NPS Form 10-900
(Oct. 1990)

OMB No. 10024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x' in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Mercantile Bank & Trust Building

other name/site number Wall Street Tower

2. Location

street & town 1101 Walnut Street N/A not for publication

city or town Kansas City N/A vicinity

state Missouri code MO county Jackson code 095 zip code 64106

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Mark A Miles DECEMBER 4, 2009

Signature of certifying official/Title Mark A. Miles/Deputy SHPO Date

Missouri Department of Natural Resources
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

☐ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.
☐ removed from the National Register.
☐ other, (explain:) _____

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☐ other, (explain:) _____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Function
(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE:Financial Institution
COMMERCE: Business
COMMERCE: Restaurant
COMMERCE: Specialty Store

Current Function
(Enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC: Multiple-Dwelling

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENT

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete
walls Steel
Glass
roof
other

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

☒See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 7

8. Description

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

☐ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.

☐ **B** removed from its original location.

☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.

☐ **D** a cemetery.

☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

☐ **F** a commemorative property.

☒ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1973-74

Significant Dates

1974

Significant Persons

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Weese, Harry, and Associates (Chicago), architect

Gillum, Jack D.,& Associates (St. Louis), builder

Patty Berkibile Nelson Associates (Kansas City), architect

☒See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 8

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

☒ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☒ Other Name of repository:

Kansas City (MO) Public Library, Chicago Hist. Museum

☒ See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 9

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References
(Place additional boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	1/5	3/6/3/2/1/7	4/3/2/9/0/3/1
2	/	/ / / / /	/ / / / / / /
3	/	/ / / / /	/ / / / / / /
4	/	/ / / / /	/ / / / / / /

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property.)
The East 110.5 feet of Lots 44 thru 46, SWOPES ADDITION, Kansas City, Jackson County, Missouri.

Property Tax No. JA29220491200000000

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected.)
The nominated property includes the parcel of land historically associated with the building.

☐See continuation sheet(s) for Section No. 10

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Elizabeth Rosin, Principal and Elizabeth Patterson, Historian

organization Rosin Preservation, LLC date 25 March 2009

street & number 215 West 18th Street, Suite 150 telephone 816-472-4950

city or town Kansas City state MO zip code 64108

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets
Maps A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.
Photographs: Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.
Additional items: (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

name/title WST, Inc. c/o Townsend, Inc.

street & number 12651 Hemlock telephone 913-814-7577

city or town Overland Park state KS zip code 66213

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.).*

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

SUMMARY

The Mercantile Bank & Trust Building (Mercantile Bank) occupies the southeast corner of 11th and Walnut Streets in the central business district of Kansas City, Missouri. Erected in 1973-1974, the 20-story office building was designed by the noted Chicago architectural firm Harry Weese and Associates, in collaboration with local architects Patty Berkibile Nelson Associates. The Modern Movement design features an exposed steel structure that is unique in Kansas City. A three-story base and a series of cruciform steel columns support the 16-story office tower above a retail plaza that is sunken below street level. An enormous structural "space transfer" truss forms the tapered bottom story of the tower. The truss transfers the weight of the tower onto the cruciform columns and the three-story base. Sixteen vertical steel columns and wide horizontal steel spandrels form the mass of the tower. The spandrels alternate with ribbons of mirrored gold windows to give the mass of the tower a horizontal emphasis that balances its height. Innovative engineering integrated fire protection features into the structural system, eliminating the need for a veneer, and allowing the building's steel structure to remain visible. The building retains all of the elements that define its innovative design, and it clearly communicates distinct feelings about and associations with its period of construction.

ELABORATION

SETTING

The intersection of 11th and Walnut Streets is at the heart of Kansas City's central business district. The streetscape surrounding the Mercantile Bank communicates a dense urban character. There is a small park immediately south of the building. High-rise office buildings and financial institutions, constructed throughout the twentieth century, rise in all directions. Behind the building, a narrow paved alley bisects the block from north to south. Concrete sidewalks separate the building from the street. Under the raised tower the sidewalk widens in front of the building.

Directly below the tower there is a sizable sunken plaza. A wide stairway (formerly a pair of escalators) at the northwest corner descends from the sidewalk. A railing surrounds the edge of the opening at street level. It features butt-glazed, clear glass panels and a bronze hand rail. The railing anchors into concrete panels that match the color and texture of the building's base. Below the railing, the panels form a continuous band that suggests a fascia above the fully-glazed aluminum storefronts that ring the plaza. Retail shops and restaurants originally occupied these spaces, although they are presently unoccupied. An irregular pattern of plain gray concrete walks and steps define multiple levels on the floor of the plaza. Brown concrete pavers lie within the gray outlines. Small landscaped areas in front of the storefront windows identify the business entrances. The landscape design

has Asian undertones. Natural boulders of moderate size sit on beds of wood chips that are edged with river rocks.

EXTERIOR

Along the east (rear) and south lot lines is a non-descript three-story L-shaped base that partially supports the mass of the tower. The base abuts the sidewalk along 11th Street (north elevation) and Walnut Street (west elevation). Concrete panels textured with a heavy aggregate clad the long arm of the "L." Ribbons of tinted windows create strong horizontal bands at the first, second and third stories. The windows span the west elevation and wrap around one bay on the north elevation. This arm of the base originally housed the banking lobby and offices of the Mercantile Bank and Trust Company. On the north elevation (facing 11th Street) the first floor windows become a fully-glazed entrance.

The shorter arm of the "L" has fully-glazed north and west elevations, creating a dramatic three-story atrium at the main lobby. Non-historic metal panels with ribbons of fixed, multi-light storefront glazing clad the south wall of the base. This cladding was added to the brick party wall when the adjacent building was demolished several years ago.

Five cruciform steel columns support the base of the tower. A fire-retardant solution fills the hollow columns and provides a key element of the building's fire protection system. Immediately above the cruciform columns, the building's fourth story angles up and out to the perimeter walls of the tower. The fourth floor structural members form a continuous band of interlocking triangles that encircles the base of the tower. This truss design transfers and supports the weight of the upper stories onto the lower columns and elevator core. Originally, this floor housed mechanical functions, and louvered vents clad the wall behind the structural members. Fixed aluminum-framed windows replaced some of these vents in the south elevation when the building was converted to residential use.

The tower itself has a very uniform appearance. Vertical steel members divide each façade into regular bays. The north and south elevations are three bays wide, while the west and east elevations are five bays wide. Horizontal steel spandrels separate the floors. The edges of the steel spandrels flare outward. As described below in Section 8, this was another innovation designed to protect the structure in the event of fire. Between the spandrels, each bay contains a ribbon window composed of six panes of mirrored gold glass. When the building became a condominium development, one or two double-hung windows were added to each bay to provide the residential units with code-required fresh air. Each of the double-hung windows matches the size of an original glass pane and replicates the color and reflectivity of the historic glazing.

INTERIOR

Inside the main entrance, the three-story atrium creates a bright, airy public lobby. The north and west walls are glass. Concrete panels with heavy aggregate clad the north and south walls of the lobby and the walls of the north entrance corridor (from 11th Street). The panels match the exterior cladding of the building base. Brown stone trims the east wall, framing a tall section that includes the passage to the elevator lobby and small balconies on the upper floors. The same material is also used for the lobby floor. Balconies along the south wall overlook the lobby from the second, third and fourth floors. Each balcony wall is composed of two concrete panels. The upper panel is canted inward, away from the atrium, and has a brass hand railing.

The elevator core at the southeast corner of the building rises from the basement to the 20th floor. The first floor elevator lobby has plaster walls and a coved ceiling. Brown stone frames the elevator bays and covers the floor. The walls on floors 2 and 3 have concrete panels that match the exterior walls of the base. The elevator lobbies on the upper floors have travertine marble walls. On the first floor and floors 4 through 20, vaulted cathedral ceilings grace the elevator lobbies. On floors 2 and 3, the ceilings have suspended grids with lay-in acoustical tiles. All elevator lobbies have carpeted floors with stone trim.

The upper floors were historically open office space. They have been subdivided into residential units with non-historic finishes.

A portion of the fourth floor mechanical area now serves as an amenity space for building residents. In this area, along the secondary south side of the building only, glazing has replaced the louvered vents behind the V-shaped structural members. The angle of the wall and the extension of the base in front of the tower substantially obscure this alteration from street level view.

INTEGRITY

As described in *National Register Bulletin1 15*, an assessment of integrity requires a clear understanding of three things: the ways in which a property is significant; those physical elements that define its significance; and the integrity retained by these elements. The Mercantile Bank and Trust Building is significant for its distinctive structural system and its expression of Modern Movement architecture as it had evolved in the early 1970s. The building designer, the internationally prominent firm Harry Weese and Associates, melded the distinctive aesthetic qualities of structural exhibitionism with cutting edge engineering to produce a building that combined the newest safety technology and construction economies without sacrificing a sleek, signature image. The building clearly retains the features that define its architectural style and period of construction, most notably the exposed steel frame.

Indeed, the Mercantile Bank & Trust Building is unique in Kansas City, Missouri as a Modern Movement high-rise building designed with an exposed steel structure. Built in 1973-74, it is the only building in the city that expresses this architectural genre. The Mercantile Bank retains all of the features that communicate its distinctive qualities – the tower-over-plaza form; the exposed steel structural system; the strong horizontal feeling created by the spandrels and ribbon windows on the tower; and the fire-suppressing design elements, such as the fluid-filled support columns and flanged spandrels. Several of the engineering practices incorporated into the Mercantile Bank design were very early executions of cutting-edge building technology of the period.

