

ART IN THE MOTOR CITY The Fisher Building is an Architectural Treasure Defining the Detroit Skyline

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THE FISHER BUILDING WAS NAMED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK IN 1989.

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IT'S HARD TO MISS THE MAJESTIC GOLDEN TOWER OF DETROIT'S FISHER BUILDING. CONSTRUCTED WITH APPROXIMATELY 325,000 SQUARE FEET OF MARBLE, IT IS THE LARGEST EXTERIOR MARBLE COMMERCIAL BUILDING IN THE WORLD. Add to that more than 150 different carvings, a tower cap of gold and green terra cotta, 40 varieties of marble, brass and bronze, and a hand-painted vaulted ceiling, it's no wonder the Fisher Building has been hailed as Detroit's largest piece of art since 1928.

"They don't make them like this anymore; you can't afford to," said Rick Sellers, CPM®, general manager of the Fisher Building. "It is a really magnificent building."

When the Fisher brothers, who developed the closed body for the automobile, decided to build the headquarters for Fisher and Company, there was no limit to how much they would spend to build the "world's most beautiful office building." After purchasing seven acres near the former General Motors Building, the brothers envisioned creating a "new center of Detroit," complete with shopping and entertainment, located one block from the official city center.

DESIGN ESSENTIALS

To bring their vision to life, they hired esteemed architect Albert Kahn, who already had a formidable reputation as one of America's great architects. His work included designs for the magnificent Hill Auditorium at the University of Michigan and the world headquarters for General Motors. The Fishers gave Kahn complete creative freedom and encouraged him to use the finest materials, craftsman and contractors.

The original designs for the building called for three towers—one 60-floor tower, flanked by two 28-floor towers and connected by several 11-floor wings. It was estimated the building would cost \$35 million (equal to more than \$400 million today). However, Kahn was only able to build one of the 28-floor towers and two of the wings before the Great Depression hit. The final cost was \$9 million (equal to more than \$100 million today).

The 440-foot building is an architectural gem. The exterior was designed in the American Vertical style, with windows that are grouped and recessed, and strong vertical planes that give the illusion of greater height. The sloped roof was originally covered in golf-leaved tiles, but has since been replaced with gold and green terra cotta tiles.

While the elegant marble and bronze exterior façade exudes a venerable sophistication, the breathtaking interior takes elegance to a whole other level. A 600-foot-long arcade runs through the building and connects the five main entrances. The arcade is comprised of European and American marble that ranges from warm reds and cool greens to rich browns and delicate pinks.

Large Art Deco chandeliers hang from the arcade's center. Hungarian artist Geza Maroti created all of the frescoes, lunettes, plaques and mosaics that hang in the arcade. Forty percent of the arcade's barrel-vaulted, hand-painted ceiling is covered in gold leaf, with the remaining ceiling boasting shades of deep orange and green. The overhead painting is comprised of 60 nude figures, hemlock oranges, flowers and greenery, folk art motifs and dozens of eagles.

One of the highlights of the Fisher Building is the Fisher Theater. Originally built as a movie

house, the theater was decorated with early Mexican Indian art. Banana trees and native plants, along with a pond with goldfish and turtles, set the mood within the foyer. In 1961, the Fisher brothers took on a \$3 million renovation to remodel and convert the movie house into luxurious legitimate theater. Currently, Fisher Theater is home to Broadway fare in Detroit.

In 1928, the Architectural League of New York awarded Kahn a Silver Medal for the Fisher Building, applauding it as the most beautiful commercial building built that year. In 1989, the Fisher Building was named a National Historic Landmark.

PORTRAIT OF PRESTIGE

The building's rich history and architectural mastery have made the Fisher Building a local treasure and a national symbol of Detroit. Honoring its history and maintaining its historic design is both a challenge and a benefit for the building's current owner, the Farbman Group. For instance, when management had to replace two hand-hammered copper spires on the roof, Sellers worked closely with the historical society to ensure the replacement spires would not change the building's look.

"We had to go through many approvals to make sure they looked identical to what they looked like before," Sellers said. "It was quite an engineering process."

Of course, managing a high-profile building has plenty of perks.

"Obviously, there is a prestige value in managing a building that is so recognized," Sellers said.

The prestige factor certainly gives the Farbman Group an advantage when it comes to leasing space in the building, which has a current occupancy rate of 82 percent. The building's tenants include traditional office tenants, retail, restaurants, a post office, pharmacy, doctor and dentist offices, radio stations and the historic Fisher Theater. Several organizations, including Preservation Wayne and the Detroit Historical Society, conduct building tours.



The Fisher Building, in fact, functions almost as a city within a city. The building is connected to New Center One, the Albert Kahn Building and Cadillac Place (the former General Motors headquarters) via underground tunnels and overhead skywalks.

"We're our own little community," Sellers said. "All the retail options are amenities. They attract people to the building and make those of us who work here much more comfortable. We enjoy our working atmosphere."

In many ways, the Fisher Building is a great example of Detroiters attempting to bring the Motor City back into the center of American economic life. This inspiring architectural treasure is both a great reminder of the city's storied past and a beacon showing the way to a better future. ■

THE 440-FOOT FISHER BUILDING WAS COMPLETED IN 1928.

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