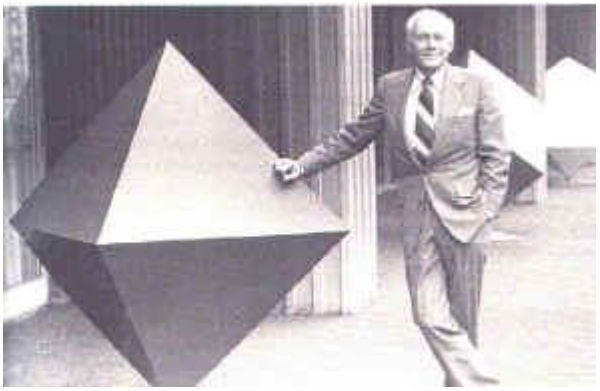
Charlotte Civic Center. UTM: 17 514370E 3897864N Opening in September 1973, the Charlotte Civic Center at E. Trade and College Sts. is a dramatic expression of the Modernist style. Virtually devoid of exterior ornamentation, the building is essentially a rectangular mass with large pyramidal skylights penetrating a flat roof. The architect of the building was A. G. Odell, Charlotte's principal exponent of Modernism. The edifice elevated Charlotte's role as a place to hold conventions and gave a great boost to the construction of new hotels in the Center City.



A. G. Odell

Charlotte Civic Center

1973

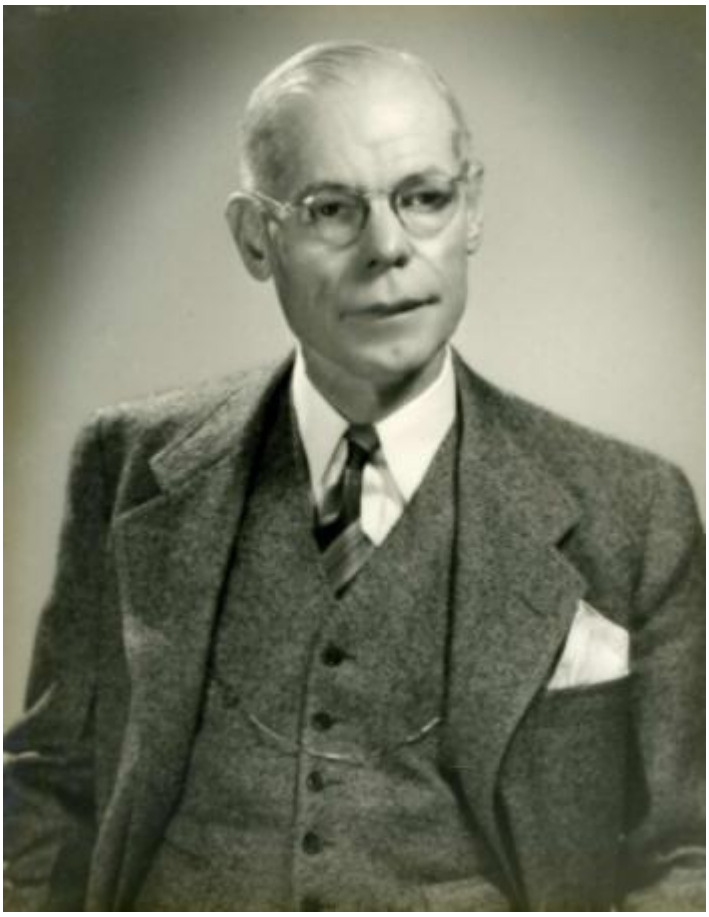
A. G. Odell, Jr., the flamboyant son of a Cabarrus County textile executive, studied architecture at Cornell University and came to Charlotte in 1939 to establish a one-man office. By the time of his death in April 1988 Odell oversaw the operations of one of the largest and most influential architectural businesses in North Carolina. "In a society where class connection still counted for much, young Odell had automatic entry to the offices of the area's mill owners and businessmen," writes historian Thomas Hanchett.[1] When Odell arrived, Charlotte's buildings were overwhelming conservative and revivalist in appearance and had been so for decades. "Most architecture in the area can best be described as pseudo-neoclassical, with elements of design copied from buildings elsewhere that had already incorporated copied elements of classic design," remembered M. H. Ward, one of Odell's early associates.[2] Odell set out to change that circumstance.

