What makes a building BEAUTIFUL?

Our critic's aesthetic rating of some of Western New York's most notable buildings

Unless I am just tuning to myself over a second cup of Earl Grey, when I call this or that building "beautiful," I'd better be prepared to explain why I think so. It isn't enough to dig up that old dodge, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." That just brings all discussion to a screaming halt. But how to explain beauty?

It is always a timely concept, but beauty applied to architecture is especially problematic. Buildings, unlike most other art objects, are social phenomena. They are steeped in pragmatic concerns — economics, politics, neighborhood protests (local examples range from the Wal-Mart controversy to the proposed hotel at Hiramwood and Riverport).

At their best — sometimes even at their worst — buildings are also expressions of a community's big, obvious symbols of shared beliefs and ideals. A building of reasonable design can be a place where ordinary life can proceed efficiently and, if we're lucky, with some measure of pleasure.

Beauty is more elusive. It is like an escape valve that gives minds and hearts the happy attitude for bureaucracy and the ordinary drag of events. It's that necessary thing that no one seems to miss until it's gone.

With all that in mind, for attempts to rate a select group of Western New York buildings — some historic and well-known, others newly constructed — in terms of beauty, I've chosen a mix of types, including municipal and public buildings, churches, domestic architecture, and commercial examples.

Because they are so often dealt with, the great trio of Buffalo's architectural fame — buildings designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan and H.H. Richardson — have not been examined here. Instead, this study of times goes off the beaten path, to areas in the suburbs, in Niagara County and East Aurora.

To reduce the complex aesthetics of a building to what amounts to a grade school kid's report card is, well, reductionist. This one-judge beauty contest is not the final word on any building's aesthetic status. The hope here is that this attempt at grading the aesthetic virtues of buildings will be a springboard for increased dialogue.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: A CRITICIZES SOME OF BUFFALO'S BUILDINGS. SEE BEAUTY SCORECARD ON PAGE H2
Beauty scorecard: How the landmarks stack up

PROPORTIONS: How a building's parts relate to one another and how these parts relate to the whole. • INVENTIVENESS OF FORM: The use of form to lend distinguishing stylistic character to a building. • CONTEXT: The relationship of a building to its site and to the surrounding environment. • PSYCHOLOGY OF SPACE: The use of space to incite emotional or intellectual reactions. • INTERIOR/EXTERIOR RELATIONSHIPS: The way in which a building's exterior works in harmony with, or in planned opposition to, its interior. • SCALE: Visual effects designed to enhance the sense of vastness or of intimacy whatever the building's actual physical size. • FUNCTIONALITY: How a building accommodates its assigned use. • STANCE: The "posture" or gesture of the building on its site. • MATERIALS: The aesthetic and functional potential of the chosen materials. • COLOR AND DECORATION: Color and decoration as surface-applied additions or as an integral part of the material.

City Court
Seneca Niagara
The Basilica
Brock House
Mercerweather
Police Services
First Presbyterian
Hauppauge Woodwind
Kleinhans Music Hall

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EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Critics detail his reactions to nine local buildings

Our Lady of Victory Basilica
South Park at Ridge Road, Lockport (2005)
Architect: Emilie Thibaud

This is an old-fashioned architecture, with triumphantheight, strings hanging and choirs of angels hanging from it.

By Richard Huntington

News art critic

Buffalo and the surrounding area are abloom in fascinating buildings. The stock of old restored mansions alone would be the envy of many cities. And the city has some of architecture's most neglected masterpieces: Cullum's Presidential Building and Wright's Martin House, among others.

As the above scorecard suggests, building styles of recent years run from high-tech to the rustic Oak Street Corridor to the glorious, as evidenced by the new Hamburg Woodwind Lives Center. Yet with all this compelling material at hand, architecture is not much of a topic in the public domain.

Let this be a call to attention, a reminder that we should never take these wonderful and so wonderful buildings for granted.

To start the discussion, here are some brief impressions of each:

Our Lady of Victory Basilica

A basilica in the Old World in the new world! Or in the small Lockwouta plot with metal plants once its neighbors, it's something of a petite gem. That's rare. It was built in a corner in a partial work of art.

By Richard Huntington

Erie County Police Services Building
45 Elm St. (2006)
Architect: Harry Warren

This building is certainly a landmark in the city and a great addition to the skyline. It is modern and yet has a traditional feel. The large windows allow the maximum amount of light to come in, which is rare in modern buildings.

Hauppauge Woodwind Lives Center
300 Elliot St. (2006)
Architect: Daniel Yudin

This building is a great example of modern architecture. The use of glass in the design allows for a lot of natural light, which helps to create an open and welcoming atmosphere.

Kleinhans Music Hall

This is a modern and unique building. The use of glass and steel creates a sense of light and space that is both striking and awe-inspiring. The design is both functional and visually appealing.

Seneca Niagara Casino & Hotel

Third Street, Niagara Falls (2006)
Architects: Peter, Cook & Jacobs.

This project is a great example of modern architecture. The use of glass and steel creates a sense of light and space that is both striking and awe-inspiring. The design is both functional and visually appealing.

Frank E. Merrittsweater

Sara Craven Avenue, and East Street (2005)
Architects: Robert Travers

This building is a great example of modern architecture. The use of glass and steel creates a sense of light and space that is both striking and awe-inspiring. The design is both functional and visually appealing.

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The new Seneca Niagara Casino & Hotel

Seneca Falls

The Basilica

Brock House

Mercerweather

Police Services

First Presbyterian

Hauppauge Woodwind Lives Center

300 Elliot St.

Architect: Daniel Yudin

These two contrasting projects are connected by a vertical transparent structure that seems to escape the ground. High-tech design elements. DeMareto is one of Buffalo's great buildings.

Kleinhans Music Hall

"Is like some giant, floating musical instrument."

Frank E. Merrittsweater

Sara Craven Avenue, and East Street (2005)
Architects: Robert Travers

There is absolutely no hall building in this ingenuous building. The main design is composed of interlocking and small drums, set out in a semi- circular arrangement. The roof of the right angle, the interior is empty, fluid and open. In this scheme the structure of the building's arm, at the center and illumi- nated by the largest of the three skylights, critics a point from which a visitor moves freely towards the space in a rough approximation of the shared space of the African vil- lage. The curve walls of the interior are pleasantly pleasing.

Seneca Niagara Casino & Hotel

Third Street, Niagara Falls, N.Y. (2006)
Architects: Peter, Cook & Jacobs. Architecture.

This big, gleaming, dramatic building makes a strong and lowly, the city look like a little tower. The "look at me" style is a style of its own, one that is often not understood by the locals. It is a great example of modern architecture.