

## **The Apex of Potential**

### **There's more than meets the eye to Pawtucket's familiar roadside ziggurat — and it's well worth preserving**

Depending on whom you ask, the Apex building next to Interstate 95 in downtown Pawtucket is a sickly eyesore, or a true landmark and an outstanding piece of roadside architecture. The structure is a standard low-slung department store box, upon which six white blocks have been stacked, each one smaller than the one below. The result is a pyramid with an upright trapezoid placed on top, displaying the name "Apex" in red. Constructed in 1969, the Apex building is an example of what Providence designer J Hogue terms "divisive architecture," "Some people hate it vehemently," he says, "while others love it."

Regardless, the future of the well-known ziggurat is in doubt. Currently, the Apex Department Store, a rump of its former retail self since the small chain downsized three years ago, occupies one half of the space, while the state Division of Motor Vehicles rents the other half. The privately owned Teknor Apex Company has not divulged its plans for the store, or the 10-acre slice of Pawtucket riverfront property upon which it sits.

The pyramid-like building's isolation from the surrounding city emphasizes its novelty, giving it a sense of being marooned. Interstate 95 is on one side, the Blackstone River on the other, and downtown Pawtucket lies across the river. There are several possible futures for Apex: demolition, reconfiguration, or continued use in its current form as the home of a distinctive Rhode Island retailer. Regardless, Apex's decision will have important implications for the redevelopment of downtown Pawtucket, particularly along its waterfront – and perhaps also for the preservation of local contemporary architecture.

Matt Kierstead, a Pawtucket architectural historian and preservationist who is a fan of the building, suggests that not just the structure's exterior, but also its conception as "an entire landscape," and its unbroken interior space, make Apex significant. Kierstead places Apex in the context of a mid-century American design ethos that celebrated mobility and expansiveness. Not coincidentally, the building was conceived and built during the age of the convertible, the drive-in, and the space program, and it reflects the optimism of that era. Less well known is how it was devised by Andrew Geller, a key associate of Raymond Loewy, the man considered the father of American industrial design.

For some people, of course, the idea of "preserving" a 35-year-old building is ridiculous, particularly given Rhode Island's rich stock of much older structures, including some of the stately 19th-century homes located not far across I-95. Kierstead and Hogue argue that the Apex building passes the landmark test, if not officially (short of exceptional circumstances, the National Register of Historic Places does not recognize buildings less than 50 years old), then by virtue of its widespread familiarity. Furthermore, like the demolished 1968 circular Gulf station on Atwells Avenue in downtown Providence (torn down by former mayor Joseph R. Paolino Jr. in 2003 to make way for a parking lot), Apex is visually interesting, distinguishing itself from the generic nature of much contemporary retail and commercial architecture.

Apex is part of the Teknor Apex Company, a Pawtucket-based manufacturer that employs 2400 workers, making rubber products, plastics, chemicals, and colorants, in 10 US locations and Singapore. Founded as Apex Tire in 1924 in Providence, the company moved to Pawtucket after the 1938 hurricane, which devastated its Providence operation. Apex opened its first retail outlet, a tire store, in the late 1930s, and inaugurated a full sized department store in Warwick in 1966; additional stores were added in Swansea, Massachusetts, and at the current location in Pawtucket. In 2001, Apex's days as a modest three-store department store chain ended when the Warwick and Swansea stores were closed, along with the Seekonk warehouse, and the inventory and staff at the Pawtucket flagship was drastically reduced. These closings came with the national decline in regional department stores; Ann & Hope, another important name in Rhode Island retailing, downsized and restructured the same year because of competition from Target and Wal-Mart.

Nowadays, the future of the Apex site in Pawtucket is of interest to private firms, state agencies like the DMV, and government and nonprofit entities devoted to Pawtucket redevelopment. A final group should be added to this list — preservationists interested in conserving the integrity of the building itself. It is from this camp that comes the most intriguing, although perhaps least likely, prospect for the structure: a museum of industrial design. Proponents include not just such unabashed fans as Hogue, the creator of [www.artinruins.com](http://www.artinruins.com), a Web site devoted to local architecture and preservation, and Kierstead, but also Geller's grandson, Jake Gorst, a Long Island-based Web designer and filmmaker.

In terms of Pawtucket redevelopment, Kierstead suggests, "A museum of industrial design across the river from what is considered the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution [Slater Mill] makes perfect sense." The site's vast unbroken interior space, he says, and especially its links to the history of American design in Geller and Loewy make it a perfect fit for a museum. Hogue, who notes the site's proximity to design communities in Providence, Boston, and New York, echoes this view. Yet even though the case for Apex as an industrial design museum is compelling, supporters admit that such talk is currently nothing more than a pipe dream. Moreover, the stalled progress of the Heritage Harbor Museum near downtown Providence could give pause to anyone thinking of developing such an institution.

The future of the Apex building lies in the hands of Andrew Gates, president of Apex at Home, who did not return calls seeking comment. (Similarly, the DMV did not respond to a request for details about its plans.) Although it might seem unlikely that Apex will continue as a retail operation for much longer, it has persisted since being downsized in 2001. The status quo, therefore, appears to be an option, at least for the short to medium term, with the DMV staying put and Apex maintaining its currently feeble brick and mortar presence, in addition to a Web site. For the DMV, the location works well — it is close to the highway, has ample parking, and the ability to accommodate the agency on one floor.

