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In the Eye of the Beholder

Public, Designers at Odds On What's a Beautiful Building

By Alex Frangos

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See Corrections & Amplifications item [below](#).

It's a question that has divided architects for centuries: What makes a great building?

THE TOP 150



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mericans' favorite architecture could be seen as an indictment of contemporary architecture.

Browse a sortable listing of the top 150 buildings and structures.

Can it be found in the formal columns of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia in Charlottesville, or the delicate glass walls of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building in Manhattan, or the constantly changing mechanical skin of Thom Mayne's Caltrans building in Los Angeles?

Nope, those favorites of architects and critics don't qualify, according to a poll of the general public to be released today. The Bellagio Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, however, does.

A survey of Americans' favorite 150 buildings and structures placed the gild-encrusted Italianate behemoth with its choreographed fountains at a lofty No. 22 on the list, tucked between Philadelphia City Hall and New York's Saint John the Divine Cathedral.

"The Bellagio -- I can't believe it," bellows Edward Feiner, a director of the Washington, D.C., office of top corporate architects Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, which has five buildings on the list. "The Bellagio is tasteless."

In the eyes of other beholders, though, the Bellagio is an icon, elevated to that status in a survey commissioned by the American Institute of Architects to suss out how Americans feel about their architecture. In conjunction with its 150th anniversary, the Washington trade group asked Harris Interactive to develop a survey of 2,000 ordinary Americans. They were shown photographs and asked to rate 247 buildings nominated by 2,500 architects in various categories.



A new poll rated the Bellagio, above, the top-rated building in the last decade; the Empire State Building, below, was picked first overall.



Some of the results weren't shocking: the Empire State Building was No. 1, the White House No. 2. But others were surprising. The National Cathedral in Washington, well known but certainly not an icon, came in No. 3, beating out the Golden Gate Bridge (5), the U.S. Capitol (6) and William Van Allen's Chrysler Building in New York (9). Also on the list: Apple Inc.'s new glass cube of a store on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue (53).

The ratings, as well as Mr. Feiner's reaction, reveal the tension between architecture as personal expression and public art, between form that pleases those who look at a building and function that nurtures those who use it.

"Taste is a big word, isn't it?" says David Rogers, design partner at Jerde Partnership of Venice Calif., Bellagio's architect. "The idea of what people like and not what architects think people like is a wonderful testimonial to the actual experience and romance and excitement of being in a place that gives people pleasure."

The results also accentuate the disconnect between what architects want to build and what regular people actually like. In the last AIA survey of architects in 1991, Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water, a house built atop a waterfall in Bear Run, Pa., topped the list. It's No. 29 on the general-public survey. Architects ranked Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia as No. 2. It's not on the new list.

The new survey also could be seen as an indictment of contemporary architecture. Other than the Bellagio, no buildings from the last decade made it to the top 30. Only two in the top 20 were built in the last 35 years and both have special meanings: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (10) and the World Trade Center (19). Americans preferred older buildings that evoke ancient architectural styles such as Gothic, Greek and Roman traditions. Of the top 50, only 12 can be described as "modern-looking," with square angles and lots of glass and steel.

America's Architecture

Top 10 favorite pieces of architecture according to a public opinion survey

Building/Location	Year completed
1 Empire State Building New York	1931
2 The White House Washington DC	1792
3 Washington Nat'l Cathedral Washington DC	1990
4 Thomas Jefferson Memorial Washington DC	1943
5 Golden Gate Bridge San Francisco	1937
6 US Capitol Washington DC	1865
7 Lincoln Memorial Washington DC	1922
8 Biltmore Estates/ Vanderbilt Residence Asheville, N.C.	1895
9 Chrysler Building New York	1930
10 Vietnam Veterans Memorial Washington DC	1982

Source: American Institute of Architects

See a full list of the 150 most popular U.S. buildings, with photos and more details, at WSJ.com/OnlineToday

Some in the architectural establishment -- whose favorite building is often said to be an ivory tower -- say the profession is taking the survey seriously. "The results are meant to get a dialogue going with the people who use the buildings," says RK Stewart, president of the American Institute of Architects. (One of his favorites, however, Rafael Moneo's Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, failed to make the cut.) The association plans to post the results in blog form to get even more feedback at www.Aia150.org.

To Mr. Feiner, who is credited with injecting federal buildings with a jolt of high design when he was the U.S. government's chief architect, the list is "useful in a way" because it "reinforces again that architecture is relevant to people's lives -- even if it's for the

Bellagio." (Trying to find a reason why it scored so highly on the list, Mr. Feiner says Dale Chihuly's glass flower sculptures inside the hotel are "fantastic.")