The only notable alteration has been the installation of double-hung windows within the original glazing ribbons. Each of the new windows matches the dimensions of an original glass pane and is glazed with gold, mirrored glass produced by the original glazing manufacturer. While the double-hung sashes disrupt the smoothness of the ribbon windows, they do not diminish the significance of the structural design employed for this building or the uniqueness of this architectural expression in Kansas City.

As was common for buildings of this type, the structural design is more significant than the finishes, particularly on the interior. The main public spaces of the building have not been altered. The organization and primary finishes of the main lobby/atrium, the secondary entrance, and the elevator lobbies remain intact. The upper floors historically provided leasable office space that was continually reorganized and remodeled to meet changing tenant needs. As was typical of office buildings from this period, the tenant spaces never contained architecturally distinctive finishes or features. The conversion of the building into residential units subdivided the upper floors, but did not alter the character-defining elements of the building.

SUMMARY

The Mercantile Bank & Trust Building (Mercantile Bank) is locally significant under National Register Criterion C for the area of ARCHITECTURE. It also meets the requirements of Criteria Consideration G for buildings that are less than 50 years old. The period of significance is 1973-74, the years of construction. The Mercantile Bank features a dramatic articulated steel structure that illustrates a distinctive type, period and method of construction. Its sculptural form embodies the evolution of Modern Movement architecture in the 1970s as it moved away from the rectangular slab building form. The sole example of the exposed articulated steel frame genre in Kansas City, it is the most architecturally distinguished building erected within the downtown loop in the post-war period. The project architect, the internationally renowned firm Harry Weese and Associates, used the sparse design to present an economical, yet sophisticated, solution for a tight building lot. The project was widely lauded for incorporating cutting-edge fire-safety technologies. These features enhanced the visual qualities that make the design an arresting addition to Kansas City's built environment. Writers praised the design for the "honest" expression of its sculptural form and anticipated its long-ranging influence on future office design. By the end of the 1970s, however, rising inflation and the collapse of the domestic steel industry would make the construction of similar buildings cost-prohibitive. As a result, the Mercantile Bank represents an outstanding example of the short-lived exposed articulated steel frame architectural genre and an enduring signature building for downtown Kansas City.

ELABORATION

THE MERCANTILE BANK IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

Like all buildings, the Mercantile Bank was a product of its architectural times. The Modern Movement had begun in Europe around 1900, a reaction against historicism fueled by the refinement of building technologies – steel, glass, and reinforced concrete – developed during the industrial revolution of the preceding century.

Modernism's best-known proponent was the Swiss-born Frenchman Le Corbusier (1887-1965), whom Harry Weese repeatedly cited as one of his foremost architectural influences.[1] Beginning in the 1920s, LeCorbusier was widely recognized for his writings on architecture in the machine age. In his 1923 *Vers une architecture* (*Towards a New Architecture*), Le Corbusier declared:

> The history of Architecture unfolds itself slowly across the centuries as a modification of structure and ornament, but in the last fifty years steel and concrete have brought new conquests,

[1] *Oral History of Harry Mohr Weese* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2001), 17; Carleton Knight III, "Harry Weese: Humanism and Tradition," in *Process: Architecture*, No. 11, *Harry Weese: Humanism and Tradition* (Process Architecture Publishing Co., Ltd.: Tokyo, 1979), 100-101. Harry Weese also credited the Finnish Modernist architects Alvar Aalto and Eero and Eliel Saarinen as influencing his work. *Oral History*, 24; *Process Architecture*, No. 11, 100-101.

> which are the index of a greater capacity for construction, and of an architecture in which the old codes have been overturned. If we challenge the past, we shall learn that 'styles' no longer exist for us, that a style belonging to our own period has come about; and there has been Revolution.[2]

Le Corbusier's provocative architectural philosophy led him to design a group of unornamented, geometric houses of smoothly finished reinforced concrete ("The house is a machine for living in," he famously wrote), as well as several visionary city plans featuring spare, high-rise housing blocks set in vast green lawns. Though both the single-family residences and the urban landscapes became models for much mid-twentieth-century architecture, Le Corbusier himself continued to explore new, more sculptural approaches. Just after World War II, for example, he designed an 18-story housing block in Marseilles, in which he abandoned the industrial-looking surfaces he had previously favored for a roughly-textured reinforced concrete in which the imprint of the wood forms remained visible. His expressive 1955 church in Ronchamp, with its rustic concrete walls randomly punctuated by windows and its eccentric roof like a billowing cloak, strayed still further from his dogmatic early "machine" designs.[3]

The second recognized leader of the Modernist movement was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), the son of a German stonecutter. Though lacking formal academic training, Mies went to work at age 23 (alongside Le Corbusier) in the Berlin office of Europe's then leading architect, Peter Behrens, and entered private practice several years later. Just after World War I, Mies designed his first spare, high-rise buildings of steel and glass, employing the still new technique of curtain wall construction, in which a skin of glass and minimal framing encloses the load bearing elements within.[4] Nearly a decade later, between 1928 and 1930, the rising architect designed two well-received low-rise buildings – the German Pavilion and Industrial Exhibits at the International Exhibition in Barcelona, Spain, and the Tugendhat House in Brno, Czechoslovakia. Both were open-plan structures built of steel, glass, and stone, and both were, according to David Spaeth, "pure expressions of architectural space defined, not enclosed, by walls, floors, and ceiling planes."[5] These decidedly nontraditional works led Mies to be named head of Germany's Bauhaus school of industrial design in 1930, a position he held until Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933.

Mies soon departed Hitler's Germany for the United States, and in 1938 became director of the new architecture department at Chicago's Armour Institute (now the Illinois Institute of Technology), where he set out to design a new campus plan. At the same time, Mies began to rebuild his private architectural practice in Chicago, finding

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[2] Quoted in Martin Filler, *Makers of Modern Architecture: From Frank Lloyd Wright to Frank Gehry* (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), 69-70.
[3] David Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture*, 4th ed. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005) 650-653; Rowen Moore, critical essay on Le Corbusier in *Contemporary Architects*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. James Press, 1994).
[4] Franz Schulze, "Mies van der Rohe," in *Contemporary Architects*.

great success after World War II.[6] Widely known for his dictum "less is more," Mies designed his American buildings in two basic types: the open-plan pavilion (*e.g.*, the glass-walled Farnsworth House (Plano, Illinois, 1950) and Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology (Chicago, 1956)) and the rectangular, curtain-walled high-rise slab (*e.g.*, the steel and glass apartment towers at 860 and 880 Lake Shore Drive (Chicago, 1951) and the bronze-hued Seagram Building in New York (1958, with Philip Johnson)).[7] Regardless of the building type, it was the structure, rather than the finishes, that played the starring role in Mies' designs.

Though Harry Weese cited Le Corbusier as one of his primary architectural influences, it was Mies' lead that the majority of American architects followed in the post-war years, particularly when it came to high-rise buildings. The biggest proponent of Mies' simplified style was the large, prolific firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM). The Chicago-based company designed many sleek curtain-walled towers of steel and glass, including the early Lever House (1952, New York) and Inland Steel (1958, Chicago) buildings and the later, less rigidly rectilinear John Hancock (1970) and Sears Tower (1974) in Chicago. Three SOM buildings were erected in Kansas City. Though spare and unornamented, they varied somewhat from the firm's best-known buildings. Two of the three – the Plaza Center Building (1963, originally the John Hancock Building) and City Center Square (1977) – are executed in reinforced concrete. The former has a visible steel frame that is set back within a structural concrete grid. It shares many design traits with the highly lauded Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, although unlike the translucent marble panels at the windowless Bienecke, the steel frame of the Plaza Center Building carries a more conventional recessed glass curtain wall. Erected in 1977, City Center Square is a visually weighty structure with a dominant concrete grid.[8] The history of this development and its significance are discussed further below. SOM's third Kansas City building, the BMA Tower (1963), is also described as an example of the articulated steel structure. However, at the BMA Tower the welded steel structure was not left exposed but clad in white marble panels that form an exo-skeleton that projects in front of recessed bands of windows.[9] This building is the only one in Kansas City to receive a High Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects (1964), and it was featured in a 1965 exhibit of Modern design in America at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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[5] David Spaeth, "Mies van der Rohe," *Master Builders: A Guide to Famous American Architects* (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1985), 152.
[6] Spaeth, 152-153.
[7] Schulze in *Contemporary Architects*; Spaeth, 153; Alice Sinkevitch, ed., *AIA Guide to Chicago* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993), 112-113; The Architecture Week Great Buildings Collection, *Architecture Week* website, http://www.greatbuildings.com/architects/Ludwig_Mies_van_der_Rohe.html, (accessed 23 November 2009).
[8] George Ehrlich, *Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History, 1826-1990* (Columbia, Missouri: The University of Missouri Press, 1992), 138-139, 167-168.
[9] The BMA Tower was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002. It is located about three miles south of the downtown loop.

Other leading architects, such as I.M. Pei, took Mies' spare combination of steel and glass even further. In I.M. Pei and Associate's John Hancock Tower in Boston, completed in 1977, the glass-to-steel ratio was so high that the 4-1/2'x11-1/2' double-layer mirror glass windows began to crack and crash to the ground. Though the original glass had to be replaced with single-thickness tempered panels, the stunning 60-story parallelogram still dramatically reflects its urban surroundings.[10]

As the Miesian slab office tower became a widely copied design standard, advances in steel and concrete technology brought new experimentation with these materials. Designers shifted visual emphasis away from the curtain wall to highlight a building's structural system, in some cases shedding exterior cladding completely to reveal the building's steel skeleton. These "articulated structure" buildings were executed in steel and concrete with different effects. In either case, architectural historian Carole Rifkin notes that "the articulation of structure… satisfied the growing taste for effects of weight, mass, and solidity," a contrast to the lightness of the curtain wall.[11] Articulate structure designs were widely praised for their "structural 'honesty'."

