
ROCHESTER HISTORY

The Life and Times of Midtown Plaza

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Vol. LXIX

Spring 2007

No. 1

A Publication of the Central Library of
Rochester and Monroe County
and the Rochester Historical Society

The Life of Midtown: A Timeline

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The Broad Street entrance of Midtown Plaza. The front, back and inside cover photographs are courtesy of the City Hall Photo Lab, Contemporary Collection.

Several of the photographs shown in this publication were taken from newspaper clippings, and are therefore, not of the highest print quality.

A Vision for the Future

When Gilbert and Gordon McCurdy and Maurice and Fred Forman announced their plan for Midtown Plaza on September 25, 1958, a Rochester *Times-Union* reporter declared it “the 15-million-dollar dream” that would “trigger a rebirth of Rochester’s entire downtown area.” There was much cause for excitement. Not only would the plan replace several acres of scattered parking lots, but Midtown Plaza would be an entirely new kind of development. At a time when shopping malls were still a recent innovation, Midtown would be the first downtown enclosed shopping mall in the nation. The project captured the imaginations of city officials, architects, and planners nationwide. Nationally-syndicated columnist Sylvia Porter told her readers in February 1959 that when it came to downtown revitalization, “Rochester is doing more than worrying.” It was “boldly redrawing its commercial face.” Just a few months later, the nation’s major building industry trade journal, *Architectural Forum*, raved that “conservative Rochester” was charging forward with “one of the most imaginative, well-rounded urban renewal programs in the U.S.”¹

Yet forty years after its celebrated grand opening, Midtown Plaza had become, according to many Rochesterians, obsolete. Thomas C. Wilmot, whose company owned the Sibley building across the street from Midtown, declared it “a hulking mess.”² Rochester Downtown Development Corporation (RDDC) president Heidi Zimmer-Meyer was similarly blunt. “Frankly,” she said in the fall of 2003, “if someone died and put the property in your lap, what would you do with it?”³ By 2005, an RDDC-commissioned study by the Urban Land Institute recommended the demolition of most of the six-building complex. The ULI recommendations won the endorsement of incoming Mayor, Robert J. Duffy. Then, the announcement in October 2007 that Paetec, the fast-growing local telecommunications company, would build its new headquarters at the Midtown site makes it certain that by the end of this decade, Midtown Plaza will cease to exist.

Institutions come and go, and four or five decades can result in enormous change. Still, the life of Midtown Plaza has been short. The stark nature of its demise calls out for explanation, and raises questions as well: Was the project well-conceived? Could its decline have been prevented? Should it affect how we view other "big projects" and if so, in what way?

The problems of Midtown in the last decade have been well-documented. In January 1997 alone, Midtown lost five tenants, including two national chains. In November of the same year the McCurdy family, by then the sole owners of Midtown, sold to Arnold Industries, a California company that went bankrupt just three years later.⁴ But troubles began much earlier. Midtown's history had been rocky from the start; as rocky, in fact, as the past forty-some years of the community (and nation) that welcomed the opening of Midtown with such celebration in the spring of 1962.



L. to R. Fred S. Forman, Gilbert J. C. McCurdy, Gordon McCurdy and Maurice R. Forman. Both the Forman and the McCurdy brothers inherited control over their businesses from their fathers, who had founded the stores early in the 20th century. John C. McCurdy founded his store in 1901, and Benjamin Forman established his business in 1908. Photograph courtesy of Rochester Democrat & Chronicle.

Trouble Downtown

Older Rochesterians often remember the downtown of the 1950s as a magical place. If your standard of comparison is the downtown of today, it would be hard to argue otherwise. Yet if you were to have asked Gilbert McCurdy in 1956 about the state of downtown, he would have presented a troubling picture. Downtown had been struggling the entire decade. As early as 1952, for example, the Chamber of Commerce Retail Merchants Council began organizing to combat the decline of downtown shopping. They urged the city to improve bus service and they orchestrated “Good Neighbor Days” in which stores held sales simultaneously to attract larger crowds of shoppers. The major automobile routes into Rochester were soon peppered with billboards proclaiming to motorists—or perhaps reminding them—that downtown offered Rochester’s greatest variety of outlets, all in one convenient place.⁵

Like any good business men, the McCurdys and the Formans saw the opportunities in the suburbs and responded. The McCurdys had recently opened a store in Northgate Plaza in Greece, and B. Forman’s had expanded to Irondequoit’s Culver Ridge. Neither the McCurdys nor the Forman brothers had intended their expansion into the suburbs to come at the expense of sales at their flagship downtown stores. But by the mid-1950s, it was clear that was happening. By 1958, the year the Formans and McCurdys announced their plans for Midtown Plaza, the Rochester region had added 400,000 new square feet of suburban retail space in less than a decade. Meanwhile, sales at all downtown department stores combined, had fallen by a quarter.⁶

The McCurdys and Formans were civic-minded, and wanted to improve the business climate downtown rather than abandon the heart of the city. The source of the problem seemed clear enough: parking. The Inner Loop, started in 1947, had begun to address the twin realities of suburbs and the automobile by easing traffic flow in and out of the city, but adequate space for parking cars remained a problem. The city had already constructed several parking garages, and both the McCurdys and the Formans had approached the city urging the need for more. But they were disappointed with the city’s response: a proposal for yet another garage, with a

500-car capacity, to be situated near both stores. So, the McCurdys and Formans met to devise their own solution⁷. It was only natural that they would seek the input of Victor Gruen, the nation's most renowned urban planner, the man whose suburban mall designs had recently made him a darling of the popular press.

