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Minorou Yamasaki left his imprint on city skylines

By Dale Northup/Herbert Conlan
special writer

The name Yamasaki has become a key word in American architectural vernacular.

Minorou Yamasaki who died last week made a notable imprint on the American landscape as he approached the second half of a century in architecture with the same gusto as when he began.



The Yamasaki-designed Michigan Consolidated Gas Co. building, now American Natural Resources, had a significant impact on the World Trade Center of New York which he did 17 years later.

He attributed his entry into the field of architecture to his uncle Koken Ito, a graduate architect from the University of California. Yamasaki attended the University of Washington where he excelled academically, despite racial discrimination, an issue to which he addressed himself in later years.

After his stint at U of W, he went to New York where he could be self sufficient. There he worked for the firm of Shreve, Lamb and Harmon, architects of the Empire State Building and Harrison, Foulthou and Abramovitz, architects of Rockefeller Center.

From there he went to become the chief designer with Detroit's own Smith, Hinchman and Grylls. Yamasaki later went into partnership with George Hellmuth, but the St. Louis-Detroit partnership proved to be too much of a physical strain.

HIE THEN embarked on the development of his own firm and the seminal work which really marked his beginnings — the McGregor Conference Center on Wayne State University's campus.

This building is a jewel which captures the architect's lifelong philosophy of architecture. Nestled in the center of an urban university, and surrounded by other structures, it is a breathtaking oasis of beauty.

Words that best describe it are delight, silhouette, texture and, above all, delicacy. The latter is most significant and characteristic of Yamasaki's later work. In regard to his work and a reference to fragility, his retort was, "No, delicate. Fragile means breaking apart."

It received an architectural award from the American Institute of Architects and, most notably, this year a 25-year award from the Detroit Chapter of the AIA.

WITHIN THE-Detroit skyline, Yamasaki designed the Michigan Consolidated Gas Co. Building



(1959), now American Natural Resources. It was another significant work to influence the later development of the World Trade Center in New York (1976).

As he put it, "Our first high building. This was fun for me because it was the first time we used narrow floor to ceiling windows. They work well because people who work in the building get frightened with large windows. By narrowing the frames, the windows are no wider than your shoulders so people can look down or lean against the window."

The same format was chosen at the Trade Center along with the facade clad in aluminum, a technological first since the material actually helps support a part of the building's weight. Once the world's tallest buildings, they are slender, graceful silhouettes which punctuate the Manhattan skyline, a testament to the man who created them.

Yamasaki has left an indelible mark on the world of architecture. His works include an international airport in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia (1983) and the Shiga Sacred Garden in Shigan, Japan (1983).

On the local level are the Temple Beth El (1974)

and the to-be-completed Wilshire West Office Building on Crooks Road by the Kireo Development Co. of Bloomfield Hills. The latter marks Yamasaki's re-entry into the area.

CLAD IN GLASS, the building represents "the cheapest material," said Yamasaki. Above all, it will compliment the community with a landscaped area three times the required area and typifying the element of serenity which the architect espoused in his designs.

From the smallest to the largest, the architect left his unique touch. A YMCA in northwest Detroit includes an unusual canopy roof section suggestive of a pagoda.

His office in Troy blends so unobtrusively into the natural surroundings, that it is hard for those who haven't been there to find it a first time. Inside it is a masterpiece of simplicity with soaring ceilings and walls of glass.

Yamasaki, the man, is gone. Yamasaki, the architect, lives on in everything he touched.

Dale Northup teaches architecture at Center for Creative Studies and at area community colleges. Herbert Conlan is a local builder.

The McGregor Memorial on the Wayne State University campus is an architectural jewel nestled in the center of urban life. The building captures Yamasaki's architectural philosophy.

'Update: Detroit Artists' — rich, diverse

By Manon Melgaard
special writer

"I never select artwork solely from slides," said Roy Slade, director of the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum.

And in keeping with this solid principle, Slade, together with Susan Waller, curator, and Michele Rowe-Shields, administrator, undertook an extensive tour of the workplaces, studios and homes where the 18 Detroit artists chosen for the "Update: Detroit Artists" exhibition create and often live. One exception to this exploratory survey is primitive-nature painter Betty Brownlee, whose studio is the great outdoors.

The overall effect of this pastiche of more than 60 recent works — paintings, sculptures, assemblages, photographs, drawings and mixed media — is an exercise in diversity.