Most articulated steel frame buildings, like Mercantile Bank, followed the standard Miesian form. They were rectangular slabs supported on a series of structural columns that extended to the ground; often the lower two or three stories were recessed slightly from the framing elements. Notable among these buildings are Inland Steel (Chicago, SOM, 1954-58), The Chicago Civic Center (C.F. Murphy Associates with SOM and Loebl, Schlossman & Bennett, 1963-66), and the First National Bank of Chicago (Perkins and Will with C.F. Murphy Associates, 1968-71). Of these three, only the flared base of First National Bank varies from the typical rectangular slab form. Building from these precedents, the elevated structure and sculptural form of Mercantile Bank expresses an evolving design direction that foreshadows the Post-Modern architectural movement to come.

Exposing the articulated frame of steel structures proved challenging. If left untreated steel will corrode after exposure to the elements. Some buildings experimented with Cor-Ten steel, a product that would generate a self-protective rust coating over time. As it matured, the steel structure took on a striking deep red color. U.S. Steel showcased Cor-Ten steel at its 1970 headquarters in Pittsburgh (Harrison, Abramowitz and Abbe). Unfortunately, during the initial weathering process residue from the rusting steel discolored the concrete below the building and even other buildings nearby. Subsequent versions of the Cor-Ten product have minimized this problem, but during the prime years of articulated steel design most buildings, like the Mercantile Bank, painted the exposed steel to prevent deterioration.

[10]In a very different design, the East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., Pei paired a wall of glass on the Mall façade with a triangular mass clad in stone to match the adjacent Beaux-Arts West Wing. Carter Wiseman, *I.M. Pei: A Profile in American Architecture* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1990), 138-183; The Architecture Week Great Buildings Collection, *Architecture Week* website http://www.greatbuildings.com/architects/I._M._Pei.html, (accessed 23 November 2009).

Through the 1960s and into the 1970s, as buildings became taller and as architects and engineers experimented with new materials and construction techniques, fire safety in high-rise buildings increasingly became a topic of concern. Typical fire suppression protocol included spraying anti-flammable material (usually asbestos) on the structural members and/or encasing them in stone, steel or concrete to protect them from failing during the heat of a fire. Several fires brought the issue to the fore. In January 1967 Chicago's McCormick Place exhibition hall experienced a devastating fire that quickly collapsed the unprotected steel truss roof. A few years later, a fire above the 30th floor of One New York Plaza sparked additional concern about fire safety in high-rise buildings. Recognizing that construction methods and materials were innovating at a faster pace than fire protection standards, attendees at a General Services Administration conference produced new recommendations for basic fire protection measures in high rise buildings in 1971.[12]

With no cladding on the exterior of articulated steel frames, it was necessary to develop new methods of fire protection. US Steel Corporation erected two high rises in 1970-72 that celebrated both innovations in fire safety technology and articulated steel structures. The new corporate headquarters in Pittsburgh was the first building to use fluid-filled structural columns as part of its fire-suppression system. A *USS Building Report* described the process as follows:

> During a fire, the solution absorbs heat in much the same way as does the water in a water-tube boiler; while convection circulates the fluid through the pipes linking the columns, any steam that may be generated will be dissipated through vents open to the atmosphere.[13]

The second innovation, first used at One Liberty Plaza in New York (SOM), featured flanges on the upper and lower edges of the exposed horizontal girders. The flanges were designed to deflect flames away from the mid-sections of the girders during a fire. Two years later, Mercantile Bank became the first building to combine both of these fire-safety innovations. An article published in the journal *Civil Engineering* in 1976 predicted that 10 percent of future buildings would adapt flanged girders due to the cost savings and structural honesty this construction method offered. Fluid-filled columns would not be quite as prolific, the article ventured, simply because the cost savings were not significant and the traditional method of fire-proofing and cladding was relatively easy to construct. At that time, two years after Mercantile Bank opened, the number of buildings employing these methods had grown to four with flanged girders and six with fluid-filled columns.

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[11] Carole Rifkind, *A Field Guide to Contemporary American Architecture*, (New York: Plume, 2001), 279.
[12] Arthur E. Cote, "History of Fire Protection Engineering," *Fire Protection Engineering* magazine website, http://www.fpemag.com/archives/article.asp?issue_id=47&i+375, (accessed 23 November 2009).
[13] "Mercantile Bank Tower, Kansas City, Missouri," *USS Building Report*, August 1-12, 1976, 4.

A downturn in the national economy and the subsequent collapse of the United States steel industry brought an end to the exposed, articulated steel frame genre. Escalating energy prices beginning around 1972 led to a period of rampant national inflation. While the steel industry benefited from a brief construction surge in 1973-74, the worldwide recession that followed was devastating. An overvalued dollar compounded the problem by making foreign imports (including steel) cheaper than domestic products. The major steel companies had made no significant effort to update their production process or facilities over the past century, and most active American steel plants operated in facilities constructed before 1920. These had been incrementally expanded or reconfigured as needed, but "band aids" rather than comprehensive solutions typically addressed changing production needs or snags in operations. Owners focused on keeping costs (particularly wages) in check. The first wave of plant closings hit in the late 1970s. US Steel alone closed thirteen plants that year.[14] The steel industry's workforce, which had held steady in the post-war period, shrank by 15 percent. By 1982 domestic steel production was at its lowest level since the Great Depression. The country's major steel producers together lost over three billion dollars that year.[15] Rising prices and reduced production made articulated steel frame construction cost prohibitive. Architects quickly minimized the amount of steel in their buildings and turned to concrete and glass as the prominent visible material for new office buildings.

When Harry Weese and Associates designed Kansas City's Mercantile Bank building, some architects had already begun to turn against the rigid simplicity of Modernism. As Robert Venturi famously put it: "less is a bore." (He later retracted the statement as being too harsh.) Philip Johnson, who had worked closely with Mies on the Seagram Building, and had even penned a monograph about Mies in 1947, also rejected the style of his mentor. Instead, Johnson began to design buildings in which he sheathed the structural steel and employed exaggerated ornament. Among his more notable Post-Modern buildings was the AT&T building in New York City, with its granite cladding and enormous Chippendale entablature (1978-1984).[16]

The Mercantile Bank is, in many respects, a Miesian building and therefore very much a product of its time. The Bank's spare, rectilinear upper section with its alternating bands of steel and glass clearly has its roots in Mies' designs. Although , the floating form and dramatic angled base of the Mercantile Bank tower diverge sharply from the standard slab office building of the period, illustrating the evolution of Modernism into a more sculptural realm. The exposed truss, horizontal girders, and cruciform support columns plainly and honestly display and

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[14] "United States Steel Corporation," Funding Universe website, http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/United-States-Steel-Corporation-Company-History.html, (accessed 23 November 2009).
[15] Christopher G.L. Hall, *Steel Phoenix: The Fall and Rise of the U.S. Steel Industry*, (Christopher G.L. Hall, 1997), 63-73, retrieved from Google Books website, http://books.google.com/books?id=iRmDVaE52AMC&dq=steel+phoenix&printsec=frontcover&source=in&hl=en&ei=qQIUS7OzDdC2ngf8jOTFAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=18&ved=0CFYQ6AEwEQ#v=onepage&q=&f=false (accessed 23 November 2009).
[16] David Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture*, 4th ed. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005), 660-661.

celebrate the tower's expressive structure. Completed late in 1974, Mercantile Bank represents a building style that would soon be cost-prohibitive to construct.

The Sunken Plaza

Coupled with its elevated mass, the sunken public plaza is one of the more visually arresting features of the Mercantile Bank. In the years following World War II, many modern architects, not least the wildly influential LeCorbusier and Mies van der Rohe, incorporated open public spaces into their high-rise designs (*e.g.*, Mies' Lever House (1950-1952) and Seagram Building (1954-1958) in New York). Such public plazas became even more commonplace after 1961, when New York City changed its zoning laws to allow developers to build taller structures in exchange for open space at street level. [17]

Sometimes these plazas were set below grade. The below-grade variant of the public plaza had been paired with high-rise office development at least as early as the 1930s, when a sunken plaza was constructed to draw shoppers down into the below-ground concourse level of New York's Rockefeller Center.[18] The sunken plaza accompanied many Modern high-rise towers of the 1960s and 1970s – the General Motors Building (New York, 1968; Edward Durrell Stone and Emery Roth & Sons, architects), the John Hancock Center (Chicago, 1965-1970), and the First National Bank of Chicago (Chicago, 1968-1971; Perkins & Will and C.F. Murphy Associates, architects; Novak, Carlson and Associates, landscape architects) – to name a few.[19] And noted Modernist landscape architect Lawrence Halprin often used the sunken plaza in his designs, such as those for parks in Portland, Oregon (1968) and Rochester, New York (1975).[20]

Developer Charles Coyer requested that Harry Weese and Associates incorporate a sunken plaza into the Mercantile Bank design. Coyer's goal was to create "an exciting and pleasant urban environment at the pedestrian level."[21] A member of the Weese team described the plaza as providing "a sense of space, of relief, in this crowded downtown area" with the secondary function of letting natural light into the banking offices beneath the tower.[22] This was not an easy feat given the tight parameters of the site, yet the architects produced a plaza that not only adjoins the tower, but also extends far beneath it, drawing pedestrians in, and maximizing the public space on this tight corner lot. Made possible by the structure's raised form, the inviting below-grade space feels

[17] Rifkind, 266; Andres Lepik, *Skyscrapers* (New York: Prestel, 2004), 14.
[18] Winston R. Weisman, "The First Landscaped Skyscraper," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* Vol. XVIII, No. 2, May 1959, 54-59.
[19] Rifkind, 281, 294; "Sunken Plaza Planned for G.M. Building on 5th Avenue," *New York Times*, August 8, 1965; Paul Gapp, "The First plaza that pleases…and others that pain," *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1973.
[20] "Lawrence Halprin," *Process: Architecture*, No. 4, February 1978, 159-183, 205-212.
[21] Roberts, "Tower Plaza Downtown."
[22] Gene Dallaire, "Kansas City Bank Tower Features Water-Filled Columns, Exposed Spandrels," *Civil Engineering - ASCE*, January 1976, 58.

voluminous, soaring to the fourth-floor level. The architects used the space frame truss to shift the weight of the tower onto the five tall columns, thus minimizing the number of vertical members extending through the building to the ground. The result was an uncluttered open space below the tower. This dramatic sunken space also had a practical side, keeping the desired retail spaces and restaurants corralled below grade, creating a more streamlined appearance at street level.

