

Motown's Most Famous Gear

The Ford Rotunda used to be one of the most popular tourist attractions in the United States, but its main draw wasn't its cars, but its Christmas decorations.

Alex Cannella, News Editor

It's hard for me to think of a massive Christmas exhibit as being the fifth largest tourist attraction in the entire country.

I mean, sure, it's still a tradition to show up at the local Macy's to check out the Christmas decorations, but for my generation, the idea that a Christmas exhibit could draw out 1.5 million visitors, more tourists than either Yellowstone Park or the Statue of Liberty received, is stunning. But at the height of its popularity, that's exactly what the Ford Rotunda was.

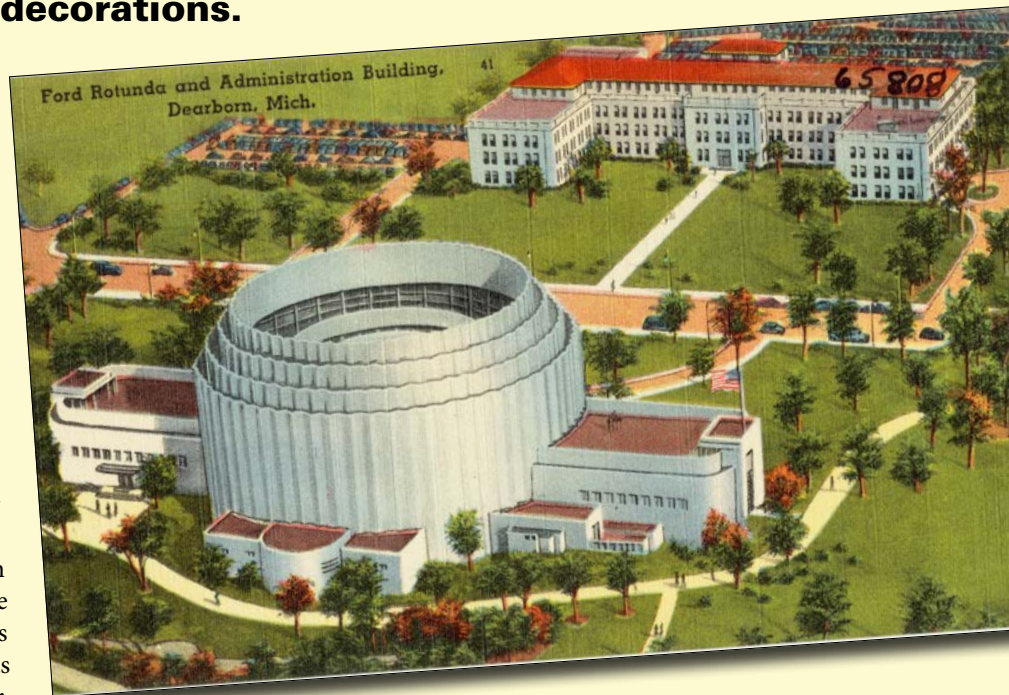
The Rotunda was, of course, more than just a Christmas display. It also featured the Ford Motor Company's latest car models alongside other industrial exhibits and was regularly used to host events and for advertising purposes. But the Ford Rotunda's main draw would eventually become its Christmas Fantasy exhibit, a massive, yearly display that featured thousands of individual pieces from dolls to animatronic scenes.

The building itself was also a unique sight. It was designed to look like a giant set of gears.

Initially constructed in 1934 for the Century of Progress World's Fair in Chicago, the Rotunda didn't follow any architectural style of the time. Instead, it was built to resemble a graduated cluster of internally-meshed gears. The "gears" were 12 stories tall and surrounded a 92-foot-wide courtyard. For a temporary structure, it was mammoth. The building was built by Albert Kahn, the architect behind two of Ford's factories amongst other buildings in the Detroit region.

The Rotunda became one of the centerpiece exhibits at Chicago's World's Fair until it ended a few months later, but Ford wasn't done with its now famous gear-shaped building yet. Instead, they decided to build a new, permanent version of the building near their Rouge Plant in Dearborn, Michigan. In its new location, the Ford Rotunda became a showcase of the company's latest car models alongside other displays. The Rotunda eventually underwent renovations in 1952, during which one of the very first geodesic domes in the world was installed over the courtyard. The building wasn't designed to support the weight of a conventional roof, and so Buckminster Fuller's dome design was utilized.

A year later, the Ford Rotunda underwent a grand reopening just in time to celebrate Ford's 50th anniversary. Over the next nine years, the yearly Christmas Fantasy events started kicking off and the building reached the peak of its renown. For almost a decade afterwards, the Rotunda was not only a well-known



landmark, but also a continued platform to leverage Ford's latest car lines.

Less than a decade later, however, the Ford Rotunda caught fire while preparing for the 1962 Christmas Fantasy. The fire started while workers were applying weatherproofing sealant to the dome, some of the sealant's vapors catching fire. An hour later, the building had burned to the ground, though there were no casualties. The only part of the Christmas Fantasy display that had survived was the 15,000 piece miniature animated circus, which had only evaded the fire by virtue of still being in storage.

And just like that, the Ford Rotunda vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared. Ford opted not to rebuild the Rotunda, as its reconstruction was estimated to cost a staggering \$15 million.

Though best remembered for its Christmas displays, the Ford Rotunda was also one of the most well-known symbols of the automotive industry. Its gear-inspired architecture and industrial displays wowed crowds since its inception at the 1934 World's Fair. The building was at the center of some of Ford's marketing efforts and was often used to photograph and introduce car models, including the ill-fated Ford Edsel.

During the short time it was in operation, the Ford Rotunda saw over 18 million visitors, and no doubt many of the people in our industry were among them. All that's left of the Rotunda is a street that carries its name, but the fact remains that it was an iconic cornerstone of industrial America's history, our history, and as those who were around to actually visit the Ford Rotunda move on and retire, it should not be forgotten. ⚙️