Mr. Feiner thinks the picks are less about architectural quality and more about emotions. "If you look at that first part of the list, it's mostly Washington icons. It's the attachment people have to them, not that they're necessarily great architecture." He says people picked what they perceive as important buildings: churches, government buildings, sports stadiums. "If you asked the typical citizen of Rome or Athens for their top 10 buildings, it would be the same list: the Parthenon, the Forum, the stadium. Here we have Camden Yards," he says, referring to the nostalgia-tinged home of the Baltimore Orioles (No. 122 on the list).

FAVORITE ARCHITECTS

The American Institute of Architects survey reflects America's enduring love for **Frank Lloyd Wright**, whose buildings appear eight times on the list, more than any other. **Richard Meier** leads all living architects with five buildings.

Frank Lloyd Wright – 8
 Henry Hobson Richardson – 6
 Philip Johnson – 5
 Richard Meier – 5
 Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (Bruce Graham) – 5
 Cass Gilbert – 3
 Daniel Burnham – 3
 Eero Saarinen – 3
 Henry Janeway Hardenbergh – 3
 Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue – 2
 Frank Gehry – 2
 John Portman – 2
 John Russell Pope – 2
 McKim, Mead, and White – 2
 Michael Graves – 2
 NBBJ – 2
 Pei Cobb Freed & Partners (James Ingo Freed) – 2
 Thomas Jefferson – 2
 Wallace K. Harrison – 2

Some architects are more dismissive. Mark Robbins, dean of architecture at Syracuse University, says the survey "reinforces one's sense that the general public's knowledge of architecture is still limited to things that are big and have columns or have a lot of colored lights." He says the list reminds him of the Zagat guides to restaurants, which rely on customer submissions. "It's only as good as the people who send in reviews. When I lived in Columbus, Ohio, Applebee's was in Zagat's."

To be sure, the poll isn't a true reflection of how people interact and appreciate a building. Respondents were shown static photographs of each building online and were asked to

rate them on a scale of one to five. "Buildings unfold in time and space and can't really be understood from a flat pictorial way," says Mr. Robbins.

And architects complain that some keystone buildings in U.S. history are missing from the list. Richard Meier -- whose spare, white designs appear five times on the list with buildings such as the Getty Center in Los Angeles (No. 95), more than any other living architect -- calls the results "fascinating." But, he adds, "many of these things on the list are places people go and enjoy themselves, but I wouldn't consider them works of architecture." He finds it "very curious" that such Modernist architectural standards as Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe's Seagram Building in New York and Farnsworth House in Plano, Ill., aren't on the top 150, nor is Philip Johnson's Glass House, in New Canaan, Conn.

Other notable no-shows: Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax Building in Racine, Wis., Louis Kahn's Salk Institute in La Jolla, Calif. -- and the recent winner of the Pritzker Prize, a top architectural honor: Mr. Mayne's building for the regional office of California's transportation department in Los Angeles.

Top sports venues	Rank	Top hotels	Rank
Wrigley Field Chicago	31	St. Regis New York	16
Yankee Stadium New York	84	Hotel Del Coronado San Diego	18
Paul Brown Stadium Cincinnati	101	Bellagio Hotel and Casino Las Vegas	22
Top museums		Top skyscrapers	
Metropolitan Museum of Art New York	17	Empire State Building New York	1
Philadelphia Museum of Art Philadelphia	24	Chrysler Building New York	9
Rose Center For Earth And Space New York	33	World Trade Center New York	19

Source: American Institute of Architects

Todd Schliemann, designer with James Polshek of the massive glass box Rose Center for Earth and Space at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (at No. 33, the top modern-looking building of recent vintage, completed in 1998), isn't surprised that the list is dominated by older, traditional-looking buildings. "The older the building, it's a safer bet, like an old sofa," he says.

Michael Lykoudis, dean of the classically oriented architecture school at University of Notre Dame, says "most buildings since World War II have been preoccupied with a narrow set of criteria, for a corporate client or for the architect. That type of architecture can't have the kind of mystery that a complex cultural exercise like Union Station in D.C. has.... What architects see in pristine detail gets lost on people if they can't connect to it on the philosophical and practical level."

Mr. Schliemann says he is pleased the Rose Center is in the same company as those older buildings, but adds, "The recognition that I would like is to go up to 42nd Street and see a snow globe made of the Rose Center. That would mean it was in an icon that has some permanence, as ironic as that sounds."

Corrections & Amplifications

The U.S. Capitol is No. 6 on the AIA's list of most popular architecture and the Lincoln Memorial is No. 7. Camden Yards is No. 122. An earlier version of this article and a chart published with it had incorrectly switched the ranks of the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial, and the article had incorrectly said Camden Yards was ranked No. 120. The above article and chart have been corrected.

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