Crossed Signals

Midtown never was strictly retail, nor was it even simply composed of shops and offices. What stands out most clearly in hindsight is a fundamental misunderstanding between its champions in Rochester, and Gruen, its ambitious and idiosyncratic designer.⁸ The McCurdys and the Formans wanted to attract more shoppers downtown. Mayor Peter Barry and City Manager Robert Aex were eager to help. Facing a declining tax base, Aex was particularly delighted that a single plot of land would encompass three uses: a parking garage, a shopping mall and an office building. Aex and the Mayor had been negotiating with the McCurdys and Formans since the fall of 1956, when the two major retailers set up Midtown Holdings Corporation to begin buying downtown land. Key to the project would be the City's agreement to bear the costs of extending Broad Street and building an underground parking garage for the project to which the McCurdys and Formans were investing \$15 million. It would be up to both the City Planning Commission and the City Council to approve the expenditure.

Opposition materialized quickly. Several merchants along Main Street charged that the plan would only succeed in drawing shoppers away from downtown Rochester's main thoroughfare. Others, such as City Planning Commissioner Bernard E. Finucane, focused less on the concept of Midtown than on the city's financial contribution, estimated at \$12 million. Few questioned the assumption that the fortunes of downtown depended in large part on the success of its major retailers.⁹

But Victor Gruen had proposed a project whose core element was only incidentally retail. Gruen presented Rochester with a design for a grand, enclosed town square that was to be a center not only for shopping, but for public art, performances, meetings, and impromptu gatherings.



The vision Victor Gruen proposed was more similar to Rochester's historic Reynolds Arcade than to an enclosed shopping mall. The Arcade, first built in 1828, was the dream project of Abelard Reynolds, a pioneer settler of Rochester. The original Arcade building, which stood until 1932, was the focal point of the city. It had everything: the post office, John Bausch's optics shop, Western Union Telegraph, a library and meeting room, and a variety of shops carrying everyday and luxury goods. Photograph courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Division.

In 1964, two years after Midtown's grand opening, Gruen published a book called *The Heart of Our Cities*, in which he devoted an entire chapter to the plan, execution, and first two years of his most ambitious project yet. This visionary complex, he boasted, was a multi-functional urban center serving "human" needs in addition to material ones. In a statement that surely would have raised eyebrows had Rochesterians known of it, Gruen declared: "Midtown Plaza is not a shopping center downtown." Despite claims that Midtown was a downtown mall, Gruen argued forcefully that the most significant feature of the complex was the "variety and versatility" of its functions. Given variety and versatility, Midtown would provide a "change of urban pattern, a new order," and in so doing, eliminate the "backward, unadjusted urban organism" that described pre-Midtown Rochester, and, in Gruen's view, American cities in general. In 1964, Gruen declared Midtown Plaza the first living example of a theory of urban revitalization he called "transfiguration."¹⁰

To the handful of Rochesterians at the center of the project, however, the focus remained retail. It is unlikely that the McCurdys, the Formans, Mayor Barry, Aex, or any City Council members were aware of, or even cared about, Gruen's theory of transfiguration. His articulation of the theory was vague, yet promised radical results. To the project's chief boosters in Rochester, the ultimate goal of Midtown was clear, measurable, and one with which even Gruen's most ostentatious claims were fully compatible. The plan was to return crowds to downtown to buttress the retailers who had been central to downtown for decades. A multi-use facility captured the imagination of many of Rochester's civic leaders because it promised economic benefits to a struggling urban core.

But to Gruen, the non-retail elements of Midtown were anything but ornamental, and anything but mere enticements to attract shoppers. They were central to the project itself. And if they didn't succeed, neither would Midtown.

Architect of Environments

Victor Gruen, as Malcolm Gladwell described him in a 2004 *New Yorker* profile, was “short, stout, and unstoppable, with a wild head of hair and eyebrows like unpruned hedgerows.”¹¹

In the decade after World War II, Gruen, one of the first architects in this nation to have achieved popular fame, invented the American shopping mall. But he seemed an unlikely person, to say the least, to have single-handedly brought into being America’s most quintessential suburban institution. An Austrian Jewish émigré who had been steeped in the Viennese Socialist movement of the 1920s

and early 1930s, Gruen, née Victor Gruenbaum, would not have blended well in the typical postwar American suburb.