Odell took his lead from the thinking of such revolutionary post-World War One European architects as Le Corbusier. From about 1920 until shortly before his death in 1965, Le Corbusier was an untiring proselytizer for what he called the "Radiant City." To his way of thinking, urban designers should break completely with the past. Le Corbusier had no sympathy or interest in the preservation of existing buildings or neighborhoods. "Modern town planning comes to birth with a new architecture," he proclaimed.[3] Le Corbusier envisioned people living in high rise apartments surrounded by lustrous skyscrapers separated from one another by large expanses of manicured open space and dramatic fountains. Urban cores should be hygienic, antiseptic, and ordered -- not cluttered, begrimed, and haphazard. The tradition of mixing functions in a single structure or neighborhood was an anathema to Corbusier. The city of the future would be

divided into discreet sections devoted to specific purposes – working, living, leisure – connected to one another by expressways.

Le Corbusier also called for a new vocabulary of building design. "We must start again from zero," he insisted.[4] His new architecture became known as the International style. "A house is a machine for living in," said Corbusier.[5] The fundamentals of the International style centered upon the exploitation of new materials, especially reinforced concrete, strengthened steel, and large expanses of glass, to create grace, airiness, and to allow great amounts of sunlight to penetrate the interior of structures. Some suggest that Corbusier wanted all buildings to look like luxury liners. The proponents of the International style "maintained that a well- designed building could be beautiful without the addition of expensive trim that obscured its functional shapes and structure," Hanchett explains.[6] Another center of International style philosophy was the Bauhaus in Germany, where influential designers like Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe held sway.

A. G. Odell, Jr. is standing in the middle.



A.G. Odell, Sr.

A. G. Odell, Jr. became Charlotte's principal champion of the International style and devoted his considerable talents and energies to reshaping the local urban landscape. For good or ill, he largely succeeded. Odell embraced the architecture of "tomorrow" and had nothing but disdain for the revivalist buildings he observed on the streets of Charlotte. Describing what he saw when he arrived in Charlotte, Odell declared: "There was nothing here . . . that illustrated the honesty of stone as stone, steel as steel, glass as glass. Everybody was still wallowing in the Colonial heritage."[7]

In 1965-66 Odell and Associates developed a comprehensive plan for the remaking of Center City Charlotte.[8] **It reflected his iconoclastic philosophy and established the fundamental parameters of uptown development for more than two decades. The plan continues to have considerable impact even today. The initial impetus for the remaking of Center City Charlotte originated with the Downtown Charlotte Association in the early 1960s. Convinced that the urban core was spiraling downward in the face of growing suburbanization, the Association hired Hammer & Associates, economic consultants, in early 1963 to study what Center City Charlotte needed. The Hammer Report determined that**

new stores, green space, parking garages, and new entertainment facilities were required. It was this report that induced the Downtown Charlotte Association to hire A. G. Odell and Associates in 1965 to devise the Center City Plan, which was officially released in September 1966.[9]