MODERN MOVEMENT ARCHITECTURE IN KANSAS CITY'S CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT

The significance of the distinctive Mercantile Bank to Kansas City's built environment is undeniable when one examines the architectural context within which it exists.

Born as a riverfront landing in the 1820s, Kansas City remained a small town on the edge of the western frontier through the Civil War. Around 1870, construction in Kansas City of the first railroad bridge across the Missouri River initiated an economic boom that turned the sleepy town into a thriving community.

As the city grew, its built environment gained sophistication. Moving inland from the original settlement near the Missouri River, Kansas City's first commercial district developed near 5th and Main Streets. By the 1880s the business district boasted numerous architect-designed, multi-story buildings embellished with Victorian era ornament. Kansas City's skyline was born with the construction of the eight-story "high-rise" New York Life Insurance Building (McKim Mead and White, 1888).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Kansas City was a prosperous modern metropolis and a key distribution center for manufactured goods and raw products serving a broad geographical area. Kansas City's central business district continued to expand southward, away from the river, and the character of the new commercial buildings evolved as speculative developers erected larger, taller buildings that housed multiple businesses. Architects clad these buildings in a classical masonry veneer, even though this skin hid a variety of new construction materials, such as steel and reinforced concrete structures. In 1906 the city's first three steel-framed skyscrapers rose within one block of 10th Street and Grand Boulevard. The fifteen-story R.A. Long Building (Howe, Hoit & Cutler) was built on the northwest corner of 10th Street and Grand Boulevard; the twelve-story Scarritt Building (Root & Siemens) was constructed at the northwest corner of 8th Street and Grand Boulevard; and the fifteen-story Commerce Bank Building (Jarvis Hunt) was constructed at the northwest corner of 10th and Walnut Streets, one block to the west.[23]

After World War I, population and construction activity in Kansas City surged through the 1920s.[24] Land prices in the central business district were at a premium, and high-rise construction maximized the amount of building

[23] Ehrlich, 61. All three of these buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
[24] Ibid, 66.

that could occupy a small plot of land. During planning for the new Federal Reserve Bank (Graham Anderson Probst and White, 1921) civic leaders expressed concern that the new 20-story building would have an adverse effect on the skyline and urged the architects to consider a more-diffuse massing.[25] The value of land was too high to justify this change, and the structure was built as originally designed. Typical of the tall buildings constructed in Kansas City during this decade, the Federal Reserve Bank had masonry veneer, three-part form, and classically inspired ornament.

Over the next decade, a series of new buildings gave Kansas City a distinctive skyline that would remain relatively unchanged for nearly forty years. Planning for a number of these began late in the decade, although construction was not completed until the early 1930s. This group has massing that reflects setbacks instituted by the city's 1923 zoning code; they also eschew overt references to historic styles. Their streamlined forms and simplified ornament reflect the early influences of Modern Movement design, particularly the Art Deco.[26] Significant among this crop of skyscrapers were the Kansas City Power & Light Company Building (Hoit, Price and Barnes, 1929-31), the Professional Building (Charles A. Smith and George McIntyre, 1929-30), the Bryant Building (Graham, Anderson Probst & White, 1931), and the Fidelity National Bank and Trust Company Building (Hoit, Price and Barnes, 1929-1931).[27] The tallest and most distinctive of this group was Kansas City Power & Light Building with its illuminated glass cap reaching up 36 stories.

When construction resumed after World War II, tall office buildings with Modern Movement architectural styling were slow to appear downtown, although urban renewal initiatives and highway construction began to have a significant impact. New parking lots and garages were built in an effort to ease automobile access into downtown.[28] The large Auditorium Plaza Garage was constructed in 1955 on the block previously occupied by the convention center. Two new bridges were built and a third bridge was converted from rail to vehicular traffic to improve access into downtown from north of the Missouri River. When completed in 1957, construction of the highway loop encircling downtown had removed numerous buildings and absorbed large chunks of land.[29] The new vehicular chasm also defined the boundaries of Kansas City's central business district.[30]

The allure of "progress" included a desire to update the city's commercial building stock. Several civic plans

[25] The root of concern was that the Federal Reserve Building would dwarf the older, shorter buildings and make them less prominent on the skyline.
[26] Ehrlich, 71.
[27] All of these buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
[28] Ehrlich, 127.
[29] Ibid.
[30] The highway loop encircles the central business district at 6th Street, Charlotte Street, 15th Street, and the edge of the bluff west of Summit Street.

proposed demolishing older buildings or hiding them behind modernized facades.[31] The new office buildings erected in Kansas City during this period reflected Modern Movement philosophy and incorporated elements of Miesian design. The earliest of these were low-rise buildings with more sprawling forms; they were also constructed a significant distance south of the central business district. The earliest was a facility for the Midwest Research Institute (Neville, Sharp & Simon, 1953) located near the Country Club Plaza and the campus of the University of Missouri – Kansas City. It has a glass curtain wall surrounded by a heavy masonry frame. A large and prominent glass curtain wall -- without a masonry frame – highlights the asymmetrical massing of the corporate headquarters designed for Hallmark Cards by Welton Beckett & Associates (completed 1955). Architectural historian George Ehrlich cited the latter as a more successful expression of the Miesian form.[32] The first Miesian high-rise erected within the downtown loop was the Public Library and Kansas City Board of Education Building (Edward W. Tanner, 1959), an eleven-story building with a glass curtain wall resting on a limestone clad base. It is located near the civic plaza east of the commercial core.

The 1960s finally brought Modern Movement additions to Kansas City's downtown skyline. Three office towers rose between 1963 and 1968: the Traders Bank Tower (northeast corner of 12th Street & Grand Boulevard; Thomas E. Stanley, 1963); the Commerce Tower (911 Main Street; Keene, Simpson & Murphy, 1965) and Ten Main Center (northwest corner of 10th and Main Streets; Charles Lucian, 1968). Each of these unornamented, slab-like buildings expressed Miesian design philosophy, combining steel, glass, and concrete in ways that broke sharply with the historical eclecticism and Art Deco ornamentation that characterized Kansas City's existing building stock. Each, in the words of architectural historian George Ehrlich, "was committed to a simple geometric shape."[33] Both the Traders Bank Tower and the Commerce Tower have flat, rectilinear facades ornamented with simple grids, while Ten Main Center, clad with precast panels that each contains a beveled window opening, is more textural in appearance. All three illustrate the Miesian slab form and utilize standard materials of the period. There have been few visible changes to the Commerce Tower and Ten Main Center, although the integrity of the Traders Bank Building was notably impacted when the exterior of the building was reclad within the past decade. None of the three is as visually exciting or as distinctive as the Mercantile Bank. A fourth high-rise building was built on the west side of downtown near the convention center in 1968. The Holiday Inn (now the Crowne Plaza Hotel) has a geometric concrete slab tower that perches somewhat awkwardly atop a multi-story parking garage. Though it is notable for its 28-story height, the building is otherwise an unexceptional expression of the Modern Movement style.

A series of labor strikes between 1967 and 1970 abruptly curtailed building in Kansas City. The 200-day strike of 1970 was particularly devastating. By one estimate, the strike impacted planned or active construction projects

[31] Ehrlich.
[32] Ibid, 121-125.
[33] Ibid, 141.

valued at almost three billion dollars. When the period of labor unrest ended, over one calendar year of construction activity had been lost. [34] As the labor unrest was ending, the nation entered a period of inflation that drove material costs and wages higher. Understandably, the instability affected developer's ability to start new projects.

Late in 1969, the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority of Kansas City initiated planning for an Urban Renewal Program that the agency hoped would "provide a dynamic renewal and revitalization of Downtown Kansas City."[35] A team of national consultants conducted an in-depth study of the 145 blocks bounded by the highway loop. The plan issued in January 1971 offered a strategy for leveraging public and private involvement to transform the area "into a vital, attractive and dynamic Downtown for the entire City." This plan soon gave rise to a number of highly anticipated construction initiatives. The Mercantile Bank project and a mixed-use development proposed for the nearby Block 92 were the most ambitious of these plans.

