Celebrating 125 Years

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants
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TABLE OF CONTENTS
Part 1: Historical Roots  9
11 The Founding
15 Chamber Locations
22 Partnership & Cultural Venues Timeline

Part 2: Signature Accomplishments  29
30 Public Policy Initiatives
34 Tourism Leader
40 Air Service
46 First Women
50 The Return of Baseball
56 The Bartholomew Plan
60 The Renaissance Begins
66 Prairie Meadows
72 The Des Moines Vision Plan
78 Vision Iowa
86 The Partnership Model
96 Greater Des Moines Leadership Institute
98 Young Professionals Connection
104 Pappajohn Sculpture Park
108 Principal Riverwalk

Part 3: The Giants  113
113 Board Leaders
123 Connie Wimer
125 Steve Chapman, Suku Radia
126 Steve Zumbach
127 John Ruan III
130 Executive Leaders
131 Monroe Colston
132 John Adams

Retrospective Section  136

Capital Crossroads  169
The modern rebirth of downtown Des Moines is often tied to the early 1970’s. That’s when Robb Kelley built a new headquarters for EMC Insurance Companies on Mulberry St., John Fitzgibbon of the Iowa-Des Moines National Bank (now Wells Fargo) built the Financial Center on Walnut St., and John Ruan built the Ruan Center on Grand Ave.

But the rebirth goes back further than that. It goes back to an effort in the late 1960’s to keep a J.C. Penney store in downtown. The department store was threatening to move its downtown store to the suburbs, as Sears had already done and Montgomery Ward was about to do.

Since the 1930’s, the three major national retail chains had operated department stores in downtown Des Moines.

In fact, it was in the Des Moines Penney store that the future founder of Wal-Mart Stores Inc., Sam Walton, received his first retail sales training. After graduating from the University of Missouri with a degree in economics in 1940, Walton took a job as a management trainee in the Penney store in Des Moines, where he worked until he left to go to war in 1942.

But after the war, developers began creating shopping malls in suburban areas, and in 1959, the Des Moines area got its first major mall when Merle Hay Plaza opened as an open-air mall on the site of the former St. Gabriel’s Monastery on the northwest edge of Des Moines. Sears and Younkers were the original anchor stores.

At the time, Younkers kept its downtown store, but Sears did not. Not many years later, Montgomery Wards followed suit and abandoned downtown in favor of a store at Merle Hay.

The downtown J.C. Penney store was considering a similar move, which concerned downtown property owners. They worried that downtown might soon become an empty hole in the center of the city, as was happening in other large cities, including Omaha, Kansas City, and St. Louis.

Years later, Iowa-Des Moines National Bank president Fitzgibbon recalled a meeting at the old Des Moines Club, which was located in the building where the Suites of 800 Locust boutique hotel is today.
Business owners were complaining about all the boarded-up storefronts and bird droppings on sidewalks,” Fitzgibbon said. “People wanted to know what we were going to do about it.”

Fitzgibbon and Des Moines Register Publisher David Kruidenier agreed to lead the effort. Both of their businesses depended on the success of the community, and both believed that the success of the community depended on having a vibrant downtown, which is exactly what the Bartholomew Plan for Des Moines had said in 1961.

But virtually none of the plan’s recommendations had been followed, and now the deterioration in the core was increasingly obvious.

Kruidenier and Fitzgibbon traveled to Penney’s regional headquarters in Skokie, Ill., and to the national headquarters in New York, and asked what it would take to keep J.C. Penney downtown.

The answer was a new store with adjacent parking. The old store was located on the northwest corner of Fifth Ave. and Walnut St., where the Kaleidoscope at the Hub is today. The site the Penney’s officials wanted was across the street at 500 Walnut St., where the abandoned Sears store stood.

To keep J.C. Penney downtown, the community was going to have to buy the old Sears store, tear it down, and build a new store that could be leased to Penney.

But who would pay for it?

As it happened, one of the few accomplishments of the 1961 Bartholomew Plan was to spur the Greater Des Moines Chamber of Commerce to create a new entity, called Des Moines Development Corp., as a way to pay for downtown improvements.

So far, the corporation hadn’t done anything, because there had been no consensus on where to start. But now they had an agreed-upon goal: keep J.C. Penney downtown. Fitzgibbon
and Kruidenier persuaded more than 30 downtown business owners to put in enough money to get the project started. Then, they would borrow the rest.

But they still needed parking. The site that worked best was the half block directly across Fifth Ave. It was occupied by a Salvation Army store and the city’s original federal building, which had been completed in 1871.

The city bought the buildings, tore them down, and built a four-level public parking garage.

The garage was connected to the Penney store by Des Moines’ first skywalk, beginning a network that would eventually extend for more than three miles throughout downtown.

The way Fitzgibbon and Kruidenier raised money for the J.C. Penney project evolved into a pattern that is still used today for major civic projects.

