Pools, Domes, Yamasaki—Debate

The exotic designs of a Japanese-American architect raise a storm of controversy.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

AN impassioned debate is raging in the architectural world. The issue is whether an American architect of Japanese descent named Minoru Yamasaki is the best, or the worst, thing to hit the profession since the skyscraper.

The argument has picked up fresh intensity from the fact that Yamasaki has just been commissioned to design the $270,000,000, 15-acre World Trade Center for lower Manhattan. Earlier this year, it had centered on his Federal Science Pavilion for the Seattle Fair. His champions called it a breakthrough for beauty; his critics hinted darkly at mortal sins against modern architecture. The public just enjoyed it.

The work that sparks this kind of controversy is new, different and so characteristic of its designer that it could be picked out as Yamasaki's in any simple guessing game. There are pools and plants, skylights and courts, domes, vaults, arches, arcades, canopies and colonnades. Materials are sumptuous; surfaces are intricate. These are exotic, elaborate designs intended to delight the senses. To many architects trained in the severe modern school, they represent nothing short of heresy.

MAN AND MANHATTAN—Minoru Yamasaki stands before a model of lower New York, for which he will design a World Trade Center.

In addition to his conscious pursuit of decorative detail, Yamasaki draws openly on history. Sometimes there are Oriental overtones, and sometimes a medieval manner (the Seattle Science Pavilion, done with associated architects Naramore, Brain, Brady & Johanson, is Yamasaki neo-Gothic), but whatever the mood, his experimental architecture goes beyond conventional standards to explore a more adventurous and evocative world (Xanadu and Shalimar) for a broader, richer and more ornamental contemporary style.

On the World Trade Center, Yamasaki will be collaborating with the New York firm of Emery Roth & Sons known less for oriental pleasure domes than for practical, packaged office space wrapped in glass and metal by the mile. Even so, those who know his work have visions of a Manhattan Taj Mahal. One thing is certain: this large and important group of structures will be unlike anything that New York has ever seen before.

AT the center of the controversy—like the quiet eye of a storm—is a small, slight man of serene manner and gently explosive humor. Yakasaki, who will be 50 this week but looks no more than 40, has a simple reserve and a modest, direct way of speaking that suggests considerable assurance; if he is breaking architectural rules and outraging architectural sensibilities, he is doing so with composure and conviction. How does he answer his critics? "I don't. I just keep on working. You can't go to pieces every time anyone says anything. I'm not going to work the way anyone else wants me to. We just glance off a few blows and go on."

Yamasaki argues against the current frantic search for new forms, a search which avoids any form done in the past. "The development of all the important aspects of man has been based upon history. In architecture, too, we should have no reluctance to interpret the richness of the past through logical modern means. Only by building upon our heritage with new ideas will we have the basis for progress in human environment.

"Above all, with political turmoil, traffic problems, vast increases in population and the tremendous impact of the machine, we must have serenity. Man needs a serene architectural background to save his sanity in today's world.

"THE state of architecture, like the state of the world, is uneasy and chaotic. The evidence is the explosion of architectural ideas that gush forth to fill the streets of our cities. This flood of experiments is producing almost every conceivable shape and form, and for the most part without reason. All these shapes, each trying to outdo the other, when placed together—as at Miami Beach—can only result in complete confusion. I felt literally ill while I was there.

