

## America's Favorite Buildings

*The buildings Americans love.*

**EARLIER THIS YEAR** the American Institute of Architects (AIA) released the results of a national poll, conducted by Harris Interactive, that asked the public to name their favorite buildings in the United States. The survey of 1,804 randomly selected American adults asked participants to rank buildings from a list of 284 structures pre-selected by AIA panels (write-ins were also permitted). The result is a list of the 150 American buildings that the general public considers its favorites.

The issue of what the public likes and dislikes is particularly pertinent since architectural design is now considered a significant factor in real estate develop-

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ment. High-profile architects such as Norman Foster, Richard Rogers, and Fumihiko Maki have been recently commissioned to design new office towers at the World Trade Center site in Lower Manhattan. Architect Frank Gehry and landscape architect Laurie Olin are currently planning Brooklyn Yards, a mixed-use development. Robert A.M. Stern has designed the tallest office tower in downtown Philadelphia for Comcast; Santiago Calatrava has designed an unusual residential tower in Chicago. One assumes that in all these cases the architects were chosen not only to create “good” buildings, but also buildings that would have a broad popular appeal.

#### THE PUBLIC’S TASTE

Bearing in mind that “favorite” is not necessarily the same as “best,” or “most advanced,” or “most historically significant,” what does the AIA list suggest about the public’s architectural taste? In a time of celebrity architects, signature buildings, and prominent coverage of new architecture in the media, one might expect that people’s favorites would be the newest, the latest, the most modern. For example, more than half of the list of 250 “favorite” movies chosen by on-line participants in IMDb (Internet Movie Data Base) date from after 1980 (although the list also

includes classics such as “Citizen Kane” and “Modern Times”). The first startling thing about the AIA list is that the public unequivocally favors old buildings over new. Only two of the top twenty-five buildings were built after 1980, and only three of the top fifty. Of the entire list, only one out of five buildings was built since 1980, and two-thirds of these were in the bottom half of the list. Old railroad stations are rated far ahead of new airports, for example, while venerable hotels are more highly valued than new ones, and old churches rated more highly than new ones. The most popular museum is John Russell Pope’s 1941 National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (I. M. Pei’s adjacent East Wing addition doesn’t even make the list). The next most popular museum is Charles B. Atwood’s 1891 Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Santiago Calatrava’s eye-catching addition to the Milwaukee Museum of Art is the top-rated new “iconic” museum, though at number fifty-nine, it is not high on the list. So much for the so-called “Bilbao Effect.”

Old does not mean ancient. While one building near the top of the list is more than two hundred years old (the number two White House was built in 1792), and there are several examples from the nineteenth century (the Washington Monument, H. H. Richardson’s Trinity Church in Boston, and the Metropolitan Museum in New

York City), fifty-three of the 150 buildings date from the first half of the twentieth century, with the Empire State Building, completed in 1931, in the number one spot. Of the top twenty-five buildings, ten were built between 1900 and 1950; and of the top fifty, twenty-six. The first half of the twentieth century (more accurately the first three decades, since very little was built in the United States between the Depression and the end of World War II) was a period that saw a combination of craftsmanship, high-quality construction (and high budgets), as well as a large number of exceptional architectural offices that served as training grounds for practition-

ers. Buildings from this fecund era include Grand Central Station, the Chrysler Building, and Rockefeller Center, as well as the New York Public Library and grand railroad stations all over the country.

The post-1950 period is not strongly represented on the AIA list. Of the twenty-five most popular buildings (Table I), only four date from after 1950: Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial; the St. Louis' Gateway Arch, designed by Eero Saarinen in 1965; the destroyed World Trade Center towers (which seems like a sentimental choice); and Bellagio, a Las Vegas hotel and casino, which is the sole building in the top twenty-five that is less than twenty years-old.