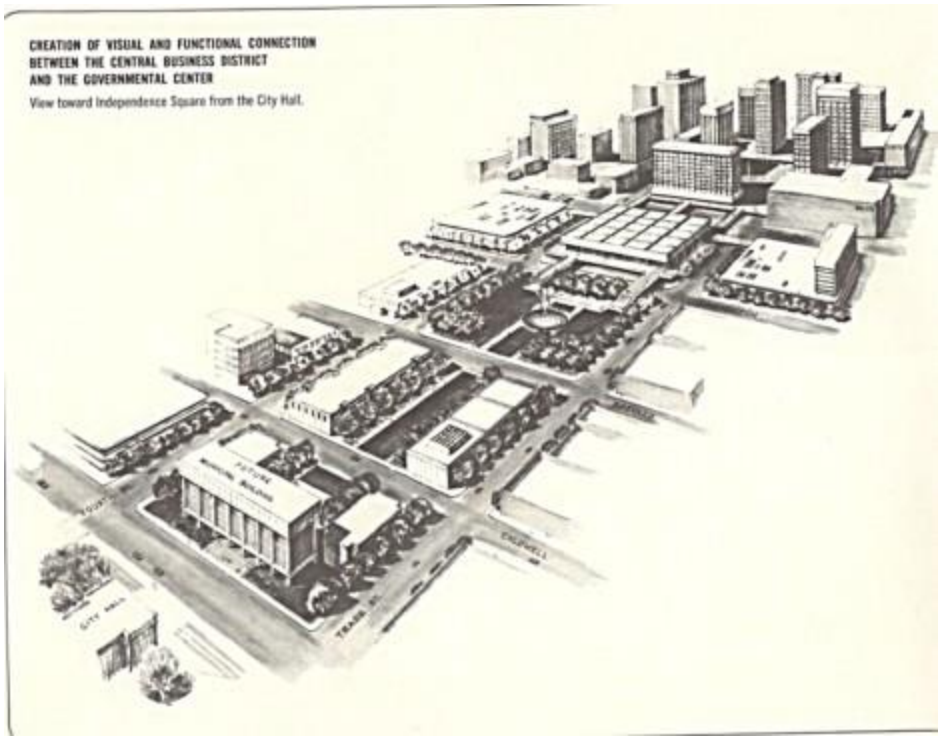
Odell benefited from the temper of his times. The 1960s and 1970s in Charlotte-Mecklenburg and the United States as a whole were decades of buoyant optimism, the persisting unpopularity of the Vietnam War notwithstanding. An eagerness to greet the challenges of the future and an almost total rejection of history and its architecture dominated elitist thinking. In a speech to the Charlotte Civitan Club's 1966 Distinguished Citizens Award Ceremony, Dr. John T. Caldwell, Chancellor of North Carolina State University, advanced the commonly held assumption of that day that focusing upon the past was counterproductive to "progress." Charlotte "is a community filled with optimism for the days head, or it is a city enjoying a past that probably never was," he declared. Caldwell continued: "Charlotte is a city which is captive to the mores and fears of the past, or it is a community which greets the new demands of contemporary America with resilience at least and with eagerness at best."[10]

The *Charlotte Observer* sounded a similar tone. The newspaper was a consistent champion of the growth and expansion of Charlotte and its environs. Predictably, it issued a call for aggressive implementation of Odell's Center City Plan when it was presented to the Charlotte City Council in March 1966. The editorial page contended that "Charlotte . . . has been studied enough. Those concerned about making this a more functional, more attractive city will now begin to act."[11] **The *Charlotte Observer* chided City leaders again in July 1966 for their alleged record of sluggishness in moving ahead with daring innovations. "Past councils have been much too reluctant to act with boldness and determination in redevelopment," the newspaper proclaimed.**[12]

On March 2, 1966, James Rouse, the visionary developer of the planned community of Columbia, Md., trumpeted the same message in a stirring address he gave to attendees at the first annual UNCC Forum. He argued that unless Charlotte acted quickly and boldly it could squander its chances for becoming "one of the country's most glorious cities." According to Rouse, the people of Charlotte stood "on the threshold of opportunity." To step back from the challenge, he insisted, would propel Charlotte in the wrong direction. "You can also succeed in reaching the point where the big, ugly cities are now. And you will surely get there if you don't plan with boldness and vision," Rouse maintained.[13] **Not surprisingly, the *Charlotte Observer* rushed to endorse Rouse's remarks. "Charlotte, as the major city of the Carolinas, can plan, can grow in an orderly manner, can become a city of the future," the editors declared. "But its citizens will have to have their minds stretched again and again."**[14]

This is Odell's vision of Center City Charlotte. You are looking toward the Center City from the west.

Odell's Center City Plan was bold and visionary. Voters had approved a bond referendum the previous year to fund street improvements in the Center City; and the leveling of virtually every structure in the Second Ward or "Brooklyn" neighborhood, a large African American enclave, was already proceeding apace.[15] Building upon these initiatives, Odell proposed a series of audacious initiatives. Like Le Corbusier, Odell embraced the philosophy of the "Radiant City." His plan predicted that visitors would "be coming to a new Charlotte, a Charlotte built anew with imagination, with sound economic reasoning, with a full knowledge that Charlotte's position of leadership in the Carolinas and in the Southeast is one which the city deserves."[16] What the *Charlotte Observer* called "swaths of expressway construction" would enable suburbanites to drive their automobiles more easily to the urban core.[17] Parking decks would be built to house all the additional cars coming to the Center City, and all curbside parking would be eliminated. The intersection of Trade and Tryon Sts. would be transformed into a true "Square" by creating a plaza at the southeastern corner bordered by a hotel and retail shops.



This was the concept for connecting the Government Center of East Trade St. with Independence Square. Clean, even clinical.

