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# The Other Side of Shopping Centres

## Retail Transformation in Downtown Detroit and The Hague

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### Abstract

This paper studies the reciprocal relationship between suburban shopping mall development and department store transformation in the urban core. After all, the impetus behind most landmark malls have been the visions of large downtown retailers for growth and modernization, which also reflected upon their original premises. Subsequently, the suburban mall took its toll on their core donors, as downtown department stores have struggled for survival for decades. The morphological, economic and cultural transformation of the most central retail blocks is studied over the course of the last century in two cities which have made their mark in retail history: Detroit and The Hague. The study shows the other side of rampant suburbanization of retail, as downtown hopes are translated to the periphery of cities, and lessons and challenges are brought back downtown. The J.L. Hudson department store, the original developer of Northland, Victor Gruen's first major suburban shopping mall, created its vision for growth in America's second largest store in downtown Detroit in the 1950s. Hudson's quantum leap into Detroit's periphery would have never succeeded or even materialized without the department store's exponential downtown growth in the preceding decades, a story that has gone untold. As Detroit's population moved outward, the home base would be abandoned and demolished by the late 20th century, with smaller retailers only now recovering. Similarly, The Hague's Vroom en Dreesmann department store became the Netherlands' largest and most modern upon its completion in 1964, yet the company has downsized and is teetering on the verge of bankruptcy today. The transformation of both retail empires is demonstrated in historic Nalli maps, descriptive histories and quantitative studies. The paper concludes on the value of diversity and adaptability for the survival of retail ecosystems.

Keywords: Detroit, The Hague, urban morphology, Nollis Plan, retail transformation

## Introduction

Much of the contemporary discourse on retail transformation in Western urban cores focuses on the various social and economic forces behind the significant change that has occurred over the past centuries. Almost continuously, retailers have reinvented themselves to benefit from economies of scale in production, distribution and consumption, leading to the much-studied increase in scale, chaining and suburbanization of establishments.<sup>1</sup> As downtowns are seeing reinvestment on both sides of the Atlantic, retailers are rediscovering the urban core as a centre of culture, leisure and consumption.<sup>2</sup> Thus far, few studies have focused on the resulting morphological and architectural evolution of consumer environments, and the current body of work often focuses on landmark developments such as shopping malls and major department stores.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, most studies have focused on singular projects, often in suburban locations. As a result, the transformation of the consumer environment in urban environments has been understudied, especially from a diachronic, single-block perspective. Yet the suburban leap that sprouted shopping malls from the mid-20th century onwards was rooted in the success of downtown retailers, as large department stores planned their first branches as subsidiaries of their core establishments.

This paper studies the flipside of the growth of the suburban shopping mall – the transformation of the downtown retail block. It does so by studying the growth and decline of the downtown roots of the first American shopping mall anchor department store, J.L. Hudson in Detroit. The rise and fall of 'Hudson's' is contrasted with the growth and decline of the once-largest department store in the Netherlands, Vroom en Dreesmann in The Hague. The blocks around both establishments are mapped as Nollis Plans between 1911 and 2011, showing the relationship between interior and exterior public spaces. The plans are based on various historic floor plans in The Hague, Sanborn Fire Insurance Plans and original building plans in Detroit, augmented with photographic material for clarification in both cities. The maps are accompanied by a timeline of the department stores and conclude with patterns of similarities and differences.