Their strategy was to go to Harold Allen, who was the chairman of Bankers Life Co. (now Principal Financial Group Inc.). The insurance company was the largest employer in downtown. Fitzgibbon figured that if they could get a substantial commitment from Allen, they could use that example when they went to other business owners.

After Allen, they went to Jim Windsor, who was the head of Equitable of Iowa Life Insurance, the second biggest employer, and then worked their way down the list of downtown employers.

The Penney store helped kick off a new wave of downtown office construction. A new headquarters for EMC Insurance was built simultaneously with the Penney store in 1970. The 25-story Financial Center followed in 1972, and the 36-story Ruan Center was built in 1973.

The next big project that involved the same group of leaders was the Des Moines Civic Center.

For decades, the KRNT Theater on Ninth St. near Iowa Methodist Medical Center had been the place where major performances were held. By the 1970’s, though, the number of performances had fallen considerably. The theater was well past its prime. Not many people wanted to go there and not many artists wanted to appear there.
Civic and business leaders realized the city needed a new theater and organized a bond issue to get the money to pay for it. But the issue failed.

“... if we really wanted a Civic Center, we needed to go out and raise the money ourselves.”

The day after the vote, Fitzgibbon said Kruidenier came to him and asked: “What do we do now?”

“I told him that if we really wanted a Civic Center, we needed to go out and raise the money ourselves.”

Kruidenier argued that the timing was bad.

Fitzgibbon said the timing is never right, but if you want something, you just do it.

“How do we start?” Kruidenier asked.

“With you,” Fitzgibbon said. “You’ve got the Cowles Foundation, the Kruidenier Foundation and the Register and Tribune.”

Fitzgibbon figured they needed to raise about $10.5 million.

He told Kruidenier to come up with $2.5 million and said he would come up with $750,000. The rest they would get from the community, just like they had done before with the J.C. Penney project.

They put together a team that called on every segment of the community – labor unions, contractors, insurance companies, retailers, doctors, lawyers, and bankers.

It only took about three months to raise the money they needed, Fitzgibbon said.

The Civic Center opened in 1979.

The next project was a new downtown hotel. There was a debate over where to put the hotel. Kruidenier wanted it near the new Civic Center at Third and Locust Streets, while John Ruan wanted it near his new Ruan Center office building at Seventh St. and Grand Ave.

Ruan raised most of the money for the project, so he got to put it where he wanted.

The $27 million Des Moines Marriott Downtown that opened in 1981 turned out to be the first of a long list of new construction projects put in place during the 1980’s.

1981-1990 PROJECTS

Between 1981 and 1990, more than 20 downtown commercial and residential projects costing more than $500 million (more than $1 billion in 2013 dollars) were put in place. The projects included:

1981 — The Marriott hotel, $27 million
1981 — The Locust Mall (now the Partnership Building), $12 million
1981 — Elsie Mason Manor, $6.5 million
1981 — Civic Center Court apartments, $3.6 million
1982 — Two Ruan Center, $12 million
1983 — Capital Square, $48 million
1985 — Capitol Center complex, $12 million
1985 — Polk County Convention Complex, $14 million
1985 — Plaza condominiums, $25 million
1985 — KCCI TV studio, $4 million
1986 — Park Place apartments, $10 million
1986 — Hub Tower and Kaleidoscope at the Hub, $48 million
1986 — Walnut Street Transit Mall, $9 million
1986 — Keck City Center, $8.2 million
1986 — Principal Financial Group Tower, $42 million
1986 — East Grand Office Park, $10.3 million
1987 — Ligutti Tower and parking garage, $6 million
1987 — State of Iowa Historical Museum, $27 million
1990 — 801 Grand, $80 million
1990 — Parking garage south of 801 Grand, $12.5 million
1990 — Embassy Suites hotel, $15 million
Many current aspects of downtown Des Moines, including its world-class sculpture park and attention-getting riverwalk, can be traced back to an intellectual exercise that began in 1988.

At the time, New York City architect Mario Gandelsonas was teaching at Yale University, where the Argentine native had become fascinated with the grid layouts of American cities. The grids of cities in Europe and South America often followed rivers, hills, and other topographical features, while development in most American cities followed latticework grids that Thomas Jefferson had originally created to more accurately map the Louisiana Purchase.

In 1988, Gandelsonas received a grant from a foundation run by the national architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) to apply his grid-work studies to a still-developing Midwestern city. SOM President Bruce Graham suggested Des Moines, where his firm had designed the American Republic Insurance Co. headquarters at 601 Sixth Ave.

When Gandelsonas looked at a map of Des Moines, he was immediately intrigued. The Des Moines and Raccoon rivers meet just south of downtown, creating a slightly off-center downtown grid, which intersects with a traditional north-south grid just beyond the downtown core.

In 1988 and again in 1989, Gandelsonas brought teams of Yale students to Des Moines to study and plot the 150-year history and significance of the city’s development as a center of industry, finance, and government.

