

Draft January 2025

# The Architecture of Alonzo Robinson, Jr.

THEMATIC SURVEY REPORT



DECEMBER 2024

## Central City Plaza

600 W. Walnut Street  
AHI #132951

Construction date: 1973

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the core of Milwaukee's Black community was an area known as "Bronzeville." Its commercial heart was located along Walnut Street, which was lined with African American businesses, professional offices, and jazz clubs.<sup>41</sup> The Bronzeville neighborhood was the target of urban renewal in the 1950s, when the City of Milwaukee began demolishing homes and businesses that had been identified as "blighted." At the same time, the construction of the North-South freeway (now Interstate 43) ran through the middle of Bronzeville and displaced residents and destroyed the fabric of the community.<sup>42</sup> One of the final blows to the Walnut Street commercial district came in July 1967, when a night of civil unrest resulted in sporadic gunfire, arson and looting, nearly 100 injuries and four deaths, and \$570,000 in property damage.<sup>43</sup>



Around the same time, a group of African American business leaders launched a venture to create a new commercial heart for Milwaukee's Black community. The Central City Development Corporation (CCDC) was founded in 1967 with the goal of building a new shopping center in Milwaukee's historic inner core.<sup>44</sup> The driving force behind the development of Central City Plaza was Felmers Chaney, Milwaukee's first Black police sergeant, president of the Milwaukee chapter of the NAACP, and president of the North Milwaukee State Bank, established in 1970 as one of the only minority-owned banks in Wisconsin.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Black, *Bronzeville*, 15; Reuben K. Harpole, "Introduction," in *Milwaukee's Bronzeville: 1900-1950*, by Paul H. Geenen (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 8-9.

<sup>42</sup> Niles William Niemuth, "Urban Renewal and the Development of Milwaukee's African American Community: 1960-1980" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014)

<sup>43</sup> Karl Flaming, "The 1967 Milwaukee Riot: A Historical and Comparative Analysis" (Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1970), 29, 43-48; Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 144-46.

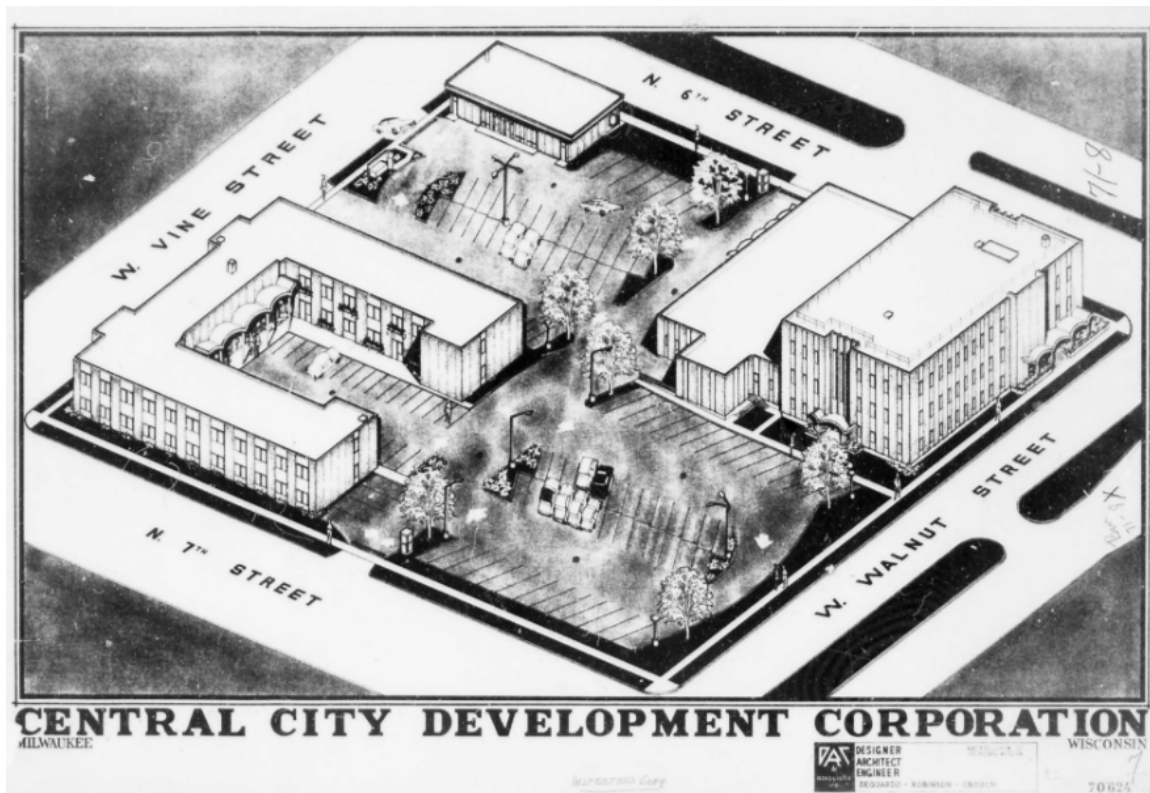
<sup>44</sup> "Central City Development Corporation," entity ID 1C10058, registered 3/2/1967; corporate records on file with State of Wisconsin Department of Financial Institutions.