Bellagio, Las Vegas, Nevada

**Table I:** Twenty-five most popular buildings, chosen by the public

American Institute of Architects (Harris Interactive, 2007)
1. Empire State Building, New York City, 1931 (Shreve, Lamb & Harmon)
2. The White House, Washington, D.C., 1792 (James Hoban)
3. Washington National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., 1907 (George F. Bodley)
4. Jefferson Memorial, Washington D.C., 1943 (John Russell Pope)
5. Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, 1937
6. U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C., 1793 (William Thorton, etc.)
7. Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1922 (Henry Bacon)
8. Biltmore Estate, Asheville, N.C., 1895 (Richard Morris Hunt)
9. Chrysler Building, New York City, 1930 (William Van Alen)
10. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1982 (Maya Lin)
11. St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City, 1878 (James Renwick)
12. Washington Monument, Washington, D.C., 1884 (Robert Mills)
13. Grand Central Station, New York City, 1913 (Warren & Wetmore)
14. The Gateway Arch, St. Louis, 1965 (Eero Saarinen)
15. Supreme Court of the United States, Washington, D.C., 1935 (Cass Gilbert)
16. St. Regis Hotel, New York City, 1904 (Trowbridge & Livingston)
17. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, 1880 (Calvert Vaux, etc.)
18. Hotel Del Coronado, San Diego, 1888 (James Reid)
19. World Trade Center, New York City, 1977 (Minoru Yamasaki)
20. Brooklyn Bridge, New York City, 1883
21. Philadelphia City Hall, Philadelphia, 1881 (John McArthur Jr.)
22. Bellagio, Las Vegas, 1998 (Jerde Partnership)
23. Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City, 1892 (Ralph Adams Cram, etc.)
24. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1928 (Horace Trumbauer)
25. Trinity Church, Boston, 1877 (Henry Hobson Richardson)

It is tempting to conclude that people just don't like modern architecture. But the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the St. Louis Arch are resolutely minimalist in design, and the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building are likewise modern or, at least, 1930s "moderne." Of course, since many of the buildings on the list were built before 1950, there is a preponderance of revival styles. Table II lists the most popular buildings built during the last ten years. Almost three-quarters are from the lower

half of the list, which suggests that the public's affection for recent architecture is lukewarm, and that the architectural profession may currently be out of touch with public taste. Stylistically, the buildings are a mixed bag, and include architectural novelties (Disney Hall, Seattle Public Library, Walker Art Center), dramatic contemporary designs (Milwaukee Art Museum, Salt Lake City Library, Getty Center), mainstream modern buildings (Rose Center, Apple Store, Time Warner Center), traditional

**Table II:** Twenty-five most popular buildings 1997-2007, chosen by the public

<b>American Institute of Architects (Harris Interactive, 2007)</b>
22. Bellagio Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas, 1998 (Jerde Partnership)
33. Rose Center for Earth and Space, New York City, 2000 (Polshak Partnership)
53. Apple Store Fifth Avenue, New York City, 2006 (Bohlin Cywinski Jackson)
59. Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, 2001 (Santiago Calatrava)
68. New York Times Building, New York City, 2007 (Renzo Piano)
69. Salt Lake City Public Library, Salt Lake City, 2003 (Moshe Safdie)
71. Hearst Tower, New York City, 2007 (Foster & Partners)
79. Ronald Reagan Building, Washington, D.C., 1998 (Pei Cobb Freed)
82. Sofitel Chicago Water Tower, Chicago, 2002 (Jean-Paul Viguier)
95. J. Paul Getty Center for the Arts, Los Angeles, 1997 (Richard Meier)
97. Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse, Islip, N.Y., 2000 (Richard Meier)
99. Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, 2003 (Frank Gehry)
101. Paul Brown Stadium, Cincinnati, 2000 (NBBJ)
104. AT&T Park, San Francisco, 2000 (HOK)
105. Time Warner Center, New York City, 2003 (SOM)
108. Seattle Public Library, Seattle, 2004 (Rem Koolhaas)
117. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2005 (Herzog & de Meuron)
118. American Airlines Center, Dallas, 2001 (David M. Schwarz)
121. San Francisco International Terminal, San Francisco, 2000 (SOM)
135. Safeco Field, Seattle, 1999 (NBBJ)
141. Apple SoHo, New York City, 2002 (Bohlin Cywinski Jackson)

designs (Bellagio, American Airlines Center), and neoclassical buildings (Reagan Building). The three stadiums on the list are representative of this trend: Paul Brown Stadium in Cincinnati is stylishly modern; Seattle's Safeco Field, with its retractable roof, is industrial-looking; and AT&T Park in San Francisco is a "traditional" ball park. In other words, the public's taste somewhat mirrors the eclectic range of what architects are designing today.

One of the lessons that can be drawn from the list is that people's "favorite" buildings tend to be public buildings. All the buildings in the top twenty-five are

public, in the sense that they are monuments or memorials, symbolic civic buildings such as government buildings or city halls, religious buildings, museums, or commercial buildings that are either quasi-public, such as hotels, or have assumed the status of public landmarks, such as prominent skyscrapers.

