

Brian Fawcett/ THE AKRON DESIGN CENTRE

I'm Public Eye, your guide to the Akron Design Centre.

Akron resembles a hundred other contemporary cities in North America. About 300,000 people live there, many depressed and unhappy, wondering if maybe they should pack up and move to New York or California. The center of the city is in what urban planners used to call urban decay and now call redevelopment opportunities. Its citizens are mostly poor, ethnic, black or combinations of those three. There is some urban renewal going on — old buildings becoming parking lots, a square block of tenements wakes up to discover that it is a huge and windowless warehouse. Shopping malls named after trees that don't grow anywhere near Akron are constantly promised and quietly cancelled shortly after elections. Those that are built are identical to ten thousand other malls across the continent, filled with franchised merchandise manufactured off-continent, and run by bright-eyed polyester managers who wear name-tags but don't want to know your name except to put it on their junk-mail list. Life goes on, sideways or down.

Thirty years ago most of the automobile tires produced in America were manufactured in or near Akron. They called Akron *Tiretown*. You could get a job in one of those filthy tire factories, and if you worked hard and smart, you could own your own home, have five or six kids and maybe get to be a department foreman. A man living and working in Akron could feel the pulse of America's heartland. After work you could drink any of a dozen brands of watery beer and get your face pushed in at well over a dozen tough bars.

They closed the last tire factory a few years ago. Now when people talk *Tiretown* they mean the franchise corporation that retails tires across North America. The tires are made somewhere else now — Taiwan or Korea — where manual labour is cheaper and the workers don't bring class-action suits against the company when they start to die from cancer. The tire companies of Akron moved the workers out and the managers and researchers in long ago. They spin profits in and out of town, country and hemisphere electronically, and they *think* about the market for tire products.

There's low-level unemployment in Akron. Some people do leave and go to the big cities, but most hang around and get overweight on junk-food and they get drunk too much and depressed and generally less and less employable. Eventually they get reclassified out of the unemployment stats and become welfare cases, unemployables, part of the growing fringe of the homeless and disenfranchised—the “failures” who are never counted accurately because the failure is in the system.

The managers and researchers who remain all live in the new “secure” residential developments out on the farmlands north of Akron. They do all right for themselves, moving on up the corporate ladder, as the saying goes, and eventually out of Akron.

Most visitors would take the first bus out of Akron. Not me. I've got questions to ask of it. How did all this mediocrity get created, anyway? What's happening to Akron, Ohio? Is there anything under that impermeable, inorganic, nondecaying skin of white plastic that's settled over it?

Akron, Ohio has “made in America” stamped all over it, even if the part of America meant is in Canada, Korea, Taiwan, Japan or even Russia. Those are accomplice states in a union most Americans are no longer a part of, least of all the hard-drinking, balding, pot-bellied kick-fag tire workers of Akron, Ohio. They're ghosts of the past, and so are most of the rest of us.

If you still think, as people could as recently as twenty years ago, that the United States is the center of the world, or that the United States of America means the same thing as America, it's time to wake up. The only center America has now is the Akron Design Centre, and you're probably not part of it. You've been globalized. Your old political rights as a citizen have been marginalized into consumer rights, and the Centre *demands* that you exercise them.

I grew up in Akron, and I was a helpless witness to its transformation. But I also grew up in the earthly paradise. I had a mother who taught me how roses grow, why birds sing, and that the beautiful, voracious, winged dead are all around us. When I asked how that could be, she explained that the rain was the tears of the dead, sad that they couldn't be alive anymore, and that when I felt a breeze against my face it was

from the beating of their wings. Then she told me who I was, and why I'd been born.

I studied any and everything that passed my way, provided that it promised to tell me something about how life — and Akron — was changing, and why. I studied primitive cultures and their mythologies and customs, modern architecture, forestry, computer design. I worked as an urban planner, as a teacher in every odd circumstance I could force my way into — anything that would provide evidence of the destruction of my legacy. And I discovered that practically everything offered evidence.

Take architecture. It's easy to glimpse the dimensions of the Akron Design Centre in architecture. Architecture is the most visible nexus of deliberate design and subliminal economic motivations we have. As far back as the early 1950s, evidence of cloned design concepts began to appear in residential subdivision design, and they occurred in areas as environmentally and socially diverse as Jackson, Mississippi and Edmonton, Alberta.