Although Apex and the DMV are under the same roof at the Pawtucket building, one can't pass from one to the other without going outside and reentering. The DMV side of the structure retains a number of Apex fixtures, shelves, and signs, suggesting that this arrangement — launched when the state leased the space after a flood at the previous DMV location in January 2004 — may be short term.

A dingy banner above the Apex store entrance reads, "Apex at Home OPEN," and another sign provides the Web address, [www.apexstores.com](http://www.apexstores.com), from which mostly household items, as well as coin collectible such as silver dollars and theme quarters, can be ordered. Inside, six shoppers meandered about the lightly stocked space on a recent Tuesday, and three employees, one talking on the phone at the cash register, walked the floor. Apex still sells clothing, as well as small appliances like coffee makers and electric razors, but other areas, including the garden center and home electronics, are empty or closed. Although an employee folding sweaters had no idea how long the current DMV arrangement will last, he noted that Apex's business had increased since the DMV moved in, as customers waiting to renew a registration or get a license next door sometimes wander over to shop.

The northeast corner of the building, on Main Street near the Blackstone River, has also been transformed. Newport Creamery once operated a location there, but it closed in 2001 when the chain declared bankruptcy. New owners subsequently purchased the Creamery, but the Apex location never reopened, and it now houses the Rhode Island Ciudad de Dios ("City of God") Church.

Although you wouldn't know it from such pedestrian details, the Apex building has some surprisingly rich elements in its heritage. The structure's designer, Andrew Geller, best known these days for the innovative beach houses he designed on Long Island's Hamptons in the 1950s and 1960s, has recently been featured in several books, including Alastair Gordon's *Beach Houses: Andrew Geller* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2003) and *Weekend Utopia: Modern Living in the Hamptons* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2001). Geller, who enjoyed a long and successful career as an architect and designer, was employed in New York by Raymond Loewy from the mid 1940s until 1976, when he struck out on his own. Loewy, known as "the man who shaped America," ran an empire that produced designs not only for houses and offices, but also appliances (the Coldspot refrigerator); transportation (the Studebaker, the Greyhound bus, the interiors of three spaceships); packaging (Lucky Strikes' cigarettes, the Coke bottle); and logos (Shell, Exxon, the US Postal Service eagle). Geller, whose principal focus was residential and commercial architectural design, was an integral part of the Loewy firm and served for a number of years as its vice president and director of design.

In addition to his work for Apex, Geller was responsible for designing department stores on behalf of clients including Macy's and Lord & Taylor (whose logo was taken from Geller's scribbling of the retailer's name on a design rendering). Jack Gorst, an unofficial Geller biographer, notes that his grandfather was one of the few Loewy designers allowed to freelance while in the employ of the master. The Apex store was one of these side projects.

Novel as they may be, the characteristic sign and ziggurat design were not the product of a flight of fancy on the part of Geller and the Apex company. Mike Cassidy, director of Planning and Redevelopment for the City of Pawtucket, notes that Apex bought the site from the Pawtucket Redevelopment Agency (PRA) in the 1960s. The PRA had established a prohibition on freestanding signs more than six feet tall. It allowed signs on the buildings themselves, however, with the proviso that the size not exceed the linear feet of the property's road frontage. Apex, with a 10-acre site bordering three streets, had a large amount of potential sign space — the question was how to use it.

According to Geller, 80, who spoke with me by phone from his home in Northport, Long Island, "I remember I criticized the fact that they weren't making it [the building] more noticeable from the highway. And so we came up with something triangular." Geller's initial rendering, in fact, was a triangle, but with the Apex name on a separate piece elevated above the main structure. The eventually realized pyramid design features the Apex name more prominently than in Geller's initial conception. In addition to its eye-catching form from the highway, the pyramid design dovetailed nicely with the name "Apex," or summit.

Geller last saw the Apex building about 10 years ago when he drove past it on I-95. He is vague about the building's precise design, perhaps not surprising given that he worked on it more than 35 years ago, and it was one of many department stores he designed in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic states throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. He does recall, however, the happy association he had with Apex, as well as the site's prime location. Geller also notes that Apex, like other stores he designed during an era he describes as "important socially and commercially," features large amounts of undivided floor space. Geller-designed stores typically featured stockrooms housed on a separate level above or below the sales area, rather than amongst or adjacent to it. "Visually," he says, "it meant that the entire floor was visible rather than broken up."

Of course, the very features that make the Apex site attractive to the state Division of Motor Vehicles — ample parking, easy highway access, and a large amount of clear unobstructed space — might also fit the needs of such potential tenants as a museum, a big-box retailer like Wal-Mart, or even a multi-use building with a restaurant, galleries, and boutiques.