Walnut Associates, a development group led by Washington, D.C. developer Charles B. Coyer, announced plans for the Mercantile Bank in the late fall of 1972. Coyer envisioned an architecturally noteworthy "luxury" tower at the southeast corner of 11th and Walnut Streets – an office building for the "type of businessman who 'recognizes quality and is willing to pay for it.'"[36] Coyer commissioned the Chicago architecture firm, Harry Weese and Associates, to design a 20-story building with the lower stories set-back from the sidewalk to create "an exciting and pleasant urban environment at the pedestrian level."[37] The Mercantile Bank & Trust Company, a longtime Kansas City institution, would become the building's primary tenant, although office space would be available to other businesses. A newspaper ad run by Mercantile Bank shortly before the building opened, boasted that "the project will symbolize Mercantile Bank's emergence as a major force in Kansas City banking, as well as our faith in a bright, vigorous future for downtown."[38] The bank viewed the project as "an exciting concept in modern urban landscaping … a glass and steel sculpture, vaulting over a spacious sunken landscaped plaza ringed by a restaurant and elegant shops." Construction began early in 1973 with the razing of the Altman Building. The Mercantile Bank opened in the fall of 1974, becoming the first – and only – exposed, articulated steel structure building in downtown Kansas City.[39]

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[34] Ibid, 147.
[35] Gladstone Associates, et.al, "Kansas City, Missouri Downtown Plan," prepared for the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority of Kansas City, Missouri, January 1971, 12.
[36] "Real Estate & Business Roundup," *The Kansas City Star*, November 8, 1973, quoting Charles B. Coyer.
[37] Joe Roberts, "Tower Plaza Downtown," *Kansas City Star*, [1972], Kansas City Public Library, Envelope Clippings.
[38] "When You've Got It, Flaunt It!," *Kansas City Star*, 14 January 1973, special section.
[39] Carol Rifkind describes the BMA Tower as an articulated steel structure; however, the structure of the BMA Tower was hiding behind marble panels. The exposed steel structure is unique to the Mercantile Bank in Kasnas City.

Just one block west of the Mercantile Bank, City Center Square was developed on Block 92 -- a full city block bounded by 11th, 12th, Main and Baltimore Streets. The developer, Altgar, was a local group that included two members -- Arnold Garfinkle and Richard Altman. As early as 1964 the two began formulating a plan for a mixed-use commercial development downtown. [40] They hired Philadelphia architect Louis Khan to design a twenty-two story concrete structure with a rose-colored glass curtain wall. That vision eventually grew into a 32-story building with a substantial landscaped plaza. LCRA approved the plan in 1972, and Altgar expected to start construction that fall and to finish two years later. However, at the end of that two-year period the developers had not found a builder, locally or nationally, willing to attempt the innovative construction proposed by Khan.[41] As development loans began to come due, Altgar was forced to take on an out-of-town financial partner, Tom McCloskey. McCloskey liked the concept and the location of the project, but replaced architect Khan with SOM, who prepared a more conventional design for the site. The resulting building was finally completed in early 1977. The major mass is a 30-story, modified hexagonal office tower that rises from a four-story block comprising a banking lobby, retail shops, and restaurants. The entire structure sits atop a 400-car parking garage. A dominant exposed structural grid, this one articulated in concrete instead of steel, hides deeply recessed bands of windows. Together with the structure's sprawling foot print, this design gives the building substantial heft and bulk. George Ehrlich described the design as having a "formidable" heaviness that is reinforced by the proportionally small and "slot-like" window openings.[42] The dominant massing give this building a notable presence in downtown Kansas City, although the architecture seems less innovative than Khan's original design.

With delays at City Center Square, the distinctive Mercantile Bank was for several years the newest high-rise office building in downtown Kansas City. Ehrlich notes the visual contrasts between the Mercantile Bank and its Art Deco neighbor, the Bryant Building. Where the Bryant Building stands rooted to its lot, its mass lightening in a series of setbacks near the top, the Mercantile Bank presents lightness at its base below the elevated tower. In spite of its height, the exposed girders and ribbon windows of the Mercantile Bank tower give the design a strong horizontal emphasis, while the Bryant Building is an upward reaching vertical form. Ehrlich writes, "While [the Mercantile Bank] makes for an odd neighbor to the Bryant Building, it is an appropriate companion to the City Center Square…."[43] The spare yet sculptural form of Mercantile Bank is more graceful than City Center Square, although both illustrate the new weightiness typical of 1970s architecture.

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[40] The project was originally proposed to replace the Altman Building at 11th & Walnut, but after the LCRA plan was released in 1971 the developers shifted their project to Block 92.

[41] Kathleen Q. Pemberton, "Piecing Together City Center Square," *Outlook*, December 1978, 18-21. Khan proposed slip-form construction for the building. Similar to bridge design, this structural system features a top truss that supports all of the floors, which hang from cables attached to the truss. By building from the top down, the need for scaffolding and heavy equipment would be eliminated. This construction method had been used successfully on smaller buildings, but never on a building as tall that proposed for City Center Square.

[42] Ehrlich, 168.

[43] Ibid.

Although George Ehrlich's book, *Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History, 1826- 1990*, discusses only two new additions to downtown during this decade – the Mercantile Bank and City Center Square[44] – three other buildings were under construction at the same time. The glass-sheathed mid-rise Executive Plaza office building at 8th and Main Streets was designed by Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, and completed 1973. The first glass cube in downtown Kansas City, it represents a move away from the formal Modernism espoused by Mies and toward the future of Modern Movement architecture. The Southwestern Bell Telephone Company also erected two buildings – a new district headquarters on East 8th Street (completed 1972) and a long-distance center at 14th and Oak (completed 1976). Both are within the downtown loop, but are removed from the core of the business district.[45] The Southwestern Bell district headquarters is an undistinguished, hulking, articulated concrete mass with deeply recessed fenestration. The lower two floors are set slightly behind the structural piers. Plunked in front of the building is a concrete block that provides entrance to a parking garage. The long-distance transfer center is a utilitarian buff brick 28-story high-rise.

Another significant development was underway in Kansas City during this time, although outside the downtown loop. The Hall family, founders of Hallmark Cards, began planning for a 200 million dollar mixed-use development near their corporate headquarters in 1968. The Crown Center plan would encompass 25 city blocks between 22nd Street and 27th Terrace surrounding the blighted "signboard hill" just south of Union Station. In addition to Hallmark company offices, the first phase of the plan included 2,240 residential units in nine low-rise apartment buildings; 660,000 square feet of office space; a 10-acre public square; a 400,000 square foot retail center; a movie theater; and a 730-room hotel.[46] The Halls hired a team of nationally renowned designers to plan the site, the buildings, and the landscape for Crown Center. Victor Gruen and Associates of Los Angeles and Larry Smith and Company of Seattle prepared the preliminary plan, and Edward Larrabee Barnes of New York served as the coordinating architect. Although demolition and excavation began in 1968, local labor strikes delayed construction. The first office building did not open until 1971.[47]

Within the Crown Center development, Harry Weese & Associates designed the Crown Plaza Hotel (now the Westin Hotel), the massing of which the *Architectural Record* pronounced "spectacular."[48] Completed in 1973, the hotel provided a particular challenge because of its unusual site, which included a 70-foot-high limestone cliff,

[44] Ehrlich, 162-177. As the first glass-sheathed cube in Kansas City, the Executive Plaza building may be National Register eligible before it reaches 50 years of age; however additional research would be required to determine if it is "exceptionally significant."
[45] "Joe Roberts, "Downtown Office Momentum Holds," *Kansas City Star*, 14 January 1973, Sec. D, 1.
[46] "Crown Residences Start Soon," *Kansas City Star*, 20 January 1974.
[47] Ehrlich, 155-158. The development of Crown Center is still on-going. The newest addition is a 24-story office building by Zimmer Gunsul Frasca that opened in 2003.
[48] "Crown Center," *Architectural Record*, October 1973, 117. The design for the Crown Center Hotel received awards from both the Chicago Chapter of the AIA and the Pre-stressed Concrete Institute. *Process Architecture*, No. 11, 160.

and because the hoteliers, Western International Hotels, wanted a vertically- rather than a horizontally-oriented scheme. The final design comprised two separate but connected buildings of pre-cast concrete, one a 15-story L-shaped structure atop the bluff for the 730 sleeping rooms, and the other a five-story block at the base of the bluff. The latter contains the restaurants, shops, ballrooms, and other program spaces, and features a multi-story lobby garden that incorporates a portion of the exposed bluff.[49] It is very possible that the Crown Center development merits inclusion in the National Register and that Weese's Westin Hotel also merits individual listing; however, one must use caution when comparing the Westin Hotel to Weese's Mercantile Bank because the development context of Crown Center differed significantly from the context affecting new development downtown.

During the mid-1980s, a downtown construction boom altered the Kansas City skyline more than any wave of development since the late 1920s. Three high-rise buildings were completed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These were: the AT&T Town Pavilion (1111 Main Street; HNTB, 1986); One Kansas City Place (1200 Main Street, Patty, Berkibile, Nelson, Immenschuh, 1988); and the 1201 Walnut Building (HNTB, 1991). Their sleek glass exteriors and Post-Modern forms represent a new generation of commercial office tower design that differs markedly from Mercantile Bank, City Center Square, and the other buildings that came before them.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MERCANTILE BANK

Developer Charles B. Coyer and his primary tenant, the Mercantile Bank & Trust Company, gave architect Harry Weese and Associates a list of challenges for the small, constrained lot at the corner of 11th and Walnut Streets. Not surprisingly, Weese was up to the challenge. The firm produced a 20-story office tower like none other in Kansas City. The building's mass sat atop an airy, multi-story banking lobby and a sunken, open-air plaza that could be reached from street level by means of "moving stairs." Like all of the firm's best work, the Mercantile Bank combined "painstaking attention to the specific design problem"[50] with innovative engineering to create an enduring urban landmark.

