



## Key Points:

- Of fundamental importance to the quality of design is process; and process is driven by the culture of its participants.
- Design matters, but the culture of design shapes the influence—the quality of impact.



**Michael L. Guthrie, AIA** is the founding Design Principal of inFORM Studio, with offices in Detroit and Chicago. He received his Master of Architecture from the University of Michigan and was honored with an Alumni Society Award at the university in 1997. His commitment to the firm's progressive work is illustrated by a broad range of projects including museums, libraries, a recording studio, commercial, hospitality and pedestrian bridges; with an innovative approach to sustainable design Michael has achieved significant professional awards and distinctions that include 28 AIA Design Awards and several projects achieving LEED certifications. Additionally, Michael received the 2003 AIA Detroit Young Architect Award and was honored with the 2004 AIA Michigan Young Architect Award. His work has been published in various publications; and shown in numerous exhibitions globally.

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## The Culture of Design

### Michael L. Guthrie, AIA; inFORM Studio

Design matters: a contagious phrase that has permeated the architectural community and become the name of focus groups, conferences, books, and even a ball sponsored by AIA New York this past October. But, why does design matter? How does design matter? The answer starts with the design's impacts, and—perhaps more importantly—what impacts we value.

In 1971, Henry Ford II dreamed of a renaissance for the city that was identified with his family's legacy, Detroit. The Motor City faced perilous hardship in the wake of the 1967 riots, yet Ford—burning with a passion for resurgence—partnered with a number of the city's most affluent and influential citizens to signify to the world, Detroit's return to glory. His vision was to become the design of the Renaissance Center, a new precedent for urban renewal. The projected cost was \$500 million, the largest privately financed development in history, and would be built on 33 acres of riverfront with the investment of 51 of the leading corporations in America. The Renaissance Center Partnership appointed John Portman—one of the nation's foremost architectural visionaries—for the commission, leaving no doubt that this ambitious endeavor would signify to the world that Detroit would symbolize the city of the future.



The project heralded five towers stretching over a 350,000 square foot shopping center, soaring spaces, the largest hotel in the world, exterior glass elevators, and a six-story lobby with suspended walkways over a reflecting pool. The project lacked nothing in the way of ambition.

Design matters.

Completed in 1981, the Renaissance Center spiraled into financial ruin in less than 20 years. Explanations for the failure pointed out numerous causes including economic challenges, a disorienting lobby, a lack of contextual integrity as a megastructure—the list goes on. None drew more scathing criticism than what can only be described as a concrete bunker doubling as a front porch. Ruled by defensiveness, a strategy of security governed the design process by locating heating equipment along Jefferson Avenue as a barrier of protection from the rest of Detroit. The resulting psychological impact was jarring to urban connectivity and separated the city from the riverfront. In short, the design was deemed a failure.

The verdict on the design of the Renaissance Center, although powerful, shadows a more critical factor to ponder. Shouldn't the culture of design be



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more significant than the design itself?

Of fundamental importance to the quality of design is process; and process is driven by the culture of its participants. Perhaps more over-looked in the conception of the Renaissance Center was the design of culture, or lack thereof. Paralleling the rise of the Renaissance Center was the decline of another ambitious project lobbied by Robert Moses. LOMEX, a controversial plan to build an elevated highway from the Holland Tunnel on the west side of Manhattan to the Manhattan Bridge on the east, met its final demise at the hands of a vocal group of advocates, spearheaded by Jane Jacobs, in 1969.

Unbeknownst to NYC officials, the abandonment would spur the creation of one of the most vibrant neighborhoods in the world. SoHo, or South of Houston, was saturated with underutilized cast iron structures left by the departure of large manufacturers of mercantile and wholesale goods. The upper floors of these former industrial spaces became attractive to artists for the wide open floor plans, access to natural light, and low rent. The resulting proliferation of artist galleries, shops, and boutiques, receives the credit for making SoHo one of the more valued districts in our world today. But to observe the result and neglect the cultural formation, belies the root of the success story. Operating outside of the zoning laws of the period, artists began to take up residence in the lofts and establish a vital live-work community. The multi-ethnic population pioneered into the urban fabric with little equity, but a spirit of hope and promise. Neighbors helped each other build lofts, taught one another construction techniques, and encouraged one another through struggle. They shared ideas, cuisine, and materials, and inspired each other with a tireless work ethic. The creativity thrived. Design was real and authentic.



Design matters, but the culture of design shapes the influence—the quality of impact. In many ways, it is a circular endeavor. In order for design to thrive, everyone should feel empowered to contribute, with freedom to fail, dialogue, and share ideas. Leadership is critical, but participation is paramount; and in a healthy culture of design—design is applied to the culture itself.

Henry Ford II dreamed of a resurgent Detroit. In September of 2016, the sixth-annual Detroit Design Festival returned to the Eastern Market for a celebration of creativity. This was an intentional collection of diverse enthusiasts of the creative disciplines, and was attended by far more than just designers. Culture breeds culture. It is precisely this ingredient, this