Pawtucket officials are circumspect when asked about possible futures for Apex. Mike Cassidy, Pawtucket's director of Planning and Redevelopment, defers the matter to Apex owner Andrew Gates, and says that in regard to planning for the site, "We haven't really taken a run at that." Cassidy's colleague, Pawtucket Economic & Cultural Affairs officer Herb Weiss, also says he is unaware of how Gates is leaning, but notes that in response to inquiries about the property, "We're still sending people over."

While Pawtucket officials are understandably reticent to hazard predictions or make recommendations to a private landowner, the Apex site is clearly a key in Pawtucket's redevelopment plans. Rich Davis, executive director of the Pawtucket Foundation, which represents the business and not-for-profit sectors in championing improvements, notes how the site's gateway location — and the river views from the property — make it a potential linchpin for redevelopment. Although also hesitant to advance any proposals, Davis says, "As a property owner, businessman, and developer, he [Andrew Gates] has a fair idea of what the property is worth and what its potential uses might be."

The Pawtucket Foundation has nonetheless promoted ambitious plans to continue the redevelopment of downtown Pawtucket, with the river, the city's industrial heritage, and the burgeoning arts scene as key elements. The foundation sponsored the 2002 Tidewater Workshop, summarized in the report, *A Strategy for Tidewater Redevelopment*, which recommended providing greater access to the river, as well as development along its banks. The foundation

laments that much of the river, which it regards as Pawtucket's strongest and most defining feature, is currently inaccessible or obscured from view.

The Tidewater Redevelopment report specifically recommends the restoration of River Street and the establishment of a riverwalk along the eastern side of the Blackstone, skirting the western edge of the Apex site. The commission's recommendations are comprehensive, encompassing all of the Pawtucket waterfront, including the "Mill Pond" (below Exchange Street and near Slater Mill and City Hall), the "Gorge" (between Main Street and the I-95, where the Apex site lies), and the "Basin" (south of the I-95 and Division Street, and leading toward Narragansett Bay). The Apex site is thus only one element in a redevelopment strategy for the Pawtucket riverfront, but its central 10-acre location along the Blackstone, and between two key crossover points, renders its disposition central to such efforts.

When it comes to development, nothing is forever, as is suggested by conversations with Mike Cassidy and Rich Davis, and a review of the Tidewater redevelopment report. Asked and answered 40 years ago, the question of what should be done with the Apex site is now being revisited in light of changes having to do with Apex, Pawtucket, and the broader culture.

The Tidewater report notes how the Apex property was once crossed by four public streets and divided into six city blocks. The site comprised mills, houses, churches, a fire station, and a bakery — in effect, a neighborhood, run down though it may have been. The completion of Interstate 95 east of the river in 1963, and the Pawtucket Redevelopment Authority's purchase of the tract that was cleared and sold to Apex, cemented the current course of development. This path, trod by many cities in the 1950s and 1960s, is marked by easy highway access and plentiful parking, although it creates an unfriendly cityscape for pedestrians, and turns its back on such natural assets as waterways. Just as in Providence, the completion of I-95 cut Pawtucket in half, displacing a number of residences and businesses, cleaving the city in two.

The Tidewater redevelopment report notes that although the Apex site borders the river, "it bears little relationship to the water because of steep slopes and the river's low elevation below the falls." More specifically, a walk around the Apex building reveals that the loading dock and freight entrances are at the rear of the building, on the riverside. Not only is there a steep drop from the driveway (the former River Street) adjacent to the Blackstone, this embankment is completely overgrown and thick with trees, bushes and weeds — you can't even see the river from it currently. Interestingly, Andrew Geller's initial rendering placed an entrance to the Apex on the riverside. Any development seeking to orient the Apex site toward the water would have to address public access to the Blackstone, while literally turning Apex (or another occupant or building) around.

From the standpoint of preservationists, the next best choice after a museum would be something maintaining the Apex building as it is, as well as such aspects of the site as the signs and the vintage mid-1960s bug antennae-like lights in the parking lot. Sale to a big-box retailer, which would likely raze the Apex structure, would be a worst-case scenario. Kierstead suggests that the demolition in the late '90s of the nearby 2700-seat Leroy Theatre, and its replacement by a Walgreens drugstore, represents just such a preservation nightmare. Hogue, expressing the general fears of preservationists, says of Apex owner Andrew Gates, "I would hope that before

he gets the idea in his head that the land is worth more vacant, nothing rash happens to the building."

Although Gates attended the Pawtucket Foundation's 2002 workshop on the future of the Pawtucket waterfront, he has otherwise demonstrated little interest in redevelopment initiatives. Davis, the foundation's executive director, says Gates "has a high regard for the building itself." Still, in the absence of comment from Gates, it's difficult to know what this means in practice.

Perhaps it's worth considering the thoughts of Apex designer Andrew Geller, who, not surprisingly, expresses dismay about how regional department stores are anachronisms and shopping is increasingly done from home-based computers. Told how the Apex now shares space with the DMV, he asks, "That's progress?" Geller remains impressed by Apex's possibilities, however, and suggests that "marketing and merchandising types" could engineer a restoration or revival of this once-important name in Rhode Island retailing. While such an unexpected twist seems as improbable as turning the Apex building into an industrial design museum, it beats at least some of the alternatives.

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