The Viennese Socialists who held power in that city through the 1920s and early 1930s emphasized the fulfillment of human potential—particularly mankind’s highest spiritual, intellectual, and artistic aspirations—that they assumed could result from the pursuit of socialist economics. The arts, especially architecture, were central to that mission. Viennese Socialists believed that architecture was not merely the design of buildings to serve the practical needs of humans, but the design of social environments, by physical means, that would unite people and create the kind of community in which human talent would flourish. Years later, Gruen would evoke that faith in surprisingly similar terms. In 1964, in the same book in which he outlined “transfiguration,” Gruen called for a new type of architect—an “environmental architect”—who would, among other things, possess a “restless seeking for deeper insight into the nature of man.”¹²



Victor Gruen, 1903-1980

In the late 1950s, Rochester seemed to be following at least a few of the tenets of environmental architecture. Gruen was impressed by the coordinated steps the city was taking to improve its downtown. The Inner Loop expressway, which he believed was an essential prerequisite to revitalization, was mostly complete. While the Inner Loop made the city more accessible, he also believed that a proposed civic center would draw more people downtown. Gruen had complained that Rochester's downtown had been little more than a "thin facade of productive buildings" that lined Main Street, with no development to speak of either north or south of the thoroughfare. "When photographed from the air," Gruen wrote, "the core area of Rochester appeared like a sea of asphalt and automobile tin roofs, from which rose, in island-like fashion, some structures holding out against the surf of slow but incessantly moving waves of automotive traffic."¹³

But Gruen found the city administration energetic and forward-thinking, and was pleased when the city not only lent its support to Midtown Plaza, but appeared to give serious attention to Gruen's suggestion of a plan to revitalize the entire core (Inner Loop) area. Gruen envisioned new bus lines and parking garages adjoined to the Inner Loop in such a way that "would make it possible to free the intensely developed heart area from all mechanized traffic, and allow the conversion of Main Street, and its cross streets" into pedestrian areas.¹⁴



An aerial view of the Midtown site, looking south from East Avenue, taken before construction began.

Midtown eventually extended from McCurdy's (bottom right), to Broad Street (top left).

Photograph courtesy of the Rochester Public Library, Local History Division.

The design for Midtown Plaza and its surrounding environment would proceed according to a market analysis conducted by the noted real estate consultant Larry Smith of Larry Smith & Associates, in Washington, D.C. The study was authorized by the City Planning Commission, with City Council approval, in 1958, and completed in January 1960. Smith's analysis concurred with Gruen's impression that there existed a surplus of "non-productive and obsolete space" within the Inner Loop. But Smith's analysis offered contradictory conclusions as to the best use for Rochester's urban core. "While the central business district still remains the largest single total grouping of retail shopping facilities," Smith reported, "significant activity has been underway during the past several years *which has considerably altered the role and function of the central business district*" [emphasis added].

Smith detailed the ways in which the rapid suburbanization of Rochester had been followed by the swift growth of suburban retail outlets. "In many respects," the report continued, "the growth of suburban retail activity has assumed many of the roles previously carried out exclusively by facilities located in downtown Rochester." Smith concluded: "The results of our analysis indicated generally that the Rochester Central Business District presently contains a surplus of space in many retail categories...and with respect to the population of the metropolitan area." But Smith also pointed out that, by 1975, "considerable numbers of obsolete or poorly located space will be dropped from the existing inventory and replaced by newer or renewed centrally located facilities. The success of Rochester's central business district as a retail hub lies in its ability to create or to have available a compact, well merchandised retail core capable of competing with existing...facilities or facilities which may be developed at any future date."¹⁵

The report could be legitimately read in two ways. Read in one way, the report concluded that downtown could no longer count on retail. Read another way, the right retail design could save downtown.

The Perfect Bubble World

Because he never envisioned Midtown Plaza as primarily a retail venture, it is unlikely that Gruen would have been concerned about Smith's report. To Gruen, the emphasis on generic concepts such as square feet of floor space or "retail establishments" would have missed the point. Midtown Plaza would address a larger cultural and spiritual problem. It would overcome, as Gruen put it, the "unspeakable ugliness" and "absence of delight" that characterized American cities. Significantly, when Gruen visited the proposed Midtown site in December 1958, his major public appearance was at the Memorial Art Gallery. There Gruen cited Venice's Piazza San Marco as an ideal city center and asked his audience, rhetorically, why "the citizens of the richest nation in the world have to travel thousands of miles to find restfulness and serenity" of the type that could be found in Piazza San Marco. Gruen concluded that a major reason was that the culture of the United States had "driven art underground, into the galleries, museums and private art collections," where it was removed from the everyday experience of most Americans.¹⁶ Gruen's attitude towards art explains the centrality of the Clock of the Nations to the entire project (*see page 13*).

