



BY ERICA HOBBS

When Washington Boulevard's Book Tower reopens this year, it will be both a testament to the street's glorious past as well as the next step in a hopeful future. Bedrock has spent the past seven years restoring the 38-story Louis Kamper-designed building in a \$300 million endeavor that prides itself on its historical preservation and accuracy.

"It is certainly the gem of the boulevard once again," said Detroit historian Dan Austin. "It had lots of competition back in the '20s, but to me there is no question now that the Book Building and Tower are the exclamation point on a stretch of road that has lots of exceptional pieces of architecture."

Standing at 475 feet, the Book Tower was the tallest building in Detroit when it opened in 1926, soaring over its neighbors with its distinct and, at times, controversial Academic Classicism decor. Its European-inspired design would become the epitome of Washington Boulevard's glory days, later turned dingy as it came to represent the street's decline, eventually closing in 2009.

But the Tower's rebirth is the most recent evidence of growth and restoration that started on the boulevard in the early 2000s, offering a glimpse of the glory days of the street's rich past and a taste of what could be their return.

ORIGIN STORY

After Detroit's Great Fire of 1805, Judge Augustus Woodward's 1807 master plan created Washington Boulevard as one of the city's main residential areas. What started as a sleepy pasture transformed into one of Detroit's wealthiest neighborhoods by the mid-1800s. The area's well-heeled sought out homes outside the city's bustling downtown, then concentrated

A STREET OF DREAMS, AND A FEW DETOURS

Washington Boulevard has seen beauty, boom and blight—now, it's looking up

Covered up and unseen for years, the spectacular atrium inside the freshly reborn Book Tower exemplifies the dedication to accuracy and preservation in Bedrock's \$300 million renovation.

between Campus Martius and the Detroit River.

Washington Boulevard offered an ideal location, bordering the new Grand Circus Park and mere blocks away from Woodward Avenue and the city center, Campus Martius.

“Living in a city where you pretty much had to walk everywhere, being a block or two removed from the central business district ... and on a park, ... that’s the place you really want to be,” said Jeremy Dimick, the Detroit Historical Society’s director of collections and curatorial.

Carriages and grand homes began to fill out the street, then only a narrow cobblestone road lined with elm and maple trees. One of the grandest homes was the residence of former Gov. John J. Bagley, built on the corner of Washington Boulevard and Park Avenue in 1869. The brick Italianate Villa-style home spanned the entire block.

In 1888, the stately Cadillac Hotel was built on the corner of Washington Boulevard and Michigan Avenue. Although not the majestic Book-Cadillac Hotel that was to break ground on the site 35 years later, the Cadillac was a gem in its own right. Designed by the John Scott & Co. firm, the Italianate and Romanesque-style structure was the residence of James Burgess Book, wealthy physician, real estate investor and the father of three sons who would revolutionize the boulevard.



On this 1915 postcard, leafy, elegant Washington Boulevard is described as having been "... one of the principal residence streets, but on account of the rapid growth of Detroit, it is now being turned into a business thoroughfare." | Image courtesy of Detroit Historical Society.

BOOK BROTHERS AND THE GLORY YEARS

As Detroit’s population grew, the city continued to expand. What was once a peaceful residential area became more bustling, and the city’s wealthy residents sought out a quieter space to call home.

After traveling around Europe studying its cities and architecture, admiring the continent’s ornate buildings and grand boulevards, Book’s eldest son, James Burgess Book Jr., sought to bring that splendor to Detroit, joining the popular City Beautiful movement that set to replicate that grandeur in American cities.

As the United States embarked on a building blitz of skyscrapers, the younger Book envisioned a transformation of his childhood home into a lavish shopping district that would rival Fifth Avenue in New York City. When his father died in 1916, he and his brothers, Frank and Herbert, inherited significant holdings along the

boulevard, which they began to expand.

“They took that cherished street that they grew up on, and they tried to make it a place that Detroit would be proud of,” Austin said.

In 1917, the brothers opened their first structure, the appropriately named Book Building. The 13-story Italian Renaissance office building was the first of a series of structures designed by Louis Kamper—the brothers’ architect of choice—but the grandest of the designs were yet to come. In 1924, the brothers turned the already-grand Cadillac Hotel into something greater and created the Book-Cadillac Hotel, which remains today.

With more than 1,000 guest rooms, three ballrooms and ground-floor retail, the lavish Neo-Renaissance building would become one of Detroit’s signature hotels—another of which was its rival down the road, the Statler Hotel, designed by George B. Post and built in 1915.

At the time, the Book-Cadillac was the tallest building in the city and the tallest hotel in the world, with

33 stories. Its architectural details included Corinthian columns, statues of Detroit’s early history at its entrance and its elegant, glass-ceilinged Italian Garden ballroom, designed to simulate the feeling of standing in a garden of an Italian villa.

The Statler—though not a Book-Kamper building—held its own. The Renaissance Revival-style hotel, designed by George B. Post, was the most expensive hotel in Detroit when it was built in 1915 to the tune of \$3.5 million (more than \$100 million today). It was notable as being the first hotel in Detroit to offer private baths in each room and the first in the nation with air conditioning in all public areas.

When the Book Tower came along, it became the crown jewel of an already-glamorous street that also

included the 1901 Stevens Building by Donaldson and Meier, 1910’s Palmer Building by Albert Kahn, 1915’s David Whitney Building by Daniel Burnham and the original (since rebuilt) St. Aloysius Church, a relic of the 1800s, and its next-door chancery.

1928 brought the boulevard into a whole new light—literally—with the installation of 28 ornate electric lampposts. Standing 35 feet tall and carrying clusters of five lamps with a brilliance of 2,000 lumens—200 lumens more than that of Chicago’s State Street—Washington Boulevard became the most well-lit street in the world.

