

## Architecture and the Architects of Bloomfield Hills

By Hugh Aaron

Friday, January 18, 1963, Time Magazine's weekly magazine hits the shelves. The cover featured Time's iconic red border and plastered on the center of the cover in front of the plans of the Seattle Pacific Science Center was the face of architect Minoru Yamasaki; designer of among others building the World Trade Center in New York.<sup>1</sup> An architect based out of Bloomfield Hills designed the symbol of American economic power, yet he is only a small part of Bloomfield Hills' architectural legacy.

Bloomfield Hills residents have contributed greatly to the development of American art; specifically in the field of architecture. Architect Minoru Yamasaki was a resident of Bloomfield Hills and designed many buildings in the community; while another famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright was a frequent visitor and contributed to the architecture of Bloomfield Hills. Architectural movements such as the Modernist style grew and developed out of Bloomfield Hills.<sup>2</sup> This architectural influence has permeated throughout Bloomfield Hills from Temple Beth El, the Smith House, The Affleck House, and many other buildings.<sup>3</sup> The architectural influence of Bloomfield Hill cannot be overstated.

### Minoru Yamasaki

Born in Seattle Washington in 1912 to Japanese immigrants, Minoru Yamasaki grew up poor, yet held lofty aspirations.<sup>4</sup> Minoru Yamasaki would go on to graduate from the University of Washington's School of Architecture, but following a rise in Japanese hate during the 1940s, he would move east to New York.<sup>5</sup> Following the attack on Pearl Harbor Yamasaki worked to provide relief to displaced Japanese Americans in New York. After the war, Yamasaki resumed his architectural work, and in 1945

<sup>1</sup> *Architect Minoru Yamasaki*, illustration, Time, January 18, 1963, <https://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19630118,00.html>.

<sup>2</sup> M.H. Miller, "How Michigan Became the Epicenter of the Modernist Experiment," *New York Times*, September 6, 2018, [Page #], <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/06/t-magazine/michigan-modernist-architecture.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, "How Michigan,"

<sup>4</sup> . Bill Reader, "World Trade Center Architect Minoru Yamasaki Faced Discrimination, Criticism and Controversy, but His Work Elevated Design — and the Seattle Skyline," *Seattle Times* (Seattle, WA), September 9, 2021, [Page #], accessed February 23, 2024, <https://www.seattletimes.com/pacific-nw-magazine/world-trade-center-architect-minoru-yamasaki-faced-discrimination-criticism-and-controversy-but-his-work-elevated-design-and-the-seattle-skyline/>.

<sup>5</sup> Reader, "World Trade,"

he moved to Michigan.<sup>6</sup> While in Michigan Yamasaki began to hone his style and develop his philosophy of "beauty over function."<sup>7</sup>

Minoru Yamasaki moved to Bloomfield Hills in 1945 and joined the Smith, Hinchman & Grylls firm as the head of design.<sup>8</sup> A decade later he opened his architectural firm in 1955.<sup>9</sup> In opening his firm he stated, "My premise is that delight and reflection are ingredients which must be added...sunlight and shadow, form, ornament, the element of surprise are little-explored fields, barely understood by today's architects."<sup>10</sup> The use of light to enhance his buildings can be seen in Yamasaki's design of Temple Beth El, one of the largest Jewish Reform temples in the world.

Temple Beth El would prove to be one of Yamasaki's most beautiful buildings and most impactful in Bloomfield Hills, due to its impact on the local Jewish community. Minoru Yamasaki would be tasked with designing a new synagogue in Bloomfield Hills in 1973 and would take inspiration from the ancient tents of the Israelites and design the synagogue as a tent.<sup>11</sup> Temple Beth El would incorporate traditional Jewish style with Yamasaki's use of light to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Temple Beth El would embody Yamasaki's belief that "beauty through structural clarity and fidelity to technology becomes culture."<sup>12</sup> Minoru Yamasaki embodied this sentiment with his seamless blending of a simple design with new features of Modernism such as large windows to allow for ample sunlight. Temple Beth El would prove to be a tremendous architectural success and play a great role in cementing Bloomfield Hills as the home for Modernist architecture; furthermore, it solidified Minoru Yamasaki as Bloomfield Hill's most prominent architect of the day.