Retailers such as the McCurdys and Formans would have found much to like in the vision Gruen presented in the winter of 1959. Shopping centers had long employed designers who could harness aesthetics to create an atmosphere of luxury and celebration, in increasingly sophisticated window and floor displays. Because these designers drew a blurry line between these displays and public art, the centrality of public art to a shopping mall would not have been an entirely new concept. Similarly, the "delight" Gruen wished to create in Midtown Plaza would not have differed very much from the delight that department stores had long attempted to arouse in their customers. As one architectural historian described it, Midtown was to be "[t]he perfect bubble-world—the long-sought utopian refuge from the anti-social troubles of the world."¹⁷

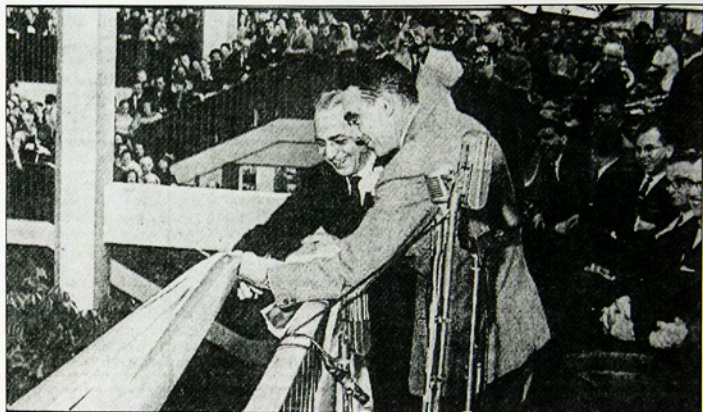


Ground was broken on April 6, 1959. This image, taken in Spring 1961, shows construction of the underground garage.



A welder puts finishing touches on the Midtown Plaza Mall. The entire Midtown Plaza complex, including the 18-story Tower, encompassed seven and a half acres of shopping and business space.

Photos this page courtesy of Rochester Public Library, Local History Division, Midtown Collection.



Mayor Henry Gillette (left) invited former Mayor Peter Barry to cut the ribbon signifying the opening of Midtown Plaza. Mayor Barry lost re-election to Henry Gillette, who had initially opposed the City's involvement in the Midtown project.



On April 10, 1962, throngs jammed Midtown Plaza to witness the ribbon cutting. Above photograph courtesy of Rochester Democrat & Chronicle. Left, from the Rochester Public Library, Local History Division, Midtown Collection.



The Clock of Nations, the centerpiece of Midtown Plaza, mimicks the village clock typically found in outdoor European markets. As an early promotional brochure described it, "As the plazas of Europe, from the days of the Renaissance, have traditionally been enlivened by the village clock, so Midtown Plaza—America's first downtown 'Galleria'—features the 'Clock of the Nations' to mark the time of the day with a colorful pageant." The clock consists of twelve rotating stages, each depicting one of "the twelve major cultures of the world:" Ireland, Puerto Rico, Scotland, Japan, Thailand, Poland, Italy, Canada, Germany, Israel, Nigeria and the United States. Photograph from the Rochester Public Library, Local History Division, Midtown Collection.

If the McCurdys and Formans did not yet envision any plan to escape anti-social troubles (these were yet to come), Rochesterians could at least expect to escape their meteorologic problems. Among the most eagerly anticipated features of the Plaza was the steady 75° climate that would prevail throughout the year. In addition, a combination of natural and artificial light would approximate sunshine, which visitors could enjoy alongside tropical plants and an Italian-styled fountain and reflecting pool.

But at the heart of the town-in-a-bubble vision was a fatal contradiction. The town square that Gruen foresaw, and many Rochesterians embraced, assumed a virtual absence of social conflict. The community that Gruen imagined was one of connections and mutual alliances, and never internal divisions. Gruen—who had in the 1930s watched his beloved Viennese town square fall into the hands of Austrian fascists—had apparently not devoted thoughtful attention to the possibility



that social discord could play out in Rochester's new—and enclosed—town square.

After Midtown opened, Gruen moved on. Meanwhile, Rochesterians were left to discover that town squares are not easily made into escapes from the problems of the town.

Rochesterians were eager to experience the year-round Spring at Midtown. "While the February snows fall, you will be able to dine at a sidewalk café" and even "watch the colorful tropical birds flit about [in] their cages," reported the Times-Union in 1958. ¹⁸ Photo from the Rochester Public Library, Local History Division, Midtown Collection.

