

A Century of Iowa Architecture - 40 Minute Version
Written by: Nancy Heather

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100 years ...
50 influential Iowa buildings...
The art of Architecture.

Dan Naegele

There are many, many renowned architects that have practiced in Iowa and that have left buildings here to see.

Architecture is the art we walk through, drive by, and live in.

Eliot Nusbaum

It's not surprising, in a way, that buildings around the state really look great, they were designed by great designers.

You're about to step into some of Iowa's most remarkable, larger than life sculptures that have withstood the test of time.

John Rice

There is a certain skill, a certain few people who can put stuff together and they just do it right and it sings.

Now, let's enjoy highlights from "A Century of Iowa Architecture"...

Main Title and music... dip to black

Montage of ALL 50 BUILDINGS

For its centennial celebration, the Iowa Chapter of the American Institute of Architects - the AIA - sorted through a long list of Iowa's most celebrated buildings, to select what they deemed the 50 most significant Iowa buildings of the 20th century.

By following their list through the century and learning the history of some of these buildings, we'll see the Iowa we thought we knew, but through a new perspective.

Paul Mankins

I think the first thing you see is that Iowa, at the early part of the 20th century, was extremely prosperous, and that comes across in the buildings that it was a very

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prosperous place, that they were committed investing in their communities and they were making significant buildings and those buildings are really spread across the state.

Paul Mankins

Another thing you realize is that Iowa has not always been economically dominated by Des Moines, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, that the affluence was spread out and tended to be centralized in areas you might not expect today.

One of the best-known architects in the world, Frank Lloyd Wright, left a large impression in Iowa, and the AIA selected several of his early-century buildings for their list. They also included buildings by Wright's colleagues and even one of his instructors.

Paul Mankins

Mason City, in the earliest part of the 20th century, was an extremely progressive, extremely prosperous place and fostered some significant architecture from people who were, at the time, international architects or subsequently became very, very famous architects.

City National Bank/Park Inn

In Mason City, Wright designed the City National Bank Building and Park Inn Hotel.

These two commercial buildings, standing side by side in the downtown, were chosen by the AIA as fine examples of Wright's early-century American architectural style.

The Bank building, on the eastern end, is still in use as a retail store.

But the Park Inn Motel is another story. It had fallen into disrepair and is in the middle stages of being renovated.

Even in its current state, it exemplifies the creative brick work, elongated overhangs, and geometric ornamentation of Frank Lloyd Wright, a style known as "Prairie School."

Bob McCoy

I think one thing about the Prairie School architecture, it came as a revolutionary idea revolting against the meaningless ornateness of Victorian period and also I think the Prairie School architects kind of seized on the fact that family life had changed a little bit. I mean, the Victorian mores were not the mores of the first part of the 20th century so much.

Bob McCoy

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So, they had a different traffic flow plan that fit the new social requirements of the 20th century. It took an architect with a revolutionary mind, somebody willing to push the envelope to have that perception. And so when you think who was a great architect, the great architects were the people that broke the mold.

As the only remaining Frank Lloyd Wright hotel in the world, this building's decay would have been a major loss. Recognizing this, locals took on the hard work and high price of preservation.

It is a tale repeated from town to town, that a few determined people can make a big difference in the physical history that will be left standing a century from now.

Nat: Fortunately, they chose just such a man...

Steve Stimmel

But that is a movement now that is preserving barns, preserving buildings that are non-architect designed as well architect designed buildings. It's very much a good thing because those buildings are quite unique.

Rod Nelson

I think being in a city that is surrounded by buildings that have stood the test of time I think gives the city, the population, some confidence that, you know, it's here to stay, it's built to last, there is some stability in the community.

Melson House and Rock Cliff/Rock Glen Neighborhood

In the next decade, Mason City's Melson family approached Frank Lloyd Wright to design a home for them in an urban area next to a river. The area had been used for a grist mill for many years, and they wanted to change it into a residential area.

Wright came up with a design but the Melsons didn't like it. Wright never had a chance to redesign it, because during this time he gained infamy by moving to Europe – with the wife of one of his clients!