## Vroom en Dreesmann The Hague

The central block ensemble that now contains the Vroom en Dreesmann department store in The Hague is an excellent example of the rapid transformation of the Dutch retail and leisure landscape over the past century. The blocks reflect the remarkable flexibility of The Hague's inner city to adapt to

changing means of production and consumption by building over, digging under and breaking through its urban landscape. A century ago, the area was defined by contrast. The Spuistraat was established as the city's popular retail street, lined by a wide variety of retailers. Visiting the street was considered an urban adventure, in which viewing merchandise had as central a role as viewing other citizens, bathing in 'a sea of light and radiating reflecting windows'.<sup>4</sup> With the industrialization of merchandise and the growing wealth of Dutch citizenry as well as the introduction of fixed prices, shopping had become a form of leisure activity.<sup>5</sup> The Spuistraat was also at the southern end of the city's first shopping arcade, the Passage, built in 1885. This arcade was specifically targeted at the growing urban bourgeoisie, which used its sheltered interior space to purchase goods as much as its aesthetic coherence and upscale ambiance to affirm their status.<sup>6</sup>

Retail consolidation gathered pace in the first decade of the 20th century with the growth of the city's first department stores. Vroom en Dreesmann, a chain department store from Amsterdam, had taken up several adjacent buildings to house their operations during this decade, but was certainly not the largest store downtown. This would be the Grand Bazar de la Paix, constructed in 1906 across from the Passage's exit to the Spuistraat. Using steel-frame technology, a 'hall of enormous dimensions, magically lit from all sides, both during the day and at night' was constructed in a matter of months. Its almost 27000 square feet of retail space took up the land of eight former properties and clearly outcompeted surrounding smaller businesses, as 'progress has its demands.'<sup>7</sup> Nearby, the Kattenburg Company had combined two buildings into the start of a small department store of their own, the 'Magazijn Nederland.' Despite these department stores, smaller retailers and dwellings still dominated the vibrant Spuistraat, and especially the poorer Jewish district to its direct south.

As the city's population, economy and wealth had taken a leap during the 1910s and 1920s, traffic grew exponentially and inner city housing became overcrowded. To combat traffic and worsening housing conditions, the city decided to construct the Grote Marktstraat and Hofweg between 1914 and 1924. The building plots that were created by the new street cuts allowed for the construction of radically new building types at a scale thus far unknown to the city. On the Grote Marktstraat, the existing Grand Bazar de la Paix commissioned an extension to their premises to face the new street by architect van Dorsser in 1929. The Bazar had to respond to the building that turned all the heads on the Grote Marktstraat – the Bijenkorf department store designed by Amsterdam School architect Piet Kramer built in 1926. This 'palace of life's enjoyments' was

the first branch of the Amsterdam-based luxury retailer outside the capital city, and with over 100000 square feet of retail space the store was the largest in the country and marked a new era and scale of retail for The Hague.<sup>9</sup> On nearby plots, several growing retailers would soon construct their premises, either newly entering the inner city or expanding their original floor space. C&A, rising empire of Clemens and August Brenninkmeijer, the Modehuis (Fashion House) of the Lampe company and several smaller stores attempted to lure in the public through an elaborate composition of display pavilions, corridors and a recessed storefront, allowing a maximum amount of merchandise to be on display at all times of the day and night. The divide between public and private space was deliberately blurred to remove the threshold resistance between passers-by and merchandise, a concept originating from the United States that would be later optimized in shopping mall design.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most daring example of this deliberate ambiguity between public and private space was the new building for Vroom en Dreesmann's department store, designed by the company's preferred architect Jan Kuyt in 1929. The Art Deco building connected the busy Spuistraat with the Spui with an arcade that aimed to provide passers-by with a shortcut between both streets, luring them with merchandise en route. Like with the C&A and Modehuis stores, interior and exterior public space blended to maximize contact between potential customers and merchandise with almost sixty various display windows and pavilions, connecting with the expanded existing store and providing a grand staircase that led customers to higher sales floors.<sup>10</sup> In a sense, the design mirrored the vision of the older Passage complex by functioning as an interior public space with a connectivity function as well as a meaningful commercial presence of its own. It thus melded the prototypical qualities of the shopping mall with an urban footprint. The complex was part of a much larger envisioned building which would stretch the entire block between Spui, Spuistraat, Voldersgracht and Grote Marktstraat, but these plans faltered during the Depression, leaving the store's frontage on the Grote Marktstraat underused for decades.<sup>11</sup>

