Cleveland's *Terminal Tower*: The Forest City Acquires a Metropolitan Image

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During the crucial years from 1890 to 1930, Clevelanders learned to express their communal aspirations through design. In 1890 they understood their city as a discreet self-contained organism. By 1930, Cleveland was portrayed as the region's heart and capital. While this change in concept for the great American city was not novel, Cleveland achieved what other cities failed at: a visual symbol that reflects communal desire and achievement.

By the 1920s, the world's largest skyscraper city-within-a-city was planned and begun in Cleveland. Its centerpiece, the Terminal Tower—for forty years the tallest building west of New York City—transformed the city's unassertive skyline into one representative of twentieth-century metropolitan life. Located at the geographic hub of the city on Public Square, this complex was planned to reinforce Public Square as the city's most vital transportation node. Long-distance steam trains, interurban lines, rapid transit, streetcars, as well as taxi cabs and automobiles were to be brought together, making this the first attempt in the United States to unify and integrate an entire city's transportation system under one roof.

The Terminal Tower itself, a fifty-two-story office building, crowned not only a train station below but also an integrated group of high density, multi-function buildings. The office building component was intentionally planned and sized to satisfy Cleveland's need for new office space for ten years. Flanked by two wings—a hotel and a department store—the diagonally oriented tower is key to a remarkable architectural composition which confronts and wraps around two sides of Cleveland's Public Square, providing a monumental backdrop for civic pageantry and a symbol for community pride. Because of its height—708 feet—the tower is visible from virtually all parts of the city, and even beyond. When the tower opened in 1928, it instantly became Cleveland's most important cognitive marker, both during the day, and at night, when a beacon sent forth waves of metaphoric light. One person admiringly wrote the developers: "I see your flaming tower." Built before Rockefeller Center in New York City, this remarkable architectural achievement resulted from linked social, political, economic, historic, and geographic factors, which were unique to the Cleveland region. The objective of this paper is to introduce some of the key considerations in the decision-making process and some of the implementation strategies employed by the developers.

The idea that design could contribute to civic unity was well understood by 1896, when the city's centennial was celebrated by performance. At that time, the desperate need the city had for a new City Hall, County Court House, Public Library, and Post Office formed the catalyst which inaugurated a complex set of events which resulted in the Group Plan of 1903, commonly known today as the Mall, downtown. This was Cleveland's first major attempt to create an architectural symbol for the city: a series of public buildings placed around an extraordinarily large, open public space which emulated the Court of Honor—the White City—of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.

Cleveland's Group Plan, proposed by a commission headed by Chicago architect Daniel Burnham, recognized the multi vocal potential for urban design. First, this district was to be an image *in the city*. Uniformity of style—academic classicism—was to give the area an identifying character which would make public buildings immediately recognizable. Second, this civic center was to be the image *for the city* of Cleveland. After arrival in a proposed new lakefront railway station, the traveler emerged into the mall, the vestibule of the city. Not one building but several were to symbolize Cleveland, one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Third, on a universal level, it expressed a utopian image *of the city*, for it was to convey two important aspects of the human condition—peacefulness and repose—which the designers proclaimed to be the true basis of contentment.

But, because of the values that informed it, because the railway station was never built at the head of the mall as intended, because of its geographic location and isolation between two major radial lines of development of the city–Ontario Street and Superior Avenue—and for other reasons, the mall only obliquely affected the lives of Clevelanders. Thus, it failed to become the City's symbol. Instead of a "White City" the mall turned out to be a "White Sepulcher," the problems of which are still being addressed by planners today. Acknowledging its failure to provide the intended physical symbol, City Plan Commissioner member, Charlotte Rumbold wrote in 1930 that "...the civic center has been of incalculable value in welding into a unity of feeling the whole citizenship about a hope of achieving a beautiful thing...pride in

their city. . .is one of the intangibles that in the long run outweigh many concrete, visible achievements." The real importance of the Group Plan, therefore, lies in the fact that it taught Cleveland's leaders how successful urban imagery could function and how beauty can linked to commercial objectives and success. The honor, however, of providing the city a symbol was to go to the Terminal Tower.