The four largest categories of commercial buildings are: high-rise office buildings (20) and hotels (20), followed by transportation facilities (13) and sports stadiums (nine). Although high-rise office buildings are increasingly inaccessible to the general public (especially after 9/11), they are highly visible urban landmarks,

and are perceived as “belonging” to the city. Hotels are public places, and because they are often linked to vacations (many of the favorite hotels are resorts), hence are prized for their special architectural character. Transportation facilities are experienced by many people, and remain among the most-used public buildings. It is a reflection of the low state of airport design—and of air travel more generally—that only four of the twelve favorite transportation buildings are airport terminals (actually only three, since the TWA Terminal at New York’s JFK is no longer in active use). The magnificent railroad stations built between 1900 and 1930 all remain popular. Modern mass transit appears in the form of the Washington, D.C. Metro, whose stations exhibit a high quality of design. Sports stadiums are cherished by the public, although only one stadium—Wrigley Field in Chicago (1914)—made the top half of the list. It is also striking that, with the exception of one football stadium and one multipurpose arena, all the favorite sports venues are baseball fields.

The list also demonstrates that certain types of buildings have been ignored. There is not a single shopping mall on the list (although it is unclear if any shopping malls were on the pre-selected list). While the public shops in malls, it does not appear to like them aesthetically. This has nothing to do with the nature of retailing

itself, since two old department stores and several free-standing shops are on the list. Rather, it reflects the low architectural aspirations of shopping mall builders, as well as the “inside-out” design of most malls, which means that their exterior appearance is unlikely to be memorable. Multi-family residential buildings are absent from the list, with the exception of the Dakota Apartments in New York and Lake Point Tower in Chicago. Although residential developers have sometimes used high-profile architects (Mies van der Rohe, I.M. Pei, Richard Meier), it appears that apartment buildings are not highly valued by the public.

The list suggests that the public recognizes buildings, not necessarily architects. The designer of the Empire State Building, William Shreve of Lamb, Shreve & Harmon, is hardly a household name, nor is James Hoban, the architect of the White House, or George F. Bodley, who was the first architect of Washington National Cathedral. Thomas Ustick Walter, who designed the dome of the U.S. Capitol, is not well-known to the general public. The same could be said of Henry Bacon, the architect of the splendid Lincoln Memorial; James Renwick, the architect of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York; and Robert Mills, whose competition-winning design is the basis of the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C.



The White House, Washington, D.C.



There is no Babe Ruth on the list—no architect appears in the top twenty-five more than once. The leader in the top fifty is that great nineteenth-century architect, Henry Hobson Richardson (with three buildings), followed by Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Burnham, and Frank Lloyd Wright, with two each. No living architect has more than one building in the top fifty. The picture changes only slightly if one considers the top seventy-five buildings. Richardson still leads (with four), followed by Burnham and Wright (with three each). The only addition is the long-lived firm Skidmore Owings & Merrill (which is represented by two projects from the 1960s). In other words, no living architect appears more than once in the top half of the list.

#### THE PROFESSION'S TASTE

The high ranking of Bellagio on the AIA list—it was the only building built in the last twenty-five years to make the top twenty-five, and only one of two to make the top fifty—has caused consternation in the architectural community. The Las Vegas hotel and casino includes a Tuscan lakeside village, and its nostalgic brand of architecture is held in low esteem by the profession. Yet Bellagio, inside and out, is the perfect expression of its purpose: attracting and retaining—and entertaining—the public. This raises an interesting question: what is the relationship between professional and public taste?

In 1991, *Architectural Record* magazine polled a selection of its readers—practicing architects—to determine the “100 most important buildings of the last 100 years.” The list allowed ties, so it actually included 146 buildings; buildings from outside the United States were included; and the earliest cut-off date was 1891. Despite these limitations, it nevertheless provides useful data for a comparison.

The buildings chosen by architects are not the same ones identified by the public in the 2007 survey. Of the eighty-eight



The Empire State Building, New York, New York

American projects on the architects’ list, only twenty-five also appeared on the public’s list. Put another way, almost three-quarters of the architects’ choices were not recognized by the public. There are a number of explanations for this divergence. Architects tended to admire private residences, while the public included only houses that were de facto public buildings, such as the Biltmore Estate or Monticello. Although architects, like the public, picked the Gateway Arch and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, they generally ignored older monuments and memorials, and the Lincoln Memorial and the Jefferson Memorial were both prominently absent from their list. Architects also tended to by-pass neoclassical buildings, such as the Supreme Court and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and they snobbishly ignored two entire categories that were popular with the public: hotels and sports venues. Perhaps what architects consider “important” means “serious” or “not frivolous,” and disqualifies buildings devoted to leisure and recreation? Professional and public taste converged when it came to landmark office buildings such as the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, and the World Trade Center, although architects highly rated a number of office towers, such as the Seagram Building, Lever House, and the AT&T Building (all in New York City), that did not appear on the public’s list at all.



