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Grand Rapids: Made by Design

With the exploding popularity of design programs on television, and a renewed public interest in aesthetics and style, Grand Rapids is the perfect place for the budding “style guru” to feel right at home. Once known as “The Furniture City,” Grand Rapids has always had a firm foundation in the design field. As it once set the standard for furniture design and production for the nation, modern furniture design giants such as Steelcase, Herman Miller and Haworth still call the West Michigan corner their home. This inherent design influence is readily apparent from the moment passengers de-plane at Gerald R. Ford International Airport. From Herman Miller benches lining the gates to the Steelcase contemporary tables gracing the space between business centers and Starbucks, the striking modern design of the city’s airport introduces visitors to the overall aesthetic climate of Grand Rapids – a city historically important in design, rich with significant and varied architecture and home to innumerable works of public sculpture.

Grand Rapids has a “solid as oak” history in the furniture industry, since 1837, when cabinetmaker William Haldane first opened shop. That history continued through the lumber boom of the 1880’s, when Grand Rapids established itself as a center of craft and carpentry (with 44 furniture companies thriving along the Grand River), and through the modern furniture era of the 1950’s, highlighted by the immensely popular Charles Eames lounge chair produced by Herman Miller in 1956. Today, Grand Rapids is home to the innovative work solutions developed by Steelcase, a leader in U.S. office design and furniture companies. Visitors to The Van Andel Museum Center can experience a multimedia exhibition, *The Furniture City*, which chronicles the history of furniture design in the Grand Rapids area from the mass-produced pieces from the 1860’s to the office furniture of modern 20th century mavens like Charles & Ray Eames.

Continuing this design tradition, Grand Rapids also is home base for Kendall College of Art and Design. Kendall graduates make up 90 percent of the working furniture design industry, while the presence of the school builds on the creative element of the city's population.

Architecturally, Grand Rapids has something for everyone, and it's quickly apparent that the Grand River has impacted the design aesthetic of architects commissioned for downtown projects. Downtown visitors lodging at the historic Amway Grand Plaza Hotel note an arresting contrast between the hotel's elaborate stone facade--part of the original 1913 architectural style fashioned after English Adams--and the modern Glass Towers that comprise the hotel's 1981 addition. Rising 28 stories high, the hotel's tower rooms afford sweeping views of the Grand River and the region. Adjacent to the hotel is DeVos Place, Grand Rapids' new convention center. DeVos Place Convention Center and Performance Hall is noted for high-tech design, including the center's graceful, contemporary architecture—also inspired by its location along the Grand River. Providing further architectural and sculptural interest, the front plaza of the sleek and modern Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum provides a fitting setting for the Judd Nelson sculpture *Man in Space*. A 300-foot glass wall capitalizes on the museum's west bank location.

Perhaps the most significant point of architectural design interest in the city is the Frank Lloyd Wright Meyer May House, designed and built in 1908, and one of Wright's last Prairie-style homes. The house was restored to its original splendor, including all interior furnishings and textiles, in 1987 by the Steelcase Corporation and is now one of the most complete restorations of a Frank Lloyd Wright design in existence. The house is open to the public and well worth the visit for the incredibly informative, free tours given by volunteer docents, most of whom are former Steelcase employees. A video account of the restoration also is available to visitors for viewing in conjunction with the tour. The Meyer May House is located in the Heritage Hill historic district, a neighborhood of 1300 homes dating from 1848 and representing over 60 architectural styles, and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In Grand Rapids, almost everywhere one turns, another opportunity to experience the city's dedication to art and design presents itself. "Grandly" planted in front of City Hall, Alexander Calder's "La Grande Vitesse" (1969) serves as a symbol of Grand Rapids and as a source of local pride. "La Grande Vitesse," brightly painted in Calder's signature orange-red color, is now considered one of Calder's best, and is the result of the National Endowment for The Arts naming Grand Rapids the very first recipient of its grant to fund public works of art. Following in this tradition, the downtown area now plays host to over 30 outdoor sculptures. A published walking tour of downtown sculpture and historic buildings takes visitors by these sites including "Motu Viget" by Mark Di Suvero (1977), "Ecliptic" on Rosa Parks Circle by Maya Lin (2001), and "The Grand River Sculpture and Fish Ladder" by Joseph Kennebrew IV (1974).

The internationally renowned Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park adds another dimension to the area's investment in art and design, with a mission statement pledging "to promote the enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of gardens, sculpture, the natural environment and the arts." The Meijer Gardens is a non-profit organization that houses more than 160 sculptures in its permanent collection, including Nina Akamu's "The American Horse/Leonardo da Vinci's Horse" (1998), and works by other well-known artists such as Rodin, Henry Moore, Oldenberg and DiSuvaro. Spanning 125 acres of natural wetlands, woodlands, meadows and botanical gardens, the Meijer Gardens offers tram guided tours of the sculpture park, excepting January and February, and a year-round experience with indoor tropical, Victorian, carnivorous, arid and seasonal gardens. A world-class indoor sculpture gallery also offers rotating exhibits of international artists. Currently, the sculpture gallery is showing *Marvels of Maiolica: Italian Renaissance Ceramics* (September 23 – December 31, 2005). The Garden's integration of art and nature distinguishes it from traditional botanic gardens and art museums alike, prompting former President Jimmy Carter to deem it a "national treasure."

For more information about Grand Rapids as a design destination, consumers may contact the Grand Rapids/Kent County Convention and Visitors Bureau at 800/678-9859, or on the web at www.visitgrandrapids.org.

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