The driving force behind the Tower's development was not the city, nor professional city planners, but the determination of the two local brothers, O. P. and M. J. Van Sweringen, whose formal education ended with the eighth grade. In the early 1900s they allied themselves with Cleveland and out-of-state financiers. Motivated by profit, only thinly camouflaged by ideological rhetoric, they sought to develop suburban Shaker Heights into an affluent, socially- segregated community.

To give their proposed real estate venture a competitive edge over other suburban developments, the brothers realized that it required fast transportation to the downtown business district by a rail link located in a private right-of-way to avoid time-consuming street congestion. Acquiring a private right-of-way is usually prohibitively expensive, but the geography of Cleveland offered an affordable, underdeveloped, natural path, Kingsbury Run—a deep ravine that runs nearly from downtown to Shaker Heights. They soon recognized that rapid transit to the Heights could never alone be profitable and would require a large capital outlay that they did not have and could never hope to recover. O. P. Van Sweringen, however, was ever resourceful; for him obstacles carried opportunities. He simply crafted a more ambitious scheme. Capital to build the rapid came from profits gained from serving as front men for the New York Central Railroad, for whom they built a high level warehouse.

First, the Van Sweringens considered a site for a downtown terminus near East Ninth Street, close to the "New Center." But, by 1911, they made plans for a Union Electric Depot to be located behind Public Square, where land prices were depressed. Besides the rapid line to Shaker Heights, the proposed station was to serve most interurban lines entering the city. Recent Ohio legislation fostered such a terminal. They also tried, but failed in 1911, to convince the Nickel Plate Railroad to use its rights-of-way to provide rapid service to the entire region, joining with them in this project and sharing in costs. Only after 1916, when the Van Sweringen interests gained control of the Nickel Plate, was the idea of building a metropolitan rapid transit system developed and carried through well into the Depression.

Toiling in the utmost secrecy to hold down land prices, options to purchase and leases for nearly all the necessary property were acquired through multiple real estate firms and individuals. After the majority of the transactions were completed, only then were they recorded in the public record. Once that happened, the potential for Public Square was recognized, and new buildings on the square by other developers were erected, such as the Marshall Building (designed in 1912, completed in 1913), number one Public Square, and the Illuminating Building(1915). Therefore, plans made in 1911 sparked the redevelopment of Public Square and, most important, a conscious attempt was made to recentralize Cleveland's business district, which was then migrating out Euclid Avenue.

Most important to the Public Square development was the inability of the Pennsylvania and New York Central railroads to reach an agreement with the city in 1911 for the construction of a critically needed new railroad station at the head of the Mall. It was rumored that the railroads were considering other sites. Realty men acclaimed the benefits of building a union station on Public Square, and O. P. Van Sweringen called on architect Daniel Burnham with this in mind. The idea of including steam railroads in the project fermented over the next five years, before it finally materialized.

As the project moved forward, events beyond the Van Sweringens' immediate control affected it. Contracts governing the use of a proposed station including some of the steam railroads had just been distributed. One was actually considering withdrawing from the project when, unexpectedly, in January 1918, control of the railroads passed to the Federal Government under the United States Railroad Administration. A. H. Smith, then regional director of the administration and the best friend and a business partner of the brothers, called on O. P. and proposed that the station be enlarged to include the railroads presently using the dilapidated lakefront station. Smith thus rekindled the notion for a union station on Public Square.

O. P. immediately took up the idea and with typical audacity suggested that the tracks be extended straight north from the proposed station site at Public Square and connected through to the lakefront train tracks. Smith rejected this proposal, for it failed to accomplish the very thing he was after, relief from the rail congestion on the main line from New York to Chicago. Instead, he proposed a station in which trains were to cross the river on a new, high-level bridge. This solution relieved congestion on the lakefront tracks

and had the potential of accommodating more through freight business, which was then expanding faster than passenger business. Since warehouses could be built next to, or even over, the new right-of-way, this arrangement eliminated the need to truck goods from trains to warehouses. The Van Sweringens and their associates foresaw great personal profit in developing these facilities.

