

# Planner holds high hopes for Detroit

By CORINNE ABATT

When Detroit's Renaissance Center was just an idea, Katherine Ford Beebe of Birmingham listened to the pessimists' fear it apart.

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

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

"In 1971-72, people thought Detroit was hopeless," she said. "But ever 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 now 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 circles 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 they couldn't farm in wedge-shaped 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 Whitney 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 saw many strengths. One of the most encouraging was that institutions in the area weren't trading 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 Y 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 housing and the construction of new 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 use."

ONE OF THE future strengths for Grand Circus Park is that it will be a stop for the projected people mover. 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 "boomtown days."

"When we try to revitalize those areas, we have to look back on those boomtown 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 happen."

With only a shade less conviction, but still optimistically, she mentioned river-front housing west of Cobo Hall, Forest City's plan to build housing 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 views.

"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."

AFTER THAT she was with Detroit Renaissance for seven years as a planner. She took a one year sabbatical to work on her doctorate in architecture at the University of Michigan.

She is particularly interested in community design and has done extensive follow-ups on European and American new cities to see how they have fared with use. She said architects seldom, if ever, have an opportunity to do a follow-up to see if a project designed to meet the needs of a people and/or a community has fulfilled its destiny - and if so, how.

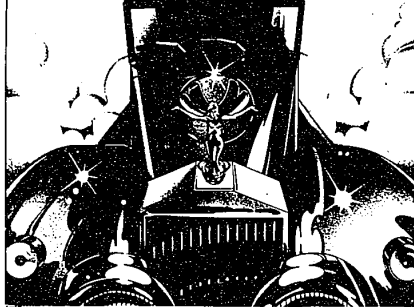
She and her firm's partners are presently working a design for the Farwell Building to establish 70 housing units. "But, the one I'd really like to save is the Fox Theater," she added. It would be ideal for large scale performing arts. It has a fine organ and there's no reason why something like the Metropolitan Opera couldn't be there - the acoustics are better than the Masonic. The city is about to acquire it for taxes. What a resource. It's fantastic. It could change that whole area."

Mrs. Beebe's confidence in the future of Detroit comes through in every gesture and every thing she says. She's a city-lover who really believes in this one.

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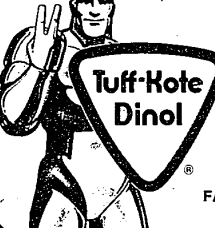
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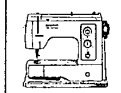
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