The Modernist expression of the Mercantile Bank stands in stark contrast to its early-twentieth century neighbors. With the exception of the 26-story Art Deco Bryant Building to the east, the buildings near the Mercantile Bank were low- to mid-rise masonry commercial blocks. While it was never the tallest building in Kansas City, Mercantile Bank certainly dominated its immediate surroundings. As one newspaper article noted, the first typical office floor at the new building would roughly align with the height of the Altman Building it replaced.[51] The openness below the tower would recall its now vanished predecessor.

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[49] "Happiness is a Cold Beer in the Arcade of Life," *Building Design & Construction*, August 1973, 44-46; "For Kansas City a Tropical Hillside Garden – Inside a World Class Hotel – at Crown Center," *Interiors*, July 1973, 48-67.
[50] Paul Spreiregen, "Harry Weese," *Contemporary Architects*, 3rd Edition (New York: St. James Press, 1994). 1035.
[51] Roberts, "Tower Plaza Downtown."

Among the city's mid-century high-rise towers, the Mercantile Bank exhibits a uniquely sparse Modern form that dramatically reveals its structural elements without the interference of veneer or cladding. Harry Weese and Associates incorporated economical, cutting-edge fireproofing technologies that allowed the architects to reveal and celebrate the building's steel skeleton and to experiment with the visual qualities of weight, mass, and solidity. A large space transfer truss, four stories above the sidewalk, allows the sleek office block to rise above a startlingly open base and an asymmetrical sunken plaza – unexpected design elements that set the building apart from its neighbors in the dense heart of the commercial district. And, as with the best of Modern Movement architecture, the structure rather than the finishes are the highlight of this design.[52]

At first glance, the upper section of the Mercantile Bank is reminiscent of Harry Weese and Associates' award-winning Time-Life Building in Chicago. The bank building features the same alternating bands of steel and gold mirrored glass, though the façades of the Mercantile Bank tower lack the "furrowed" soffits of the Time-Life, and therefore present a much more uniform appearance.[53] The uniform facades and elevated massing of the tower give the Mercantile Bank a graceful, sculptural form that sets it apart from the Time-Life building and from other articulated steel high rise buildings.

What the Mercantile Bank lacks in ornamentation, however, it makes up for in engineering innovation. This is plainly seen in the lower portion of the building. Whereas the structural supports of the Time-Life Building run directly to the ground all around the structure's perimeter, the weight of the Mercantile Bank's fifteen office floors rests upon an impressive three-dimensional, 18-foot-deep "space transfer truss." This exposed truss or "space frame" comprises a series of giant steel "V's" inclined outward at a 45-degree angle around the four sides of the building. The weight of the truss is in turn borne by five 60-foot-tall cruciform columns and the elevator core. This design allows the tower to "float" above the open base, making room for the sunken public plaza and the three-story lobby, onto which several of the bank's working floors originally opened.[54] The truss allowed the building to make an architectural statement, "to honestly express the building's structure" in a highly unique way.[55]

The space transfer truss was not innovative in and of itself. This structural feature dates back to the 1940s and even earlier. In the 1950s, Buckminster Fuller's architectural experiments with the space frame encouraged architects and engineers to explore its use. Designers were further inspired by space frame exhibits displayed at Montreal's Expo '67. In its more typical applications, the space frame provides a useful truss solution for

[52] Rifkind, 279, 288.
[53] *Process Architecture*, No. 11, 103.
[54] Mercantile Bank Tower project summary in the Harry Weese Architecture Collection (#2001.167) at the Chicago History Museum.
[55] Dallaire, 60.

spanning large open spaces in industrial and commercial buildings. Smaller examples frame portable stages and provide the rigid frame work that supports highway road signs.[56] What distinguishes the space truss at Mercantile Bank is the dramatic, yet economical way in which it is used. As it transfers the weight of the tower onto the five columns and the elevator core, the truss allows the building to float above the street, bringing light into the dense streetscape and meeting the developer's goal of creating a pedestrian-friendly corner. Exposed to view from the street, the truss becomes a visually distinctive, sculptural element of the massing. It aligned with the rooflines of the older buildings to its south in such a way that it resembled a deconstructed and disembodied cornice.

While the enormous space transfer truss provided the building with a unique massing, the two cutting edge fireproofing systems employed at the Mercantile Bank were more-notable engineering innovations. Working together with structural engineering consultants Jack Gillum & Associates and the U.S. Steel Company, Harry Weese and Associates implemented two cutting-edge fireproofing systems, making the Mercantile Bank the first building to combine both breakthroughs.[57] First, the architects filled the hollow cores of the five cruciform columns at the building's base with 1,740 gallons of fireproofing solution. This solution – a combination of water, potassium carbonate (as anti-freeze) and potassium nitrate (to prevent the steel from corroding) – was intended to prevent the massive steel columns from over-heating should a fire occur. It provided an alternative to the more-traditional method of spraying support columns with fire retardant and then cladding them. The first patent for this approach was issued in 1884, although the design was not executed until 1969 at the Pittsburgh corporate headquarters of U.S. Steel.[58] Mercantile Bank was the second building erected with this feature; by 1976 (two years after Mercantile Bank was completed) that number had grown to six.[59] An article in *Civil Engineering* praised the innovation and its "thinner, more graceful, more honest columns" at Mercantile Bank. The author anticipated that fluid-filled columns would not become a widely used element. For one, they did not provide a significant cost savings and there was no point in using this method if the columns would be clad. "A key reason for using water-filling is to *bare* the columns, to express structural honesty" of the design.[60] As long as articulated steel designs remained popular it is likely that architects and engineers would continue to design fluid-filled columns. Unfortunately, the rising price of steel was shortening the life of the style.

The second fireproofing innovation was the use of flame-shielded horizontal girders or spandrels on the building's upper floors. These spandrels – used in place of the more traditional concealed spandrels – serve multiple structural functions. They carry floor loads, provide stiffness to resist wind loads, and frame ribbons of glazing.

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[56] Forest Wilson, "Space Frames," *Encyclopedia of Architecture, Design, Engineering &Construction,* Vol. 4, Joseph A. Wilkes, editor (The American Institute of Architects: John Wiley & Sons, 1989), 510-518.
[57] Gene Dallaire, "Kansas City Bank Tower Features Water-Filled Columns, Exposed Spandrels," *Civil Engineering - ASCE*, January 1976, 58.
[58] *USS Building Report*, August 1-12, 1976, 4.
[59] The article does not specify the other four buildings. Dallaire, 60.
[60] Dallaire, 60.

Prior to construction, fireproofing material was sprayed onto the back (interior side) of each girder. On the exterior, each girder was equipped with a 3/8-inch upturned flange on the top and a 3/8-inch downturned flange on the bottom. The flanges would act as deflectors, directing flames away from the mid-sections of the girders during a fire. Such flame-shielded girders had first been used just one year earlier on New York City's One Liberty Plaza (SOM). Mercantile Bank was the second building to use this feature. By 1976, the Whitney Young High School in Chicago (Perkins and Will, 1975) and the Moore Business Forms building in Glenview, Illinois (A.M. Kinney, date unknown) also had exposed spandrels.[61] The article in *Civil Engineering* anticipated that 10 percent of new office buildings would adopt exposed spandrel designs due to the financial advantages the design offered.[62] While cost savings was indeed a reason Weese and Associates used exposed spandrels at Mercantile Bank, the aesthetics of the design also weighed heavily in the decision.

During a period of rising inflation, cost savings in construction were extremely important. The *Civil Engineering* article lauded the economic advantages of Mercantile Bank's exposed structure. Concrete had been considered as a building material for the project but was quickly abandoned in favor of steel-frame construction. They were right. The article tabulated savings to be $306,000, or roughly four-percent of the $7,218,000 price tag.[63] Several aspects of the design contributed to the thrift, but the exposed spandrels provided the largest portion of the savings. By acting as the upper and lower frame for the glazing, the spandrel system eliminated the need for additional curtain wall material and eliminated the need to fireproof and clad the exterior of the structure. Together these factors produced a notable financial benefit.

In its many unusual details, the Mercantile Bank is another in a long string of designs in which Harry Weese achieved architectural distinction by "recombining known elements" in new and arresting ways.[64] The creation of an honest, expressive structural design as well as the ability to shave both time and money from the construction process influenced the architects to select an articulated steel structure for Mercantile Bank. Philip Prince, a designer at Harry Weese and Associates, summarized the motivations of the design team:

> This structural solution is also an architectural solution. Nearly every piece of exposed steel functions to make the total structure work…. Our structure is exposed to full view – no

[61] *USS Building Report*, August 1-12, 1976, 5,7; Dallaire, 59, 62. Whitney Young High School is a highly-regarded college-preparatory public school that was constructed on a block of land near downtown Chicago. Earlier buildings on this block were destroyed during the riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Moore Business Forms is located in a light-industrial park outside of Glenview. Both are low-rise buildings with sprawling forms. According to the A.M. Kinney website (http://www.amkinney.com/aia.html) the Moore Business Forms building received an AIA Certificate of Merit but it does not indicate which chapter bestowed this award or why. "Whitney Young High School," Wikipedia website, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whitney_Young_High_School (accessed 3 December 2009).
[62] Dallaire, 60.
[63] Ibid, 58.