Site-specific design features to accommodate local social characteristics and habits, climate, light orientation, and material availability disappeared. They were replaced by repetitive “style” features and demographic preloadings. Construction practices changed to reward large-scale production technologies and demographic projections.

Decorative features — such as A-frame entrance gables (meant to divert alpine-depth snow loads) — started appearing in areas that never see snow at all, supplanting local and more accurate responses to landscape and climate characteristics. The Akron Design Centre made housing into an expression of solidarity with global demographic and occupational ideals — a “world” society that ignores the local conditions and values of Jackson and Edmonton alike. Artificial structural patterns were also introduced, such as compact kitchens that reinforce the division of domestic labour and serve workspace “efficiencies” that alienate residents from local custom and from simple domestic contact.

I could cite this sort of evidence until we're all nauseous. Look around you. Your new house has been engineered, although not for you. But I'll never convince you this way, will

I? Okay. I'll stop, and tell you stories. Here's one:

I'd just gotten into town after a long absence, and I was sitting in a chain restaurant called "Choices" having a cup of coffee. You've been there — formica-topped tables and padded grey vinyl chairs, Neo-japanese food along with an assortment of muffins, croissants, "light" sandwiches and weak coffee.

The place was deserted except for the Oriental proprietor — he looked Korean — and the cook, a beefy blond girl in polyester slacks and running shoes who couldn't have been older than twenty-one or two. Choices wasn't a big hit in Akron, and neither was the mall it was in, which was also empty. You could almost hear the developer tearing out his hair and mumbling words like *underutilization*.

I'd ordered a muffin and coffee, and was staring out into the parking lot alternately wondering how to get back out of Akron and whether I should go ask the proprietor for some butter for the too-dry muffin. A late 50s Cadillac — a '59 model with those amazing twin ruby hooters for taillights pulled into the parking lot. Two wild-haired blond kids got out of the front seat and after a moment's consultation headed into the deserted drugstore next to Choices.

Just as they moved beyond my line of vision one of the Cadillac's back doors eased open, and a woman got out. Like the kids she was wild-haired, but she was older, and her hair was jet black. She looked toward the drugstore her two companions had disappeared into, shook her head, and walked straight toward Choices. She seemed familiar, and after a moment, I knew why.

Aside from tires, Akron, Ohio is famous for just one thing. It has produced the working mechanisms for two of the most intelligent Rock & Roll groups around. One of them is Devo, who wear flowerpots on their heads, quote obscure Russian sci-fi novelists, and hurl imprecations about techno-nihilism. The other is Chrissie Hynd, the lead singer from the Pretenders. The woman heading for Choices was a dead ringer for Chrissie Hynd. And the closer she came, the more she looked like the real thing.

There are few people in the music world I'd rather meet than Chrissie Hynd. No one, in fact. She's an angry woman with a brain, a singing voice like a cobra in a grease pit, and

the diction of a machine-gun with its trigger mechanism on methydrine. It's her anger that interests me. It's white hot and sophisticated, the kind of fuck-you rage that no one is born with and which only something deeper than private neurosis can feed.

Unfortunately, I'm no Rolling Stone journalist, so when she pushed open the glass doors, I merely sat in my chair and watched her. She sat down a couple of tables over from mine and plopped a leather bag on the tabletop large enough to carry an electric guitar or a machine gun. I decided it was the latter, and looked away.

Next thing I knew she was standing beside me. "You got a light, pal?" she asked.

I resisted the impulse to say "yes sir," and handed her a pink disposable light I'd swiped off a friend. She lit her cigarette and slipped the lighter into her jeans.

"You local?" she demanded.

"Nope," I said. "Not anymore. I'm on a kind of pilgrimage. I wanted to see how Akron has changed."

"What the hell for?"

"Akron is the dead centre of the North American heartland."

"You got the dead part right," she said, plunking herself down in the chair next to mine. She took a deep pull on her cigarette and blew a stream across the table. "But you're off base on the anatomy. If they gave the American heartland an enema, they'd stick it in at Akron."

I smiled, but didn't say anything.

"This place used to be fine," she went on. "Lots of farms, people doing real work, having real lives. Not any more. Now it's the fucking Inner Station."

