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Letters from Readers

The Congressman vs. Christmas

I have read K. Jason Sitewell's letter ["Letters from Readers," April 2] in which he urges the opposition of a bill that would abolish Christmas cards and substitute a computerized registry.

I have known Congressman Day for many years. He is a devoutly religious man. It is his respect for religion that motivates him to sponsor a national computerized Christmas-greeting registry.

Congressman Day's bill does not abolish the custom of exchanging Christmas cards and New Year's greetings. It only applies to those cards that contain no penned signatures or handwritten messages. There is no warmth in a card that lacks the personal touch; it is as sterile and dehumanized as the computer print-outs that so enrage Mr. Sitewell. Congressman Day's proposed bill does have the advantages of saving more than two million trees and many millions of dollars for the American people.

Congressman Day, I salute you. I know how hard it is to champion an unpopular cause.

Sanford Hershfield
Glen Arm, Maryland

K. Jason Sitewell, for once, has a point. Congressman Day's proposed legislation to abolish Christmas cards and substitute a national computerized registry does dehumanize our society.

I wish, however, that Mr. Sitewell would abandon what appears to be a one-man vendetta and try to be constructive. I believe that two simple amendments to H.R. 9713A will restore the personal touch at holiday time.

First, for a nominal charge, say, \$2.50, any individual could register his desire to thank the persons who had wished him well (or who would have, if cards were legal).

Second, anyone who had used the registry to send well-wishes could, for an additional \$3.00, receive the list of persons who cared enough to send a thank-you (or who would have, had the cards been sent in the first place).

I have telegraphed Congressman Day with these suggestions, and I believe your readers should know this before writing to their own representatives.

Mel Rosen
Stanfordville, N.Y.

Hooray for Day! He's right. But then again, so is Sitewell.

Christmas cards are a plague—more menacing than the insidious golf greens of *SR* legend. But computers are not the answer. There's a better way to handle the situation.

Here's the full story of how our family con-

quered Christmas-card pollution:

For years, our Christmas-card list had the names of relatives, neighbors, friends, acquaintances, fellow members of church, clubs, and organizations to which we belonged, and people we'd met on trips and at meetings, parties, and conventions, whose faces we scarcely recalled.

Last fall we realized the total was 681 and rising. When I started thinking about the worth of the tradition, I recalled having said to a friend the previous January, "Sorry you didn't get our Christmas card."

"But we did," he protested. "Wasn't it the one with Santa being pulled by Rudolph and Snoopy? Or was yours the one with the full moon and empty bottles?"

"No, ours was the one with the handwritten note inviting you to the New Year's Eve party you missed."

That's when I realized our Christmas cards were just adding to the national pollution problem. My wife, Peggy, and I sat down and cut off everyone from our list who hadn't sent us a card the year before (but, of course, that was mere child's play). "We've got to cut more," I said. "Who's next?"

"We've only knocked off a few of your relatives," Peggy said.

We then cut off everyone who had sent us three-page mimeographed reports of their travels and triumphs.

"They won't even notice," Peggy said.

Then we cut off everyone who'd sent cards with printed names only. The list was now down to 103.

"Who'll we cut next?" I asked.

"We've hardly made a dent in your relatives," said Peggy.

So we cut off everyone who *merely* signed the cards.

"I believe that leaves only one of your relatives," said Peggy.

"Yes, and she died last August," I answered.

Then we cut off everyone we'd see around town frequently. "We'll just *tell* them 'Merry Christmas' in person."

That left 11 names on our list. We had triumphed over another menace that pollutes our environment.

But that was last October. After a few weeks of pre-Christmas carols and parties, we were glowing with Christmas spirit. We started putting names back on our list, one by one, two by two, and ten by twenty.

By December first, the count was 824 and rising.

Charles Branch
Memphis, Tennessee

Saving Our Cities

The rage for building giant downtown commercial centers as the ultimate remedy for urban decay goes on unabated despite nagging doubts that those centers may in fact do more to destroy a city than to save it. In the following section, Roger M. Williams inspects the rationale for Detroit's new Renaissance Center; Henry Ford II adds a few words in praise of the giant project; and lastly, urban affairs consultant William G. Conway takes careful aim at what he calls today's "destructive, lumbering urban dinosaurs"—the megastructures.

