

Architects debate usefulness of 'best' lists

By Doug Funke
staff writer

If you want to start a good discussion among architects, just ask who is the greatest American architect of all time, the most influential living American architect and the best example of American architecture.

The American Institute of Architects, a professional association, surveyed some 800 members last summer and came up with some interesting results.

The top three individuals in the greatest ever category were Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959), Louis Henri Sullivan (1856-1924) and Henry Hobson Richardson (1839-1886).

Wright, who designed more than

500 projects, was named by 89 percent of the respondents. His revolutionary residential work, Fallingwater in western Pennsylvania, headed the list of all-time American best works.

The University of Virginia, designed in 1826 by Thomas Jefferson, placed second in that category and the Chrysler Building in New York City, designed in 1929 by William van Alen, was third.

Josh Ming (I.M.) Pei, born in 1917, was chosen as the most influential living American architect. He also placed eighth on the all-time list.

PEI'S WORKS include the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. — which was

10th on the all-time list — expansion and modernization of the Louvre Museum in Paris and the Bank of China Tower in Hong Kong.

Robert Venturi and Charles Moore were rated the second and third most influential living architects. Venturi authored a book, "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture," considered to be a standard for the profession.

Erick Carne, a Plymouth architect who has practiced for nearly 40 years, agrees with the rankings of Wright and Fallingwater. He considers John Portman of Atlanta as the greatest living architect.

"He has had a great influence on American cityscape," Carne said. "He designed a fabulous house, a contemporary house, probably in the wrong spot among colonials, on Sea Island, Ga."

Portman also designed Detroit's Renaissance Center.

"Great architecture meets the needs of the mass of people and influences people," Carne said. "It brings them shelter, grace and delight and takes them out of the shell of their mundane lives. It lets them see some art, some excitement, some awe."

TOP 10 LISTS probably aren't really fair, Carne agreed, but they do serve a purpose in getting people to think about architecture.

"There may be a parks shelter in Wyoming that's wonderful for its purpose and a skyscraper in New York that's wonderful for its purpose. It's hard to match them up," Carne said.

Francis Bartlett, a Rochester architect in practice since 1982, doesn't like the idea of rankings. He also believes that the American Institute of Architects has bogged down in management detail in recent years rather than focusing on design.

"I.M. Pei is a business man. He doesn't work over a drawing board with his sleeves up. He used to," Bartlett said. "In my opinion, Fay Jones of Fayetteville, Ark., is right at the top of the list as one of the top guys in the sense that he gets down and designs every nut and bolt of a job. He's a total master architect who brings it all together."

Jones ranked eighth on the AIA list of living architects.

DESIGN THAT influences architects is different from design that in-

'Great architecture meets the needs of the mass of people and influences people.'

— Erick Carne
Plymouth architect

fluences people in general, Bartlett said. "Many more small jobs done by architects, take a small house on the corner, have influence on people. It's like being exposed to good music."

Bartlett admires Wright because Wright expressed the idea that dynamic use of space is the key to great architecture.

"Most architects today only think of the exterior, facade," Bartlett said. "What I try to do is work real hard on this form, shape, space, environment to make people happy (but) not in terms of fashion. I want people to see my buildings 100-200 years from now and say, 'This is a classic little beauty.'"

Robert Ziegelman, a Birmingham architect and president-elect of the Detroit chapter of the AIA, didn't participate in the survey, but identi-

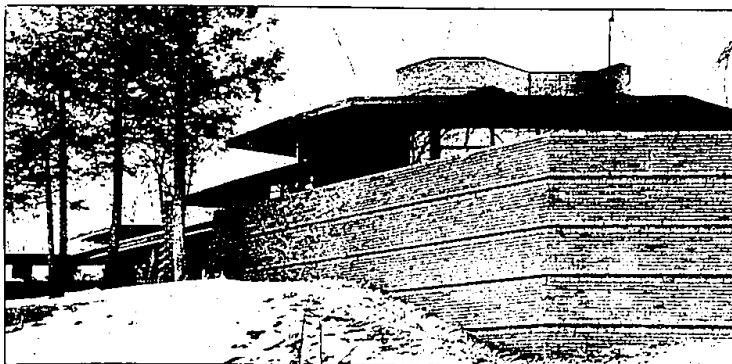
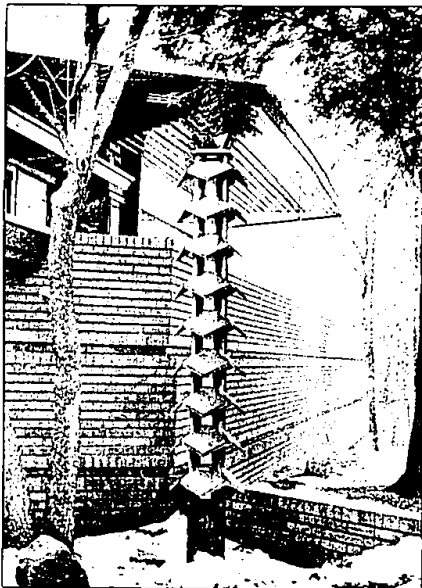
fied Wright and Pei as his choices for best all-time and living architects.

"Part of it is they're innovative and their innovation is timeless," Ziegelman said. "It's not faddish or stylish. They didn't deal in clichés."

Innovation is only one aspect of great architecture, Ziegelman said.

"It also accomplishes the ordinary. It keeps the elements out, works for whatever function you worked for. It didn't make the owner go broke. People are invigorated by being near it, close to it. Architecture ultimately is for people who use it."

A great work accomplishes the ordinary and goes beyond innovation, Ziegelman added. "It enhances for generations."



FILE PHOTO

Carl and Margaret Wall commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design their Snowflake House in Plymouth Township in 1942. Wright was named the best Amer-

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