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Celebrated designer left mark on campus

World Trade Center architect responsible for building layout

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Minoru Yamasaki designed the McGregor Memorial Conference Center, located in the heart of Wayne State's campus.

Corey Wheeler

Anyone who has stood outside the Education Building, with its Gothic rows of pointed arches, or walked past the Helen L. DeRoy Auditorium, with its perpetually dry moat, has stood next to structures designed by one of America's finest architects.

Both of these buildings were designed by Minoru Yamasaki, an architect whose work is spread across the country. However, a very significant entry in Yamasaki's portfolio is now missing – the World Trade Center.

Yamasaki was the chief architect of the World Trade Center, and, while it may have been his finest achievement, it was far from his only one.

Born in Seattle in 1912, Yamasaki was a second-generation Japanese-American.

“Minoru Yamasaki was born to a struggling family in a poor Japanese-American neighborhood of Seattle,” Dale Allen Gyure, architectural historian at Lawrence Technological University, said. “He lived his first few years there in a tenement without indoor bathrooms.”

In 1945, Yamasaki was hired by the Detroit architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls. He became its chief designer and started his own architectural firm called Yamasaki & Associates four years later.

His first building on the WSU campus was the McGregor Memorial Conference Center.

“In the commission, Yamasaki tried to incorporate many influences from a recent trip to Italy, India and Japan,” Gyure said. “That trip changed his architecture, and the McGregor Center was the first major building he designed in his new mode.

“Some of the new ideas he tried out at McGregor were the interest in the building's silhouette against the sky, a new palette of rich materials and an attempt to create a peaceful, serene oasis by adding courtyards and pools next to the building.”

Yamasaki also had a large impact on WSU's layout. He envisioned a new master plan for the school that was implemented in the 1970s. The plan called for a portion of Second Avenue to be closed, which would allow a large portion of the school to become unified.

This resulted in the creation of Gullen Mall and much of Wayne State as it exists today.

When selected to design the World Trade Center in 1962, Yamasaki decided to take a modernistic approach and designed the buildings to look like brushed metal against the New York skyline. The narrow windows of the towers were due to Yamasaki's own fear of heights.

Yamasaki died in 1986, long before the events of 9/11. And though he and World Trade Center are gone, Yamasaki's legacy still lives on.

"I think he's a great American success story – he pulled himself up from near poverty and anti-Asian discrimination in Seattle to become one of the most renowned architects in the world," Gyure said.

His life story is in many ways a textbook example of the American Dream. And he, like all Americans following the aftermath of 9/11, showed that no matter a difficult an initial hardship may be, it is always possible to persevere.

Check out our Yamasaki slide show

"here":http://www.thesouthend.wayne.edu/index.php/gallery/minoru_yamasaki.