

**LEADERSHIP TRANSCRIPT:** 13:01 minutes

In the late 1960s, Max Fisher and Henry Ford II would dream about Detroit's future and ask themselves, "What can we do for Detroit?"

They longed for the days when the downtown was bustling with industry, shoppers, nightlife, and the general sentiment was that Detroit was a great place and only getting better.

Max Fisher was always very active in civic matters that affected Detroit. He had been named the Chairman of New Detroit, a corporate committee formed to address the city's economic and social issues in September 1968.

One important goal of New Detroit was to address the problems that led to the race riots in 1967.

Detroit's economic hardships were a result of the decrease in US auto manufacturing, urban sprawl, and souring race relations, the latter reaching its apex with the riots during the summer of 1967.

While social critics suggested that whites resented blacks for taking their city, Max Fisher was undeterred. He wanted to improve Detroit for everyone living there. His passion was not fueled by nostalgia but by civic pride.

*Damon Keith:*

*To Max's brilliance, when we got into some of the meetings, uh, some of the corporate leaders said this wouldn't have been happening as the city was burning if we'd been talking to the right negroes. I said, along with Dr. Arthur Johnson, you have been talking to the right negroes, but you haven't been listening to us. We've told you about police brutality, we've told you about unemployment, we've told you about education, we've told you about housing, and we've been telling you about these things and you have not listened to us. Had you listened to these problems, maybe this would not have happened, the explosion. But don't say that you've been talking to the wrong negroes. Well, Max Fisher immediately supported Dr. Johnson and me. He said, "Damon and Art Johnson are absolutely right – they brought these problems to us before and we've done nothing about them. We've swept them under the rug." But that was his sensitivity and how he was able to sense the problems all along, and he has just been totally committed to the city of Detroit.*

In early 1970, Max Fisher had resigned as leader of President Nixon's program on volunteerism. He also had made good on his promise to help George Romney staff the federal office of Housing and Urban Development. He was ready for a new opportunity.

That spring, Dwight Havens of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce assembled a collection of Detroit business leaders to tackle the social and economic problems facing

Detroit. He persuaded Max Fisher to be the Chairman of the Detroit Renaissance.

Detroit Renaissance would be Max Fisher's vehicle for channeling his emotional desire and galvanizing his powerful network with the single goal of improving Detroit.

Twenty-three executives from Detroit's business community, including Chairman of General Motors James M. Roche and J. L. Hudson were on board.

*Jane Sherman:*

*..but to see the city that he had spent so much of his life, being a part of and growing up in. even though it was his adult life. And really he built his adult life around that city; burning. I think it had traumatic effect and I think that when he spent time after that, it was to try to recover and get you know, rebuild the city. Which became very obvious, from new Detroit to new Renaissance and um.. everything that he encouraged. Um.. Ford and doing the building of the apartments downtown. This was all part of trying to give something back to the city that he had made his fortune in.*

The public launch of Detroit Renaissance took place on March 29, 1971 when Fisher addressed the Economic Club of Detroit. In his "What Can We Do For Detroit" address, Fisher drove home the point that "Detroit is not dying."

Fisher had already hired Robert McCabe, a veteran of the public side of urban development, to oversee the program to establish a close working relationship between government and business.

*Bob McCabe:*

*It was somewhat of a surprise to me. In terms of - I didn't realize how fast businesses were leaving the city. Max had told me that the Detroit Renaissance Business Leadership was dedicated to the economic and physical revitalization of the city. But, while that was their aim, there were lots of businesses that were going out to the suburbs. Because things were pretty tough in the city then.*

Fisher dreamed big. He envisioned a venture that would radically change the image of downtown Detroit. In 1971, Fisher, Henry Ford, and Al Taubman commissioned a study of future development along the riverfront.

Ford trusted Fisher and his idea for revitalizing Detroit, and gave him credit for persuading him to start the project.

In the Fall of 1971, Henry Ford undertook the largest single building venture in Detroit's history. The project was the Renaissance Center, also known as "RenCen."

In May 1973, ground broke on RenCen. The goal was to build an "urban village" with as

many of Detroit's services under one roof as possible.

RenCen opened in 1977. Whether or not it accomplished its goal of restoring Detroit and spurring future development along the riverfront was debatable, but it was a financial disaster for Ford, Fisher, and Taubman. The community feared that Fisher might give up on his dream for a better Detroit.