In 1918, at the instigation of the Van Sweringens, an enabling ordinance for changing the proposed site for the union station from the Mall to Public Square was introduced in City Council *by public petition*—a provision provided for in the city's charter as a safeguard against corruption. Protracted and heated negotiations with the city and extensive debate in City Council followed. Some citizens brought picnic lunches and waited for hours to get in to listen. Thoughtful citizens recognized that the entire Group Plan for the Mall—the gateway to the City of Cleveland—depended on the train station, as well as the technical shortcomings of the Public Square site, for efficient railroad use. Citizens' groups and civic activists, such as Peter Witt, described the scheme as a ruse to further Van Sweringen real estate interests. While City Council passed a resolution recommending against the ordinance, supporters pointed out, however, that a union depot at Public Square had the advantage of providing a unified transportation system and convincingly argued that the Mall location was too far away from the active business district of the city. Therefore, the debate beginning in 1918 and continuing well into the 1920s can be characterized as a debate about the public good versus private profit, a debate which continues to today.

Because the decision was to be made on the ordinance by public referendum, the Van Sweringens felt certain they could sway public opinion. As the election approached, they ran extensive advertisements in the newspapers with increasing frequency. More ingenious and selective, they conducted a direct-mail campaign to registered voters. A picture postcard brochure was designed to bridge the gap between the architect's conception of the proposed station and the voter's appreciation. Like the *Group Plan,* its objective was to persuade through visual and rhetorical argument. Even before the brochure is opened, the proposed Public Square facade is pictured on the back of the brochure to be seen as it traveled through the mail. This same image was used in all newspaper advertisements. The same image was employed to make the project memorable, thus desirable, in the public's mind.

The brochure claims to tell the story of the depot and its meaning. Realizing the power of greed—something for nothing—the developers capitalized on the public's naivete: "The biggest improvement in the History of Cleveland, Without a Dollar of Expense to the People." First seen, as the brochure opens, is an interior view of the proposed grand concourse. While the written word points to convenience and capacity, a symmetrically organized illustration—which takes the least perceptual energy for the human mind to understand—communicates a sense of palatial grandeur. This was obviously employed to appeal to the public's expectation and sensibility. By contrast, the next images depict the present decrepit station facilities with horses and carts: not a proper image for a modern, progressive city. Succeeding pictures depict streets which are to be leveled. While not explicitly stated, the implication was that run-down and slum-like conditions will vanish. The next images capture the energy that the developers have brought, though the visual devices of asymmetrical movement and diagonal vista, to Cleveland in related projects, such as the bridges for the Shaker Rapid and the new freight terminals. The viewer is subliminally led to the conclusion that the developers were both experienced and trustworthy. Leaving nothing to chance, a sample, correctly-marked ballot was then shown. The final image, a bird's-eye view of the development, sums up the project and places visual emphasis on the Grand Concourse within it. Quite intentionally, it does not communicate the totality of the developer's plans. The high density commercial areas were left intentionally vague to play down the highly-criticized, money-making aspect of the project.

The special election in January 1919 brought out an exceptionally large number of voters, more than 50,000. While the developers expected the issue to pass by a vote of four to one, the vote was closer: three to two. Popular appeal garnered through advertising was crucial, I contend, to the result. Over the next eleven years, this complex became one of the largest private developments in the United States. Winning the 1919 election was decisive for these outcomes. The powerful role that art played in initiating a building project resulted in the creation of a regional image for Cleveland needs to be recognized.

The enabling ordinances were the most complicated to come before Cleveland's City Council in its history. Yet, in the short time allowed by the city's charter, the council was very effective in negotiating a more favorable deal for the public good and protecting the city's interest and capital resources. From 1911 onwards, the Van Sweringens went through several architectural firms. They first got ideas from Warren and Wetmore, and actually hired George Post and Sons to design the Cleveland Hotel, who slapped a lien

on the property in 1917 when they were let go without full compensation. After John J. Bernet was hired to run the Nickel Plate in 1916, they hired, at his instigation, Graham, Anderson, Probst and White of Chicago, the successor firm to Daniel Burnham's.

