

# BMA Tower

31st Street and Southwest Trafficway  
completed 1963

by Elizabeth Rosin

Kansas City's BMA Tower, completed in 1963 for the Business Men's Assurance Company of America (BMA), is among the nation's finest examples of Miesian Modern architectural design. It occupies a 7 1/2 acre parcel at the northeast corner of Karnes Boulevard (31<sup>st</sup> Street) and Summit Street (Southwest Trafficway) on the southern edge of Penn Valley Park, approximately three miles south of the city's traditional business district. The design by Chicago architects Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) features an abstract geometric form stripped of all unnecessary ornament set on an open plaza that reinforces the contrast between the natural and manmade environments. Like other corporate buildings constructed in Kansas City as well as nationwide after World War II, the BMA Tower broke the traditional formula for office building design by rejecting the stacked masonry form, ornamented cornice, and central business district street wall. In its fulfillment of this radical philosophical shift, the BMA Tower represents the most complete expression of Modern architectural principles applied to corporate architecture in Kansas City.

In 1908, W. T. Grant founded BMA to provide personal injury insurance to business and professional men. The company grew quickly, and in 1930 moved its offices into a building on Pershing Road across from Union Station. Twenty-five years later BMA occupied the entire building. Now led by W. D. Grant, company executives decided to construct new headquarters and hired the Chicago firm Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) to assist with planning and design.

The construction of Lever House in New York City earlier in the 1950s vaulted SOM to the forefront of corporate architectural design. The firm boldly embraced the design philosophy of master architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who championed architecture that was simple and abstract; that had clean lines and a pure shape; and that dismissed all allusions to historical precedents. As American architects embraced this philosophy in the post-war era, the American urban landscape changed. Dense 19<sup>th</sup> -century street grids gave way to expansive plazas holding



tall boxes constructed of steel, glass, and concrete. The elegantly sparse designs produced by SOM taught corporate America that good architecture could provide business with tangible benefits by improving public recognition.

The BMA Tower was the first high rise erected in Kansas City since the completion of City Hall in 1936 and is the most distinctive post-war office tower in the city. It features a stronger welded, rather than riveted, steel frame. White marble panels clad the vertical and horizontal steel beams, creating a stark structural grid. Set back from the structure at each story, aluminum-framed plate glass form curtain walls of floor-to-ceiling windows. Recessed even further from the perimeter of the structure, the glass walls of the first story lobby create the illusion that the tower floats above the surrounding formal plaza. The site SOM and the BMA Company selected for the new building tops one of the highest points in Kansas City, further distinguishing it from the crowded skyline of the central business district. Bordered by park land, the formal plaza melds with the surrounding natural landscape. Its location and setting enhance the tower's prominent design as well as its visibility from miles away.

For all its modern features, the design for the BMA Tower did not completely abandon architectural classicism. The symmetry of the building mass, the number and rhythm of the bays, the white cladding, and the formal plaza all echo classical proportions, materials and design. Yet, the absence of ornament completely abstracts the classical form. SOM project designer Bruce Graham described the Tower thus, "Situated at the top of a hill, around which the wind and birds travel, the BMA [Tower] sacrifices everything for the purity of its frames and expression of its delicacy." In a perfect expression of Mies' mantra "less is more," the building has become sculpture.

On October 7, 1963, nearly two years after ground was broken, the nine million dollar, 384,000 square foot building opened for business. At the dedication ceremony two weeks later, eighteen hundred people listened as Kansas City Mayor Ilus Davis described the BMA Tower as "... a symbol of real enterprise and good business...." The *Kansas City Star* issued a special section of the newspaper to commemorate the dedication. "Quite possibly the most exciting building, in many respects to be created in Kansas City," wrote Real Estate Editor Fred Fitzsimmons, "is the striking emotionally inspiring, deceiving (and deliberately) simple-profiled B.M.A. Tower."

The design for the BMA Tower received numerous accolades of which two are particularly notable. In 1964 the tower was one of only four buildings nationwide to receive the First Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The year's other honorees included another corporate campus designed by SOM and educational buildings designed by Paul Rudolph and The Architects Collaborative. At the time, Lambert Airport Terminal in St. Louis was the only other Missouri building to have received the AIA's highest award.

The following year, the BMA Tower was the first Missouri building to be recognized by New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). It was featured in an exhibit of 69 buildings entitled "Modern Architecture U.S.A." that chronicled the history of Modern design constructed in the United States since 1909. The exhibit catalog noted that some buildings were chosen because they "are unique masterpieces; others are primarily of historical significance. Some buildings are shown because they launched an idea; others because they carried it to its conclusion." Among the other office buildings featured in the exhibit were the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society (Howe and Lascaze, 1932), the S. C. Johnson & Son Administrative Building (Frank Lloyd Wright, 1936-39), the United Nations (Wallace K. Harrison, 1950), Lever House (SOM, New York, 1952), the Seagrams Building (Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, New York, 1958), Deere and Company Administrative Center (Eero Saarinen, Moline, Illinois, 1964), an IBM Office Building (Curtis and Davis, Pittsburgh, 1964), and the Chicago Civic Center (C.F. Murphy Associates, 1963)—buildings that are literally textbook examples of American architectural Modernism. Among these peers, the BMA Tower, with its sparse form, grid of contrasting white frame and black curtain wall, and absence of ornament, was heralded as a pure example of Miesian design philosophy extrapolated to its ultimate expression.

In 1985, the BMA Tower experienced a problem not unfamiliar to contemporary modern office buildings. Its innovative construction technology proved to be less durable than expected, and the bolts fastening the marble panels to the steel structure began to fail. Architects and engineers studied the problem at length and determined that the method used to anchor the panels to the structure was not sound and that the marble had not been uniformly quarried for maximum strength. The options available to remedy the problem included adding stainless steel bolts to reinforce the original panels or replacing the panels with either new marble or a synthetic glass product called neoparium. Adding bolts would change the appearance of the building and

could damage the already weak panels. New marble panels would need to be substantially thicker than the original panels, and the structure was not designed to support the additional weight. Therefore, the decision was made to replace the marble with neoparium. A visual test showed that from a distance the marble and neoparium were nearly identical in color and texture. Because the building was meant to be viewed from a distance and not up close, the replacement of the marble panels did not reduce the visual splendor of the BMA Tower nor its significance to the high-rise landscape of Kansas City. It continues to be a prominent landmark on the skyline.

In 2002 the National Park Service recognized the importance of the BMA Tower to Kansas City's architectural history by listing it on the National Register of Historic Places. Although the BMA Company recently sold the building, it will maintain its place on the Kansas City skyline continuing to operate as the "Landmark Tower."

#### Sources

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