Odell, much in the tradition of the International style, advocated the creation of residential districts defined by parks and high rise apartment buildings. The plan called for the destruction of all the older homes in Fourth Ward, which the *Charlotte Observer* termed a "slum."[18] Edwin Towers, a high rise apartment building for the elderly, was then under construction and apparently was the type of structure Odell envisioned for much of Fourth Ward.[19] The plan advocated the burial of all utility lines and the removal of the railroad tracks between College and Brevard Streets and the turning of the rail line into a "Convention Boulevard."[20]

The most crucial element of Odell's Center City Plan, what the *Charlotte Observer* called its "spark," was the construction of a Convention Center at the corner of South College St. and East Trade St.[21] John A. Tate, Jr., Chairman of the Committee for the Master Plan, underscored the urgency of proceeding with the building when he spoke to the Charlotte Rotary Club on June 14, 1966. "The convention center is the 'heart' of the master plan for downtown revitalization," Tate insisted. "It is the 'trigger' and the 'stimulant' for redevelopment of the first block of South Tryon Street."[22]

The story of how the Convention Center got built is a tortuous and twisted tale The schedule for erecting the Convention Center was sidetracked on several occasions, but the City finally began constructing the facility in October 1971.[23] **"We're concerned that this building will have a character of its own that will symbolize Charlotte in the eyes of the nation," said A. G. Odell. Odell promised that the Charlotte Civic Center, as it became called, "will compare with any in the country."**[24] **The building opened with great fanfare on September 9, 1973. Ironically, the Charlotte Civic Center, which has been replaced by a new, larger convention center, stands empty today; and its future is in great jeopardy.**

In this writer's opinion, the 1973 Charlotte Civic Center demonstrates a major weakness of the International style.[25] **The building's most distinctive features are large pyramidal skylights that are only visible from a perspective several hundred feet in the air. While perhaps impressive as part of an architectural model, the Charlotte Civic Center presents blank brick walls to the pedestrian and provides no vitality or life to the streetscape. This criticism in no way detracts from the historic importance of the building, however. The Charlotte Civic Center did stimulate large-scale real estate developments on adjacent parcels, specifically the North Carolina National Bank Complex and the Radisson**

Hotel. The building was also the most crucial element in the implementation of A. G. Odell Jr.'s seminal 1966 Charlotte Center City Plan.

Special Note: The Charlotte Civic Center was imploded on June 19, 2005.

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1. Hanchett, Thomas W. n.d. Charlotte Architecture: "Design Through Time Part 2." landmarkscommission.org/educationarchitecturept2.

2. *Charlotte Observer*, April 22, 1988.

3. Rybczynski, Witold. n.d. "The Architect Le Corbusier." time.com/time/time100/artists/profile/lecorbusier.

4. Quoted in Rybczynski.

5. Quoted in Rybczynski.

6. Quoted in Rybczynski.

7. Hanchett.

8. Economic consultant for the plan was Hammer, Greene, Siler Associates. Wilbur Smith and Associates was the traffic consultant.

9. *Charlotte Observer*, March 9, 1970.

10. *Charlotte Observer*, May 2, 1966.

11. *Charlotte Observer*, June 1, 1966.

12. *Charlotte Observer*, July 12, 1966. Charlotte demolished an average of 1100 black-occupied housing units per year between 1965 and 1968. Goldfield, David R. *Cotton Field And Skyscrapers. Southern City and Region.* 1989. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press. 168.

13. *Charlotte Observer*, March 3, 1966. The first UNCC Forum at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte was entitled "The University and the Development of the Modern City." Professor Edith Winningham was the organizer of the Forum.

14. *Charlotte Observer*, March 4, 1966.

15. *Charlotte Observer*, June 6, 7, 1966.

16. A. G. Odell and Associates Architects, n.d. "Greater Charlotte Central Area Plan."

17. *Charlotte Observer*, March 4, 1966.

18. *Charlotte Observer*, May 27, 1966. The park would have embraced the land now bordered by Seventh, Ninth, Poplar, and Pine Streets. That land is now at the heart of the Fourth Ward historic district.

19. *Charlotte Observer*, June 22, 1966. Edwin Towers was designed by J. N. Pease Associates.

20. *Charlotte Observer*, March 4, 1966.

21. *Charlotte Observer*, June 16, 1966.