In May 1918, months before public controversy about the proposed site took place, preliminary architectural and engineering studies for a union station at Public Square began. The railroad men, who were far from committed to the project, were shocked at the Van Sweringens' precipitousness and demanded that the architect prepare no more plans until technical feasibility studies had been completed. Since the needs of the future users of the terminal had not yet been determined, the design was conceived from the outside in! For the rest of the year an Engineering Committee, consisting of representatives from the railroads, carried out a complete analysis. The Engineering Committee's final report was issued in December 1918, well after the enabling ordinance was submitted to the council.

The Van Sweringens' planning methodology was highly orchestrated—architectural, technical, and legislative efforts proceeded simultaneously rather than one after another. The dream of a union station including all the railroads was dashed, however, when the Pennsylvania Railroad withdrew in December 1919.

Real estate may be divided in horizontal planes for the purpose of ownership. In this particular instance, the Cleveland Union Terminals Company, owned by the railroads, owned the ground rights and constructed the station thereon; while another, the Cleveland Terminals Building Company, owned by the Van Sweringen interests, constructed, owned, and operated the buildings above the station. The different owners, though allied, were separate. In 1921 the rights and obligations of each company were articulated in contracts between them. Since the railroads wanted to be involved in neither local transportation nor retail sales, the Van Sweringen interests formed a third company, which agreed to lease the rapid transit, interurban, and concession areas of the station from the station company. (The unrealistic rent was $850,000 per year, plus taxes, insurance, depreciation, and the cost of the interior finish of the concession area.) This arrangement did not work out. By 1930 interurbans were already going out of business and indeed never came into the station. And, due to the Depression, the Van Sweringens' plan for a regional rapid transit system was never completed.

Furthermore, since the railroads gave the Van Sweringens proxies to vote their stock in the station company, the whole complex was brought under unified control during its design and construction. At that time, this organizational model was one of the most innovative for the development of the concept of "air rights."

Still another hurdle arose with the passage in the U. S. Congress of the Esch-Cummins Act in 1920, the need for approval by the Interstate Commerce Commission. After extensive testimony with debate again centering around the issue of public good versus private profit, and after a reversal of an earlier decision, the commission finally gave its consent on December 6, 1921 to build this non-union, Union Station.

In the 1918 proposal the Public Square facade was to consist of eleven-story buildings accented by a central, twenty-story tower. The idea of harmonizing the new station with the Hotel Cleveland, thereby uniting the south and west sides of Public Square into a single composition, and of placing the tower above a diagonal entrance in the middle, not only imparted grandeur to the scheme but addressed the city itself because it wrapped around the square instead of merely defining one side of it. This had even more important visual consequences later, with the decision to build a taller office tower. Even this early scheme, however, reflects a sophisticated and thoughtful approach to architectural design. Public Square's chaotic clutter was to be replaced with a consistent order: a clear, nearly symmetrical image that people could easily recognize and remember and, consequently, one that would easily lend itself to symbolic connotations.

When O. P. Van Sweringen decided to build a monumental fifty-two-story tower on Public Square—an idea which had been fermenting since 1919—with characteristic acumen he kept the scheme to himself until a propitious moment. Public Announcement of the new plan did not come until Valentine's Day, 1925. Publicity statements proclaimed that the underlying objective of the new design was the production of a landmark edifice to rival the Woolworth, Municipal, and other famous buildings in New York City and to embody the giant strides of Cleveland's development. The base truth of the matter was, however, an economic incentive: a cost-benefit analysis forecasted a 12% profit margin for the fifty-two-story office tower compared to 9% for the adjoining lower commercial buildings.

