

State's architecture deserves better

By Dale Northrup
special writer

Five of the top 10 architectural award winners in the 1986 Michigan Society of Architects design competition are in the local area.

They are the Brooks Farm, Troy, now the headquarters for the Kresge Foundation, and Holtzman and Silverman office interior, Farmington Hills, both by William Kessler of Detroit; Comerica Operations Center, Auburn Hills and First Center office complex, Southfield, by Harley Ellington Pierce Yee Associates; and Macabees Mutual Life Insurance Co. back lobby, Southfield, Smith Hinchman Grylls of Detroit.

The 84 projects submitted were juried in Denver by a group of Western designers.

The Brooks Farm project by Kessler pays homage to the past while recognizing the Kresge Foundation's needs for expansion. The 10,000-square-foot office addition doesn't offset the 1853 farm homestead on Big Beaver Road, but rather complements it.

The roofline of the two-story addition (the first level is one-half level below ground) meets the line of the cornice on the house. Serpentine in

configuration, the structure faces east with a vast expanse of glass looking out over the farm buildings. Some of these contain the mechanical units for the complex.

A SKYLIGHT dormer on the west side of the structure permits light to filter into the two-story opening on the east side. Planter boxes are constructed of stone, the same material that covers the house. Overall the addition is a study in contextualism.

The Kessler-designed Holtzman and Silverman office interior, 13,000 square feet, is based on a three-dimensional grid system punctuated

by circular forms.

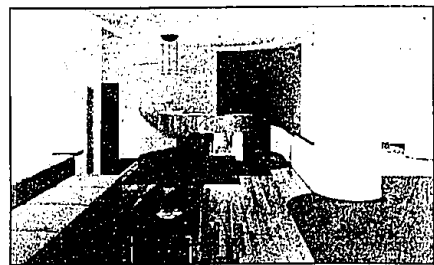
The architects made use of elements that can be easily relocated when the clients elect to move.

Except for the white interior of the atrium, the building has a predominance of gray tonalities both inside and out with offices off to the side much like the cell blocks of old prison movies.

When seen from a distance the building with its vaulted skylight is imposing. Up close it's a "persona non grata" in regard to site orientation. It would be more appropriate in Detroit's financial district.

In the same manner the First Center office complex in Southfield is a 750,000-square-foot megastructure.

The design solution involved three pairs of buildings related to one another as a pinwheel with a skylit atrium between each pair creating a hermetically sealed environment and conforming to the fast-track anonymity of Northwestern Highway.



The office of Holtzman & Silverman was designed to project an image of sophistication and at the same time be relatively easy to move when a change of location takes place.



The office block of the Comerica Operations Center is bisected by a 30-foot-wide, four-story skylit atrium, which allows daylight to penetrate deep into the building.

WITHIN THE speculative complex there is some question about architecture elevating the human experience with perhaps the exception of the stereotypical glass-enclosed elevator.

First Center, at least, is an office oasis surrounded by asphalt, lacking a street presence — by its very nature it lives up to the designation speculative, space not place.

The rear lobby of the Macabees Mutual Life Insurance Co. Southfield by Smith Hinchman Grylls is a study in spatial gymnastics with inset mirror panels playing on the visitor's bi-

nocular vision. The nature of the materials reflects the integrity of design and superiority of craftsmanship.

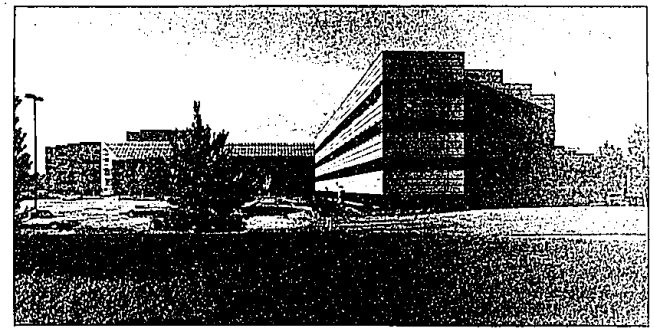
As indicated in the prospectus by the architects, "The two-story lobby conveys a sense of timeless elegance with its groin vaulted ceiling. . . . There are much better public lobbies in this metropolitan area.

This metropolitan area deserves better. The total of 84 projects submitted to the Michigan Society of Architects doesn't say much about what Michigan architects are doing.

One architect said smaller firms

can't afford either the time or the money to participate in the design competition.

Robert Benson, architectural critic, wrote in an article for Inland Architect magazine following last year's Detroit Chapter AIA Awards, "On the other hand, if these six awards are considered the best work of the year, Detroit architects are in trouble. As a group, they are conservative, derivative and unimaginative, for the most part satisfied with rehashing accepted styles or timidly compromising artistic content in client negotiations."



Shown is the First Center Office Complex in Southfield. The design places three pairs of buildings related to one another as a pinwheel with skylit atrium between each pair.

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