

A Visit to American Center *By Chad Quella*

A while back, I was in Detroit for my job and was motoring along I-696 when I saw a huge obelisk appear on the horizon. I hadn't thought about it but I was in the suburb of Southfield, and Southfield happened to be where American Motors built its headquarters building in 1975. As I drew closer, sure enough, it was American Center, pretty much as it looked in annual reports, promotional flyers, and filmstrips from the late 70's.

I had time to kill, so I got off the highway and found my way toward the tower, which stands alone above a basically flat expanse in all directions. The Helvetica-lettered name of the building was in white against the black cap of the building, and the only thing missing were the triangle-rectangle "A-mark" logos in the corners. There was a ground-level building that expanded out from the base of the tower and appeared to house a lobby area and some retail shops. Seeing that I had nothing to lose, I went in.

Entering through a revolving door, I strolled up to the information desk, where two older ladies were seated. I told them plainly that I was a fan of AMC from out-of-town, I recognized the building, and thought I might check it out. I expected them to say that if I didn't have any business in the building, they would have to ask me to please leave. But the next thing that came out of their mouths wasn't that, nor was it a call for security. Rather, they both seemed delighted to meet a fan and have the opportunity to share their memories of the good old days! They had both worked at American Center since it was occupied by AMC, one lady had worked there since it was new, the other had been there since 1985, after AMC had sold the building and was a mere tenant in it's own headquarters. They both recalled plenty of important executives coming and going, and remembered the uptick in activity whenever there was a new model being developed.

Pointing to different areas of the lobby, they told me where revolving platforms were that showed-off the latest and greatest AMC products and they recalled at least one spot where the history was displayed too. "That corner over there was where they had the old Hudson." But after a few minutes, they did call security. "Hey Bob, you got a minute?" one lady asked of a gentleman wearing a security badge. "This young man is a fan of AMC and we were telling him about it." "Oh!", Bob said with a chuckle. He had worked there since the AMC-era too, and gladly told me about having to take extra precautions whenever "important French muckety-mucks" would fly in for meetings and such. He pointed out the window to the open lawn, where he said a helipad used to be for executives and dignitaries. "Of course, this is where they brought the display cars in and out," he said as he directed me to an extra-wide door, cleverly concealed in a corner of the glass-walled lobby. "That doesn't get much use anymore." As my hosts talked, I couldn't help but imagine Dick Teague, Gerry Meyers, Roy Chapin, Jose Dedeurwaeder, Paul Tippett, and other AMC captains coming and going through these doors, in good times, bad times, and really bad times.

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Author Jim Mann wrote a book called *Beijing Jeep*, about AMC's foray into Communist China to assemble the Cherokee for Asian markets. One chapter describes in detail the scene, here in this building in 1987, when AMC employees got the news that they were done: Lee Iacocca had just become their new boss, Chrysler their new



employer, and almost all of them were now redundant. This shock extinguished the little flame that they had worked so hard to build, finally achieving a string of successes with Cherokee and Comanche, the Wrangler, new 4.0L and new 2.5L fuel-injected engines, the Alliance GTA and new Premier and Medallion, now it was all for naught.

The security guard also had a story about secret passages that were on the AMC floor, connecting to meeting rooms and such, and that it proved very difficult to be able to protect and even find all of the nooks and crannies that had been designed into the offices. I asked him if any of the old AMC stuff was still around the building anywhere. He replied, "no," but then recanted. "Well, who knows, they tear-down and rebuild walls so much, maybe there's a spot somewhere that's all walled-off and forgotten about."

By this time, most of an hour had passed and I apologized for taking up so much of their time. They thanked me for stopping by and invited me back next time I was in the neighborhood. I have heard that since my visit, the "American Center" signs have been replaced with "Charter One," a bank. Sounds like I got there just in time to behold the last vestiges of AMC's headquarters the way AMC built it.