

Ford's numerous world headquarter buildings hold vault of company history



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- Ford Motor Co. will vacate its iconic 'Glass House' headquarters in Dearborn, Michigan, after nearly 70 years.
- The building, which opened in 1956, was the site of major company decisions, including the Mustang launch and saving the company during the 2008 recession.

From a vast labyrinth of underground tunnels to executive suites high up on the 12th floor, Ford Motor Co.'s world headquarters building holds a plethora of automotive industry history.

It's where the auto industry titans drafted key contracts — such as in 1963 when Ford tried to buy Ferrari. They made critical business and marketing maneuvers — such as a historic advertising campaign to launch the Mustang in 1964 — and, most importantly, it is where former Ford CEO Alan Mulally and his team met weekly during the 2008 Great Recession to save the company from bankruptcy.

In a few months, Ford will vacate the Glass House on Michigan Avenue in Dearborn — a striking monument of architectural innovation that housed Ford's world headquarters since 1956 — to move to a new world headquarters building about a mile to the west.



Ford then plans to demolish the Glass House by the end of 2027 or by mid-2028. Even with it gone, what the people built within the walls of that building will be forever embedded in history, said Ted Ryan, Ford's archives and brand manager.

"Buildings are buildings. What's more important is the people inside the buildings and the decisions that were made in the buildings that changed Ford and changed the world," Ryan told the Detroit Free Press. "It's not like we built the Parthenon. We built a really, really, really cool, 1950s building in the 1950s and Ford put its stamp: This is Ford Motor Company. Has the world changed in 70 years? Yes."

Ryan said it's time for Ford to move forward as it's done throughout its 122-year-history. The Glass House is in fact Ford's sixth world

headquarters location and its third building to separate the company's leaders from its engineers, product developers and Ford's factories.

By moving to the new location, which is at Oakwood Boulevard and Village Road, Ford is once again putting leadership in proximity to the rest of the company, similar to when founder Henry Ford had his office inside the Piquette Plant in Detroit. At Piquette, Ford designed, developed and assembled the Model T — the car that put the world on wheels and made Ford a global powerhouse.

"The Glass House is on a grassy field away from everything and you've got to get in your car to go see your product. You won't have to do that now. Leadership will be right there where the products are being developed," Ryan said. "Ford is going back to the type of building that brought us the Model T."

