

# Building Scene

Marilyn Fitchell editor/591-2300

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## New skyscrapers fail to display new forms

By Dale Northup  
special writer

The skyscraper has always been considered a symbol of American corporate enterprise and an exclamation point of civic pride. The identity of most American cities are defined by beckoning towers: New York, the World Trade Center (by our own Minoru Yamasaki); Detroit, the Renaissance Center; Chicago, the Sears Tower; San Francisco, the Transamerica Building.

At one time that identity was nearly lost with the advent of what came to be termed modernism. Its promoter was Mies van der Rohe who espoused, as well as exposed, glass and steel as the skin and bones of modern architecture. This took hold on the American architectural scene in New York City with Lever House (1952), which became the prototype for the corporate box, and subsequent anonymity was unveiled with a bland facade.

ARCHITECT ROBERT Stern has referred to these boxes as containers in which the older, more identifiable buildings were packaged. Stern is associated with a reactionary group of architects under the heading of post-modernism. Their ultimate aim is to attach visible reminders of an older style or tradition with which the viewer can identify.

The ancient regime is back on the scene, and one of its promoters is Phillip Johnson, who curiously was once a disciple of Mies van der Rohe. Now labeled a "turncoat," Johnson claims "it is . . . much more old-fashioned to make a glass box than to copy other great periods." And with that statement he embellished the New York skyline with a broken pedimental cap atop the new AT&T Corporate Headquarters in 1978. The building elicited quite a response, with one person referring to the building as a giant Chippendale skyscraper and Detroit architect William Kessler saying that Johnson was becoming senile. Nonetheless it is a new corporate identity blatantly visual and one for which everyone is now scrambling — a new-old countenance of character.

The design of AT&T was conceived the same year when Johnson formed a partnership with John Burgee. Since then they have jointly helped change the complexion of U.S. skylines, most notably with Houston developer Gerald Hines on Hines' home turf: Penzell Place, 36-story trapezoidal towers; 64-story Transco Tower, reminiscent of the early 1900s' commercial buildings; and the 56-story NCNB Center, described as neo-Gothic.

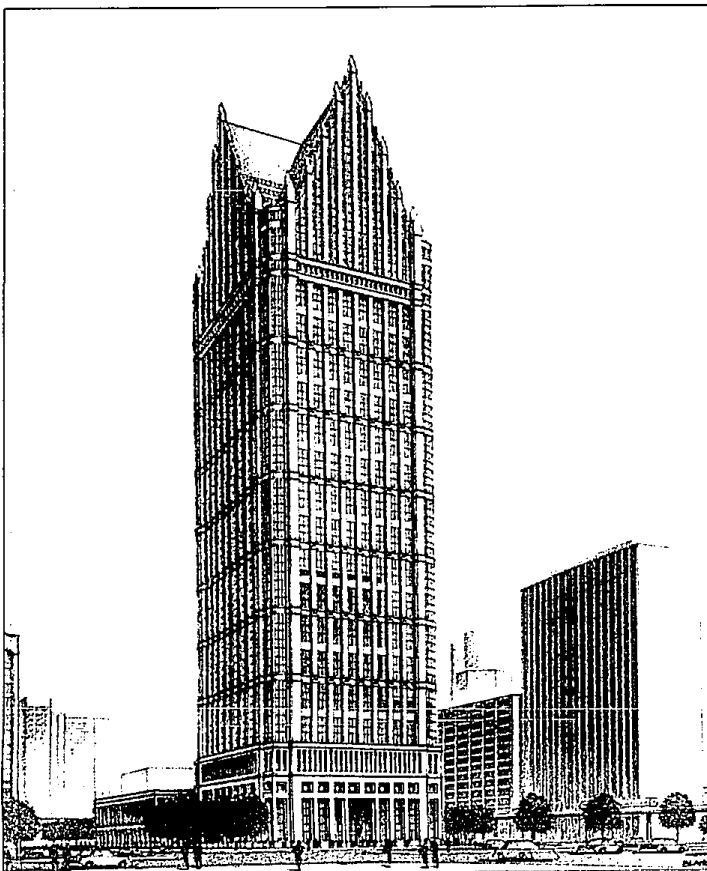
THE SKY and Houston are no longer the limit for Gerald Hines. He has now enlisted John Burgee Architects (Johnson is semi-retired) to design the 50-story One Detroit Center on Woodward in downtown Detroit.

The new tower will contain approximately one million square feet of space. It has a gabled roofline that will have a major presence on the Detroit skyline. Clad in warm, light beige granite and gray glass, materials that will make it compatible with older surrounding buildings. One Detroit Center will feature high-ceilinged lobby and granite-paved plazas outside relating to the pedestrian level. The facade has a strong vertical thrust accentuated with piers that terminate in small pyramidal caps.

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The former Vinton Building was designed by Albert Kahn in 1917. The building has the clarity and simplicity of Kahn's industrial buildings with a triangular cap.



One Detroit Center is a 50-story office tower designed by John Burgee Architects of New York in the neo-gothic, post-modern style.

### WITNESS THE DAWN

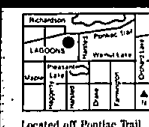
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