

One man's goal

Creating pleasant places for people motivates Yamasaki

By KATHLEEN MORAN
Troy editor

His buildings have changed the skylines of cities from New York to Los Angeles and in countries from Japan to Saudi Arabia.

But it isn't the resulting fame and recognition that drives architect Minoru Yamasaki. It's his all-consuming love of people and of architecture.

In everything he designs, whether an apartment building or the famed World Trade Center, his brilliance is seen in creating bright inviting places in which people can work and socialize.

"Buildings ought to be more human — more inviting and friendly," said the Troy architect. "They should be pleasant places which give you a feeling of comfort and happiness."

His philosophy is reflected in the pools and public gardens around buildings like the McGregor Memorial Center built in 1958 at Wayne State University.

The challenge for Yamasaki is not just to design buildings that provide 2.8 million square feet of office space — as was his assignment with the Century Plaza Towers in Los Angeles. The challenge was to provide "pleasant" offices and reserve enough of the small site for gardens and outdoor gathering areas.

After months of wrestling with that assignment, Yamasaki literally dreamed up the solution. He awakened one night with an idea for two buildings, shaped like equilateral triangles and placed point-to-point on the site.

The triangular shapes avoided the problem of aesthetics which had bothered him. He didn't want buildings facing each other so that the offices would look into each other. Plus the design left room for the gardens and landscaping.

"PEOPLE ARE EXTROVERTS," he said. "That's one of the nice things about life. They like to meet other people and talk. It's unfortunate that cities haven't been planned better to give people more places to go to enjoy nature."

Architecture is the ideal profession, said Yamasaki. "An architect gets involved in the emotional side of life," he said. "The environment for me is home for everyone. Nature is the most beautiful thing we have. It must be incorporated into what we do."

In his recently-published autobiography, Yamasaki notes how an architect's job is much more than designing a building for a client. "A general assessment of what I have learned in my practice is that the purpose of architecture is to create usable, livable areas where man can lead his life both productively and happily. . . . the architect we design should give man an aesthetic, emotional fulfillment, so that when he goes from home to work or to other activities, he can anticipate with pleasure his arrival at his destination."

As if it's an obsession, Yamasaki talks about what the world could be like if people would take time to enjoy the simple pleasures in life. "So many people are driven by money and material things," he said. "It kind of makes me sick. There are so many beautiful things in nature to enjoy. These are the things that bring happiness."

HIS APPRECIATION of nature and the "simple pleasures" may have been heightened by his life's experiences. Born in Seattle, Wash., in 1912, Yamasaki enjoyed the beauty of the forests and mountains, but also encountered the discrimination directed at the "nisei," Japanese-Americans.

His most poignant experiences with discrimination occurred while he was working his way through the University of Washington architectural school. The young Yamasaki spent summers working in the squalor of salmon cannery factories in Alaska, where the filth, hunger and exploitation of Japanese laborers left scars on his memory.

"I had never experienced anything like the drudgery, harshness and seeming dehumanization of the working conditions at the canneries," he states in his book.

"But the lessons of those summers, plus the repugnance I felt for the way we employees were exploited, convinced me that, under such oppression, I could not live with any degree of personal pride, or inspire those whom I was associated with to perform and achieve to their capabilities. This has remained the touchstone by which I have guided my life, my career, and my own office."

YAMASAKI'S ARCHITECTURAL career began in New York City, but he moved to the Detroit area to work for

Smith, Hinchman and Grylls. Once in this area, Yamasaki found the Japanese weren't welcome in Birmingham or Grosse Pointe. Instead, he moved his wife, Teruko, and three children to a farm in Troy, where they lived for 27 years.

Later he found Birmingham eager to accept the office of the then-prestigious architect — and he didn't experience discrimination in 1972 when he built a home in Bloomfield Hills.

His Troy office on Big Beaver was built in 1967, reflecting his attitudes about employees. The office is bright and cheerful with rooms looking out over trees and flowers. He has kept his staff at 80 — a manageable and personal size.

When his small firm was selected for the \$280 million job of creating an office complex for the Port Authority of New York, he was honored. In his usual style, Yamasaki thought first of the importance of the work conducted in the port authority's offices — and then took a long look around the area which was designated for the new building.

Because of its role in world commerce, Yamasaki concluded the buildings "could symbolize the importance

of world trade to this country . . . and become a physical expression of the universal effort of men to seek and achieve world peace."

He decided the 14 blocks which surrounded the site would be better consolidated into one 17-acre parcel in which small streets could be closed off and a wider perimeter road constructed to facilitate traffic flow.

The two 110-story buildings featured technological achievements of which Yamasaki is proud. The Vierendeel trusses which were used in construction of exterior of the building as well as shock-absorbing materials, mean that the buildings will sway only eight inches in a 100 mile an hour wind — almost an insignificant amount.

While the top floors of other New York high rise buildings have to be evacuated in strong winds, that hasn't been the case in the World Trade Center.

ALTHOUGH YAMASAKI is soft-spoken and friendly, he also can be stubborn. His insistence that the foundation for the World Trade Center building be sunk 70 feet to granite, rather than 35 feet, caused a stand-off which lasted

several months. "They finally said, 'Yama's not going to change his mind, so we'll have to find a way,'" he laughed.

The result was the discovery of a method for dredging out the foundation without allowing the excavation to fill with water. It also resulted in adding three floors of badly-needed basement space to the structures.

The other innovation involved designing a three-section elevator shaft to service the building, which takes up considerably less space than the central elevator systems used previously in high rise buildings.

"I feel like a made a contribution there," he said. "They saved 17 percent of rentable space — about 1.5 million square feet. I figured that it will generate for them \$25 million in rentals every year."

Although the World Trade Center was criticized for its impact on the New York skyline, Yamasaki is proud of it. "I think it makes the skyline more interesting," he said. "I think they like it now that they are accustomed to it."

The plaza area also draws people to the trade center for a break from the city of narrow streets and tall build-

ings, he said. Although the architect looks back on the trade center with a feeling of pride, he can't name a "favorite building." Borrowing an expression from Frank Lloyd Wright, Yamasaki said "the next one" will be the favorite.

NEXT IN LINE, at the moment, is the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency head office in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, scheduled for completion in 1981. In that structure, Yamasaki sought relief from the intense sunlight and sweltering heat. Instead of directing attention outside at gardens and trees, Yamasaki has designed a structure in which the offices look out on an interior "oasis" of ponds, flowers and plants.

"It will be refreshing," he says.

His attention is riveted now on the evolving plans for the gigantic Founders Hall Shinji, Shumeikai in Japan. The center for worship will serve a congregation of 330,000 and provides seating for 45,000 and standing room for even more. The 150-foot tall structure will be located in the middle of a national forest in Japan. "Someone from the congregation must have pull with the government," he said.

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