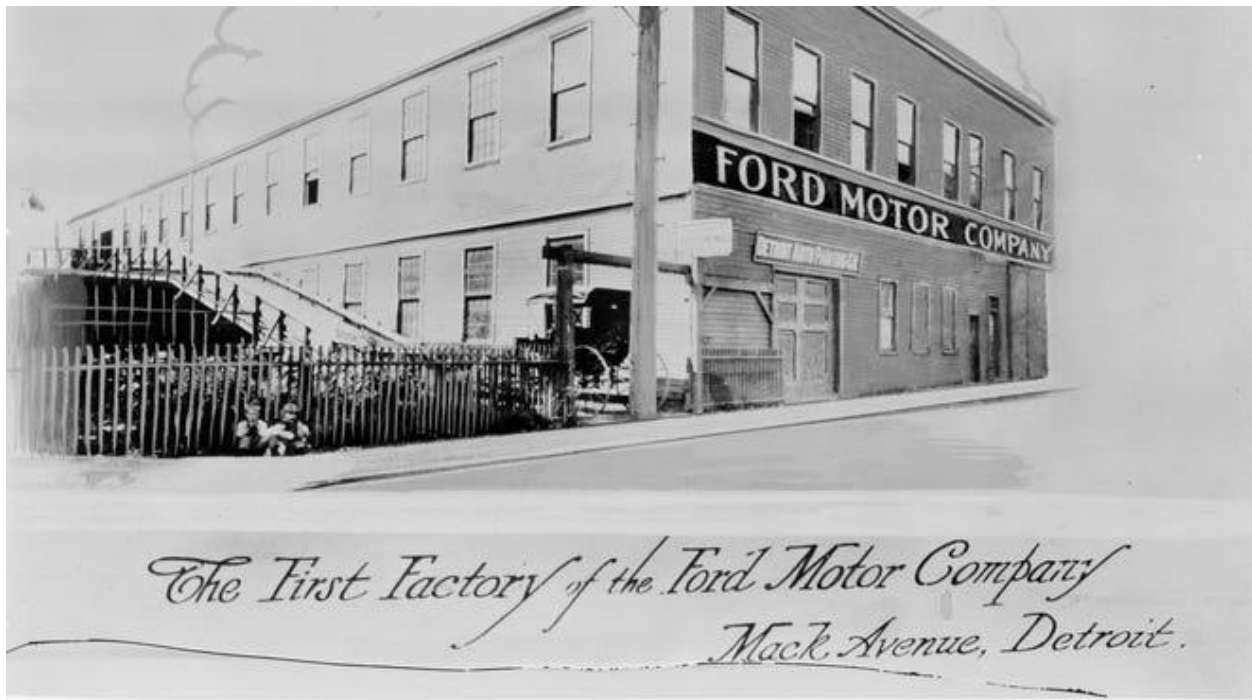
The early company headquarters

The first Ford world headquarters was Henry Ford's personal home at 58 Bagley Ave. in Detroit in 1896, Ryan said. Henry and his wife, Clara, lived at the house for about 3½ years. It was in a shed, behind the house, where Henry and his pals built the Quadricycle. That was Ford's first automobile. Many years later, Ford had the building reconstructed in Greenfield Village.

"There wasn't a Ford Motor Co. yet, but if you think about it, conceptually, that was the first (headquarters). It was literally his home," Ryan said. "But the first actual physical structure was on Mack Avenue. The Mack Avenue plant."

In 1903, Ford rented a former wagon factory on Detroit's Mack Avenue and there a small crew designed and assembled the company's first Model A cars using components made elsewhere. According to [The Henry Ford website](#), a small crew of workers used a small assembly system to make an average of 15 finished automobiles a day. But within 18 months, Ford moved to a larger facility on Piquette Avenue.

Still, Ryan said the Mack Avenue plant "was obviously important to Henry. He had it reproduced at scale at Greenfield Village. So if you were to go to Greenfield Village this afternoon, you can see a scale reproduction of the first Mack Avenue plant, which tells you how important it was. He didn't do that for any other buildings, just Mack."



A secret room opens up a whole new world

From a company standpoint, the next headquarters on Piquette Avenue in Detroit is crucial. Ford occupied the Piquette Avenue Ford Plant from 1905 to 1910 and the facility still stands thanks to the dedication of a group of volunteers that keep it going as a museum.

"If you're a car person, it's one of the few places in the world where you can see the complete run of alphabet cars," Ryan said, referring to the Model A through Model T.

In fact, the Model T was conceived of as a project in a secret room on the third floor of the Piquette facility.

"They set out — it wasn't just Henry, it was a group, Edsel (Ford) was in it and a couple of others — to design and build a car from scratch that would be a low-cost car," Ryan said. "They took it down to the bare studs and said, 'So, what's a car? And what wheel-base do we need.' We had the Model N, the Model S, the Model R, but they were a little bit too short and there was an imperfection with each of them. So they went back to the drawing board and did the Model T in secret, in a tiny, little room on the third floor as all the other alphabet cars were being built around them."

Ryan said Ford actually called it the secret room and kept it under lock and key with only a couple people having the key to it besides Edsel, Henry Ford's son, and Henry. Henry Ford's office in the plant was decorated the way someone "who's beginning to make his mark on the world" would decorate an office, Ryan said.

"Putting maps on the walls and the privilege and prestige that comes with owning a company that was selling with the Model N, the most popular car in America and then the Model T, the car that changed the world," Ryan said.



The Crystal Palace and \$5 a day wages

The success of the Model T meant Ford needed more space and a more efficient way to build the cars.

"Piquette is three floors and so every single car had to be taken down a service elevator, which was totally inefficient," Ryan said. "Going from

Mack Avenue and the Model A to the Model T at the Piquette was a leap and a bound. But then going to Highland Park, with the Model T, Ford envisioned production on a huge scale."

In 1907, Henry Ford bought a 130-acre tract of land in Highland Park to build the factory that would make Ford a household name. The assembly plant was designed by renowned architect Albert Kahn, who also designed the Dearborn Inn, the Rouge Assembly plant and Ford Engineering Lab to name a few. It had so many glass windows in the roofs and walls it was nicknamed the "Crystal Palace," Ryan said. Construction of the 60-acre plant began in 1908, and vehicle production was moved from Piquette in 1910. In 1911, Ford sold the Piquette plant to rival automaker Studebaker.



It was at the Highland Park Plant where Henry perfected the assembly line production process and instituted the famous \$5 a day wage plan. There, Ford was building 1,000 cars a day.

For the first time, Ford built a special administration building on the Highland Park property. That meant "Henry's office wasn't overlooking the lines where he's looking out windows at workers. It was actually a separate administration building and it was part of the Highland Park complex," Ryan said.

The 'center of the world' for Ford

Ford was at the Highland Park location until 1928 before relocating to the Rouge complex in Dearborn. Ryan said construction of the Rouge plant started in 1917, it opened in 1918 building tractors and then the car production began in 1927.