**Table III:** Twenty-five most important buildings 1891-1991, chosen by architects

<b>Architectural Record (July 1991)</b>
1. Fallingwater, Bear Run, Pa., 1937 (Frank Lloyd Wright)
2. Kimbell Art Museum, Ft. Worth, 1972 (Louis I. Kahn)
3. Robie House, Hyde Park, Ill., 1910 (Frank Lloyd Wright)
4. Seagram Building, New York City, 1958 (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe)
5. Chrysler Building, New York City, 1930 (William Van Alen)
6. Rockefeller Center, New York City, 1934 (Raymond Hood etc.)
7. Lever House, New York City, 1952 (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill)
8. Wainwright Bldg, St. Louis, 1891 (Louis Sullivan)
9. Johnson & Son Administration Building, Racine, Wisc., 1939 (Frank Lloyd Wright)
10. Unity Temple, Oak Park, Ill., 1906 (Frank Lloyd Wright)
11. Carson, Pirie, Scott Department Store, Chicago, 1904 (Louis Sullivan)
12. Dulles Airport, Chantilly, Va., 1962 (Eero Saarinen)
13. Salk Institute, La Jolla, Calif., 1965 (Louis I. Kahn)
14. Vanna Venturi House, Philadelphia, 1964 (Robert Venturi)
15. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, 1959 (Frank Lloyd Wright)
16. Empire State Building, New York City, 1931 (Shreve, Lamb & Harmon)
17. Yale Art and Architecture Building, New Haven, Conn., 1963 (Paul Rudolph)
18. Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Ariz, 1938, (Frank Lloyd Wright)
19. Larkin Building, Buffalo, 1903 (Frank Lloyd Wright)
20. Thorncrown Chapel, Eureka Springs, Ark., 1980 (E. Fay Jones)
21. Bavinger House, Norman, Okla., 1955 (Bruce Goff)
22. Glass House, New Canaan, Conn., 1949 (Philip Johnson)
23. Farnsworth House, Plano, Ill., 1951 (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe)
24. TWA Terminal, New York City, 1962 (Eero Saarinen)
25. The Gateway Arch, St. Louis, 1965 (Eero Saarinen)

Table III shows the twenty-five most important American buildings chosen by the architects; Table IV shows the top twenty-five on the public's list, adjusted for the same 1891-1991 time frame. The top five choices in each list are entirely different, and even among the top ten, there is only one building in common. Only four of the buildings on the architects' top twenty-five list (Fallingwater, the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, and the Gateway Arch), also appear on the pub-

lic's top twenty-five list. This is an extremely small overlap. In fact, fifteen of the buildings on the architects' top twenty-five list do not even appear on the public' long list of 150 favorites. Conversely, fourteen of the buildings on the public's top twenty-five list do not appear on the architects' long list. Put another way, 60 percent of the twenty-five buildings that architects consider "most important" are not on the public's radar screen; and more than half of the twenty-five buildings that the public

**Table IV:** Twenty-five most popular buildings 1891-1991, chosen by the public

American Institute of Architects (Harris Interactive, 2007)
1. Empire State Building, New York City, 1931 (Shreve, Lamb & Harmon)
3. Washington National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., 1907 (George F. Bodley)
4. Jefferson Memorial, Washington D.C., 1943 (John Russell Pope)
5. Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, 1937
7. Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1922 (Henry Bacon)
9. Chrysler Building, New York City, 1930 (William Van Alen)
10. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., 1982 (Maya Lin)
13. Grand Central Station, New York City, 1913 (Warren & Wetmore)
14. The Gateway Arch, St. Louis, 1965 (Eero Saarinen)
15. Supreme Court of the United States, Washington, D.C., 1935 (Cass Gilbert)
16. St. Regis Hotel, New York City, 1904 (Trowbridge & Livingston)
19. World Trade Center, New York City, 1977 (Minoru Yamasaki)
23. Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City, 1892 (Ralph Adams Cram, etc.)
24. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1928 (Horace Trumbauer)
26. Ahwahnee Hotel, Yosemite Valley, 1928 (Gilbert Stanley Underwood)
29. Fallingwater, Bear Run, Pa., 1935 (Frank Lloyd Wright)
30. Taliesin East, Spring Green, Wisc., 1925 (Frank Lloyd Wright)
31. Wrigley Field, Chicago, 1914 (Zachary Taylor Davis)
32. Wanamaker's Department Store, Philadelphia 1909 (Daniel Burnham)
34. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 1941 (John Russell Pope)
36. Old Faithful Inn, Yellowstone National Park, 1927 (Robert Reamer)
37. Union Station, Washington, D.C., 1903 (Daniel Burnham)
38. Tribune Tower, Chicago, 1925 (Howells & Hood)
41. Hearst Castle, San Simeon, Calif., 1947 (Julia Morgan)
42. Sears Tower, Chicago 1974 (SOM)

rated as their top favorites were not recognized by architects as “important.”

Another indication of a discrepancy between professional and public assessment of architecture can be gleaned from a list of who receives professional honors. The highest architectural mark of distinction that the architectural profession awards is the AIA Gold Medal. Of the forty-six American architects who were awarded the AIA Gold Medal between 1907 and 2007, only half appear on the list of the public’s favorite buildings. As for

the Pritzker Prize, which is sometimes called the architectural Nobel Prize, eight Americans have been awarded the prize since 1979, when it was founded, and the works of only three (Philip Johnson, Richard Meier, and Frank Gehry) appear on the public’s list of favorite buildings (and only Johnson is in the top 75). The other laureates—Kevin Roche, I. M. Pei, Gordon Bunshaft, Robert Venturi, and Thom Mayne—do not appear on the public’s list. There are other striking absences. Louis Kahn, whom many archi-

itects consider second only to Wright in importance, is represented by a single building (not either of the two that appear in Table III). The most striking absence is that of Mies van der Rohe, whose Seagram Building was named the “building of the millennium” by the *New York Times* architecture critic. Apparently, the old master commands the respect of professionals, but not the affection of the public.

### CONCLUSIONS

There appears to be considerable divergence between popular and professional taste when it comes to architecture. To a certain extent, this can be explained by the inevitable difference between professional and non-professional values. The public gives more importance to the symbolic role of a building, for example, which is probably why the White House is high on the list. It also appears that the public values “timelessness.” On the other hand, architects, like most professionals, are susceptible to fads and rate novelty and design innovation highly, which is why a private weekend retreat like Fallingwater appears as number one, and a private home, the Robie House, as number three (they are #29 and #138 respectively on the public’s list). “Architects’ architects,” such as Mies van der Rohe and Louis Kahn, are appreciat-

ed by their peers—and effectively ignored by the public. Conversely, crowd-pleasing buildings such as the Hotel del Coronado and Bellagio, which are highly favored by the public, are ignored by architects.

The gap between professional and public taste should be of concern—to architects. Many of the buildings that architects admire highly do not seem to appeal to the public at all. For example, Philip Johnson’s Glass House and Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House are on the architects’ top twenty-five list. Both are famous buildings and exemplars of minimalist design. Yet, both are also weekend houses for single owners, and hence have had very little influence on residential design. Nor have they been open to the public (though this will soon change in the case of the Glass House). Is it little wonder that they do not appear on the public’s list of favorites? Conversely, architects do not recognize many of the buildings that the public holds in high regard. Modern architects have turned a blind eye to Washington’s National Cathedral, for example (#3 on the public’s list), although it is not only a great civic landmark, but the site of important national funerals and memorial services.

The fact that the architectural profession does not recognize the importance of many of the most cherished architectural symbols in the country is a measure of the gap that now exists between professional

and public values. “My favorite building” is hardly a profound criterion, but it is a reasonable measure of public recognition. It is notable that the *Architectural Record* list recognized such postmodern milestones as Robert Venturi’s Vanna Venturi House, Charles Moore’s Piazza d’Italia, Michael Graves’ Portlandia Building, and Philip Johnson’s AT&T Building, which claim a measure of populism in their design. Yet, the public ignored them all. Mainstream modernist architects often maintain that their buildings are more “of our time,” hence more accessible, less intimidating, and less elitist, than the historical revivalist architecture of the early twentieth century. Yet many of the public’s favorites are precisely the buildings with the broad staircases and the tall classical columns. The point is not that architects should imitate the designs of the past, but if they do not recognize their appeal it is unlikely that they will produce work that will similarly gain the public’s affection—now or in the future. And a building that is not liked—let alone one that is actively disliked—is a building that, on one important level, has failed.

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