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Architecture of Downtown Des Moines: Some Highlights from the Twentieth Century and Beyond

By Paula Mohr

In its 170-some years, the evolution of Des Moines' commercial core has paralleled that of many American cities. Fort Des Moines, an early foothold in terms of Euro-American settlement, today survives only as an archaeological site. Early commercial buildings of wood frame on both the east and west sides of the Des Moines River were replaced with brick later in the nineteenth century. At the turn of the twentieth century another wave of development introduced tall buildings or skyscrapers. In the midst of all this change, we can see the impact of external forces, including architectural ideas from Chicago, the City Beautiful Movement and the contributions of nationally and internationally renowned architects. The "book" on Des Moines' architecture is still being written.

As a result of this constant renewal and rebuilding, only a handful of nineteenth century buildings survive in Des Moines' downtown. In the Court Avenue entertainment area across the river from the FORUM conference hotel are several notable examples. The brick Italianate Hawkeye Insurance Co. Building (c. 1869-1881), on Fourth Street, was designed by local architect William Foster and speaks to the city's role in the American insurance industry. Directly across the street, the

Youngerman Block (1876), also by Foster, features a façade of "Abestine Stone," a nineteenth-century artificial stone manufactured by the building's owner, Conrad Youngerman. The five-story Des Moines Saddlery Building (c. 1878), just around the corner, represents early manufacturing in downtown Des Moines. With its cast iron storefront, cast stone window hoods and stringcourses marking each floor, it is the largest extant example of Italianate architecture in the city.



Photo courtesy of Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs

The Equitable Life Insurance Building was designed by the Des Moines firm Proudfoot, Bird & Rawson in 1924. A 19-story late Gothic Revival building, for 50 years it was the tallest building in the state. The crowning tower originally housed its water tank.



Credit: Slingshot Architecture

Des Moines Fire Department Headquarters (now the Des Moines Social Club) was designed by Proudfoot, Rawson, Brooks and Borg. Built in 1937 with funding from the New Deal Public Works Administration, it is a good example of Moderne architecture.

Among local architects, no firm shaped the face of the city more than Des Moines-based Proudfoot and Bird. (The firm's name varied over time and today is known as BBS Architects Engineers.) In addition to serving as architect for the state's three public universities, the firm designed churches, schools, banks, hotels and the houses of Des Moines' prominent families. It was responsible for the designs of the monumental Polk County Courthouse (1906), Des Moines Building (1931), Masonic Temple (1912), Teachout Building (1912) in the East Village, Equitable Building (1924) and the Des Moines Fire Station No. 1 (1937), just to name a few public and commercial landmarks. The firm worked in a variety of revival styles including Tudor, Classical, and Gothic as well as Art Moderne.

Des Moines also turned to Chicago architects – no surprise given the proximity and strong railroad connections between the two cities, along with the Illinois city's emergence in the nineteenth century as an architectural powerhouse. One of the first instances occurred outside downtown but involved

an influential Des Moines businessman. In 1866 wealthy banker Benjamin Allen hired Chicago architect William Boyington to design an elaborate Second French Empire mansion named Terrace Hill (now Iowa's governor's mansion). In 1890, the Des Moines Catholic diocese hired Chicago church architect James J. Egan to design the limestone Romanesque Revival St. Ambrose Cathedral on the northern edge of today's downtown. In the following decade, Daniel Burnham's Chicago firm designed the Fleming Building, an 11-story office building, and one of the earliest steel-frame buildings in the state.

Des Moines' other connection to Chicago is through the City Beautiful Movement, popularized at the Columbian Exhibition held in Chicago in 1893. Around the time of this influential event, the Des Moines Women's Club and other civic-minded organizations began clamoring for improvements to both sides of the Des Moines River. This public space, the Civic Center Historic District, developed over the course of five decades and is composed both of buildings in the classical style

and assorted river improvements. Highlights include the Des Moines Public Library (1903, rehabilitated in 2011 by RDG Planning & Design for the World Food Prize Hall of Laureates, location of Saturday evening's reception), the Municipal Building (1910, opposite the conference hotel), the U.S. Post Office (1910) and the Federal Courthouse (1928). (The Supervising Architect of the Treasury designed the latter two examples.) One stylistic outlier in this otherwise classically inspired precinct is the Armory and World War Memorial Building (1934), which deviates from City Beautiful classicism with its Art Deco design and darker stone.

