Professor Harrison

Honors 1000

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Albert Kahn and the Fisher Building

The Fisher building stands as Detroit’s “largest art project” for more than 80 years (Austin). It is one of the most known and recognizable buildings in the city. Not only is the exterior beautifully made, but also the interior is crafted with oustanding sculptures, mosaics and frescoes (Fogelman). The mastermind behind this building was Albert Kahn. Albert Kahn was the most influential architect in Detroit and he was known as the “architect of Detroit”. He was given this name because he designed a variety of well known buildings in Detroit, like the General Motors Building, Detroit Free Press Building and many more. His buildings were mainly focused in more traditional styles of architecture, but when the Fisher brothers commissioned Kahn to design the Fisher building, he focused on four American cultural symbols—commerce, transportation, art and agriculture (Austin). Kahn did this because he wanted to make the Fisher building the most American and modern building of it’s time.

The Fisher Building gives Detroit an artistic appeal and allows for a different way to see Detroit. This is because Detroit is thought of only to care about cars and factories, but this different way of seeing allows for people to view the Fisher Building as Detroit’s art output. Based on my research and group research, I can support the idea that the Fisher Building gives depth to Detroit and can teach us the importance of including art in a city. I also believe that it not only represents Detroit in the artistic way but also the financial way.

My part of the research project was centered on Albert Kahn, the designer of the Fisher building, and why the Fisher brothers chose him to complete the project. I found that the Fisher brothers chose Kahn because of his previous projects and also because of his recent trip to Europe. The brothers hoped that this influence would give the building a different look and style choice from buildings already seen in Detroit. An example of the European influences is “the Fisher was built — with only slight exceptions — entirely out of granite and marble, including on the exterior. More than 40 kinds of marble from all over the world were used. From the base of the building to 50 feet up — the first three floors — the exterior is finished in polished Minnesota pink marble and Oriental granite” (Austin). This building was known to have the most marble in the whole world and still holds that title in its modern time. Kahn’s reason for putting marble in the building was to set it apart from his recent projects and to more importantly, bring more attention to the luxurious vibe it not only gives the Fisher building, but also Detroit. In other words, it brought people to Detroit, just to experience and see the mosaics and frescoes that Albert Kahn designed for the building. Aside from the shopping center, theatre, and the famous parking garage, the Building attracted many tourists from around the world to visit Detroit and see this artistic side of the city.

It’s important for a city to have artistic outputs because it gives the city a beautiful look and it attracts more people to live in the city. It is described on Patch.com when the author of the post says, “Throughout time it shows that cities with an active and dynamic cultural scene are more attractive to individuals and business’. Public ART can play a key factor in creating a unique and vibrant destination” (Neumann). When relating this quote back to the Fisher Building, it means that building essentially attracts more business and tourists, which in result betters Detroit.

The Fisher Building also helps us learn about the effectiveness of its worth when it comes down to how much profit it made. On the Fisher Building Historical website, it was made apparent that “On Dec. 7, 1962, it was announced that the Fisher and the 11-story New Center Building – now known as the Albert Kahn Building – were sold for about $15 million ($106.9 million today) by the four surviving Fisher brothers to a Detroit real estate partnership headed by prominent investors Louis Berry and George D. Seyburn” (Austin). Although the building was beautiful and artist, it didn’t bring in enough profit to support it’s worth. Due to the Fisher Brothers spending too much on security guards, janitors, and other amenities, they couldn’t have enough funds to carry out the building anymore (Morris). This demonstrates Detroit as a whole because of the financial heartbreaks the city had previously endured and is still trying to recover from. The Renaissance center also experiences this ongoing change of owners because of how expensive it is to run it. These connections allow us, as citizens of Detroit, to understand why Detroit is what it is and where Detroit is going. It also helps us to make connections from the Fisher building to Detroit, when comparing artistic and financial aspects.

The Fisher Building gives Detroit an artistic way of seeing and it also shows how financially it can affect the city. Looking at all of the sources, they all address the importance of connecting Detroit back to the Fisher building because it did affect its popularity and financial income. Based on my research and group research, I support the idea that the Fisher Building gives us more knowledge to better understand Detroit and can teach about the importance of a city incorporating art into the architecture. I also believe that it not only represents Detroit in the artistic way but also the financial way.



This picture shows Eugersa, me, and Jasmine right in front of the beautiful Fisher Building posing for a selfie.

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