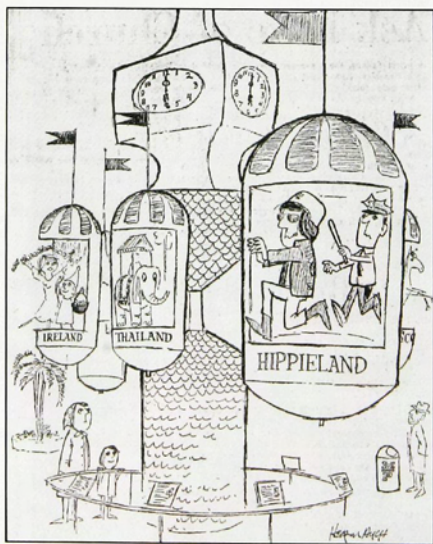
Public or Private?

On April 10, 1962, five thousand Rochesterians gathered to witness the ribbon-cutting that would officially open the City's new town square. Midtown's first year was a resounding success. In the spring of 1963, Midtown Holdings reported that close to 90% of its retail space had been occupied. Moreover, tenants of every type, including Lincoln Rochester Trust Co., the Casual Corner women's clothing store, Malcrest Shoes, and the book and stationery store Scrantom's—all reported that business was "better than expected." In Casual Corner's case, sales at its Midtown branch were 50% above projections. Gruen produced a list of events held in Midtown's auditorium that was sixteen pages long.¹⁹ By 1964, Rochesterians were crediting Midtown with inspiring a flurry of new construction including the Security Trust Building at Main Street and East Avenue, and an office building at Broad and Stone Streets.

News was so good that it was easy to ignore the story of the first tenant to close up shop at Midtown.²⁰ Funfair Amusement Center, a game room, was doing a great business. But on January 11, 1964, Funfair closed its doors, turning its lease back over to Midtown Holdings. Rochester city police had identified Funfair as a "trouble spot" because of the large numbers of young men who allegedly loitered there. Clad in tight jeans and leather jackets, the young men, a few of whom the police could identify by name, intimidated middle-class shoppers and Midtown tenants, who made their concerns known to Midtown manager Angelo J. Chiarella.

Over the next several years, the situation would not be easy to ignore. In December 1966, bitter conflict spilled onto the editorial pages of Rochester's two leading dailies. It broke with an editorial in the *Rochester Times-Union* entitled "The Kooks Mar Midtown Mall." The editorial charged that "the rendezvous for Rochesterians" was becoming "a rendezvous for some of the creepiest kooks this side of Greenwich Village." It responded to the decision by Midtown Holdings to establish new hours. The mall which had been open 24 hours a day, would now close between 1:30 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. in an effort to discourage the "kooks" from congregating at the mall.

A small minority of Rochester's youths—"shaggy-haired, tight-trousered, black-booted, chain-smoking" teenagers—blocked staircases and snarled at security and police, according to the editorial. Absent from the editorial was any clear charge of illegal activity or even substantial public nuisance on the part of the teens. What the teens seemed to violate, instead, were community standards of public dress and demeanor. What those standards were, few could articulate. By 1966, the apparent consensus surrounding appropriate public dress and manners was starting to dissipate, with divisions emerging along ethnic, class and generational lines. One reader who signed his name "Hemlock," responded in kind to the *Times-Union* editorialist. The youths in question, Hemlock countered, were simply young men and women who "choose to wear their hair in a different way." Perhaps the editorial writer "would not look exciting in tight trousers," and "does not wear black boots," Hemlock mused, "[b]ut why not have respect for the dignity of others, even though they may be young, and not square?"²²



This cartoon, which appeared in the Times-Union in January 1968, demonstrates the degree to which social divisions had come to define Rochester's town square by the late 1960s. Courtesy of the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle.

After a year or so of peace, the quarreling resumed. This time, the controversy concerned appropriate dress at the Sidewalk Cafe. The Cafe, which encircled an Italian blue mosaic and marble fountain, had been prized for its elegance. But by 1968 the Cafe too was attracting “kooks, creeps, and weirdos,” according to a *Times-Union* editorial, leading Midtown Holdings to establish a new rule requiring a shirt, jacket, and tie for men at the Cafe. Whereas the “kooks” had once been the leather-clad youths at Funfair, they now were more consistently identified by Rochester’s media, as “hippies”—long-haired teens who challenged the authority of police and security guards. “The hippies may moan about violation of their constitutional rights,” wrote the *Times-Union* editorialist, but the solution was clear: “If the hippies don’t dig the scene under the new rules, they can go somewhere else.”²³

But by 1968 the *Times-Union* and Midtown Holdings would also be on the defensive, and, for the first time, protest against the Plaza management would come from a tenant. James Chapman, the manager of Midtown Records & Musical Instruments, charged plaza security with throwing teens—many of them his regular customers—out of the mall simply for having long hair. John Humphrey, chief of plaza security guards, called the charges “far-fetched.”²⁴ In fact, partisans on both sides of the debate had ample ammunition. Shoplifting, illegal drug sales, and security’s harassment of law-abiding long-haired teens were all part of the everyday scene at Midtown. Yet, for Midtown Holdings, the stakes could not be higher: Rochester’s great achievement of urban revival, one admired throughout the nation, was fast getting a local reputation as seedy.