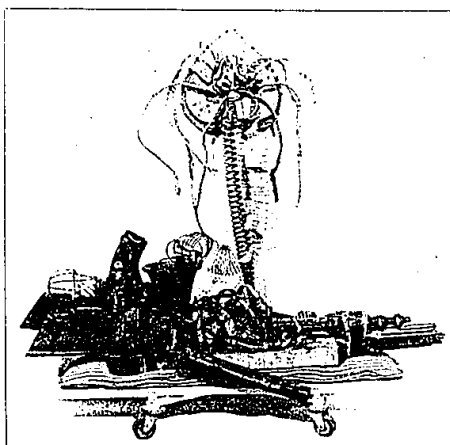
"There are two important aspects," said Slade, "definitely color . . . For example, Steven Benson is using more color in his photographs and an ongoing, tactile sense in the materials, shapes and forms of the sculptures and assemblages."

APART FROM Benson's sensitive photographs, which combine car-lined streets with a delicate tracery of bare-branched trees, two other members of Detroit's photographic community, Doug Alkon and Michael Sarnacki, are represented by some striking black and white studies. In one, Sarnacki captures the mood of jubilation, verging on the edge of violence, after the Detroit Tigers' World Series victory.

In the area of painting and drawing, realist Don Jacot magically transforms urban blight and squalor into images of nostalgia with his boarded storefronts, tubed factory towers, "burlesk" movie theaters and near-derelict money-lending establishments.

Metal-smith Jojo Macey establishes another side of her versatility in two expressionistic mixed-media drawings of undersea water fantasies, which suggest a chaos of man, wreckage and machinery.

Former Guggenheim-fellowship recipient Don Shields has two large canvases in his unique abstract style, with splashes of brilliant, almost psychedelic color and Yon Yon sharp use of symbolic, pyramid shapes and a progression of steps for her heavily pigmented, bold painting and construction with biblical themes.



"Last Night's Heart Attack," an assemblage by Matt Corbin, dates from 1978.

Icarus-like creatures with wings and bird-heads on elongated, male torsos, Wendy MacGaw's steel and bronze pagoda-like miniature towers, to Ron Leach's two large, allegorical and symbolic assemblages that represent Man's destruction and contamination of the environment.

ANOTHER HUGE assemblage is Bob Vandervenne's free-standing, brickwork arch (the artist is also a skilled brick layer), which at first glance resembles a fireplace destined for a Gothic mansion. On closer inspection it is an arching bridge, set over panels of mirrors that simulate water. These three large assemblages are exciting, but demanding.

A new "find" is sculptor Matt Corbin, who has no inhibitions about explaining his work. He freely admits he is constantly on the lookout for any kind of scrap-heap junk. His "Last Night's Heart Attack" is a veritable example of art-out-of-detriment, complete with a state-board base covered with striped ticking, grids, cables, mangled wires (a la Chris Burden) and an actual electro-

cardiograph reading that extends from a blood red, Valentine chocolate box heart.

Gilda Snowden's encaustic layered wood, intertwined with rope and wire, reveals a progressive, more open dimension from her "cocooned" earlier work.

Artist Ted Lee Hadfield, who has become fascinated with balance, equilibrium and the joys and horrors of modern technology, explores "a new direction" with a majestic but menacing space rock (aren't they all?) in wood and aluminum.

Gary Elnko exhibits imaginative, organic images in wood, which are wrapped in canvas and rope and painted with oils.

Joseph Wesner's two kinetic, painted steel over wood sculptures have the flavor and perception of some of Richard Serra's work.

One sculpture that displays a ripe sense of humor is Richard Tucker's "Falling Houses" in uneven, tinted concrete, topped by a flamboyant kind of "tribal headress" of dyspeptic-green palm leaves and one of his favorite sig-



Michael Sarnacki's photograph, above, "World Series Celebration" catches the excitement and frenzy of the moment of victory. The mixed-media drawing, at right by Jojo Macey, 43 by 60 inches, is titled "The Hunted."



natures, a fish. "A rose is a rose is a rose," said Gertrude Stein.

This exhibition demonstrates the richness and diversity of the Detroit art world. As Susan Waller, curator said, "Detroit remains a tremendously vital city for contemporary art."

"Update: Detroit Artists" continues through April 6. Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, 500 Lone Pine, Bloomfield Hills, is open 1-5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday.