

WHEN THE SHIPS THAT USED TO PULL INTO BALTIMORE HARBOR went elsewhere for deeper water, the city fell into a long decline. But by the heady 1950s, a new phrase was on the tongue: urban renewal. While strip malls and office parks spread throughout the suburbs, planners resolved to reclaim the heart of the city. This tinted glass and steel tower was the signature of Charles Center, an office complex erected between the city's financial and retail districts in the hopes of creating "a natural economic valley."

BUILT IN 1962, THE CENTER WAS DESIGNED BY MIES VAN DER ROHE, famed luminary of the international school of architecture. The 22-story structure—now in the National Register of Historic Places—was stark and daring for its place and time. The eight-sided form rose above a landscaped plaza, perched on a series of supports. Planners decided not to tear down several turn-of-the-century buildings already on the site. Though the motive was financial—demolition was too expensive—the effect was to set the old fashioned against the sleek futurism of the go-go '60s.

RECENTLY, THE HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY of the National Park Service photographed Maryland's modernist architecture in a project with the state preservation office and the University of Maryland. The effort illustrates the style's flourishing between 1930 and 1970, and how today the state's survivors serve as a microcosm of the movement. Charles Center, say researchers, is "a rich monument to Maryland's post-war modernism and the particular historical moment that invested so much faith in progress and the physical renewal of the environment."

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