In April 1970, *Upstate* magazine ran a special feature on Midtown. One reporter called Midtown “a quick micro-composite of the faces, figures, trends, clothes, fads and fancies of Rochester’s everyday people.” Yet it was also “an instant glimpse into some of the city’s problems.”

Another observer pointed out that in the eight years since Midtown had opened, the United States had “entered a period of social revolution—an era of dissent, demonstration and drugs.”²⁵ In Rochester, of course, there had been the 1964 race riots, and similar riots would break out in cities across the country. In the spring of 1970, memories of the traumatic events of 1968, including the assassinations of both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, as well as the unraveling of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago—were still raw. Midtown Plaza,

which, as Gruen boasted in 1964, had been in its first year “the scene of political meetings of both major parties, each attracting more than 10,000 participants”—no longer welcomed political gatherings.²⁶

In an interview, Chiarella acknowledged the “public nature” of Midtown, but added that it “really is a private venture.” Accordingly, he added that Midtown Holdings was undertaking a “re-evaluation of the town mall concept.”²⁷ But the question as to what extent Midtown Plaza was “public” and to what extent “private” was significant only in a society torn by conflict. While the legal question remained unresolved, Midtown officials took dramatic steps to restore harmony.

Midtown, a Happy Place

The discord at Midtown would continue into the early 1970s.

In February 1971, Chiarella ordered tightened security and strengthened patrols against loiterers, following the arrests of eight mall patrons for criminal trespass and disorderly conduct, and the expulsion of over one hundred others.

To Chiarella, the issue was clear: it was time to either “get tough” or “go out of business.”²⁸ At the same time, Midtown officials continued to worry about the messages they were sending to younger customers. Not only were long hair and “hippie” slang increasingly mainstream; demographics suggested that the real risk to business was alienating the huge numbers of young Baby Boomers now in their teens and twenties. Midtown’s managers were caught between a generational and cultural divide, and nothing symbolized their dilemma better than the new slogan they adopted just months after the new, get tough policy. From August 1971 onwards—and just in time for back-to-school shoppers—it would be *Midtown, A Happy Place*.



Between February and August 1971, Midtown Holdings public relations director Bob Fender instituted a sea-change in Midtown’s approach to youth that did not risk alienating older and more conservative Rochesterians. Midtown would appeal to the softer-edged, mainstreamed version of the hippie, whose goal was no

longer to “drop out” of society, but rather to place his or her stamp on society with a new, more casual and laid-back, sensibility. In August, Midtown signified the start of this new era with a two-week “smile campaign.” New ornaments filled the mall—balloons, posters, and a large mobile hanging above the Clock of Nations, all featuring brightly colored happy faces. Most significant of all were the new uniforms and tactics, of Midtown’s security officers, who traded in their “militaristic” old uniforms, and donned black pants, light blue shirts, striped ties, and maroon jackets with happy face buttons on their lapels. Midtown security chief Alvin Grossman, who had been appointed in May, told the *Democrat and Chronicle* that the change mirrored “a new approach to security, all over the country. We want to say to the shoppers, ‘Can we help you in any way?’” The Midtown security guard was now to be more like the favorite uncle than the tough cop.²⁹

The smile campaign, according to the *Democrat and Chronicle*, as well as the *Times-Union*, received high marks from customers both young and old. *Democrat and Chronicle* columnist Roberta Plutzik agreed, reporting that the mall was now “less plagued by loiterers.” Indeed, some of Midtown’s more serious troubles had dissipated: sales of illegal drugs, many arranged under the Clock of Nations or at other major meeting places in the mall, occurred less and less frequently. Panhandling and shoplifting were also down, according to Grossman.³⁰



Midtown Plaza has always delighted Rochesterians at Christmastime. Photograph from the City Hall Photo Lab, Contemporary Collection.

The elimination of illegal activities at the mall was surely cause for celebration. But Midtown Holdings had gone further. It had narrowed the conception of what Midtown was to be. Grossman put it most succinctly: "We don't bother someone because his hair is long. We want young people to come here if they want to shop."³¹ Although Midtown's stakeholders had always conceived of the complex as primarily a retail destination, social conflict had led them to make that claim far more explicitly. But if Midtown was to be simply a mall, then it would face even more competition than it did in 1964. The development of suburban malls continued long after Midtown opened. In 1967, it was Greece Town Mall. In 1982, it was Marketplace Mall in Henrietta. If Midtown were simply a mall, it would have to convince middle class and affluent shoppers, now concentrated in the suburbs, to shop downtown rather than closer to home. As real estate consultant Larry Smith had reported in his 1960 market analysis, it was possible, but far from certain, that downtown retailers would succeed.