As the Depression and World War II came to an end, The Hague was economically and physically in dire shape. Furthermore, residential growth moved to the suburbs where shopping malls were planned from the late 1950s onwards. Department stores would branch out to these suburban malls but they nevertheless remained committed to the urban core.<sup>12</sup> Vroom and Dreesmann expressed their strong belief in the hegemony of the inner city by purchasing the ailing Grand Bazar de la Paix in 1948 and combining it with the retailer's existing 'archipelago' of buildings and a massive Modern addition by architects

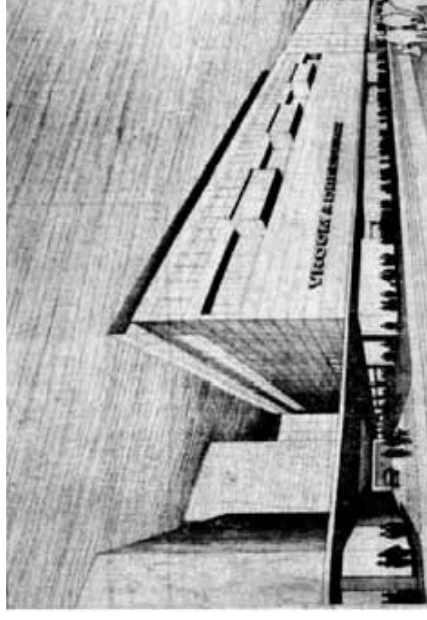


Figure 1:  
Above: Image of the 1929 Vroom en Dreesmann expansion by Kuyt.  
Image from postcard by Klitzsch & Co. (Source: The Hague Municipal Archives).  
Below: rendering by Kraaijvanger Architects of the Vroom en Dreesmann department store, with the bridged Voldersgracht and its car elevator entrance to the left.

Kraaijvanger, opened in stages between 1961 and 1964. The resulting complex became the nation's largest department store at 240000 square feet. Beyond its size, the inner city store contained a range of novelties, including a parking deck on its roof which was accessed via two automobile elevators on the Voldersgracht. The store expansion was clearly marketed toward an increasingly automobile and suburban clientele, as the director aimed to serve "...those, that want to make all their purchases in one building complex."<sup>13</sup> Even a supermarket was constructed in the basement level of the store, also in an aim to serve the downtown population (figure 1). The resulting complex clearly attempted to fit suburban ambitions into an urban footprint, which raised difficulties regarding its connection to the surrounding urban fabric. Especially side street Voldersgracht suffered from the new development as its small-scaled business activity was replaced by entry ramps for parking and logistics, a compromised outcome of Vroom en Dreesmann's original desire to close the street altogether.<sup>14</sup> Arguably, the vision for a one-stop car-centric store contrasted with Vroom en Dreesmann's 1929 store design that seamlessly blended in with surrounding pedestrian networks – a clear sign of changing times at the company and society at large.

The Modernist suburbanization of the inner city was mirrored by store expansions and car parking construction, such as the design of the large but rather isolated HEMA department store by A. Elzas in 1962 and the concurrent demolition of the rear lots behind the Bijenkorf for car parking, complemented by a large parking garage a few blocks south. An interesting countermovement was the 1967 opening of the Markthof, a covered marketplace that provided a home to a wide range of smaller businessmen to sell their goods in a modestly priced establishment, close to the retail core of the city. Despite upgrades in subsequent decades, retailers struggled in the building which many citizens considered dark and confusing.<sup>15</sup> In 2007, the Markthof was replaced by the Spuimarkt designed by Bolles + Wilson, a complex of ground floor and basement shops and restaurants in various sizes, integrating the large C&A department store, a multiplex cinema, a health club and a casino. Across the Grote Marktstraat, the Modehuis has been replaced in 1997 by the Spuihof, a mixed-use complex of shops, restaurants and upper floor dwellings designed by Cees Dam & Partners architects.<sup>16</sup> These developments reflected the increased retail activity in the inner city of The Hague since the 1990s as public regeneration policies successfully focused on high quality public space and new construction. Car and streetcar traffic was placed in a tunnel under the Grote Marktstraat, freeing the street to pedestrians and cyclists, while rendering Vroom en Dreesmann's original vision for a car-accessible inner city store obsolete.