Bob McCoy

So, eloping with the wife of a client in 1909 and not fulfilling your contracts -- that would alienate two types of people in Mason City and those two types of people are probably most of the population of Mason City.

Still, the Melsons wanted to build on the lot, and soon came up with an associate of Wright's, Walter Burley Griffin, who had a background as a landscape architect. He not only designed the Melson House, but also laid out a plan for the entire neighborhood.

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Bob McCoy

When Griffin came along he wrote a very poetic description of this little valley meandering along this stream with the high cliffs on one side and a low land on the other.

Bob McCoy

It's part of the contract that Griffin negotiated with the developers, which said that everyone owns their own ____ of land going down to the creek but everyone has equal rights to enjoy the Glen, which I think that is a very forward looking bit of city planning or small community planning.

The "Rock Glen/Rock Cliff" neighborhood now harbors nearly a dozen beautifully designed "Prairie School" homes. But, it's the first one, the Melson house, that is on the AIA's "most significant buildings" list.

Bob McCoy

It's sitting on the cliff and it's right on the edge of the cliff and you can't see where the house and the cliff begin and end. So, that was very adventurous. I think Falling Water by Wright came at least 40 years later was the next similar adventure going that far into making the house part of the natural setting.

Griffin designed half-a-dozen homes in the neighborhood, and would have designed more, but something bigger came along... he won a competition to design the entire capitol city of Australia, Canberra. He is very well known in that country, where he has even been commemorated on a postage stamp.

Merchant's National Bank Building in Grinnell

In Grinnell, another amazingly ornate building bears the name of Architect Louis Sullivan, a Chicago architect with whom Frank Lloyd Wright apprenticed. Sullivan was a great architect, but more than that, he influenced an entire generation of American architects.

Clare Cardinal-Pett

Well, Louis Sullivan was a driven person, I think, and he was driven in what I believe was his attempt to find something that was truly representative and I think the idea that it represents the new Republic that was the United States, democracy.

Bob McCoy

He talked with the Chicago Architectural Society and said each one of you in your lifetime needs to advance architecture in your own way. and he was really kind of their spiritual leader if you think of it, not in a religious sense. But he was a person that they looked up to.

The Grinnell "Merchant's National Bank" was built near the end of Sullivan's career. This 'jewel box' is one of several small banks Sullivan designed, including

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one in Owatona, Minnesota. Students of Architecture across the nation study this building as an example of how something small can have a commanding presence.

Wes Shank

He was an architect who had designed much larger structures, skyscrapers and the Chicago Auditorium, which was a hotel and auditorium and a restaurant and an office building all rolled up into one. Merchant's National Bank isn't the smallest one of those he's designed but it's among the smallest ones.

Steve Stimmel

The bank was a very strong, strong-box kind of expression with the keyhole type expression at the entrance with the organic ornament around it for the building in Grinnell. So much of his work is quite different and distinctive from the other work that he did and quite a bit different than much of the other work going on at the same time.

Charles "Chick" Herbert

Louis Sullivan's projects I just think are absolutely wonderful. I think I've seen every one in the state of Iowa and I have been to many, well, wherever he's practiced. And absolutely marvelous conceptor and just an artist.

Woodbury County Courthouse in Sioux City

Some of Sullivan's students also achieved fame in Iowa with a building in Sioux City that is known as the largest "Prairie School" building ever made.

The design includes a 4-story base, with a tower that rises another 4 floors.

The first time he saw it, architect John Rice says he found the building's design simply stunning.

John Rice

I just about collapsed when I saw this building. And then I went in it, oh boy. I mean, the exterior of the building is okay but you go in that building and it's something else. I mean, it's just marvelous.

Another remarkable feature of this courthouse is that its unique design still serves its original purpose: the county's management and legal affairs.

Local architect William Steele worked with Sullivan students Purcell and Elmslie on creating a statement with the building.