"I believe that architecture must be dignified and *(Continued on Page 150)*

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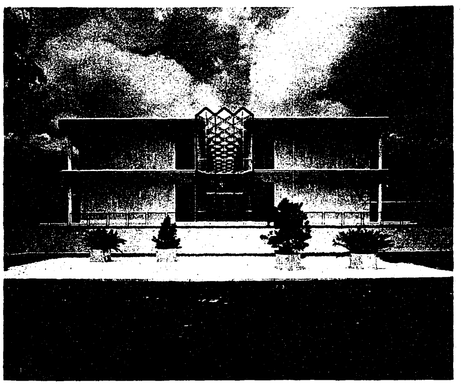
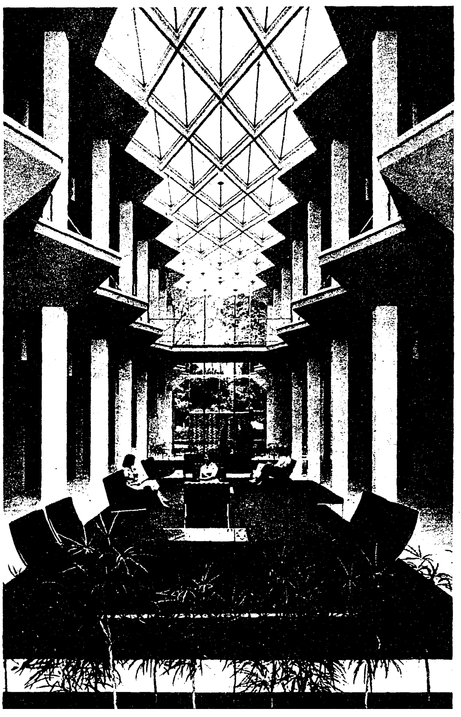
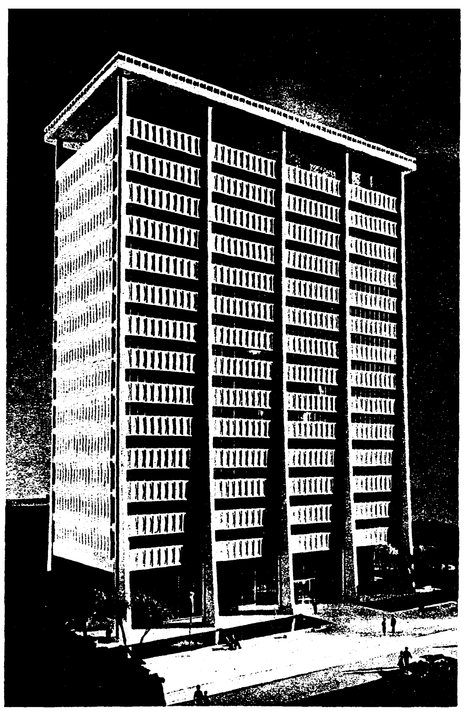
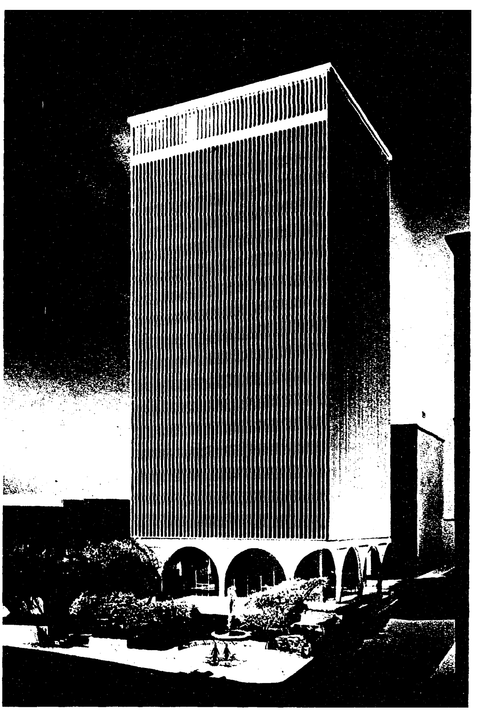




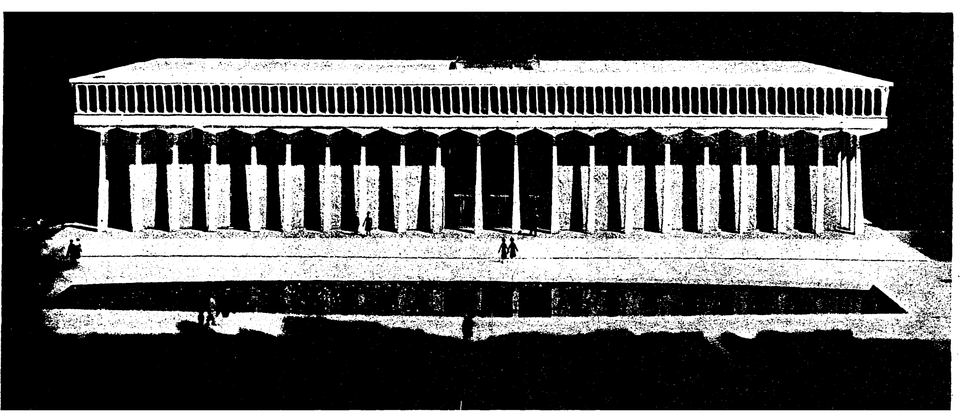
BREAKTHROUGH—The McGregor Memorial Community Center at Wayne University, in Detroit, was completed in 1958 and established Yamasaki's fame. Both outside and inside (below), it reflects the aim of his architecture—to create serenity, surprise and delight.



IVORY TOWER—Harvard will look a little less traditional when this 15-story, white structure—the Behavioral Sciences Building—is erected from Yamasaki's daring design.



BIG BUSINESS—Gardens, arcades and a delicate facade give the Yamasaki stamp to this model for the I.B.M. Building, Seattle. Naramore, Bain, Brady and Johanson, associated architects.



OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS—Greco-Roman and Far Eastern influences blend in a series of slender classic columns of Oriental lightness, in a top floor suggesting the comice of a temple, and in a reflecting pool. Thus Yamasaki envisions Princeton's School of International Affairs. The undertones of the past emerge subtly in a quite advanced and experimental construction.

Pools, Domes, Yamasaki

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elegant. It must be humanly scaled to man so that it belongs to him, so that he has pride in it, so that he loves it, so that he wishes to touch it. It must have ever-changing qualities to overcome the boredom caused by the repetitious quality of machine production —changing space, light and mood—a soaring quality which represents the realized and potential nobility of man in our society. There must be elements of delight, to offset the monotony of mass-produced building, and to enhance the enjoyment of life. Yet we must thoroughly respect technology, since only by constructing our buildings through the machine process can we economically produce the vast amount of building necessary to house the varying activities of man."

YAMASAKI'S calm assurance has been hard-won. His personal battles have been far more formidable than the polemics of professional discussion. Anti-Japanese prejudice marked his childhood and youth in Seattle, where he was born, and his years at the University of Washington. (He was deeply affected when a local company passed over the top-ranking graduating engineer, who was Japanese, to hire the next three men below him.)

Immediately after graduation in 1934, he left for a more liberal atmosphere in New York, where he wrapped and unwrapped dishes for an importing company until he found work as a draftsman and designer. In 1945, he was called to Detroit as chief designer for Smith, Hinchman and Grylls, one of the country's largest architectural firms. He resigned in 1949 to form his own partnership, then left his partnership to start Minoru Yamasaki & Associates in 1958. Shortly thereafter, he fought another battle—this time for his life—when years of emotional tension and increasing professional responsibility hospitalized him with severe ulcers. Surgery followed, and painful re-evaluation of his own attitudes and abilities, which left him wiser and more confident of his objectives.

BUT perhaps the most important event in his career, with the most profound effect on his work, was the commission he received in 1955 to design the American Consulate in Kobe, Japan. Whatever his racial experiences, he was a typical American, familiar only with American buildings and ideas.

"I was brought up and went to school in the thirties. We were in the Depression. Everything was as small and tight and economical as possible—the kitchenette kind of thing. I had never known anything else," he recalls. "I had never traveled until 1955, and what I saw in Japan and the East and in Europe—I went around the world then—shocked me. I couldn't believe the size and grandeur of the buildings: I wanted to touch them all.

"THERE were so many marvelous things. In the mosques of Isfahan you go through a narrow arch into a tremendous courtyard, then into the darkness of the mosque from the brilliant sun. Suddenly the inside is illuminated by a bright shaft of light.

"In Japan, dark temples lead out to the surprise and contrast of beautiful courts and gardens. In Rome, in Venice, all the great buildings were so beautifully and elegantly done.

"I discovered scale, texture, contrast, sun and shade, silhouettes against the sky. It was a trip of personal revelation. It changed my whole attitude toward life and architecture."

It also started the sequence of work that has so pleased or shocked observers. For better or worse, Yamasaki took off on unashamedly romantic wings. Fascinated by the infinite design possibilities of reinforced concrete, that most versatile of all modern materials, he drew on his new discoveries for new effects.

THE Gothic and Oriental motifs appeared—transformed by twentieth - century techniques and Yamasaki's own personal desires. His Detroit Y.M.C.A. headquarters used curved plastic awnings and temple - pitched roof shells to turn a bare-bones budget effort into a Madame Butterfly. Offices for the American Concrete Institute folded and pleated reinforced concrete into a tiny building as elegantly decorative as a Japanese fan. The school for the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts put a glass box inside a brick wall, not unlike the effect of those patterned paper Japanese balls that open to reveal other, contrasting balls inside. French gothic tracery was married to suggestions of the Alhambra in the Dhahran Civil Air Terminal in Saudi Arabia, done with the Ralph M. Parsons Company, and a set of golden Arabian Nights domes sheltered the United States exhibition at the New Delhi Agricultural Fair.

In prize - winning designs for the McGregor Memorial Community Center at Wayne University and the Reynolds Metals headquarters in De-

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troit, Yamasaki designed small sky - lit palaces of unexpected pleasures, with plants and lily-filled pools. Mood, material, light and shade, structure and silhouette contributed to a new aspect of American building that seemed to signal an end of modern architecture's austerities. From that point on, an increasing number of corporate executives and university professors have found themselves among the lily-pads, under skylights, in structures of growing ornamental complexity.

However, the pursuit of pleasure is a notoriously dangerous activity. The question at the heart of the present controversy is not whether success has spoiled Minoru Yamasaki, but just how good —and how valid—is his extremely beguiling work.