As the twentieth century went on, other commissions were awarded to firms beyond the state.



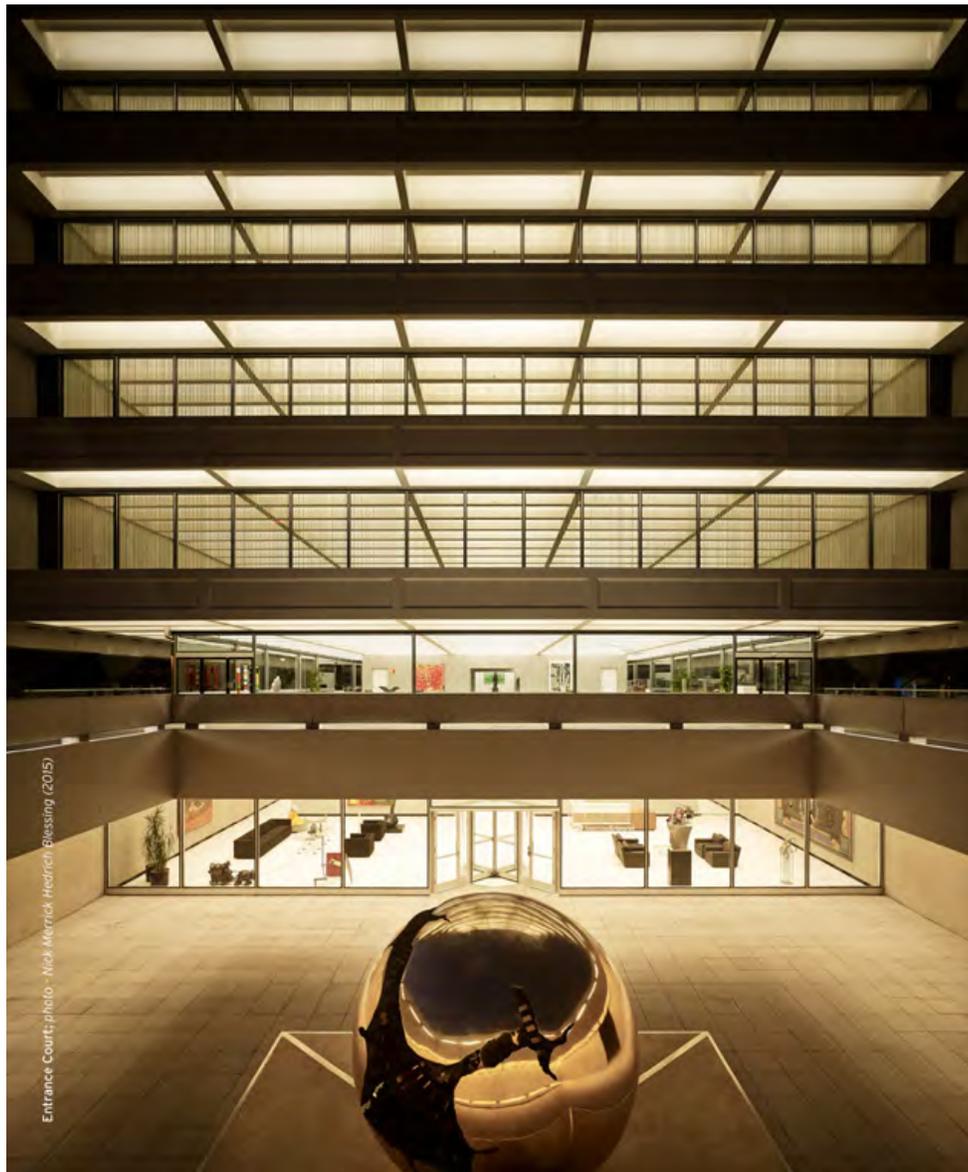
Chicago firm D.H. Burnham & Company designed the 11-story Fleming Building in 1907. The organization of its elevation – base, shaft and capital – follows the tenets of Louis Sullivan.