Using old records and his own computer sketches, Gandelsonas peeled back the layers of history. As he did, he discovered why certain buildings had been built where they were and how changing transportation patterns affected development.

He learned, for example, that Court Ave., which in the 1980’s was a one-way street carrying traffic away from the Polk County Courthouse, had originally been designed to carry...
traffic to the courthouse. As a result of his work, traffic today flows both ways on Court.

Gandelsonas was struck by the balance created by the city’s two chief culture centers: the Iowa State Fairgrounds on the east and Greenwood Park on the west. He also underscored the importance of Des Moines International Airport and Fleur Drive as the city’s most significant gateway into downtown.

As local understanding of what Gandelsonas was doing began to grow, members of the city’s power structure became intrigued and asked him to take the process a step further. They raised $250,000 and asked Gandelsonas, along with the city’s former planning director, Robert Mickle, to guide a wide cross section of the city’s social, cultural, and business populations through a planning process that would build on what the architect had learned about Des Moines.

A wide-reaching 90-member steering committee was formed, and beginning in the late summer of 1990, Gandelsonas, Mickle and Diana Agrest, Gandelsonas’ wife and business partner, began a 15-month process of brainstorming.

The city’s architectural community was drawn into the process and, to the surprise of many, became active, unpaid participants at the public sessions.

The idea was to throw as many ideas as possible on the table, and sort out later what was doable and what was not.

Water was the focus of two of the more extreme concepts.

One involved pulling back the banks of the Des Moines River as it flows through downtown to the point where City Hall and the Public Library would sit on peninsulas jutting into the river, and then create a riverwalk similar to the commercially successful one in downtown San Antonio, Texas.

A second idea was to dredge the Raccoon River to create a lake in the area behind the Meredith Corp. headquarters and then build lakeside homes around it.

Of the early proposals, Des Moines Mayor John “Pat” Dorrian said: “There wasn’t any gray area. You either thought they were ridiculous or that they had a lot of potential.”

The city looked into the river and lake proposals to the point where it became obvious that they would be cost prohibitive.
Later, Principal Financial Group Inc. would latch onto the concept of a riverwalk and adopt the project as a way of celebrating the company’s first 125 years in Des Moines. Under Principal’s guidance, the project became a $70 million effort that today includes a downtown riverwalk loop that contains two distinctive pedestrian bridges. In between are a number of attractions, including an amphitheater, an ice skating rink, fountains, gardens, artwork, and an eye-catching kiosk called The Hub for riverside events.

At the end of the vision plan brainstorming in 1992, consensus formed around a half-dozen overlapping concepts:

- Improve the western entrance into downtown with a park, which over time evolved to become the John and Mary Pappajohn Sculpture Park. The leaders believed the park would attract high-value commercial construction, which it did when insurers Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield and Nationwide/Allied Insurance chose to build corporate campuses on the north and south sides of the park.
- Redevelop the crumbling area between the Des Moines River and the Iowa Capitol. The area east of the river had been one of the city’s earliest commercial districts. It was known during the late 19th century as a brick-making center. “Red Brick City” was the name the vision planners gave to the project. “East Village” is the name that stuck once a group of mostly female retailers began opening shops in old buildings along Locust St. A combination of retail, office, and housing now occupies the area.
- Beautify Fleur Drive between the airport and downtown. The concept led to redevelopment of Gray’s Lake. The lake with its trail and signature bridge is now the city’s most popular park. In more recent years, the Ruan family spearheaded efforts to create a linear garden in the Fleur Drive median, making the trip from the airport to downtown a completely different experience from what it was in 1990.
- Create a road bypass immediately south of downtown. This proposal had been in city plans since the late 1920’s and was finally brought to fruition as Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway, which extends from Fleur Drive to S.E. Ninth St.
- Rebuild the area around Court Ave., focusing on its history as the early marketplace of the city. In recent years, the weekly Downtown Farmers Market has become a summer institution, while another institution, the Science Center of Iowa, moved from its longtime home in Greenwood Park to a new location just south of downtown. In recent years, the area south of Court Ave. has become one of the city’s most successful infill housing projects.
- Bring housing back to downtown. The Vision Plan’s original idea was to create Hillside, a $300 million community of condominiums and apartments on the hills north of Principal Financial Group’s corporate campus. It was abandoned after several developers looked at the concept and decided it was too expensive to cash flow. But rather than give up on the idea of downtown housing, developers began making small inroads in the East Village and south of Court Ave., and by creating new links to Sherman Hill, the mid- to late-19th-century community located northwest of downtown.

During the early and middle 1990’s as the Vision Plan was beginning to take shape, Des Moines City Planner James Grant captured the essence of the effort. The purpose of the Vision Plan was not to effect an immediate makeover of the city, he said. Rather it was “to plant the seeds now for some things that won’t happen until 10 or 20 years down the road.”

Which it did.

“There wasn’t any gray area. You either thought they were ridiculous or that they had a lot of potential.”