<sup>45</sup> "Wisconsin Gets Its First Black Controlled Bank," in *Investor: Wisconsin's Business Magazine*. Vol. 2, No. 2 (February 1971), 16-21, 29, 31-33. The article's title is somewhat inaccurate. The Columbia Savings & Loan, founded in Milwaukee in 1924 by Ardie and Wilbur Halyard, is recognized as the first African American-owned bank in the state, although by 1971, Columbia was led by both Black and white executives selected by Ardie after Wilbur's death in 1963.

Planning for the new mixed-use Central City Plaza took several years, including delays in land acquisition from the City of Milwaukee. The site, at the corner of Locust St. and N. 6<sup>th</sup> St., had previously contained rundown houses, taverns, and commercial buildings that were demolished by the City for urban renewal. The City offered the site for sale in 1967 for \$87,000. CCDC was the sole bidder, but the City declined to accept the offer. Two more bid openings followed, both with no other bidders, and the site was eventually sold to CCDC for \$20,000.<sup>46</sup>

The Central City Plaza project was financed through \$94,000 in private capital and nearly \$2 million in loans guaranteed by the federal Small Business Administration under a newly-established community development program.<sup>47</sup> The project was the largest multiple building complex in Wisconsin to be financed by the SBA; and it was the first Black-operated shopping center in the country to be guaranteed by a newly-established SBA community development fund.<sup>48</sup>

The CCDC hired Alonzo Robinson, then a partner with DeQuardo, Crouch & Robinson, to design the new shopping center complex. Robinson's design took advantage of the full city block and placed three distinct buildings at the corners of the site with ample parking lots in the center of the block. The three buildings were constructed of white concrete with similar architectural details. The two-story main building, at the southeast corner of the site, would contain retail space, professional offices, and a bowling



<sup>46</sup> “Black Project in Core Plans an Unveiling,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Aug. 19, 1973, part 7, p. 1; “\$2 Million Shopping Center in Inner City Foundering,” *Milwaukee Journal*, Sept. 8, 1974, part 2, p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> Funding was provided by Milwaukee-based Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co. and First Wisconsin National Bank. “Black Milwaukee Group Seeks Funds for \$1.7 Million Business Project,” *Jet*, Nov. 19, 1970, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> “Black Project in Core Plans an Unveiling.”

alley. A one-story building along N. 6<sup>th</sup> St. contained additional retail space, and a two-story U-shaped motel was located at the northwest corner of the block.

A construction permit was issued to the Central City Plaza Development Corporation in August 1971.<sup>49</sup> Construction began a few weeks later, with a groundbreaking ceremony led by Eleanor Lofton, executive secretary of the CCDC, and attended by city, state, and federal agency officials.<sup>50</sup> The general contractor for the project was the Scherrer Construction Company from Burlington, WI. As construction progressed, the CCDC board of directors began recruiting retail tenants for the new shopping center. Operators included Gregory Bush, of the Satin Wave Barber Shop; Leo Davis, manager of Darby's Foods grocery store; Charles Richard (one of five Black pharmacists in Wisconsin), of the Central City Drug Store; Mike Crosby, manager of the Apollo Lanes bowling alley; David Lawson, manager of the Masterpiece Motor Lodge and Masterpiece Supper Club; and Clarence Parrish, attorney and general counsel of CCDC.<sup>51</sup> Other tenants included Pago's Liquor Store, the Central City Merchandise Mart, EK Photo Service, Spic and Span Cleaners, and Central City Distributors, Inc. (wholesale liquor sales).