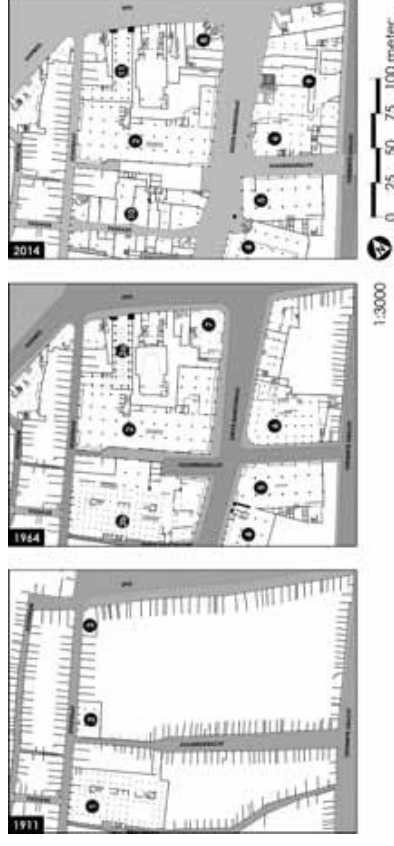


Figure 2: Blocks surrounding Vroom en Dreesmann's department store in The Hague in 1911, 1964 and 2014. Numbers represent: 1. Grand Bazar de la Paix; 2. Vroom en Dreesmann with 2a, 1929 addition and 2b, 1948 purchase; 3. Magazijn Nederland; 4. Bijenkorf; 5. HEMA; 6. C&A; 7. Modehuis; 8. Spuihof; 9. Spuimarkt; 10. New Passage; 11. Chain store in 1929 addition. (Plans from various sources by author).

The blocking of Vroom en Dreesmann's car access marked a chapter in its long onset demise over the preceding decades, as its novel underground supermarket had failed and the capacity of the rooftop parking deck had proven insufficient only a few years after opening. Facing declining sales due to the rise of competing chain stores and a fading image, Vroom en Dreesmann began to retrench from its building by shedding the former Grand Bazar de la Paix in 1992 and the ground floor of its original 1929 building in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, now housing another retailer which has closed off its original shortcut function. The former Grand Bazar has been reconstructed as an extension of the Passage, in which over 100000 square feet of smaller and larger retailers connects the Spuistraat with the Grote Marktstraat in a 'very light, open and transparent' complex designed by French/American architect Bernard Tschumi, topped off by a 118 room hotel.<sup>17</sup> The covered abundance of storefronts between the city's two main retail streets presents a dramatic contrast to the dark and inactive Voldersgracht and Haagpoort side streets, which are now closed to the public – completing the vision of Vroom en Dreesmann of five decades ago. As the department store is teetering on the brink of collapse,<sup>18</sup> the consolidation of retailers on its block over the past century may be showing a reversing trend. (figure 2).



### Hudson's Department Store Detroit

For many, the tumultuous history of Hudson's department store signifies the plight of Detroit and its downtown to survive. Yet Hudson's growth and decline was but part of a ruthless battle between several department stores all located in Detroit's most central blocks around Campus Martius, the convergence point of its infrastructure and people for centuries. On the square, small storefronts in the Detroit Opera House functioned as incubators in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for what would become some of the city's largest retailers, including Newcomb and Endicott and the start-up of English-born retailer Joseph Lowthian Hudson. His successful business would also soon outgrow this location and Hudson commissioned architect Mortimer Smith to build an eight-story retail palace a few blocks north.<sup>19</sup> Although the store was located off main retail street Woodward Avenue, its opening in 1891 proved a smashing success generating four times the construction cost in first year sales volume.<sup>20</sup> The store soon expanded and made its grand entry on Woodward Avenue in 1911 through the construction of a ten-story 'annex' connected to the original building with a bridge across the service alley.<sup>21</sup> Nearby, German-born retailer Ernst Kern Sr. and his wife had moved into a five-story building purpose built for their growing textile firm on the central corner of Gratiot and Woodward Avenue in 1897.<sup>22</sup> More competition would come from the east in 1909, where Joseph Crowley and William Milner would aggressively modernize the massive block-long, six-story building of a failed predecessor to include new fashion departments and a restaurant, in a bold aim to make the department store 'the strongest establishment of its kind in this section of the country.'<sup>23</sup>