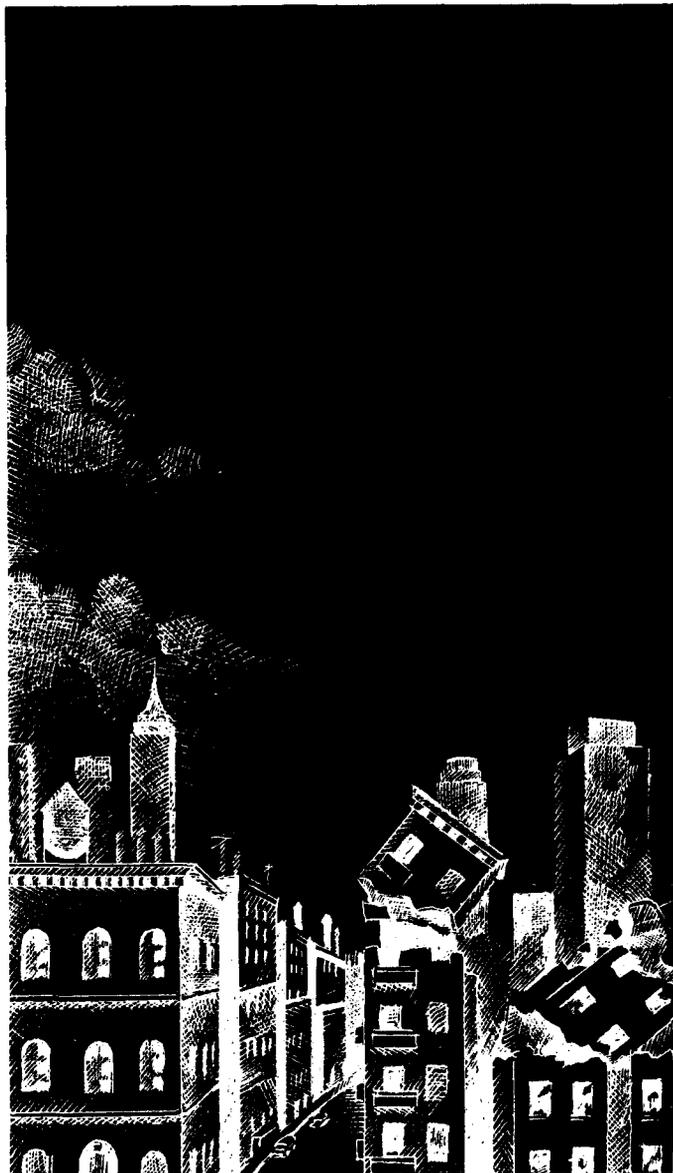
Facelift for Detroit

by Roger M. Williams

DETROIT has become everyone's favorite example of a dying city: the place where urban problems have converged to wipe out the achievements and values of twentieth-century America. Although accounts of Detroit's demise have been exaggerated as well as premature, the patient is indeed very ill. Many thousands of houses and apartment buildings lie abandoned and often gutted. Stores and hotels have closed downtown to follow the white middle class into the suburbs. The violent-crime rate is among the highest in the nation's cities, and the heroin problem is second to none. Unemployment runs around 14 percent—almost 40 percent for black teen-agers. Gangs of youths terrorize neighborhoods, parking lots, and even expressways, where, for a period last summer, they preyed on stalled motorists.

It is understood among businessmen that in such a situation everybody tries to cut his losses and pull out smoothly. Nobody expands or builds anything new. Yet downtown Detroit today is the site of the most expensive real estate development in the world—arguably the most expensive in history, if you figure that slave labor built the pyramids. The project is Renaissance Center, a colossal group of office buildings, shops, and a hotel that has risen on the barren banks of the Detroit River. The cost of construction is \$337 million, and every dollar of it is private money. Thus the center is billed as proof of private enterprise's concern for Detroit and, by extension, for all of urban America.

In that sense, at least, Renaissance Center has more importance as a symbol than it does as an actuality. Boosters already are proclaiming it the symbol of the "new Detroit," a concept that has been struggling to gain credibility for the



past several years. The name itself was chosen to suggest the city's emergence from a dark age. (Ironically, the deposed emblem, called "Spirit of Detroit," is a statue of a crouching man who could be rising to his feet or sinking to his knees, depending on one's view of him—and of his city.)

Whatever the merits of Renaissance Center as symbol, architecture, or homage to the gods, it will be judged most critically for its impact on beleaguered Detroit. Henry Ford II, the driving force behind the center, admitted as much when he proclaimed the project "primarily a catalyst to make other things happen." By "other things," Ford and his associates mean the physical regeneration of downtown Detroit and the spiritual regeneration of the whole city.

That is a very large order, and many observers are skeptical that it can be filled. How, they ask, can a flashy real estate development solve the urban problems that abound in Detroit? What significant impact can it have on unemployment, white flight, the decay of downtown? What impact of any kind can it have on crime, housing abandonment, heroin addiction, and the hostile, hopeless feeling that pervades vast segments of the city's population? If the answer is, "Very little," aren't the renaissance centers of our time—the "megastructures" mushrooming in American cities—expensive