Patty Erickson-Puttmann

It's a surprising, almost shocking building. There is a quote in the Western Architect about serene, almost impudent it stands there. And I think that is part of the building's

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stature is that it's a very quiet but very classic, dignified combination of space and art and design that just could be overwhelming if it wasn't laced together so beautifully.

Groups touring the courthouse are led down the back staircase to see still-remaining signs of community activism from World War I and II.

But the highlight of any tour has to be walking behind the dome. This huge, two-story stained glass dome can't be seen from the outside of the building, but is lit by a combination of tower windows and fluorescent lights.

From above, curious students and repair crews can sneak a peak into the rotunda. From below, the motifs of arrows, berries and leaves come to light.

Patty Erickson-Puttmann

You'll see in the patterns throughout the courthouse, the arrowheads, the berries, the leaves, the design throughout and I mean, that starts in the basement level and it goes consistent to the eighth floor.

The terra-cotta designs on the outside have American references, including the eagle in front, and two bison reliefs hidden in the back alley.

First National Bank Building in Davenport

In Davenport, the stately First National Bank building was built for \$1 million dollars in 1923 and 1924. This 'fireproof' building has lasted much longer than its two fire-prone predecessors.

Inside, customers can still step up to the same solid counters that their great-great grandparents might once have used. But, the ladies will probably not need to retire to the special "Stocking Room," to modestly remove their bank notes from their undergarments.

Beautiful though the building's interior might be, it's the exterior that Bob Broshar thinks makes this a remarkable building.

Bob Broshar

Well, the terra cotta work on the First National Bank in Davenport was a significant aspect, the attention to detail, terra cotta the attention to detail is evident and just a very well done building. But it also was an example of terra cotta, which is not used very much in Iowa anymore. We have a tough climate for terra cotta and in that particular case it was well used and well maintained so it still exists in good shape.

Eagle Point State Park

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Nationwide, the Depression affected every kind of business endeavor, including Architecture. But, there are a group of buildings on the AIA list that were built, not despite the Depression, but because of projects to try to get our nation out of the Depression.

Funded by the WPA – or Works Progress Administration- and designed by a Dubuque architect, these stone buildings are shelters for visitors to Dubuque's Eagle Point State Park.

The 140 acre park is built on Eagle Point Cliff with a lovely vista of the Mississippi River's "Zebulon Pike Lock and Dam #11" and still serves as a gathering spot for summer picnics and family reunions.

Bob Broshar

The Eagle Point Park is representative of projects that were built as a result of federal initiatives to employ people and we've got several good examples of those parks in the state. Eagle Point has to be one of outstanding examples and the jury felt that it was a significant impact in the state on people having more time for recreation and also it provided work for people at a time. But that job is done with terrific sensitivity and detail. The use of stone and the stone detailing throughout the park is really extraordinary and the fact that it serves as well today as it did when it was built is a pretty good testimonial to that.

In the 1940s, America -- and Iowans -- entered another era of tight finances and even tighter resources. Along with all other items, building materials were in short supply. Architectural firms across the nation felt the pinch.

Even so, the AIA's list reflects some designs of lasting value.

Julien Dubuque Bridge

One of these is another Dubuque design, the Julien Dubuque bridge. Spanning the Mississippi River, this bridge was designed by Edward Ashton.

Bob Broshar

We didn't have a lot of bridges. Often people don't consider bridges to be architectural but some of the bridges -- I have to say that all architecturally significant buildings are not necessarily designed by architects -- there are civil engineers who have done wonderful significant structures. The Julian Dubuque Bridge is significant because of what it means to our connection to adjacent states -- and also the fact of its simplicity and it meets that need in a very positive way. Iowa is that state between the rivers, we need to be connected and we felt that was a significant part of our heritage.

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Built during World War II, this bridge was considered important to national security, and its grey color was supposed to camouflage it to help fend off enemy attack.

The bridge is a registered National Historic Landmark, and in the future might have a twin span -- to accommodate the increased traffic into East Dubuque, Illinois.

Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad Station, in Burlington

Another architectural find from the 1940's is this 1944 building, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad Station, in Burlington.