The idea of building a tower was, of course, in keeping with the tempo of the times, but it had important contextual visual consequences as well. No longer just accenting the entrance to the station, the tower

would, by its sheer height and diagonal placement, dramatically contrast with the quadrilateral symmetry of the Public Square. Also, important was a change made from the design of 1918; the tower was set back. The entrance, newly conceived as a portico and modeled on Washington's Union Terminal, jutted forward and was given an identity of its own. This visual separation not only expressed a difference in function—entry versus office space—but created a totally different visual relationship between tower and portico. The entrance and the ground line no longer served as a base for the tower, as in the 1918 proposal, but the tower now rose from behind the portico. Because the shape of the tower was visually incomplete at this lower juncture, a sufficiently strong tendency toward visual completion was generated, creating the impression of an emergence from a subterranean base. This compositional device gave visual expression to the station below which was previously lacking.

The separation of portico and tower, however, resulted not only from visual considerations, but from a legal one as well. Since the site was on Public Square, the courts decreed that the city had no right to vacate the triangular piece of land in the southwest corner. This property was owned by the public, as distinguished from the city, and the city only had the right to occupy it for a public use. Therefore, the tower had to be set back from the square. In order to permit erection of the portico, City Council passed an ordinance licensing the construction of an ornamental passageway that would be open at all times to pedestrian traffic.

The top of the tower shares a common prototype with the Municipal Building of New York: the Tower of the Winds in Seville, Spain, which was completed during the Renaissance. Like the Municipal Building, Terminal Tower was originally to be crowned with a female allegorical figure, representing an abstract concept such as transportation, commerce, justice, or the city.

One of the Van Sweringens' foremost objectives was to create an exclusive district. But they built more than a Cathedral of Business: they shaped a visual symbol for the City of Cleveland—a landmark that answered to Cleveland's psychological needs and gave Public Square an entirely new face and character. The tower, the spacious terminal facilities, and other buildings created a modern focus for Cleveland's pride; it was a city-within-a-city in the heart of downtown, a place that everybody used and therefore knew.

Clevelanders viewed Terminal Tower as an unqualified success. For architectural critics, however, the complex lacked that triumphant sense of "the new." Even today, for the average visitor, the architectural style of the Terminal Tower complex is physically and emotionally comfortable rather than challenging. For the Van Sweringens, it connoted sturdiness, strength, and restraint.

Although Terminal Tower itself is in a traditional architectural style, the later super- grade buildings—the Department Store, Medical Arts Building, Midland Bank, and Builder's Exchange—employ a contemporary Art Deco idiom. This was the result of a conscious decision: Terminal Tower was to be the landmark, while the architectural style of the others should connote up-to-date, modern efficiency.

Because of the collapse of the Van Sweringen empire in the 1930s, the super-grade development was not completed at that time. Reflecting on his accomplishment, O. P. Van Sweringen remarked at that time to Louis Seltzer, the editor of the *Cleveland Press*: "It [Terminal Tower] looks nice and permanent. It does make the city look metropolitan, doesn't it?" Seltzer was reminded how several years earlier O. P., while looking out his downtown office window, had said: "A very shabby skyline. Cleveland needs to change itself from an overgrown small town to a metropolis." With the Terminal Tower complex, Cleveland attained that image. Cleveland capitalists successfully employed architectural form to advance Cleveland and in the process created something much greater: a sense of place through art.

Sources for Further Reading and Research:

The main archival sources are The Cleveland Union Terminal Collection at Cleveland State University and the Archives at Tower City, Cleveland, Ohio. Further archival material is located at The Western Reserve Historical Society and at the Art Institute of Chicago. Secondary sources are vast, but for further reading and details on the Group Plan see Walter C. Leedy, Jr., "Cleveland's Struggle for Self-Identity: Aesthetics, Economics and Politics" in Richard Guy Wilson and Sidney K. Robinson, editors, *Modern Architecture in America: Visions and Revisions* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991), 74-105. For the Terminal Tower see Walter C. Leedy, Jr., "Cleveland's Terminal Tower—The Van Sweringens' Afterthought," in *The Gamut*, No. 8 (Winter, 1983), 3-26, and John J. Grabowski and Walter C. Leedy, Jr., *The Terminal Tower, Tower City Center: A Historical Perspective* (Cleveland: The Western Reserve Historical Society, 1990.