

Watching Dan Gilbert's watchmen

Nancy Kaffer, Detroit Free Press Columnist Published 8:51 a.m. ET May 18, 2015 | Updated 4:10 p.m. ET May 18, 2015



(Photo: J.C. Reindl/Detroit Free Press)

I'm standing by a bank of video monitors in the Quicken Loans/Rock Ventures security command center in downtown Detroit's Chase Tower, watching a live feed from one of the more than 500 cameras that Rock Ventures has installed in and on buildings owned by Rock (like the Federal Reserve, where the Free Press is housed).

Specifically, I'm watching Free Press reporter Robin Erb walk down our office's hallways, more than a block away, captured by one of the cameras installed near the entrances and exits (though not, contrary to some reports, in our newsroom). She's talking on a cell phone, head cocked to the side to hold it in place, walking quickly toward the main doors of our second-floor office. A moment later, editorial research assistant Gina Brintley passes through the frame, en route to I don't know where.

Frankly, it's a little creepy.

[Readers: Safety over privacy in Detroit](https://www.freep.com/story/opinion/2015/05/18/dan-gilbert-security/27541239/)

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Two months ago, [I wrote a piece](https://www.freep.com/story/opinion/columnists/nancy-kaffer/2015/03/21/private-downtown-security-quicken/25117481/) about the substantial corporate security presence in downtown Detroit. It's common for companies to patrol their own buildings and campuses, and there are more than 30 companies with security patrols and command centers downtown.

It's an intersection of private security and public space. Because Rock's footprint sprawls across downtown — the company owns 75 buildings — and because the Detroit Police Department is chronically short of cash, it is in a unique position. In order to effectively patrol the company's footprint, the roughly 190 Securitas USA guards contracted to Rock pass through public spaces.

[Street artist Shepard Fairey ready to tag Detroit](https://www.freep.com/story/entertainment/arts/2015/05/16/shepherd-fairey-detroit-mural/27459223/)

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And though that security presence is almost certainly responsible for the enhanced feelings of security downtown, because of this private encroachment on public space — and the necessity of governing public space democratically, equitably and transparently — there's a need for greater accountability that's not currently being met.

Months ago, I'd asked some of those companies for basic information about their operations. Most answered. Rock did not.

After my column published, Matt Cullen, Rock president and CEO and Dan Gilbert's right-hand man, called me. Last week, I toured the command center with Cullen, Mike Bruggeman, Rock's senior vice president of security, and senior communications manager Laurel Swartz.

[Dan Gilbert: Neighborhood development is crucial to downtown Detroit's success](https://www.freep.com/story/money/2015/05/05/dan-gilbert-forbes-event-detroit-hudsons/26925033/)

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Located in the Chase Tower's basement, the command center has a few rows of desks with large monitors, staffed by innocuously professional-looking young people — Bruggeman, a University of Detroit alumnus, tells me he likes to hire U-D interns or graduates. Rock has more than 2,000 cameras, all told, in its facilities nationwide; they're monitored from Detroit. Some are fixed, some are in buildings; others are "pan, tilt, zoom" cameras with a range of a half-mile to a mile, depending on weather conditions. Camera operators work with security patrols, alerting guards to situations like medical

emergencies or a lost child, Cullen explains. He gives an example: Say a bike is stolen from the rack outside the Chase Tower. Security operators, who Bruggeman says are subject to extensive background checks, can scan the video (retained, on average, for 30 days) for the perpetrator, and pass that information along to police.

Feds object to moving Quicken Loans case to Detroit

(<https://www.freep.com/story/money/2015/05/14/feds-respond-to-quicken-request-venue-change/27337179/>)

Both Cullen and Bruggeman say any kind of criminal activity, or even a disturbance, is handed off to the Detroit Police Department — about five to eight a year — not handled by security. In fact, they suggest that Rock's security guards rarely initiate contact with members of the public. Bike guards, Bruggeman said, have the same training as bike cops.

I ask about a Rock job posting I ran across that says Rock's security analysts assist in investigations. Bruggeman says those tend to be internal.



One of Dan Gilbert's security cameras in a hallway at the Free Press' offices. (Photo: Detroit Free Press)

What about another line in the job description: "research and record potential threats toward Rock Ventures personnel, physical assets, image, reputation or stakeholders"? I'm particularly concerned about that "image, reputation" part — it sounds like a mighty broad brush, one that conceivably apply to, say, journalists. Neither Bruggeman nor Cullen had an answer. "I don't even know what that would be," Cullen said.

Bruggeman says it may just be a badly written posting. Cullen suggests that it's more likely to do with marketing concerns — a customer complaining about service at the Cleveland Cavaliers' stadium, for example. We move on.

Both Cullen and Bruggeman take great pains to underscore the mundanity of the center's work, showing me a severe weather alert sent to employees ("team members," in company jargon) in North Carolina.

Just another company, protecting its assets, making life safer and more comfortable for its employees. That's the message.

And I get it. Rock has stepped outside a strict corporate role, working actively to incarnate Gilbert et al's vision of downtown, filling storefronts with restaurants and retail, adding benches and recreational space, and inexplicably affixing speakers blaring eclectic musical selections onto downtown streets. Ensuring the safety of the workers and businesses they've imported is a legitimate concern.

Cullen told me, with apparent sincerity, that the company understands it must be more transparent about its security practices. So now I know a little more about how Rock's command center operates. But here's the problem: only at Cullen's discretion. Public police agencies may not be as universally forthcoming as reporters would prefer, but there are legal mechanisms to make them disclose information. Those don't apply to private companies like Rock.

And that means answers to those big-picture questions — how decisions are made, and how those decisions shape our downtown — continue to elude.

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