Bob Broshar

The Railroad Stations were really significant architectural structures in our history. With the change in railroads from being almost extinct regarding passenger service those depots, many of them just are gone and it's too bad because they were some of the most exciting architecture that was produced in the first half of the century. And the Burlington Depot done by a very prominent Chicago firm, Holabird and Root, was a very, very fine example of the best of the passenger depots.

Nat: We're clear on the platform

Amtrak passenger trains still stop here, but even so, you might see this Burlington depot as a symbol of "the beginning of the end" of the grand era of rail transportation.

Train departs...

Coming up, don't miss another half-century's worth of Iowa's architectural gems. Plus, we'll visit the building that the AIA has selected as the Most Significant Building of the 20th Century. Stay tuned!

"A Century of Iowa Architecture" - Continued

Wherever you are in Iowa, you are near buildings, barns, silos, and structures that embody the architects' rule of "Firmness, Commodity, and Delight."

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Reflecting on Iowa's wealth of remarkable buildings of the 20th century, our ad hoc collection of architects and jurors agree that Iowans have reason to feel proud.

Kate Schwensen

Iowa has a terrific heritage of architecture and a wealth of really good architecture in it now that we take for granted. Recently somebody, an architect from Kansas City, was here and said, how is it that the architecture in Iowa is so much better than the architecture in Kansas City?

Kate Schwensen

We have the heritage of craft in this state. It's not just the architects but it's the builders in the state that really make a difference.

Now, let's continue exploring a "Century of Iowa Architecture."

There are two Frank Lloyd Wright designed homes listed in the 1950s. The architect had returned to America, and after several personal tragedies, had landed on his feet.

Lamberson House, Oskaloosa

The Lamberson home in Oskaloosa was built in 1951, using Wrights' "Usonian" style.

Bob Broshar

Frank Lloyd Wright's career was interesting because it has distinct periods and his Prairie School experience and development was early in the century. And then in mid century he was developing primarily residential work at that time and the Usonian homes, I don't know how many we have in the state, but it would be at least six or seven and all are very interesting and distinctive.

Cedar Rock, Lowell G. Walter House

Wright also designed the Lowell G. Walter House in Quasqueton. Most people know the building as "Cedar Rock." It has been given to the State of Iowa, complete with an endowment for continued preservation, and it's open for tours during the summer.

Paul Mankins

Cedar Rock is an exemplary piece of Frank Lloyd Wright's work late in his career. It's a spectacular house. Did you get to see it? You've got to go up there and roll tape on that, that's a great house.

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This home is one of Frank Lloyd Wright's few "signature" homes, where he designed not only the house, but all the accoutrements of living: furniture, decorations, and even tableware.

But, the tale is often told that when the original owners approached Wright to design their home, they had included a garage on their wish list. Wright responded, succinctly, "I will design your home. There will be no garage."

Wright did, however, design a boat house which stands separately from the home, on the banks of the Wapsipinicon River.

Frank Lloyd Wright wasn't the only big-name architect to work in Iowa in the middle and later parts of the century.

Mies Van De Rohe designed several signature buildings in Des Moines: one downtown bank building now used as the "Catholic Pastoral Center;" and Meredith Hall on the campus of Drake University.

Frank Gehry designed a building for the University of Iowa in Iowa City.

And Three of the world's most famous architects lent their vision to the Des Moines Art Center: Eliel Saarinen, I.M. Pei, and Richard Meier.

Saarinen led the group with the first building in 1948.

Des Moines Art Center - Saarinen

Wes Shank

Eliel Saarinen was a world known architect and Finn by birth had built noteworthy buildings by the turn of the century in Finland. When the Des Moines Art Center was being planned there was a discussion on the board as to whether they should have a design that is good and competent for the time or something forward looking. And the latter viewpoint prevailed and that was the reason for bringing in Eliel Saarinen, who by that time had left Finland and he was, had settled in Michigan and he was part of a school of design in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

Eliot Nusbaum

They invited him to submit a design for the museum and he came up with a very modest, very low slung building that was very quiet, not the kind of building you would think is going to have a profound effect on architecture in Des Moines, but it did.

