit will resolve into one of the greatest industrial islands on Earth,” said E. B. Ward, a prominent industrialist and the city’s richest man in the years after the Civil War. “With immense supplies of iron and copper to the north, coal to the south, the Detroit River in front and canals on either end, the city cannot miss.”

He was right. The city took off in the latter half of the 1800s as a manufacturing center specializing in cooking stoves and ranges, shipbuilding, railroad cars and equipment, and drugs and pharmaceuticals. In 1864 the city’s Eureka Iron and Steel Works produced the first commercial steel in the United States using the Bessemer process.

By necessity, the city’s architects during this period were a versatile lot. Many functioned as builders and engineers in addition to being designers. Very few had any formal training.

“We have a number of most competent architects, thorough masters of their professions, having taste, good judgment, versatility and enthusiasm,” wrote Alexander Chapoton, a builder who worked with many of the city’s firms. “The forms of buildings in Detroit take on greater variety; there is less repetition of styles than in any other city. . . .

Drive about the streets of Detroit and you find the buildings have an individuality.”

Stylistically, the city followed the prevailing national trends. The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of revivals: Gothic and Romanesque and numerous variations on French and Italian Renaissance styles that today are referred to as Neo-Classical or Beaux Arts. “Medieval relics furnish the required inspiration for all the best work of the present day,” said George D. Mason of Mason and Rice, one of the city’s most prominent architecture firms in the final decades of the nineteenth century. “In this country . . . we have had to come back from the log cabins and board shanties. We have had to draw upon the old country for everything. We are just beginning to have ideas of our own.”

Two other architects were notable during this period: Gordon Lloyd and the family firm of Sheldon, Mortimer, and Fred Smith, respectively, father, son, and grandson.

Lloyd, an Englishman who had attended the Royal Academy in London, immigrated to Detroit in 1858. Over the course of a long career—he died in 1903—he designed numerous structures, everything from churches and residences to office buildings and theaters.

Sheldon Smith, on the other hand, is ultimately remembered more for the firm he created than for the buildings he designed. He arrived in Detroit in 1855 after spending a number of years in Sandusky, Ohio. He set up shop as Sheldon Smith, Architect, and enjoyed almost immediate success with a number of well-received civic commissions both in Detroit and around the state.

This was the beginning of the longest-running architectural dynasty in the city as well as what is now the oldest continuously operating architecture practice in the United States. Sheldon died in 1868 and was succeeded by

Mortimer. Fred took over after Mortimer’s death in 1896 and, in 1907, reorganized the firm with two partners: Theodore Hinchman and designer Maxwell Grylls. The name at that point became Smith, Hinchman, and Grylls.

After Fred’s death in 1941, the firm passed into non-family hands. Today, after several mergers, the name has been shortened to SmithGroup.

A letter from Mortimer to Fred written in the late 1870s gives a vivid description of what an average day was like for a busy Detroit architect: “They have brought in the chapel drawings I made for Wendell and want me to cheapen it \$1,000 . . . tough job . . . things are getting along well with the Ferry building. Blay is putting the concrete down as they want it—no more trouble about that. They

are hanging the chandeliers, first story, today. Don’t like them very well, too light. Endicott [the tenant] had better to have consulted me, I think.”

Overall, the picture that emerges of Detroit in the late 1800s is of a bustling regional manufacturing center not that different from Cleveland or Pittsburgh or other nearby cities and far from a global powerhouse.



And then it happened. “The darn thing ran!” is how Henry Ford later described what happened early in the morning of June 4, 1896, when he cranked up his “quadricycle”—basically four bicycle wheels, a light chassis, and an engine—and took it for a spin down Grand River Avenue.

Detail, Fisher Building