A Changing City

Having returned to his beloved Vienna, Victor Gruen watched the development of American malls, and American downtowns, with dismay. Shopping malls, whether urban or suburban, were "functional ghettos" that had failed to execute the concept Gruen had introduced of a multifunctional city center with club rooms, libraries, medical offices, and performance centers, in addition to stores.³² In Rochester, the perception was different. By the time Midtown reached its 20th birthday, times in Rochester, as in the nation as a whole, had settled. But even though thousands of patrons continued to visit the mall, retail was suffering, as was the complex as a whole. The Tower Hotel, which sat atop the mall, closed in 1980, citing high vacancy rates. Office rental brought more income than retail. By 1984, both McCurdys and B. Forman's had begun converting retail space to offices.

On a typical day at Midtown Plaza, these changes were not necessarily apparent. Thousands continued to pass through its doors everyday. It was still possible to encounter a greater critical mass of people in Midtown than anywhere else in Rochester or its suburbs. But more and more, it was a place to pass through, rather



In a Times-Union article commemorating "Midtown at 25," Charlie Barone, then 82, who had a barbershop at Midtown was interviewed. Known as "the Mayor of Midtown," he described what Midtown mall had become. "You can see the changes, what it was and is. But I think it's for the better. Midtown is meeting the needs of the people, and we have such a cross section of people. To me, I think it will be a thrill to celebrate the 25th anniversary." Photograph courtesy of Rochester Democrat & Chronicle.

than a destination. Its primary patron was a downtown office worker who walked through at lunchtime. The exception, of course, was Christmastime. Then, Midtown came alive with all the splendor its proponents promised. The huge tree, the snowy mountain, the monorail, and Santa, are some of the best, and most deeply imprinted memories on Rochesterians who now look at the demise of Midtown with bitter-sweet nostalgia.

Yet throughout the 1980s, Midtown continued to grapple with social problems that challenged cities across the country. As one *Democrat and Chronicle* article put it on Midtown's 20th birthday, Midtown was "still hanging on."³³ Although Midtown's troubles received less media scrutiny than they had in the late 1960s, a deep recession in the early 1980s underscored the persistence of problems facing the complex. A rising number of homeless Rochesterians, some mentally ill, were reported frequenting the mall and sleeping on its benches. Like in the 1960s, teens congregated at Midtown, often during school hours. Whereas these teens had once

been noted for their flowing long locks, by the 1980s, Midtown's teen patrons were predominantly African-American. Conflicts among teen patrons, and between teens and Midtown security guards—now derisively called “Red Coats”—continued.³⁴

By the time Midtown celebrated its 25th birthday, to many Rochesterians the complex was becoming less the center of the City than a center of curiosity. The *Times-Union* featured a section called “The Changing Faces of Midtown,” which examined Midtown's twenty-five years with the eye of a distant observer. The efforts of Midtown's management, and its tenants, to continue to attract crowds, were treated in the past tense, as though these efforts were over. In spite of Midtown's attempts to portray its history as a story of “renewal and diversity,” the *Times-Union* would not be swayed, reporting that “Midtown's efforts to deal with unsightly and unsavory elements were complicated by the development of suburban malls.”³⁵

And yet it would be difficult to call Midtown a failure. This is true not only because of the memories that brought Rochesterians downtown in December, 2007, to celebrate one last Christmas at Midtown. Nostalgia is too qualitative, and too close to the vague and intangible “delight” that Gruen identified as the main goal of Midtown. Midtown's successes were more the brick-and-mortar type. It was not quite “transfiguration” that Midtown achieved, but renewed interest in downtown that convinced corporations like Xerox to (literally) adjoin the Plaza. We will never know what would have become of Rochester's downtown had Midtown Plaza never been conceived. But it is possible that Midtown is not simply the barrier that must be demolished to bring Paetec's new headquarters into being. It is possible that Midtown, by inspiring development that may not have otherwise occurred, actually helped bring Paetec downtown.

Perhaps, in the greatest irony of all, Paetec's anticipated 1,200 downtown employees will want more places to shop, demanding a retail center that will start the cycle of downtown renewal in motion again.

Coins of the Realm

By *Nicholson Baker*

In 1973, when I was sixteen, I got a job in building maintenance at Midtown Plaza, Rochester's then flourishing downtown shopping mall. I spent a day pulling nails from two-by-fours—loudly whistling Ravel's Bolero while I worked, so that the secretaries would know that I knew a few things about French music—and then Rocky, the boss, a dapper man with a mustache, apprenticed me to the mall's odd-job man, Bradway. Bradway taught me how to move filing cabinets (you walk with them on alternating corners, as if you were slow dancing with them, and when you have one of them roughly in position in its row, just put the ball of your foot low against a corner and step down, and the cabinet will slide into place as if pulled there by a magnet); and he taught me how to snap a chalk line, how to cut curves in Sheetrock, how to dig a hole for a no parking sign, how to adjust the hydraulic tension on an automatic door, the right way to use a sledgehammer, and how to change the fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling of the elevator. He wore funny looking glasses, and he sang "Paper Doll" to the secretaries, embarrassing them and me, but he was a decent man and I liked him.