Des Moines Art Center - Pei Wing

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In the 1960s, leaders of the Des Moines Art Center wanted additional room for indoor displays of large modern sculptures. Once again, the Art Center decided to look for a nationally or internationally famous architect.

Building committee chairman David Kruidenier said the selection of IM Pei came easily, and they were glad of their choice from their first meeting.

David Kruidenier

He looked at some photographs we had and we explained the material that the original Saarinen building was made out of and showed him a floor plan and he said, well I'm going to put some tracing paper over this, these blueprints and here is where this building should go and here is the kind of material it should be made of and here is the way it should look, it shouldn't try and repeat exactly the earlier building but it should reflect some of the same material that is in the original building.

David Kruidenier

And so he ground up this stone and put it into an aggregate and so on. All of this in a matter of just a few minutes. I couldn't believe it and I walked out of there pretty much with the plan of the building as it was built, very hard to believe.

I.M. Pei was famous at the time of his selection, and also designed the Pyramid addition to the Louvre, the National Gallery in Washington D.C., and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, among others.

Dan Naegele

He was probably at the high point of his career at the time. He went on to build many famous buildings in the 70's and early 80's but I think that those buildings are very conservative compared to the buildings that he did in the 60's. The Des Moines Art Center is one of those buildings and a wonderful large, poured in place, somewhat brutal gallery space that was the kind of space that would have been very appealing to abstract expressionist artists from America at the time.

Dan Naegele

That addition was really a kind of high point of architecture at the time, a very, very prominent piece.

Des Moines Art Center - Meier Wing

In the 1980s, the Des Moines Art Center expanded again, and once again chose an outside influence for its design. The architect this time was Richard Meier. His design's bold white curves and numerous windows added a whole new dimension to the area.

David Kruidenier

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I was chair of the selection committee for that addition and a little more formal organization that it had been for the Pei wing. And we drew up a list of top-notch architects, really some of the very best and they were all eager to participate because the combination of Saarinen and Pei was such a great thing for an architect to be connected with that they were eager to get the commission.

Dan Naegele

That addition was really a kind of high point of architecture at the time, a very, very prominent piece.

Dan Naegele

The Meier complex is itself vertical, it goes into an almost sunken basement level and has a tremendous vertical space in it, very particular kind of gallery where light is really the essence of the interior environment, light coming in from very different angles. And I think the scale of that addition is quite wonderful. It holds very, very beautifully the kind of artwork that is installed there now. Of course, that is a selection on the curator's part but I think that the museum is of the right size, the interior spaces are crafted in such a way that they show off the pieces to their greatest advantage but at the same time there is a sort of magnificent interior daylight to this...

Dan Naegele

it's vivacious, it's alive, it changes all the time, which for me as I go back time and time again to that gallery is wonderful because I never see the same thing twice.

Eliot Nusbaum

In the end I think it's proven to be a wise choice and certainly Meier's stature in the world, specifically museum design, is pretty unparalleled.

Different as the styles of the three wings of the Des Moines Art Center are, they work together as a whole.

Paul Mankins

The Des Moines Art Center is not just one masterpiece but a collection of masterpieces by master architects in Des Moines. Really Iowa is lucky to have that as an architectural resource and I think virtually any architect in the United States, that's a good test, if he doesn't know the Des Moines Art Center, not to be trusted.

Dan Naegele

I think the Des Moines Art Center is a kind of pilgrimage place for architects. It's some place that architects come to when they come to Iowa.

We've been looking at buildings selected by the Iowa Chapter of the American Institute of Architects as the most significant buildings of the 20th century.

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The AIA not only selected a "top 50" list, they also selected 10, one most significant from each decade. Then, from these top ten, they chose Iowa's "Building of the Century." Here are the top ten:

The Polk County Courthouse
Merchants National Bank Building
Salisbury House
Earl Butler House
The Saarinen Des Moines Art Center design
Cedar Rock
C.Y. Stephens Auditorium
The Civic Center of Greater Des Moines
The Des Moines Convention Center
And the Meredith Corporation Headquarters' Expansion.

