

Planner holds high hopes for Detroit

By CORINNE ABATT

When Detroit Renaissance Center was just an idea, Katherine Ford Beebe of Birmingham listened to the pessimists that it "ain't gonna happen."

It would never materialize, no money would be available, if it did go up, it would never rent. There would be a huge gray elephant, they said.

At the time Mrs. Beebe, who was a project director with Detroit Renaissance, was promoting the redevelopment of the city "in bricks and mortar terms."

"In 1971-72, people thought Detroit was hopeless," she said. "But even since 1973 it's been getting better and better."

Now as one of four principals in the Cardozo Partnership, Mrs. Beebe is still involved in the future of the city, but new people are more optimistic about that future. Mrs. Beebe is a city planner working on her doctorate in architecture. Her three partners are architects.

Recently the firm has been working on developing a future plan for the Grand Circus Park area in downtown Detroit.

As a person who plans ahead, she frequently looks back.

"Areas have a life of their own that carries on," she said. In evaluating the Grand Circus Park area - what it had been, the kinds of institutions there, what the people need and want, and how the area relates to the city around it - Mrs. Beebe found out many interesting things.

Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French-American architect-engineer, designed a plan for Detroit in which circuses or parks would be at intervals connected by radial streets. With this plan people would be able to look down the broad, tree-lined radial streets and see wonderful views and broad vistas.

GRAND CIRCUS PARK was the first part of his plan to be implemented. Many radial streets survive from the plan which lasted for seven years.

"The farmers, whose land came up to Grand Circus Park, complained that they couldn't farm in the water-filled fields. This killed L'Enfant's plan because they wanted rectangles, not wedges," Mrs. Beebe said. "They developed long ribbon farms to have frontage on the river."

This explains some of the wedge shapes which are found among the streets around Grand Circus Park.

Fortunately, according to Mrs. Beebe, Grand Circus Park has some strong institutions and businesses which have formed an association - the YWCA, YMCA, Detroit Athletic Club, Detroit College of Law and Michigan Mutual Insurance, along with

buildings like the David Wintry Building and some residential housing.

"Nearly two-thirds of the land in Grand Circus Park is vacant," she said adding this is unusual for a downtown area. The question then was to decide how this land could best be used in a plan to be adopted by the city.

As she studied the area, Mrs. Beebe soon made a strength. One of the most encouraging was that institutions in the area weren't treadling water. They were building and investing money and time in programs and improvements.

One part of the Grand Circus Park plan is to develop a campus play area to knit together institutions like the Ys and the Detroit College of Law. While this green area would be open to everyone, it would serve to unify and link the area. This would be put on two acres presently occupied by parking lots. The plan calls for the rehabilitation of existing buildings and the construction of housing in carefully identified areas. The exact type of housing, medium rise, townhouses or something else - would be decided closer to the time they are built. Mrs. Beebe is concerned that the locations for housing be clarified.

"We are working with the city to get the land use adopted as a city policy," she said. "The type of housing will depend on where the housing market is in 1985. Our concern was to establish areas for cities."

ONE OF THE future strengths for Grand Circus Park is that it will be a site for the projected amphitheater. Since the present estimate is that 10,000 people use the area every day, the people mover will be an important factor in the economic activity of the area.

Like much of downtown Detroit, Mrs. Beebe said a lot of the buildings in the Grand Circus Park area were built

in the 1920s. She called these the "boomerown days."

"When we try to revitalize those areas, we have to look back on those boomerown days and try to picture how they looked . . . those old buildings are special."

She was speaking not only of the architecture but of the quality of material used which would be difficult, if not impossible, to duplicate today.

One of the areas she is enthusiastic and quite certain about is the Cadillac Center which is a type of mall slated for the Kern block and surrounding areas. Although the present Hudson's store may eventually come down, Hudson's is slated to be one of the anchor stores in Cadillac Center, Mrs. Beebe said.

"CADILLAC CENTER is past the drawing board stage," she said. "It will be a large, modern, well-constructed mall."

With only a shade less conviction, but still optimistically, she mentioned Ayer's front housing west of Cobbs Hall, Forest City's plan to build houses on Washington Blvd. announced this month, and the conversion of four office buildings to residential use by a group called "Adaptive Housing."

A vital, but outwardly calm person, Mrs. Beebe wondered if growing up on a farm with the glamorous big city close by might not have been responsible for her appreciation and enthusiasm for cities.

Mrs. Beebe began her career as an intern with an English planning firm.

She remembered that some of the English people she worked with pointed

out to her how special Detroit was because of the radial streets and broad avenues.

"I got so interested in the work that I started taking courses at Wayne State University in planning," she said. "There were very few women in the field at that time and I ended up getting my masters at Wayne."

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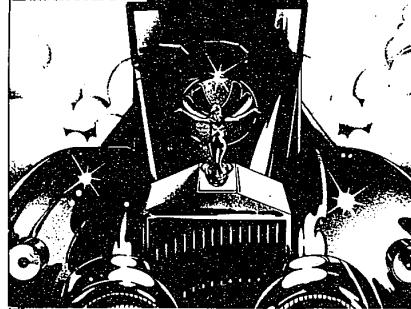
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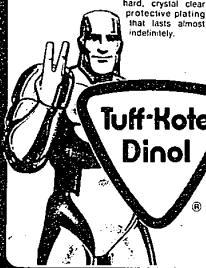
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