One day, Bradway told me he was going to teach me how to sweep up the pennies in the fountain. Midtown Plaza's fountain had a fifteen-foot-high inward-curving spray, and there were four or five low mushroom fountains to one side, lit from below; the water went around and under a set of stairs rising up to the mall's second level. People sometimes threw pennies in from the landing on the stairs and while standing at the railing on the second level, but mostly they tossed them in as they walked past. I had thrown in pennies myself. The thing to do when you wished on a penny was to thumb-flip it very high—the more air time it had, the more opportunity it had to become an important penny, a singular good-luck penny—and then watch it plunge into the water and twirl down to the tiled bottom of the pool. You had to memorize where it landed. It was the penny with the two very tarnished pennies just to the left of it—or no, was it one of the ones in that very similar constellation a foot away? Every day you could check on your penny, or the penny you had decided must be your penny, to see how it was doing, whether it was accumulating

wish-fulfilling powers. So when Bradway said that I—a maintenance worker earning two-fifty an hour—was going to be sweeping up all the pennies, I experienced a magisterial shiver. We went down to the basement and got a pair of rubber fly-fishing boots, a black bucket with some holes in it, a dustpan, and a squeegee broom. Bradway showed me the switch that turned off the pump for the fountains. I pressed it. There was a clunk.

Back upstairs the water was almost still. I stepped over the marble ledge and, handed the long pole of the squeegee, I began pushing around other people's good luck. The bottom of the pool was covered with small blue tiles, and it was somewhat slimy, so that the pennies, moved along by the squeegee, formed planar sheets of copper, arranging themselves to fit into each other's adjoining curves, until finally a row of pennies would push up, make peaks, and flip back, forming a second layer, and then another layer would form, and eventually there was a sunken reef of loose change—including some nickels and dimes, but no quarters—in one corner of the pool. "That's it, just keep sweeping them toward the pile," Bradway said. He gave me the black bucket with the holes in it, and, rolling up my sleeves as high as I could, I used the dustpan to scoop up the change and pour it, entirely underwater, into the bucket. The sound was of anchor chains at the bottom of the sea. By doing as much of it as possible below the surface we kept the penny removal somewhat discreet.

Bradway went off while I swept further afield, and I looked out with a haughty but weary look at the people walking by: I was the maintenance man, standing in the water; they were just pedestrians in a mall. "Are you going to keep all that money?" a man said to me. I said no, it was going to charity. "I'm a good charity, man," he said. The trickiest area to sweep was along the row of mushroom fountains (which were just stalks when the water was turned off), but even there it wasn't too hard, and when I got the strays out into the open tilework and scooted the change along in a cloud of pale, sluggish dust, I felt like a seasoned cowboy, bringing the herd home.

Bradway came back and together we pulled the black bucket out, letting the water pour from the holes. It was extremely heavy. We set it on a two-wheeled dolly. "Feel that slime?" said Bradway. I nodded. "The bank won't take the money this way." We went down the freight elevator to a room in the basement and he

showed me an old yellow washing machine. Together we dumped the money in and Bradway turned the dial to regular wash; the coins went through a slushy-sounding cycle. After lunch, I scooped out the clean money and wheeled it to the bank. As I'd been told, I asked to see Diane. Diane led me back to the vault, and I slid the black bucket off the dolly next to some dirty sacks of quarters.

Every week that summer I cleaned the fountain. Every week there was new money there to sweep up. I flipped more coins in myself; one nickel I deliberately left in place for a few weeks while I maneuvered away all the pennies around it, so that my wish-money would have more time to gather momentum. Eventually, I swept it along with the rest, trying, however, to follow its progress as a crowd of coins lined up like piglets on the sow of the rubber blade. There were momentary collisions and overturnings, and the wavelets of the water added confusion. My coin slid over another coin and fell to the right, and then, as I pushed them all into the corner pile, a mass of money avalanched over it and it was lost to view.

Once I came across a penny that had lain in the water under the stairs, unswept, for a very long time—perhaps years. Black it was and full of power. I pushed it into the heap with the others, dumped it into the washing machine, and delivered it to Diane at the bank.

Novelist Nicholson Baker was born in 1957 and grew up in Rochester, where he attended the School Without Walls and, briefly, the Eastman School of Music. His books include The Mezzanine, Vox, and, most recently, Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, The End of Civilization, published in 2008. He lives today with his wife and children in South Berwick, Maine. "Coins of the Realm" first appeared in The New Yorker in 2001 and is reprinted here with Mr. Baker's permission.

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Rochester History is funded in part by the Frances Kenyon Publication Fund, established in memory of Ms. Kenyon's sister, Florence Taber Kenyon and her friend Thelma Jeffries.

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