A year later, Ford built the Administration Building on nearby Schaefer Road where Ford's leaders ran the company until moving to the Glass House in 1956, Ryan said.

"What fascinates me on Schaefer Road is, A: The building is another Kahn building, it's another classic," Ryan said. "They built the Rotunda across the street from Schaefer Road Administration Building and then the Rouge (where Ford built its cars) is diagonally around the corner. So if you think about it, the Schaefer Road building was at the center of the world for Ford Motor Company from 1928-1956."



The Rotunda Center was dubbed the "Gateway to the Rouge." It was a visitor center and starting point for public tours of the Rouge Plant. Ryan said Ford also did product reveals in the Rotunda. It operated from 1936 to 1962, when workers were re-tarring the roof and some of the tar caught fire and destroyed the building, Ryan said.

"But Henry's administration office is in the Schaefer Road Administration Building," Ryan said. "He had another office at the museum and he had another office at the old building, but the Schaefer Road one was his main office so it was the seat of power for the Ford Motor Co."

Building a glass house

The existence of the Glass House is tied to Henry Ford's grandson, Henry Ford II, who became president of the auto company in 1945. Ford II thought the company's administration building on Schaefer Road, built in 1923, was obsolete.

So he decided to build an office building on the lawn and among the trees in the center of Dearborn's farmlands that would be removed from the congested city and closer to the suburbs where people preferred to live. When it was originally announced, the estimated cost to build it was \$14 million, Ford spokesman Dan Barbossa said.

Plus, development of the sprawling Product Development Center, or PDC, began with planning under Henry Ford II in 1945. In 1953, Ford opened the PDC — which was [torn down in 2020 to make room](#) for the new world headquarters center. That building was dedicated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in May 1953, using the first remote TV relay for an event, Ryan said.

"Ford was entering the modern world of automobile manufacturing under the guidance of Henry Ford II, Ernie Breech and the Whiz Kids and that was also our 50th anniversary," Ryan said. "We begin to use the phrase 'The American Road' but it was a forward-looking phrase. We would say, 'Fifty years forward on the American Road.'" That as the slogan for the 50th anniversary."



Breech was running automotive-supplier Bendix Corp. when Ford II brought him to Ford in 1946 to serve as a mentor. Ford II had become president of his family's company at age 28. The Whiz Kids were 11 Army Air Corps officers who had written to Ford II as World War II was ending telling him of their advanced logistical and organization experience gained while conducting the air corps battles, Ryan said. So Ford II hired them as a group. Three of them went on to be the high level leaders and the Arboretum at world headquarters now is named after one of them, Arjay Miller.

Ryan said Breech and the Whiz Kids were instrumental in helping Ford II modernize the company into a publicly traded corporation.

When the Glass House was completed in 1956, the company turned to its American Road slogan and won a petition to have the service drive renamed The American Road. Ford's address became: Ford Motor Co., The American Road, Dearborn, MI. It did not have to designate it as "1 American Road" until it built the Ford Credit building, which became 2 American Road. Ford Credit was formed in 1959.

The universe shifts as Ford makes a statement

Ryan said in American business, building a headquarters is a statement, and Ford II made a statement with the Glass House.

"He modernized Ford Motor Co.," Ryan said. "He had spent \$1.4 billion modernizing plants. He brought in the Whiz Kids. He'd hired Ernie Breech and Ford went from a sort of lack of leadership with the old Henry Ford to somebody who knew what they were doing and was modernizing Ford Motor Co. and he was putting a stamp on it."

So Ford II hired Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, one of America's pre-eminent architectural firms, to design a building to be a state-of-the-art architectural style.

In 1956, the Glass House opened the same year Ford did its initial public offering in the stock market.

"It was the cat's meow of American business headquarters," Ryan said. "It was built quickly and a distinctive style. The universe shifts a little

bit. Schaefer Road was used for storage and then eventually demolished, the Rotunda burns down. The Rouge is still there."

How the Glass House 'stood apart'

The 12-story building itself was unique. Made of concrete, steel and glass, the building had escalators in the lobby to carry people to the first couple of floors. Its elevators took employees to the top. It had a series of underground tunnels for employees to use to get to Ford's other buildings such as Ford Credit. The tunnels also served as storage for archives.

Ford made sure the building provided for whatever needs workers might have: A barber, which is no longer there, medical services and a modern and vast cafeteria. It even had a media center and area to bring cars inside to take "beauty shots" of them, Ryan said.