And, the building of the century, decided by a jury of two architects and three non-architects, is CY Stephens Auditorium in Ames.

John Rice

The Stephens Auditorium is one of the nicest things to ever happen to Iowa.

John Rice:

It's just a great place to walk into.

Kate Schwensen

CY Stephens Auditorium is one of my favorite art performance halls and I can't imagine anybody sitting in one of those balconies and not being moved by the space.

Inside, the building is known for excellent acoustics and excellent sight lines from every one of the 2,700 seats.

Wes Shank

Howard Heemstra tells the story of how in designing the space for acoustics they used a way of projecting light beams, which obviously you can see, and you could tell how the sounds were going to be reflected. I guess it would be the locations of the sounds, how they would be reflected in the auditorium. So, that was an aspect of the design of the auditorium space.

Teams of Iowa architects from different firms and specialties worked on the building, led by: Crites & McConnell from Cedar Rapids, and Brooks Borg Skiles from Des Moines.

Ray Crites

We had a great group of people, and we very carefully made a study of auditoriums, but I still was troubled because the orchestra, you still had to look between the shoulders, I

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mean, between the heads in front of you. And I never really could understand why that was such a controlling factor. So, really the thing that makes Stephens work so well we just threw that away and we made sure somebody could look over the head of, you know, if you were more or less the same height of the person in front of you. And, of course, if you see it well then the sound behaves well. So, you get the sound transmitted to you more directly.

Ray Crites

I've heard it claimed that this is one of the best acoustical buildings in the world. That made me feel pretty good because we worked very hard to make certain that it was going to function well. And the thing I think that makes -- I think that is what makes the interior exciting is because we also wanted to instead of having an orchestra and then balconies we wanted people to be part of the atmosphere. So, those loges on the sides become part of the total environment. So, it was a visual thing as well as an acoustical thing that was driven there by the form that came out of it.

The acoustics, the soaring roof, and the creative use of materials are all reasons that architects give for enjoying the auditorium. Tom Leslie, a professor at I.S.U., says yet another reason to admire it is: that the building went out on a limb.

Tom Leslie

It takes a special client to do an adventurous building. Most clients come to architects because they've got a complicated problem that needs to get solved. But the adventurous buildings, I think, are what keep the profession lively and what keep it interesting. Buildings like CY Stephens Auditorium, for instance, which is one of the most adventurous buildings on campus is a building that even today, 30 years later, people sort of appreciate for how bold it was. Whether stylistically it's still something that we would copy is another story. But in 1973 when it was built it was certainly an adventure in concrete and an adventure for the university campus.

Bob Broshar

this building has been recognized nationally as a national design award winner -- but the most important thing is I think it brought to more Iowans than any other building a new sense of design, a new sense of excitement.

Paul Mankins

It brought international programs to Ames and I think it made Ames more of a central hub than it had been previously. And so I think it was a very good choice, I think it was very smart.

Wes Shank

I think it just has a kind of spirit about it.

It's difficult to speculate what might happen in the next 100 years, but the architects we spoke with seemed to agree that materials will become more refined and better

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able to function without harming the environment, and that the work of architecture despite becoming more complicated, will still be about something simple: pleasing people.

Steve Stimmel

It's very difficult to look out on an entire century as where we've come because there have been so many radical changes that we don't anticipate but I think it's still about the humans that have to be made happy and comfortable and productive wherever they are. So, I think we're always dealing with people. And people haven't changed that much.

And, there's another thing that will never change: buildings will need to be maintained, repurposed, and renovated if we want Iowa's historical heritage to remain standing a century from now.

Dan Naegele

I think that what makes a great building does not change over the years. It may change superficially and temporarily but I think ultimately it doesn't change. Things that were great in the past are great in the present. Things that are great in the present will be great in the future.

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