> embellishments, no false skin. By adopting this design solution, we are not only able to create the boldest of steel structures, we are able, as well, to achieve measurable economies…[65]

Even as the building was completing construction, the escalating price of steel would render the design approach difficult to emulate. The architects achieved their goal of creating "a building with a unique, a striking appearance, an appearance that [could] not be duplicated with a concrete-frame building." [66] It became the "exclamation point" developer Coyer aspired to mark in downtown Kansas City. The resulting Mercantile Bank tower is a uniquely expressive and enduring tribute to its time and to its period of construction.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF MERCANTILE BANK

The innovative design for Mercantile Bank drew substantial attention. The building was much reported in the press. The *Kansas City Star* chronicled its construction, of course, but it also warranted a paragraph of text and an accompanying photograph in *Fortune*.[67]

U.S. Steel, proud of their contribution to the innovative building design, devoted a full issue of its *USS Building Report* to a technical case study of the Mercantile Bank's structural engineering and highlighted the building in its two-page August 1975 advertisements in *Architectural Record* and the *AIA Journal*. The report describes a clear design agenda from the outset -- that the building be aesthetically distinguished from its neighbors, to "create a distinctive architectural statement calling attention to itself within a normally dense urban landscape."[68] Describing the design as "a distinguished and ingenious solution to the … problems of high-rise commercial building planning," the report lauds the elevated structure as the "most arresting aspect" of the design. In the advertisement, U.S. Steel boasted that "[a] full-scale mock-up and Underwriter's tests" demonstrated the ability of the spandrels to withstand a fire and praised the building as "a fine example of innovative architecture and engineering… that works both aesthetically and structurally."[69]

A number of trade publications published articles applauding the tower's innovative engineering, including the Spanish-language journal *Informes de la Construccion*.[70] *Modern Steel Construction* called it "ahead of the

[64] Carleton Knight III, "Harry Weese: Humanism and Tradition," *Process: Architecture,* No. 11, 100.
[65] "Whats' Up in Kansas City?" *Modern Steel Construction,* American Institute of Steel Construction, First Quarter 1974.
[66] Dallaire, 60.
[67] See, *e.g.*, Joe Roberts, "Tower Plaza Downtown," *Kansas City Star*, 10 December 1972; Joe Roberts, "Downtown Office Momentum Holds," *Kansas City Star,* 14 January 1973; Joe Roberts, "Mercantile Bank in Headquarters," *Kansas City Star,* 3 November 1974; "New Strength & Elegance in the Sinews of Construction," *Fortune*, February 1974, 78.
[68] "Mercantile Bank Tower, Kansas City, Missouri," *USS Building Report,* August 1-12, 1976.
[69] United States Steel, "A First In Fire-Protection," *Architectural Record,* August 1975.
[70] Gene Dallaire, "Kansas City Bank Tower Features Water-Filled Columns, Exposed Spandrels," *Civil Engineering - ASCE*, January 1976, 58-62; "A Trio of Unusual Structural Concepts," *Building Design & Construction,* February 1974; "Edificio del Banco Mercantil," *Informes de la Construccion*, March 1979.

times."[71] In a largely technical article, *Building Design & Construction* noted that the Mercantile Bank proved true the old lyrics that "Everything's Up-to-date in Kansas City."[72]

A longer article in *Civil Engineering* celebrated the highly innovative structural steel design of Mercantile Bank, again emphasizing the two cutting-edge fire-protection strategies.[73] Author Glen Dallaire repeatedly heralded the "honest" design achieved by these innovations. He praised the steel skeleton, citing the importance of the material to the success of the design. The building, he noted, would have been significantly less "unique" and "striking" if it had been executed of concrete. He deemed the massive fluid-filled columns the building's "most dramatic structural innovation." Dallaire predicted that the Mercantile Bank would have a noticeable impact on the design of future office buildings. However, he could not foresee that articulated steel structures – and the design advances embodied by the Mercantile Bank -- would soon be rendered unbuildable by escalating costs and downsizing of the domestic steel industry. In his summation, Dallaire rhapsodized, "there is something beautiful, something exhilarating about a building that bares its structural elements; just as it's always refreshing to meet a person who is straightforward and honest, no artificial facades."

Despite this widespread publicity and accolades from the engineering community, the Mercantile Bank garnered relatively little attention from the mainstream architectural press. The structural expressiveness and honesty of articulated steel designs meant that these buildings were not conventionally pretty, making them often harder to appreciate. Author and architectural editor Carleton Knight III observed in the *Process: Architecture* issue devoted to Harry Weese that:

> Weese's Mercantile Bank in Kansas City is a streamlined version of the Time-Life Building and the façade, not as richly detailed, is less interest[ing]. However, the 16-story tower rests on an 18-foot-deep space truss that is on 60-foot-high columns, creating an exciting space under the building.[74]

The few other architectural observers who wrote about the Mercantile Bank were less complimentary. The *Chicago Tribune's* architecture critic, Paul Gapp, called its base "a clutter of confusion" and said the building reminded him of the Time-Life "perched on stilts."[75] Critic Nory Miller wrote in *Inland Architect* (published by Harry Weese himself!) that the Mercantile Bank was "quite menacing" and "simply not [a] very good building."[76]

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[71] "What's Up in Kansas City?" *Modern Steel Construction*, First Quarter 1974.
[72] "A Trio of Unusual Structural Concepts," *Building Design & Construction*, February 1974, 47.
[73] Dallaire, 58-62.
[74] *Process Architecture*, No 11, 103.
[75] Paul Gapp, "AIA Award Winners: They Seem Strangely Familiar," *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 1976.
[76] Nory Miller, "Chicago Awards 1976: Five More Than We Needed?" *Inland Architect*, November 1976, 8-13.

Still, like the best of the designs of Harry Weese and Associates, Kansas City's Mercantile Bank Building was awarded a prestigious AIA citation, this one a 1976 "Distinguished Building Award" from the AIA's Chicago Chapter.[77] In the 2002 *AIA Guide to Kansas City,* the entry notes that the building is an "unusual" example of 1970s structural expressiveness.

ARCHITECT – HARRY WEESE & ASSOCIATES

Harry Mohr Weese, the principal and driving force of Harry Weese and Associates, was born June 30, 1915 in Evanston Illinois. He demonstrated an early interest in design, earning his first Boy Scout merit badge in architecture and designing the logo for his father's bank at the age of 10. Weese studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institue of Tehcnology, graduating in 1938. During the 1936-1937 school year, Weese attended Yale University, where he befriended Eero Saarinen, the son of Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen. Through the Saarinens, Weese received a fellowship to study city planning at Michigan's Cranbrook Academy of Art, directed by the elder Saarinen. Weese spent another year at MIT (working as a research assistant for the Bemis Housing Foundation), and then returned to the Midwest to launch his architectural career with Chicago's Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM). In 1941, Weese left SOM to form a short-lived partnership with his Cranbrook friend and future brother-in-law, Ben Baldwin. [78]

Later that same year, Weese entered the Navy as an Engineering Officer, serving on a series of destroyers for the remainder of World War II. Armed with practical engineering experience and sketches from around the world, in 1946 Weese returned to Chicago and briefly to SOM, but in 1947 he struck out on his own to form Harry Weese and Associates.[79]

Harry Weese and his firm were prolific from the start. During the 1950s the firm's project list included individual residences, multi-family housing projects, and a chain of West Coast grocery stores.[80] Through his connection with the Saarinens, Weese also began a decade-long series of building commissions for Irwin Miller in the architecturally-progressive community of Columbus, Indiana.[81]

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[77] *Process Architecture*, No. 11, 160; "Nine Win in Annual Competition," *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 1976. AIA Chicago was unable to provide any additional information about the award or why it was given to Mercantile Bank. Rosin Preservation also contacted AIA Kansas City; they were also unable to provide additional information about the award.
[78] Kitty Baldwin Weese, *Harry Weese Houses* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1987), 9-10;*Oral History*, 41-42, 269.
[79] *Oral History*, 54-56, 269.
[80] "Weese, Harry," *The Britannica Encyclopedia of American Art* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corp., 1973), 588-589; *Oral History*, 80; Master Job List, Harry Weese Architectural Collection (1978.246), Chicago History Museum.
[81] J.M. Dixon, "Columbus, Indiana, The Town that Architecture Made Famous," *Architectural Forum*, December 1965, 40-49; *Oral History*, 87-89.

Harry Weese and Associates gained early international attention in 1957, with a design for the U.S. Embassy in Accra, Ghana. In a creative twist on the architecture of the region, Weese set the mahogany structure high off the ground on a concrete platform atop "pilotis" or stilts.[82] The embassy was featured in *Time* magazine, as well as in various architectural journals worldwide.[83]

With the notoriety acquired through the Accra Embassy, Harry Weese and Associates garnered more and more important commissions, and Harry was named a fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1961. The growing firm soon gained a reputation for designing housing developments (*e.g.,* numerous residential and related commercial structures in the Hyde Park area of Chicago, a continuation of work begun in the 1950s), theaters (*e.g.,* Arena Stage, Washington, D.C., 1961 and 1972), and campus buildings (*e.g.,* at Oregon's Reed College and the University of Wisconsin at Madison), and for city planning (*e.g.,* master plans for Southwest Washington, D.C., 1965, and South Town, Vienna, Italy, 1970), among other projects. And, unlike most other high-profile firms of the time, Harry Weese and Associates also drew attention for restoring historic structures, most notably Chicago's Auditorium Theater (Adler & Sullivan), Field Museum of Natural History (D.H. Burnham), and Orchestra Hall (D.H. Burnham), all in 1967. [84]

In the late 1960s, Harry Weese and Associates began work on one of its most important commissions – a new public transportation system for Washington, D.C. The nation's largest public works project of its time, Metro was the first such system designed entirely by a single firm. The commission brought together many of the firm's strengths -- city planning, engineering, and innovative design.

