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Boston accents: Area architects' favorite buildings cover the iconic, the classical and stabs at boldness

by Ann Greenawalt Special to the Journal

The Hancock Tower. Simmons Hall at MIT. The Boston Public Library. From iconic eye-catchers to out-of-the-way gems, the buildings picked by architects as their favorites run the gamut.

The Boston Business Journal asked a number of architects to name the buildings in Boston they believe are the most aesthetically pleasing. As to be expected, such area mainstays as the icy blue Hancock Tower and the elegant Hancock Tower made the cut, but there were a few curve balls. Here's what they said.

Pei's legacy

Peter Kuttner, president of Cambridge Seven Associates, says the "elegantly proportioned" buildings of the First Church of Christ, Scientist -- from the 114-year-old Mother Church to the 1960s-era plaza designed by I.M. Pei -- have a campus-like quality.

"They don't intrude into the public space but are a part of them. The "simple arcade allows you to get out of the weather, and the reflecting pool can be seen from everywhere," he said of the structure. The entrance to the Mary Baker Eddy library, "The Hall of Ideas," is neoclassical and contains a glass and bronze fountain-like statue that spills over with projected words.

Kuttner also hails Pei's John Hancock Tower as being "amazing for its role in the Boston skyline and for its role from a distance. You can be in Somerville and see it like a beacon down the street, and it's the same from the South End."

"It's a free-standing totem." Rick Kobus, senior principal of Tsoi/Kobus, said. "It defines an urban moment in the Back Bay, causing you to slow down and contemplate the space."

Doug Gensler, managing director of Gensler, says the Hancock Tower "literally reflects what's around it, whether it's buildings or the sky. It has elegance and lightness that doesn't overwhelm."

It's academic

The Boston Public Library, designed by Charles Follen McKim, "is a beautiful adaptation of an Italian palazzo," says Dan Perruzzi of Margulies & Associates.

"The courtyard is an amazing respite from the urban surroundings. The interior is filled with significant works of art," he said.

Kobus praised the library for its classic elegance, its nobility, and "the aspirations it conveys: learning, knowledge and the public's interaction with those."

Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center at Harvard University was "immensely fresh and new in its time," according to Neil Middleton, a principal with TRO Jung/Brannen. In 1963 when it was built, the use of concrete slabs was not in fashion, particularly among the other brick buildings of Harvard. A ramp cuts through the middle of the building, enabling visitors to enter or simply go pass through the building. Lots of glass enables someone inside to "experience the outside."

"The whole notion of where a building begins and ends is not linear in this building; it's diaphanous," Middleton said

Jeff Stein, head of the school of architecture at Boston Architectural College, says Simmons Hall at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology "looks like a sponge." Designed by Steven Holl, its rows of tiny, cubic windows make the city-block-long building look porous. The window heads and jambs are painted in

bright colors, each color representing a maximum engineering stress load. The wide swath of concrete is covered by a metal skin. When the sun rises and begins to warm up the metal facade, the metal expands and begins to click.

"It's a wonderful experience to hear the building wake up," Stein said.

The Design Research Building in Cambridge, designed by Benjamin Thompson, "has an amazing impact on the streetscape," says Angela Watson, principal with Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott. Longtime home of Crate & Barrel, it's glass from floor to ceiling, making the activity inside visible from the outside.

"It has a sense of humanity to it," says Watson. "It's an icon, a place or marker that helps you remember where you are in the city."

Boston gets bolder

Even with all of the construction problems that have come to a head of late, the Institute of Contemporary Art is still a bold design for a city like Boston, which is becoming more open to contemporary designs, according to Tony Hsiao, principal and director of design at Finegold Alexander & Associates.

"The architects (Diller Scofidio & Renfro) paid homage to the water's edge and created a landmark," Hsiao said.

Holly Cratsley, principal of Nashawtuc Architects in Concord, is also a fan.

"It's a building that stands out and beats its chest -- it draws attention just because of its architecture," she said.

Cratsley also picks the high-profile Genzyme Center in Cambridge, which has long been touted as a prime local example of sustainable design.

"You can tell it's not a normal building," she said. "I love buildings that have a mission other than providing space for offices. Its mission is to be green."

The building features an abundance of glass, an atrium and gardens. An abundance of natural light washes through the inside with plenty of open areas.

"It's uplifting," Watson of Shepley Bulfinch said. She notes the asymmetrical quality of the facade. Elements seem "more free and loose -- things are not necessarily centered around the building's axis."