"Of what?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly, as if there was a difficulty in thinking—and maybe in remembering. Most women are attractive when they're happy, but this woman became *very* attractive as her unhappiness became visible, lurid synaptic arcs of rage. Just like her music.

"That's real hard to explain. If you listen," she said, "you can hear a wierd hum around here. But when you look for it, there's nothing to see except franchise shit and industrial

debris. So you decide that you're crazy, and maybe you go stare into a pool. But when you do all you see is the skeleton of a fish floating up the surface."

Curious talk for a place called "Choices" in an Akron shopping mall. "Are you who I think you are?" I asked her.

She stubbed the cigarette out and lit another. "Yeah, sure," she answered distractedly. "No. I'm her twin sister. I'm nobody." The anger flashed more brightly in her eyes. "None of that shit matters, so don't push it."

"Push what?"

"Look buddy. You're a man. I'm a woman. We're both reasonably smart, and attractive. You want to go somewhere? Like, rent a motelroom and get it on?"

"No," I said. "I don't."

Her eyes softened. "Neither do I. I mean, you're probably a real nice guy, and all. But that's what we're *supposed* to do. You know what I really want to do? I just want to live a life, have a couple of kids, treat people well, play music and forget about all this shit around me. I want to live without having some turkey gluing my pages together all the time."

"I know what you're saying," I said, carefully. "But no one gets to do that. The world we grew up in is gone. It's all been redeveloped. Yours, mine, everyone's. Not made any better, just redeveloped. Made the same as every place else so we're never sure quite where we are. And all so a few slicko shits can wear Italian designer suits and drive Mercedes 450SLs."

She grabbed my wrist hard for a moment, then let it go. A grey sedan pulled up outside, and two neatly dressed men got out. The car pulled away, and the men entered Choices. They gazed around for a moment, then took a table within earshot of ours.

"You're in Akron," she said. "Did you know that this is where it all started? Where it all comes from? I'm not sure which, but it doesn't matter. You know what's wrong with our lives?"

"I've got a few ideas," I admitted. "Here we are, nice decent immigrant stock meant to work and build and grow and take pride in our families and what we know and what we build for ourselves, and instead we've had to spend our whole lives fighting every change, fighting a vague something or other

most of us can't even put a name to."

She looked into my eyes and grabbed my wrist again. "The fucking changes just make for more *things*, and more garbage, and more shit in the water, more poisons in the soil. And the changes have made all the good things disappear. Or invisible. I mean, the really simple things we used to take for granted, like cracks in the sidewalks, or the birds-nests in the trees outside our bedroom windows, and the songs our mothers made up for us."

The conversation was getting spooky. Two more neatly dressed men entered Choices. They conferred briefly with the first duo, then took a table on the opposite side of the room, about the same distance from our table.

"There's this place in Akron," she said, her voice softer now as she eyed the new arrivals. "This *thing*. I can't really say what it is. But it's here, and turning life into a fadeout."

"Fadeout?"

"That's the best term for it — a kind of dimming of the surface. You talked about it, so you must suspect. It's maybe just a feeling, or an instinct. Those guys. The mall." She gestured around her. "This place."

"Choices."

"Yeah. But they're fake choices, you dig? They ought to call it that. *Fake choices*."

"*Opportunities* would be a better name — *Obligatory Opportunities*. And they should have to advertise that an opportunity isn't the same thing as a choice, not when you're being compelled into exploiting it."

Two more suits entered. They nodded at the other four, and sat down at a table near the door. "I don't want to exploit anything," I added.

"Yeah, well, you're in a lot of trouble, then. We've got to rip the cover off these phoney choices. Otherwise we're paralyzed."

I glanced beyond her out into the parking lot. The two wildhaired kids were ambling across the parking lot. They opened the car door, tossed in several bags, and stood with the doors open, arguing about something.

"What *am* I looking for, exactly?"

"Give it your own name," she snapped. "That's your affair."

I've got my name. Just remember that we can't have a decent life without it being possible for everyone and everything. So look for the design that prevents that from happening."

"There's your friends," I said. "They just got into the car."

"Oh yeah," she answered, disinterestedly. "Them."

The Cadillac pulled out from between the parking stripes and headed directly for Choices, picking up speed, as it got closer.

"Are those fuckers going to ram this place?" I asked her.

"That's up to you," she replied, calmly. "Stop kidding around. That Cadillac and those kids aren't the most lethal things here."