Central City Plaza was completed in August 1973 at an estimated cost of \$3 million. At its opening, Central City Plaza was the first shopping center in Wisconsin to be built by a Black development team and designed by a Black architect. All of its retail and commercial tenants were Black-owned and operated, and the shopping center employed over 100 people in total.<sup>52</sup> The fourteen Black-owned businesses in a single location at Central City Plaza were noteworthy at the time, since the entire state of Wisconsin only had approximately 1,000 Black-owned businesses (or less than 1% of all businesses in the state).<sup>53</sup>



Attending ground-breaking ceremony are (l-r) Mrs. Lofton, CCDC President Felders O. Chaney, CCCD Secretary Beechie O. Brooks and Fry.

Image credit: *Jet*, August 12, 1971, Vol. XL No. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Construction permit #293353, issued Aug. 19, 1971; on file at City of Milwaukee.

<sup>50</sup> "Break Ground for \$1.9 Million Complex," *Jet*, August 12, 1971, p. 46.

<sup>51</sup> "Black Project in Core Plans an Unveiling," part 7, p. 1-2.

<sup>52</sup> "Business in Brief," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Sept. 10, 1973, part 2 p 3.

<sup>53</sup> There were 1,054 Black-owned businesses in the entire state of Wisconsin. Of these, 741 were single owner-operator without any additional paid employees. The other 313 businesses employed a total of 947 employees. Nationwide, there were a total of 163,073 Black-owned businesses in the US; this was 2% of all enterprises nationwide. Cited in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Minority-Owned Businesses: 1969*, MB-1, Table 2 part B, p. 69; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 42, *The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States, 1971*; U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1972.



Central City Plaza faced financial difficulties within a few years. The businesses in the shopping center did not attract the number of customers that CCDC developers had anticipated. The supermarket, in particular, was intended to be the key to attracting shoppers; but its higher prices and smaller selection discouraged neighboring residents.<sup>54</sup>

The property was turned over to the Small Business Administration in 1975 after tenants became encumbered with debt and insufficient financing to have even storefront advertising. The complex was fully vacant by 1977. Life began to come back in the early 1980s when Milwaukee-based Deaconess Hospital opened a clinic in the former liquor store building. Eventually the City of Milwaukee took over the complex and in 1982 sold it to the Prince Hall Freemasons, the oldest and largest predominantly African American fraternity in the United States. Prince Hall occupied the main two story building and rented the other buildings on the site to several public social service agencies. All three buildings in the complex remain occupied by various organizations to the present.

The Central City Plaza complex is significant as Wisconsin's first Black-owned and Black-operated shopping center. Central City Plaza illustrates the Black business community's response to the effects of urban renewal in Milwaukee in the 1960s and 1970s. Central City Plaza connects to the larger story of federal government efforts to encourage minority businesses through focused community development programs; and it represents a key moment in the local history of African American commerce and economic development in Milwaukee. For these reasons, Central City Plaza is recommended as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under *Criterion A* in the areas of *Commerce* and *Black Ethnic Heritage*.

Within the local context of Milwaukee, Central City Plaza is a distinctive architectural example and a visual neighborhood feature that was designed by a noteworthy local architect and that exemplifies the economic and social heritage of Milwaukee's Black community. Central City Plaza is also recommended for Milwaukee historic designation under criteria A, E, F, and I.



*Liquor store, east elevation*

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<sup>54</sup> "Shopping Center in Inner City Ailing," *Milwaukee Journal*, Sept. 8, 1974, part 2 p. 1; "Central City Plaza in Financial Straits," *Milwaukee Sentinel Extra*, Feb. 3, 1975, p. 1.



*Motel, west elevation looking north*



*Motel, main entry in south elevation*