



Asheville's Award Winners

By Peter Austin

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Asheville's Award Winners

Mention the architecture of Asheville and many, especially those from elsewhere, will think first of America's finest castle, the Biltmore House, designed by Richard Morris Hunt, one of the country's most prominent architects of the last half of the 19th century. Others might think of the large core of buildings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that make Asheville different from most other small cities in the Southeast.

More knowledgeable ones might think of the works of individual architects like Douglas Ellington or Richard Sharp Smith, or they might know of the contributions, nationally and elsewhere, of the designer and builder Rafael Guastavino, buried in his final project, St. Lawrence Basilica.

But there are also a handful of buildings, some well known, some on side streets, that were designed by architects whom the nation's other architects chose to honor with their highest award, the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architecture (A.I.A.). Asheville has at least three such buildings, and others have been designed for





Asheville's Award Winners

the area but were never built.

The first such building in Asheville was Trinity Episcopal Church, downtown on Church Street. It was designed by Bertram G. Goodhue, then with the firm of Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson, and was built between 1912 and 1915, supervised by local architect William H. Lord.



Trinity Episcopal Church

For someone who did not have a particularly long life (he died at the age of 55) Goodhue was identified with a wide range of styles, from Spanish Colonial Revival earlier in his career to muscular examples





Asheville's Award Winners

of the Gothic Revival. He was considered a leading interpreter of the latter style, which he use in the John D. Rockefeller Chapel of the University of Chicago and the chapel at West Point, and which he also chose for Trinity Church in Asheville, to replace a building destroyed by fire.

At the time of his death in 1924, he was at work on his largest project, the Nebraska State Capital. That project, interestingly enough, also provided a great deal of work for the R. Guastavino Co., then headed by the elder Guastavino's son, also named Rafael. Goodhue had them make and install large decorative tile mosaics designed by Hildreth Meiere, which used figures of Native Americans and locally cultivated plants to reflect the culture of the state.

But Goodhue and the Guastavinos had worked together on many projects before, and no architect used the thin tile vaulting that the Guastavinos specialized in with more intelligence and creativity than Goodhue did. He was awarded the medal posthumously, in 1925.





Asheville's Award Winners

The second structure was the more modest Dr. Sprinza Wizenblatt house on a street near Beaver Lake in North Asheville, designed by Marcel Breuer in the International style and built in 1940-41, with local supervision by local architect Anthony Lord, son of William H. Lord.

Born in Hungary, Breuer had emigrated to the United States in 1937 and joined his long time associate Walter Gropius at the Harvard School of Architecture and, sometimes, at Black Mountain College, where they had collaborated on designs for campus buildings, which were not built.

Prior to this, Breuer had a long association with Germany's Bauhaus School, both as a student and teacher, and as director of the school's furniture and carpentry shops. Breuer designed furniture himself, and his chairs from the 1920s and 30s were very influential.





Asheville's Award Winners

Breuer also was known for his teaching at Harvard, whereas a popular figure he influenced the generation of American architects that followed the Second World War. But he was also known for his design of the single-family residence, and it was an example of this type of work he would provide for Asheville.

As described in *A Guide to the Historic Architecture of Western North Carolina*, by Catherine W. Bisher, et al, it is a "...straight forward and pristine design [which] combines massive blocks of rough native stone with broad, clean bands of stone and glass; the house is oriented to provide privacy from the street, with views of the woods that slope down to the rear." Breuer received the gold medal in 1968.

The largest and most visible structure by a gold medal winner is the Akzona/Biltmore Building, designed by I.M. Pei, and built in 1978–80. The modern structure of crisp white concrete and bands of glass forms the northern edge of Pack Square at the city center, and replaced an entire block of buildings that had housed many small businesses since before the turn of the century.





Asheville's Award Winners

The project was considered a major attempt to revive a flagging and somewhat decrepit downtown, funded by Asheville's only Fortune 500 company, the Akzona Corporation. After the building was completed, however, Akzona's parent firm took control of Akzona and sold the building to the Biltmore Company in the mid-1980s.



Akzona/Biltmore Building

Pei is the most prestigious architect to have designed an Asheville building. Born in 1917, his career has been long and successful, and his large firm has designed many prominent buildings around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art in Athens,





Asheville's Award Winners

the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, LeGrande Louvre in Paris and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland.

In his AIA Gold Medal tribute, Richard Guy Wilson noted that Pei has "...succeeded in domesticating radical modernism..." and that his "...buildings are immensely popular with both the general public and architects..." Pei was awarded the gold medal in 1979, and the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1983.

There were local designs by other gold medal winners, which either were never built or were of a transitory nature. Mentioned previously was the work of Breuer and Walter Gropius, himself a medal winner in 1959, at Black Mountain College in 1939–40. They had drawn plans for a large complex to be built on the edge of Lake Eden, but even though it was to be partly constructed by student and faculty labor, it called for more money than the perpetually strapped school could raise.





Asheville's Award Winners

Instead, a less costly plan for a four-building complex was proposed by A. Lawrence Kocher, an architect with an interest in the building of less expensive structures, and he supervised the construction of one part of it, the Studies Building, in 1940–41. The other sections were not built.

Another medal winner who visited Black Mountain College was Buckminster Fuller, who wore so many design hats that it's hard to settle on just one; he was an author and mathematician as well. Fuller tried to erect an early version of his Geodesic Dome at the college in 1948, also with student help, but with little success. He was awarded the medal in 1970.

And last, but hardly least, Frank Lloyd Wright designed a house for a site near Burnsville, but the owner was unable to build it because its cost exceeded his budget. The nearest work by Wright is a residence in Greenville, SC.





Asheville's Award Winners

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Asheville's Award Winners

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