Harry Weese and Associates also became known for an eclectic mix of award-winning urban structures that combined high design with innovative engineering to meet the needs of the particular client. For example, in 1970, Harry Weese and Associates completed an office tower for Chicago's Time-Life Publishing. This sleek, elegant tower is constructed of weathering Cor-Ten steel over a concrete structural frame. Its horizontal bands of gold, mirrored glass dramatically catch the shifting sun along the Lake Michigan shore. The American Institute of Architects (AIA) recognized the Time-Life Building with a National Honor Award in 1973.[85]

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[82] "U.S. Embassy, Accra," *Architectural Record*, June 1957, 197-202.
[83] "Starting a Tradition: Design for U.S. Embassy in Accra," *Time*, March 4, 1957, 74. And see, *e.g.,* "U.S.A. Abroad: Embassy Building, Accra, Ghana," *Architectural Forum*, December 1957, 114-123; "Ambassade des Etats Unis, Accra, Ghana," *Architecture d A'jord'hui*, 29, April1958, 61 and "Die U.S. Bostschaft in Accra, Ghana," *Arkitektur*, 59, April 5, 1959, 314-315.
[84]Master Job List (1978.246), Chicago History Museum; "Chronological List of Major Works," *Process: Architecture*, 154-158. Indeed, *Time* magazine even dubbed Weese "The Landmark Man" in 1973; "The Landmark Man," *Time*, July 23, 1973, 41.
[85] "30-Story Slab of Ingenuity," *Architectural Forum*, September 1970, 21-27; *Process Architecture*, No. 11, 160.

By the mid-1970s, Harry Weese and Associates had clearly reached the top of the architectural profession. The firm was known around the world. In 1978, the AIA named the firm the Outstanding Architectural Firm of the Year. The following year, the Japanese architectural journal *Process: Architecture* devoted an entire 164-page issue to the work of the firm. By that time, Harry Weese and Associates had grown to 100 architects working at offices in Chicago, Washington, and Miami, and Harry Weese prided himself on having trained hundreds of architects over the years, many of whom had gone on to start their own practices or to work for other prestigious firms.[86] Harry Weese and Associates continued to work on significant projects for several decades thereafter – a master plan for the Federal Triangle and the restoration of Washington's Union Station and New York's Grand Central Station, to name just a few – but seemingly lost its heart when Harry Weese retired in the early 1990s. The firm disbanded in 2000.[87]

Harry Weese died on November 3, 1998, in a Veterans' hospital in Manteo, Illinois, at the age of 83.[88] In the years immediately preceding his death, several commentators attempted to sum up his varied career and eclectic body of work. Paul Spreiregen wrote in the encyclopedia *Contemporary Architects:*

> The architecture of Weese, unlike the work of many noted contemporary architects, does not bear a recognizable stamp. It is characterized, rather, by a painstaking attention to the specific design problem at hand. It is from a deep understanding of each problem—its setting, its historical relations and particularly its unique functional requirements—that his design solutions arise.[89]

CONCLUSION

Within downtown Kansas City, Missouri, the Mercantile Bank & Trust Building is an exceptional example of 1970s Modern Movement architecture designed by one of the leading architectural firms of the period. While other high-rise office towers flaunted concrete structural grids or camouflaged steel structures behind an exterior skin, Harry Weese and Associations employed cutting-edge technologies that allowed them to showcase the steel structure of the Mercantile Bank. With its exposed structure, elevated massing, and unusual sunken plaza, the Mercantile Bank is a visually arresting contrast to the more-conventional office towers that surround it. Completed just ahead of the mid-1970s economic recession, the Mercantile Bank was the only articulated steel

[86] *Process: Architecture*, No. 11, *Harry Weese: Humanism and Tradition* (Tokyo: Process Architecture Publishing Co., Ltd., 1979); "Rest Assured. Harry Weese is Keeping Chicago," *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, May 20, 1979, 26; *Oral History*, 64, 235.

[87] Stan Allan, "A Man of Many Words and Works, 1915-1998," *Inland Architect*, 1999, 63; "Harry Weese, Visionary Architect Known as 'Chicago's Conscience,'" *Chicago Tribune*, November 1, 1998; Blair Kamin, "Historical Society's Exhibit Salutes a Consummate Man of the City," *Chicago Tribune*, August 24, 1997, quoted in Blair Kamin, *Why Architecture Matters: Lessons from Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 136.

[88] Herbert Muschamp, "Harry Weese, 83, Designer of Metro System in Washington," *The New York Times*, November 3, 1998, on-line at http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A01E6DB103FF930A35752C1A96E958260, October 28, 2008; Kamin, 136.

frame high-rise built in Kansas City and perhaps one of the last erected nationally before the price of steel made this style cost-prohibitive. In the Mercantile Bank, Harry Weese and Associates combined Modern Movement artistry with innovative engineering to create a truly unique addition to Kansas City's downtown skyline.

[89] Spreiregen, *Contemporary Architects*, 1035.

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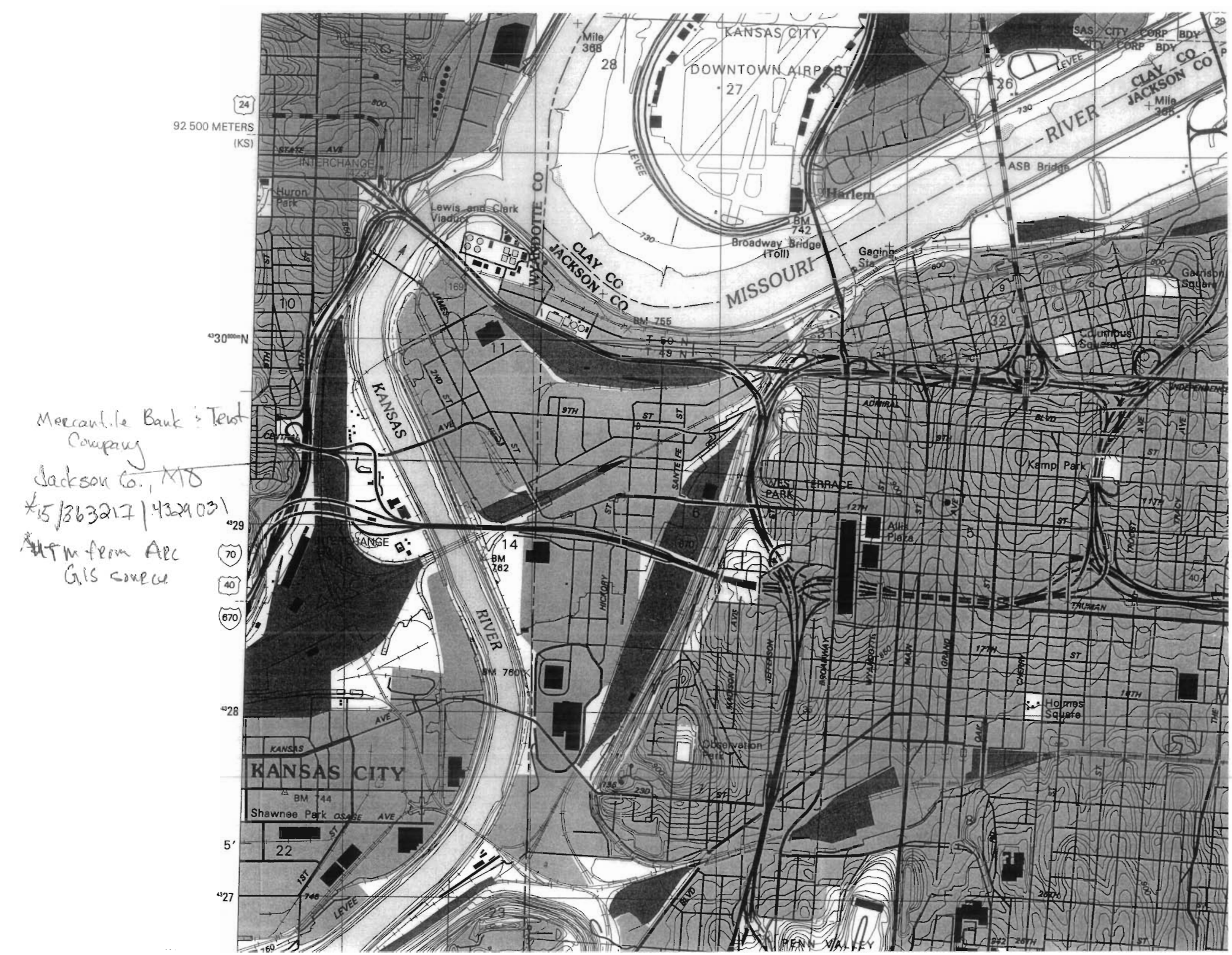
Photograph Number	Description	Camera View
1.	North and west elevations	Southeast
2.	L-shaped building base, lower floors of tower (including "space transfer truss"), and street-level view of sunken plaza	Southeast
3.	North and east elevations, building base in foreground	South
4.	South and west elevations	Northeast
5.	Sunken plaza	North
6.	Lobby	Northeast
7.	Lobby	West
8.	North entrance corridor	Northwest
9.	1st floor elevator lobby	West
10.	4th floor elevator lobby	West
11.	15th floor elevator lobby	East



Mercantile Bank & Trust Company
Jackson Co., MO
*15/363217/4329031
*UTM from ARC GIS conv.

WALLSTREET
TOWER
TED'S

WALLSTREET TOWER
CAUTION
WET
FLOOR

Kinko's

PENSKE
UMB

15
15
15