Credit: Slingshot Architecture

Outside of the downtown (but related to the city's movers and shakers), the Des Moines Art Center board hired Eliel Saarinen in the 1940s to design the first of a multi-phased museum building. (I.M. Pei and Richard Meier would design later additions). Soon after, trustees for Drake University also hired Saarinen to prepare a campus plan and design several academic buildings and residence halls. At Drake, Saarinen's work would later be supplemented by his son, Eero Saarinen, along with Sasaki, Walker and Associates and Harry and Ben Weese.

In the 1960s, German Bauhaus architect Mies van der Rohe was brought from Chicago to design two buildings. Home Federal Savings and Loan on Grand Avenue, one of downtown's most prominent streets, was finished in 1962. It is a three-story steel building with Mies' trademark applied I-beams, travertine marble and granite pavers. Luckily, it is under rehabilitation with assistance from historic tax credits. This commission led to another project on Drake's campus, where Mies designed Meredith Hall for the new School of Journalism. This building was completed in 1965.

Des Moines' insurance industry has been a major force in the development of downtown in the twentieth century. In 1962 Watson Powell Jr., chairman and president of American Republic Insurance Company, turned to Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) to design a new headquarters on downtown's northern edge. Inspired by the firm's designs for the Air Force Academy Chapel, Connecticut General Life Insurance Company and Chase Manhattan Bank, Powell wanted a modern building that would provide a humane and efficient workplace for the company's employees. A two-time AIA award recipient (1967 for its original design and 2016 for its sensitive rehabilitation by BNIM Architects), FORUM attendees will have an opportunity to see this modern masterpiece during a reception Friday evening.



Entrance Court; photo - Nick Merrick, Hedrich Blessing (2015)

Credit: Nick Merrick / Hedrich Blessing

Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill designed the American Republic Insurance headquarters, completed in 1965. The building showcases the company’s important collection of modern art.

The Principal Financial Group has been a major architectural client downtown since the 1930s. Its original building, known as Corporate One, designed by the firm Tinsley, McBroom, & Higgins, was built by the predecessor company Bankers Life Insurance in 1939. Architectural Record named it “The Building of the Decade” in 1940. As the company grew, so did their campus, and in 1992, the company hired Helmut Jahn of Chicago to design what is locally known as the Z Building on Seventh Street, just north of its 1939 building. Jahn’s interior features a site-specific work by Maya Lin that includes a trickle of water

running down the building’s glass walls and collecting in a jagged crack in the lobby.

The building known simply by its street address, 801 Grand, was erected in 1990 and today, at 44 stories, is the tallest in Iowa. The architect, Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum of St. Louis, clad the building in granite. The most prominent feature, however, is the eight-sided turret at the top, visible for miles beyond the city limits. This feature (some call it an orange juicer) is a Post-Modern interpretation of the Equitable Building tower located two blocks to



Credit: Renzo Piano Building Workshop, Architects in collaboration with OPN Architects

Krause Gateway Center

the east. The eight-sided motif is carried throughout the interior of 801 Grand in paving, metal work and signage.

In the late 1990s, as part of the downtown renaissance (and particularly the western gateway to downtown), the Des Moines firm Herbert Lewis Kruse Blunck Architecture designed an award-winning addition for Meredith Corporation, parent company of Better Homes & Gardens and many other magazines. In 2002, British architect David Chipperfield designed an iconic new central library, also in the western gateway. Clad in triple-glazed glass and copper mesh panels,

it appears semi-opaque during the day but at night has a translucent glow.

The most recent chapter of Des Moines' architectural history is being written with the construction of the Krause Gateway Center, designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano. "Lightness, simplicity and openness are the main concepts expressed in the design," Piano noted. When completed later in 2018, it will not only be a significant contribution to the city's architectural legacy but also an important symbol of the sustained commitment to downtown on the part of city leaders, corporations and the thousands who work, live and play there. ■