All of the large department stores were set for rapid growth in the decades that would follow, reflecting the city's economic and population boom. From 1913 onwards, Kern's department store would increase its sales floor area more than tenfold by buying up several adjacent structures to expand its retail operations.<sup>24</sup> Crowley and Milner were expanding almost as fast, topping their building with two extra floors, expanding it into its entire block and connecting it across the street to a new eleven-story tower with a tunnel and bridge.<sup>25</sup> In 1925, Crowley-Milner had increased almost fivefold, and at around 800,000 square feet it became the largest department store in Michigan.<sup>26</sup> Yet the most aggressive growth was experienced by J.L. Hudson's department store. Realizing the value of presenting its merchandise to a growing audience on the city's main retail street, Hudson would slowly continue to buy up smaller competitors on Woodward Avenue to expand its sales floors. Besides these major purchases and replacements (including Newcomb-Endicott's store in 1927), Hudson's original retail building on Farmer Street would be replaced by an almost twice as

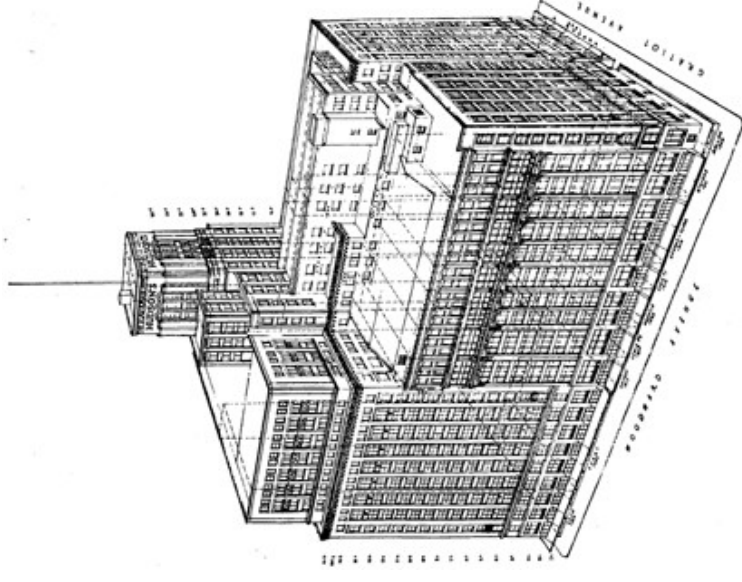


Figure 3: Hudson's department store axonometric drawing by Smith, Hinchmann and Grylls. Date unknown. (Source: Private collection of Michael Houser, acquired from Hudson's basement shortly before demolition).

tall structure. In 1928, the massive block consolidation was topped with a twenty five-story tower, crowned with a large neon sign, all designed by architects Smith, Hinchman and Grylls. Except for one small corner holdout, Hudson's had usurped its entire block to become the nation's tallest and second-largest department store at over 1850000 square feet of sales floor area.<sup>27</sup> In 1929, Hudson's sales had increased almost twentyfold since 1912.<sup>28</sup>

