Meet John Portman, the Architect Behind the Dystopian Backdrops of The Walking Dead and The Hunger Games

BY JENNY XIE | @CANONIND | APR 2, 2015, 5:23PM EDT

AmericasMart Building 3 in Atlanta, GA—All photos via John Portman & Associates unless otherwise noted
Between the Frank Gehrys and the Zaha Hadids of the world, the name John Portman easily flies under the radar. Yet the 90-year-old American architect, whose career took root in Atlanta, Georgia and has stretched all the way across Asia, has perhaps scored more screen time than most starchitects. Portman's buildings—featuring his signature mix of modernism and brutalism, highlighted by massive atriums and long, glassy elevators—has appeared in dozens of movies over the last three decades, including Sharky's Machine (1981), Grosse Pointe Blank (1997), and Mission Impossible III (2006). But more recently, they have also come to set the scene for Hollywood's most popular dystopian thrillers, such as The Hunger Games and Divergent, not to mention TV's The Walking Dead.

In the 60s, Portman began building out multiple mixed-use properties in the heart of Atlanta—the Peachtree Center, a downtown business corridor that includes the Portman-designed Hyatt, Westin, and Marriott hotels, covers a dozen blocks. Because of the scope of Portman's work in Atlanta and the "clean lines and neo-futuristic form" readily found in his designs, writer Kristi York Wooten argues, in a new piece over on The Atlantic, that more than just tax incentives, Portman's "mini empire" has largely made the southern capital "futuristic cinema's go-to city."
The Marriott Marquis in Atlanta, GA
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AmericasMart Building 1 in Atlanta, GA
The roofs and sky bridges in Portman's Peachtree Center towers, as Wooten details, serve as the post-apocalyptic setting of *Insurgent*, the second installment of the *Divergent* series, which portrays a world without free will. *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay* uses the mind-altering atrium of Portman's Atlanta Marriott Marquis to depict the ruling city of another post-apocalyptic world, Panem. And the downtown Atlanta skyline, of course, is featured in the opening credits of *The Walking Dead*.

But it's not just Atlanta—Portman's Renaissance Center in Detroit and Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles have also either inspired or appeared in countless Hollywood flicks, including the recent blockbuster *Interstellar (2014)*.
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As Wooten writes, when Frank Lloyd Wright visited Georgia Tech in the late 1940s, Portman, who was studying architecture there, asked the famed architect for advice. Wright responded, "Young man, go seek Emerson." This, Wooten says, was an impetus for Portman to begin balancing "the **tenets of scale and self-reliance** in his blueprints," an objective that certainly manifests in how small the individual seems when traversing the vast and rhythmic spaces in Portman's buildings.

Below, take a look at a few more striking designs by the architect:
The Renaissance Schaumberg Hotel & Convention Center in Schaumberg, IL
The Student Center at Emory University in Atlanta, GA
The Hyatt Regency Hotel in San Francisco, CA
The Westin in Warsaw, Poland
Bank of Communications building in Shanghai, China
Taj Wellington Mews in Mumbai, India.

- Portman’s Buildings Provide Apocalyptic Hollywood Heaven [Curbed National]
- How 1980s Atlanta Became the Backdrop for the Future [The Atlantic]