However, the goal for RenCen was not to turn a profit, but rather, to provide a catalyst for downtown growth – and in that respect, the goal was accomplished.

Max Fisher was thinking about the future of Detroit, in the year 2000 and beyond. While he'd helped Ford move along the idea of RenCen, he still felt a calling to make more of a mark, and as Chairman of Detroit Renaissance, he was not going to quit on the city.

*Peter Cumming:*

*I heard Max talking about the city for many years before I became a resident of the city. And I heard him say very, very frequently that before you can be a leader in your state or your country or even internationally, you need to be a leader in your own hometown. And, and, it's part of...for Max, I think it's, it's, it's a manifestation of loyalty. As, as hard a sell as Max is, once he's sold, once he's a believer, loyalty takes over. And he is enormously loyal to people and to causes. He doesn't make snap judgments about the people and the causes that he's going to be committed to. But once he's committed, he's committed. And I've seen this time and again with causes and with people.*

His dedication to Detroit continued in 1974 with his initial vision of Riverfront – a modern apartment complex, a marina, and a bustling shopping center. He began to line up the rest of the partnerships needed to realize his vision.

Hoping to breathe economic life into Detroit as well, Mayor Coleman Young, a Democrat, forged necessary partnerships between City Hall and suburban developers. Nonetheless there will still many challenges.

Referring to the number of difficulties experienced during the development of Riverfront Fisher said: "I never ran into these kinds of roadblocks before. For three years, it was just one fight after another." But Fisher's relationship with Mayor Young flourished despite their differences.

*Bob McCabe:*

*...Coleman clearly had political problems. He had to convince people that he could be a Mayor. And they wanted to help him because again, the idea of a public-private partnership is the way to revitalize cities.*

*I do believe it was love of the city, and wanting it to be a success. And their*

*personalities.. were strong personalities..but they could talk to each other. They didn't always agree; but they could talk to each other. And out of that again, came a consensus.*

Fisher wanted both the state and the city to have a stake in Riverfront. He lobbied and got the “Max Fisher bill” passed, giving the Detroit City Council the power to grant twelve-year property tax exemptions to new housing construction downtown. The bill was signed into law by Michigan Governor Milliken, a Republican.

In the Spring of 1978, after a long series of deals and partnerships, Fisher purchased the riverfront acreage and formed Riverfront Associates with Al Taubman, each personally putting in \$100,000 in seed money...

...But roadblocks abounded. Opposition to the development came from environmentalists, government financiers, and much to Fisher's dismay, an activist segment of Detroit's black community.

Fearing the project would be doomed without government support and needing to play politics with federal agencies like HUD, FHA, and the Government National Mortgage Association, Fisher forged ahead, exhausting his rolodex on behalf of the city.

In September of 1981, the FHA loan was approved. A small portion of the twelve- year mortgage was to be paid with money from a city tax abatement. This arrangement divided the Detroit City Council.

Leading the opposition was Councilman Kenneth V. Cockrel, the voice of those from Detroit's black community that opposed the tax breaks for Riverfront. His slogan, “Tax Max and his pal, Al!” spread through the city.

Fisher had supported civil rights and was empathetic to the struggles of minorities. Frustrated but determined, Fisher contacted Mayor Young to make a hard push for Riverfront to the citizens of Detroit and cool off the political and racially-charged rhetoric in the process.

Fisher and Cockrel went before the city council to state their cases. The process had taken an emotional toll on Fisher, and financially, he stood to personally lose \$10 million if the deal did not go through. But at greater stake was the realization of his dream.

In the end, the council voted in favor of the tax abatement, and the formal opposition to Riverfront was over. Cockrel even sent Fisher a letter wishing him luck with the development.

On June 15, 1982, after seven long years, groundbreaking on Riverfront began. In Spring of 1984, the first tower opened to renters, with the second tower opening that Fall. In 1990, ground broke on a third tower.

The project operated at a loss for many years, with Fisher and Taubman losing more than \$30 million between 1978 and 1991, but personal profit was not their goal.

Experts at Michigan State University declared Riverfront “a kind of textbook case in the application of power to realize an urban development project.”

In the process, Fisher endured a civic controversy unlike any in his career. It required him to use his fortune and political savvy, and to put his personal relationships, negotiating skills, and leadership to the test. But, Max Fisher persevered and Riverfront, Fisher’s vision, passion, and fulfillment of a promise to Detroit, was built.