22. *Charlotte Observer*, June 15, 1966. The members of the Committee for the Master Plan were John A. Tate, Jr., Chairman, William T. Harris, George M. Ivey, Jr., Sandy R. Jordan, W. E. McIntyre, Arthur R. Newcombe, Marshall I. Pickens, Elmer E. Rouzer, Jerry C. Tuttle, E. L. Vinson, J. Mason Wallace, Jr., Paul R. Younts.

23. *Charlotte Observer*, October 17, 1971.

24. *Charlotte Observer*, February 2, 1970. For a photograph of the Charlotte Civic Center under construction, see *Charlotte Observer*, February 28, 1972.

25. New York architect Robert Stern visited Charlotte in 1986 and called Center City Charlotte "the ugliest collection of third-rate buildings in America." *Charlotte Observer*, May 17, 1986.

Charlotte Civic Center, 1973

101 South College Street

The massive 1973 Charlotte Civic Center occupies an entire city block bordered by East Trade, South College, and East Fourth streets, and is bordered by the Southern Railroad to the east. From street level the building appears as a series of large tall and blank sections of white masonry wall, veneered with oversized ceramic brick, interrupted by a series of narrow recesses. The largely blank walls are topped by a deep terrace, which is in turn sheltered by a flat slab roof. From above, the relative symmetry and horizontal nature of the building are apparent, as are the Civic Center's most notable architectural feature, a group of nine glass and metal pyramids.

The Civic Center defies typical building form in several ways. The building consists of two tall stories and has two main entrances, each located in one of the building's corners. These entrances are deeply recessed, sheltering an angled bank of six tall glazed doors set in a metal frame. Each door is topped with a tall fixed glazed panel. The site slopes down from south to north with the southern entrance slightly below grade and the north entrance accessed by a low set of steps. The terrace sections above the recessed entrances is supported by a massive concrete posts.

The ceilings over the entrances has been removed exposing many of the structural details of the building. Reinforced concrete beams radiate from the column, supporting the reinforced slab of the second floor. Concrete beams integrated into this slab along the exterior walls support a steel frame upon which the masonry skirt-wall sections above the entrances are suspended. Also exposed is the concrete block construction of the building's exterior curtain walls.

Entrance Ceiling Detail

4th Street Entrance

College Street Elevation

The College Street elevation is symmetrical and composed of five wide bays separated by narrow recesses, with the entrances occupying the outer bays. Despite the prominent and public nature of this elevation, the center bay contains four loading dock entrances, recessed below the second story slab floor. Each entrance is filled by a large metal rolling door. An enclosed elevated walkway is centered on the elevation, connecting to the open terrace of the second story. Massive posts extend trough the terrace. The posts end in integrated angled brackets , which support the roof deck. The posts are painted a dark grey, and the exterior brick walls along the terrace are painted black, to contrast with the bright white masonry of the lower walls, and to give depth to the terrace. Banks of windows alternate with blank brick walls along the terrace. The roof deck is surrounded by a deep metal panel freeze, also white. The paneled freeze features subtle decorative recessed panel sections where the posts meets the roof deck.

Fourth Street Entrance **Trade Street Elevation**

The Fourth and Trade Street elevations are similar. On each elevation eight bays are separated by seven narrow recesses. With the exception of the entrances on

college street, the bays are largely blank expanses of white brick. Because of the dramatic slope of the site, the walls become more massive near the rear elevation, with heights of about 50'. Each elevation is pierced by two wide parking deck entrances that access the basement levels of the building. Most of the recesses along Fourth and Trade streets contain paired metal exit doors that allow for evacuation of the building. Each of the recesses is lit by modernist sconces. Four widely spaced bracketed posts support the roof. The rear elevation extends one bay past the roofline.

Documentation of why and in what ways the Charlotte Civic Center meets the criteria for designation set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-400.5.

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance. The Commission believes that the Charlotte Civic Center does possess special historical significance for Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. It bases its judgment on the following considerations.

1) **The Charlotte Civic Center was designed by A. G. Odell, Jr., an architect of seminal importance in the evolution of the built environment of Charlotte.**

2) **The Charlotte Civic Center was the centerpiece of a comprehensive plan devised by A. G. Odell, Jr. for the revitalization of Center City Charlotte.**

3) **The Charlotte Civic Center represented an unprecedented commitment by the City of Charlotte to become a major center for the convention trade.**

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association. The Commission judges that the description presented in the Center City Survey demonstrates that the Charlotte Civic Center meets this criterion.