Years after it opened, Ford decided to tint the building's 3,083 windows to reduce glare and absorb heat, according to The Filmshield Group website, which said its "energy-saving window film" project was one of the company's success stories.

"Ford says the company is now enjoying the benefits of an energy consumption reduction, which could save them an estimated \$57,000 a year in energy costs," said the Filmshield Group website, which was undated but suggests mid-1990s.



Indeed, before the window tint installation, Ford could not cool the building below 80 degrees on hot summer days. And in the building's Trading Room, employees had not been able to open their drapes for more than seven years, because the sunlight made it difficult to see their computer screens.

Ryan said one of the noticeable features that stands out to him is when the "afternoon sun was baking in my window when I was on 10, it could get pretty warm up there."

But for a long time, there was nothing else like it in Detroit.

"It stood apart and it stood apart in the way that it was positioned on Michigan Avenue," Ryan said. "When you saw the Glass House coming

down Southfield you saw Ford's world headquarters with the blue oval on the side. It stood out from the crowd."

The key decisions made at the Glass House

Beyond its unique architecture, the Glass House was the center of power in the company.

Ford's legal, accounting, marketing research, and administration teams were located in the Glass House. Product development was at the PDC and engineers were at the Ford Engineering Lab on Oakwood Boulevard, Ryan said. So nearly all the big decision-making happened at the Glass House.

"The meetings and events that changed Ford Motor Co. history, those decisions were made at the Glass House," Ryan said. "It's what took place inside the walls that was more important than what it was."

The contract Ford proposed to Enzo Ferrari to buy car company Ferrari was drafted at the Glass House. Ferrari changed his mind at the last minute and did not sell to Ford. The marketing research meetings on the Mustang project with then Ford executive Lee Iacocca, who developed the Mustang and later went on to run Chrysler, and Ford product manager Don Frey were at the Glass House.

"The Mustang was designed at the Product Design Center, but all the other meetings are taking place at the Glass House," Ryan said, "The decision to buyout out network time on all three networks the night that Mustang came out (1964), which was the first time in automotive

history Ford bought out ABC, NBC, CBS and ran the same ad on all three networks to introduce the Mustang.”

The most important thing to happen inside the glass walls, though, was CEO Mulally getting the company through the 2008 downturn in his famous weekly Business Plan Review meetings on the 12th floor of the Glass House. **He was one of 11 CEOs to work in the Glass House.**

"It saved the company," Ryan said. "We made it through the downturn without taking the government bailout and that was by the leadership team at the time and by the meetings that were taking place. It changed the way that we do business and cutting costs and the selling off of the luxury brands — selling Jaguar and Land Rover and focusing on what we did. All of those decisions, those were the high-level decisions that would have been taking place in the boardroom at the Glass House.”

To help Ford, Mulally famously pledge the company's blue oval logo and other assets as collateral for a \$23.5 billion loan package to get through the recession. So to mark the return of the Ford Blue Oval and Ford being lifted to investment grade status, Ford Chair Bill Ford joined 1,000 employees, wearing blue and white T-shirts, on the lawn outside of Ford world headquarters on May 22, 2012, to form a human Blue Oval.



The CEOs who worked in the Glass House were:

- Henry Ford II - Sept. 21, 1945 – Sept. 30, 1979
- Philip Caldwell - Oct. 1, 1979 – Jan. 31, 1985
- Donald E. Petersen - Feb. 1, 1985– Feb. 28, 1990
- Harold Poling - March 1, 1990 – Oct. 31, 1993
- Alex Trotman - Nov. 1, 1993 – Dec. 31, 1998
- Jacques Nasser - Jan. 1, 1999 – Oct. 29, 2001
- Bill Ford (William Clay Ford Jr.) - Oct. 30, 2001 – Sep. 2006
- Alan Mulally - September 2006- June 30, 2014
- Mark Fields - July 1, 2014-May 22, 2017
- Jim Hackett - May 22, 2017-Oct. 1, 2020
- Jim Farley - Oct. 1, 2020-Present

Making a bet on the future

Despite all those memories, Ryan said as a historian, "if you cling to the past, you're doomed to repeat the past."

So Ford has to focus on moving forward to its next phase in a newer more modern setting that will allow for collaboration between product designers, engineers and decision makers.

“We’re focusing on our product. We put our leadership and our product team together really, the first time since Piquette, when we did the Model T,” Ryan said. “Our product designers will be right there with management and we’re a blended team focused on product that we’re going to bring to the worldwide consumer.”

Ford is betting that new synergy will pay off.

“What are we telling the world?” Ryan said. “That we’re moving to the best building that can be built in 2025 with the best technology to build the best products for the future to make the best decisions for the company.”

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