ON the positive side, one famous city planner feels that Yamasaki is bringing a new kind of "environmental enjoyment" to American architecture because of the way he groups buildings, gardens and pools to create effective relationships of indoor and outdoor space, areas of contrast and islands of repose. It is generally conceded that he has been largely responsible for reintroducing to the West the welcome Eastern idea that water adds charm and enrichment to architecture. It is also acknowledged that the need for those expressive or poetic values that make architecture an art is not being met in many modern buildings, and that his preoccupation with this lack is real—if, to some, his methods may be suspect.

On the other hand, he is regarded by some of the profession's most serious practitioners as having strayed down the primrose path of token visual pleasures without thinking through the problem "in depth." One well-known architect calls the elaborate precast panels of varying intricate patterns with which he encloses his buildings "exterior decoration." His historical borrowings from the Gothic and the East are scored as "shallow"; he is accused of preoccupation with "superficial details."

"HE has sold out," says one champion of the traditionally severe modern movement, probably remembering Adolf Loos's revolutionary dictum of 40 years ago that "ornament is crime." "He is entranced with making a delightful - looking building. But he has no big idea. Yamasaki invests all his energy in attractive secondary effects."

Yamasaki himself admits that he has made mistakes. Of his Gothic phase he says simply, "I was on a kick." In his preoccupation with the versatility of precast panels, he has created overelaborate systems with what he calls "wedding - cake" results. "I wouldn't do it again" is a recurrent refrain, for he has been frankly experimental and exploring.

HE means to enrich the modern vocabulary with more and varied sensuous effects, and to incorporate three important Asiatic qualities into Western architecture: serenity, surprise and grace.

How well has he achieved his objectives? The answer to the question is in whether the elaborate alternatives that he offers to more simple, direct solutions are really better than the simpler solutions would be. Because architecture is a structural art, a great building always makes its structure clear; one either sees or senses "the bones," and in the case of the buildings that move us most—the Gothic cathedral and the modern skyscraper—the bones are most evident of all. A great building states clearly what it is, in terms of materials and technology, and how it got that way, in terms of the sensitive and logical use of these elements by the architect. So far, many of Yamasaki's buildings fail to meet this test.

Departing from the logical can lead to forced, artificial designs, and it takes a sure talent to avoid going over the line. Yamasaki knows that he has occasionally overstepped it, but he feels that errors are justified in some cases if he has succeeded in evolving a wider and richer range of answers in others.

In today's architecture, techniques are as important as art, and the expression of technology must take its place with the search for beauty. Yamasaki acknowledges the dual principle, but in the final analysis he often overbalances the scales for delight. As he

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Nonconformist

Minoru Yamasaki's appearance defies the conventions of the architectural fraternity. His suit is conservative, but it is noticeably not Ivy League. He wears the knit tie that is the badge of his profession, but he adds a characteristically ornamental badge of his own—a pearl pin. Instead of the foreign car favored by architects as a symbol of status and good taste, he drives a Pontiac Grand Prix, lined in lush black leather and rich power-operated gadgets.

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becomes more and more delicately decorative, the structural members of his buildings become more attenuated and less convincing as supports for the large-scale construction that they carry. (In his skyscraper for the Michigan Consolidated Gas Comany, to cite one instance, the main columns are dressed up in white marble; where the building needs to say "strong," it says "pretty.") Even his orientalism is consciously borrowed, and not very deeply absorbed. Some decorative devices, like the gold anodized aluminum screen around the Reynolds Building, have a disconcertingly costume-jewelry look.

AT the same time—and this is the crux of his critics' dilemma — many of his buildings are undeniably wonderful to look at. And there is a new and necessary restraint in his latest projects which suggests that he may be moving closer to the ideal: the building that has structural clarity, and still entrances the eye.

In the meantime, there is a large model of lower Manhattan in his office, in which closely packed skyscrapers surround a gaping hole. The hole is the World Trade Center, and Yamasaki has to fill it. An eager staff of 65, including 11 associates, his own model makers and engineers, and the large, efficient organization of Emery Roth and Sons, will help him do it. There is no specific design as yet, but he sees it as "a strong, positive kind of building that must have both grandeur and humanity." It will be "tremendous... a great complex of structures... separate and apart from the rest of New York, with an identity of its own."

WHAT that identity will be is still anybody's guess. It is unlikely to have the "masterpiece" stature of a work by Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe or Frank Lloyd Wright. ("I don't believe in masterpieces," says Yamasaki. "I think you struggle to do the best that you can on every job, and hope the next one will be better than the last.") It could be Baghdad-on-the-Subway. Or Venice-on-the-Hudson. But there is a good long shot that it may be one of the loveliest buildings of our time.