Most retail growth in Detroit ground to a halt when the Depression hit. Hudson's sales halved between 1929 and 1930<sup>29</sup> and Crowley-Milner's sales similarly dropped by almost 75%.<sup>30</sup> but discounter Sam's Cut Rate thrived in the then closed Detroit Opera House<sup>31</sup> and grew into an adjacent building.<sup>32</sup> Suburban competitors like Sears and Federal benefited from the starting suburbanization of Detroit's middle class. Relief came from World War II as Detroit prospered from wartime construction jobs. Hudson's grew even taller and bought up the last remaining holdout on its block,<sup>33</sup> becoming a store of superlatives by the end of the war: 200 departments offering 553921 items on 17 floors, connected by 51 elevators. The store had its own hospital, art gallery and delivered across the globe (figure 3).<sup>34</sup>

### **Retreat**

As the city and Hudson's reached its peak, the tides had already turned for downtown. The Motor City's very invention, the automobile, began to turn against its master as Detroit's middle class increasingly moved further away from downtown, prompting Hudson's to build one of Detroit's first car parking decks in 1941.<sup>35</sup> Suburbanization only accelerated and by 1950, Hudson's realized that the battleground with its competitors had shifted from downtown to the Michigan prairie. Rather than continuing to lure Detroit's suburbanized middle class downtown, the store decided to follow them. Working with famed retail architect Victor Gruen, Hudson's spared no expense and built a 550000 square foot department store in the middle of Northland, America's first major suburban shopping mall. The resulting retail experience was unprecedented, replacing the noise and bustle of downtown Detroit with a neatly laid out yet playful environment for consumption.<sup>36</sup> The Northland gamble paid off, as Hudson's \$30,000,000 investment already yielded \$88,000,000 in trade in its first year, a return on investment only seen before at the 1891 opening of its first department store. The startling initial sales figures prompted the opening of a second branch in Eastland Center in 1957, followed by Westland Center in 1965.<sup>37</sup> Crowley's would soon follow and opened its first new branch store in West Dearborn in 1959 with great success. More would soon follow in malls around the region, but their modest sizes never matched Hudson's grand efforts.<sup>38</sup> Kern's department store

was unable to establish branch locations and was forced to close in 1959.<sup>39</sup> Its site was cleared with federal grant money, only to stay vacant for almost four decades.<sup>40</sup> The new reality for downtown Detroit's retail palaces was clear: branch out or lose out. The percentage of CBD department store sales in the metropolitan region would plummet by almost 50% between 1954 and 1963, and by 1966, less than 15% of Detroit's metropolitan department store floor space was located in downtown, almost all of it in Hudson's main building.<sup>41</sup> But that same year, only 40% of Hudson's income would be generated from its downtown store sales.<sup>42</sup>

Arguably, the decline of downtown as a retail centre would truly enter its point of no return with the Detroit's civil disorders of 1967. While the disorders did not inflict much physical damage in downtown Detroit, the central city's image was heavily marred and crime levels rose rapidly. Declining patronage and rising store theft caused a sharp decline in profits for Hudson's and Crowley-Milner's remaining downtown stores.<sup>43</sup> As a result, the 1970s marked an era of retreat. Crowley's department store was forced to downsize its central store drastically from 1973 onwards, and in 1977 the store closed.<sup>44</sup> Hudson's remained open but would slowly close off upper sales floors, dwindling to only three floors by the early 1980s. A last-ditch effort to replace the old building with a shopping mall failed due and worsening socio-economic conditions in Detroit and a subsequent lack of interest from other retailers to join.<sup>45</sup> After a company merger and change in management, Hudson's would finally close its 'Matriarch of Woodward' in 1983, sending a ripple effect of closures among downtown's remaining businesses.<sup>46</sup>