Of the elaborate lighting ceremony, which attracted an audience of 20,000 people, the *Detroit Free Press* said in its July 11, 1928, issue: “The boulevard was lighted to almost daylight

brilliance. A cheer arose from the watching thousands.”

The Book brothers also had plans to create an even greater building at the corner of Washington Boulevard and State Street, an 81-story skyscraper that would have been one of the tallest buildings in the world. But the 1929 stock market crash would bring the Book brothers’ building blitz to an end.

MIDCENTURY HEIGHT OF RETAIL

According to Detroit historian and retail expert Michael Hauser, Washington Boulevard reached its retail peak in the 1950s. Unlike the mixed-array shops that lined nearby Woodward Avenue, Washington continued to cater to the city’s well-



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to-do, keeping its status as Detroit's Fifth Avenue.

Himelhoch's women's department store anchored the boulevard, offering high-end clothing, shoes and makeup to the wives of wealthy auto executives. Its seven-story Albert Kahn building reflected the wealth of its customers, with marble-faced walls, mahogany floors and gilded staircases.

The shopping experience, Hauser said, was unlike the casual browsing of today. Patrons dressed up to shop, and merchandise on the boulevard would have been displayed in elegant glass and mahogany showcases instead of racks.

"Typically, you were a longtime purchaser at a lot of these stores, so you knew the manager, you knew your favorite salesperson who looked out for you, and they may have called you to let you know something new had come in," he said.

A NEW LOOK IN THE 1970S

If the 1920s were the glory years of Washington Boulevard, then the 1970s marked the beginning of the street's decline. In the 1970 *Detroit Free Press* article "Marching Along Washington Boulevard (Mr. Book's Grand Unfinished Dream)," Jeanne Findlater describes a lively neighborhood of shops, restaurants, apartments, hotels and other businesses. While some former buildings had now been turned into parking lots, and the boulevard's once-proud historic lamps were rusting, Findlater still described the boulevard as the city's most interesting walking place.

But Detroit's massive population decline soon after saw many of those shops close or move to the suburbs, with some dubbing the street as a "boulevard of broken dreams." In an effort to save the neighborhood, the city embarked on a project in the mid-1970s that would completely change the face of the boulevard into something meant to be more accessible and appealing to young professionals.

Working under city planner Alex Pollock, architect Gino Rossetti envisioned a pedestrian-focused

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This advertisement from the Dec. 27, 1959, edition of *The Detroit News* speaks to the upscale core customer at Himelhoch's Washington Boulevard department store: "Buy your fur the way your husband buys his stock ... WHEN THE PRICE IS RIGHT!"



The Statler Hotel, sitting empty in 2001, was later torn down as the city tidied up for Super Bowl XL in 2006. | Image courtesy Library of Congress.

playground full of outdoor activities and entertainment. He permanently closed traffic on the boulevard's east side to create a mall with a promenade plus fountains, an amphitheater and recreational spaces.

One of its most prominent additions, however, was the installation of a tourist trolley that ran the length of the boulevard and extended along Jefferson Avenue to Hart Plaza. More controversially, the plan included a massive, decorative, bright red steel structure, later disparagingly nicknamed Washington Boulevard's "monkey bars" or "tinker toys."

The project received mixed reviews, and ultimately, the development was not successful. People and businesses continued to leave, including the Statler Hotel—then called the Heritage Hotel—in 1975 and, finally, the Book-Cadillac in 1984.

"Detroit never died, it never went anywhere; but in terms of the glory years, having those two hotels close, it ended a chapter in the city's history for sure," Austin said.

After being added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, the boulevard would mostly lie in dormancy for the rest of the 20th century.

A NEW CENTURY AND A NEW BEGINNING

Starting in the early 2000s, Washington Boulevard's luck began to change, beginning with the restoration of its original boulevard design from its 1970s changes in 2003-04.

After a long series of failed attempts and ownership changes, the glorious Book-Cadillac reopened in 2008 as the Westin Book Cadillac Detroit, with more than 400 hotel rooms and luxury condominiums on the top floor.

The Statler/Heritage Hotel suffered an entirely different fate, demolished in 2005 ahead of the city's 2006 hosting

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of the Super Bowl. Still, development continued. The 19-story David Whitney Building—at the intersection of Washington Boulevard, Grand Circus Park and Woodward Avenue—reopened in 2014 with high-end residences and the boutique Aloft Hotel, plus the restoration of its four-story atrium.

The City Club Apartments were built on the former site of the Statler and opened in 2021. The Industrial Bank Building (now the Louis Kamper Apartments), the Stevens Building and the Westin Book Cadillac have all been undergoing multimillion-dollar renovations.

But the Book Tower's reopening will take the boulevard's rebirth to a whole new level. Its historic renovations include the hand-painted re-creation of more than 7,000 square feet of ornate ceiling tiles, the reinstallation of 50,000 square feet of marble, the restoration of 29 caryatids on the building's exterior and the unveiling of a grand, three-story marble atrium. The former office building will now become high-end residential units and an extended-stay hotel and feature 52,000 square feet of retail and office space.

Although no longer Detroit's Fifth Avenue of the past, Washington Boulevard is forging a new identity for itself with a blend of residential, tourism and office space that should bring back the crowds once more.

The Book Tower restoration is “the greatest accomplishment in bringing back Washington Boulevard to that dream that the Book Brothers had a 100 years ago, of being one of Detroit's go-to destinations for entertainment, residential and shopping,” Austin said. “And it adds something that they never thought of at the time, which is living in the heart of it all.”