After its closure, Hudson's empty building remained as a silent landmark to downtown Detroit's decline amidst hundreds of shuttered stores, offices and cultural venues. Efforts to find tenants for the mostly empty structure were unsuccessful, as tenants had a wealth of other vacant downtown buildings to choose from. The central blocks of Detroit were re-envisioned by a mayor-backed consortium as a commercial hub in the 1990s, with no place for Hudson's old building. In 1998 the empty hulk met its inevitable fate, as it was imploded with 'a deafening roar that will echo in the hearts of Detroiters for decades.'<sup>47</sup> Ironically, besides an underground garage nothing has yet been built on its actual footprint, but an office has been constructed on Kern's former footprint. This situation may be changing soon, as mortgage banker Dan Gilbert has purchased the Hudson's site and has commissioned New York-based ShoP architects to design a mixed-use complex with retail, offices, dwellings and parking spaces. While no new building can remotely equal Hudson's

sheer size and grandeur, early renderings show a bold design with the potential to mend the heart of Detroit and its citizens (figure 4).

## Conclusion

Retail change is ruthless and hardly leaves a trace. As modes of production, consumption and distribution have radically shifted over the past centuries, the physical retail landscape has adapted in tandem. This paper demonstrates the rapid change of Detroit and The Hague's most central retail blocks reflecting this adaptation. Interestingly, the resulting pattern of transformation in both cities has been quite similar for the first half of the twentieth century - successful department stores grew by consolidating or demolishing smaller competitors and their premises, ultimately usurping entire city blocks. Paths would diverge during the suburbanization of the 1960s, as The Hague's retailers and government remained committed to its inner city while Detroit's retailers and public continued to look forward. This has resulted in a clear dichotomy between contemporary Detroit's strong abandonment and renewal and The Hague's continued retail vibrancy. Yet in both cases, the hegemony of the department store has been disrupted, leading to the full or partial loss of this type of retailer.

Adaptability remains key in the continuously changing retail landscape. The Hague's central Vroom en Dreesmann department store has been more able to shed space to new retailers, in contrast to the failed transition and resulting full demolition of Hudson's massive department store (figure 5). Northland Mall, Hudson's suburban dream, has caved under the very same socio-economic issues its downtown store did, and Eastland may soon follow.<sup>48</sup> The rise and fall of the department store and the suburban shopping mall have one lesson in common - retail dreams solidified into optimized environments become limiting if the assumed future turns out different. To prevent the resulting inertia between the envisioned and real futures of consumer environments, a balance will need to be sought between permanence and flexibility - one typically found in the heterotopia of urban cores.

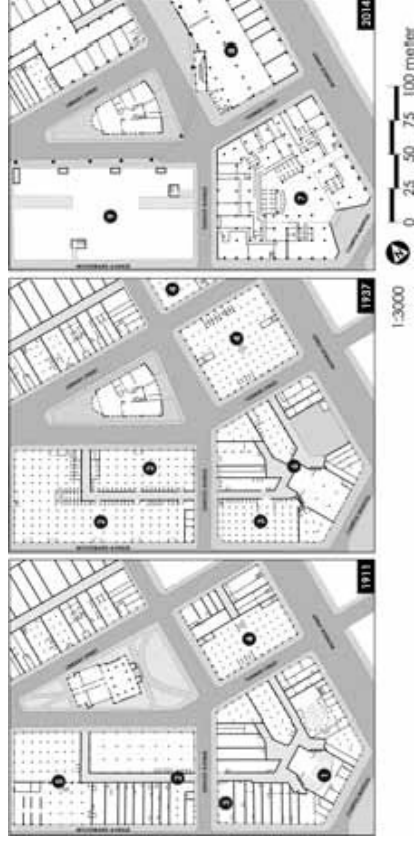


Figure 4: Blocks surrounding Hudson's department store in Detroit in 1911, 1937 and 2014. Numbers represent: 1. Detroit Opera House; 2. Hudson's department store; 3. Kern's department store; 4. Crowley-Milner's department store; 5. Newcomb-Endicott's department store; 6. Sam's Cut-Rate store; 7. Campus Martius office block; 8. Campus Martius office parking garage; 9. Hudson's former footprint (empty with parking underneath).



Figures 5: Demolition of Hudson's department store in 1998. (Source: image sequency by Lowell Bolleau).

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