The presence of an architect of Minoru Yamasaki caliber put Bloomfield Hills on the map of architects all around the world. His numerous projects throughout Bloomfield Hills as well as his firm's

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<sup>6</sup> Sanae Nakatani, "Minoru Yamasaki," *Densho Encyclopedia*, [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Minoru\\_Yamasaki/#:~:text=He%20was%20known%20for%20his,to%20people's%20eyes%20and%20minds.](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Minoru_Yamasaki/#:~:text=He%20was%20known%20for%20his,to%20people's%20eyes%20and%20minds.)

<sup>7</sup> Nakatani, "Minoru Yamasaki."

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Binno Savage, "Minoru Yamasaki," The WSU Yamasaki Legacy, accessed February 22, 2024, <http://yamasaki.wayne.edu/biography.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "Our Story," Yamasaki, <http://yamasaki-inc.com/about-us/>.

<sup>10</sup> Savage, "Minoru Yamasaki," The WSU Yamasaki Legacy.

<sup>11</sup> "Temple Beth El," <https://detroithistorical.org/learn/encyclopedia-of-detroit/temple-beth-el>.

<sup>12</sup> "Yamasaki, Minoru," <https://detroithistorical.org/learn/encyclopedia-of-detroit/yamasaki-minoru>.

presence in the community served as a magnet of attention for Bloomfield Hills. It's undeniable that Minoru Yamasaki played a pivotal role in the modernist art movement; however, it's equally true that he wouldn't be remembered as such an important architect and innovator without his work in Bloomfield Hills.

## Frank Lloyd Wright

Born in Wisconsin in 1867, Frank Lloyd Wright moved frequently as a child throughout the eastern United States exposing young Wright to the diversity of architecture throughout the United States.<sup>13</sup> At age 18 Frank Lloyd Wright enrolled in the University of Wisconsin and to help afford college Wright worked for the dean of the engineering school which provided useful knowledge on the construction of buildings, however, he never graduated.<sup>14</sup> In 1893 after working for multiple firms Frank Lloyd Wright opened his own firm which would become one of the most prominent in America. Through this firm, Frank Lloyd Wright would design and build two of his most renowned homes, the Smith and Affleck houses.

Frank Lloyd Wright's connection to Bloomfield Hills begins at the illustrious Cranbrook Art Academy. Frank Lloyd Wright gave lectures at Cranbrook in 1935, 1937, and 1945, and while the transcripts of these lectures have been lost the general idea of these lectures can be gained from surviving quotes in which Frank Lloyd Wright implores the students to "Work, work, work—night and day!"<sup>15</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright embodied the hard-working Midwestern attitude that he preached. He worked tirelessly to fulfill the wishes of his clients while maintaining his unique style, which is visible in his works in Bloomfield Hills.

To understand the Affleck and Smith Houses, understanding the Usonian style is critical. Frank Lloyd Wright is considered to be the founder of the Usonian Style and it reflects elements of Frank Lloyd

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<sup>13</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, "The Life of Frank Lloyd Wright," Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, accessed February 23, 2024, <https://franklloydwright.org/frank-lloyd-wright/>.

<sup>14</sup> . Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, "The Life," Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Adkisson, "Cranbrook and Frank Lloyd Wright," Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research, last modified October 2017, accessed March 9, 2024, <https://center.cranbrook.edu/frank-lloyd-wright-smith-house-cranbrook-and-frank-lloyd-wright>.

Wright's past. Chiefly, Usonian-style homes draw many similarities to the midwestern prairie houses Wright had designed in the early 20th century, such as low and flat houses, lack of ornate features, and horizontal layouts.<sup>16</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright was motivated to create homes in this style due to the Great Depression's effect on middle-class housing and aimed to create cheap, yet aesthetically pleasing homes.<sup>17</sup> In describing his style Frank Lloyd Wright would write, "It is necessary to consolidate and simplify the three appurtenance systems — heating, lighting, and sanitation".<sup>18</sup> In these areas, Frank Lloyd Wright would innovate and liberally include features such as skylights and radiant heating; Frank Lloyd Wright's contribution to the Usonian style led many to rename it Wrightian.<sup>19</sup>

Frank Lloyd Wright's Bloomfield Hills homes are the paradigm of the Usonian style. For example, The Affleck House features a prominent skylight as well as being designed horizontally.<sup>20</sup> The Affleck House is a single-story home seamlessly blending into the ground, mirroring the horizontal nature of the Great Plains, another key feature of the Usonian style.<sup>21</sup> Examples of the Usonian style also lay in Wright's other Bloomfield Hills home, Smith House. Frank Lloyd Wright designed the home with earthy hues; a feature that was also important to him and prompted architectural unity with nature.<sup>22</sup> This unity with nature promoted the Usonian ideal of simplicity and helped the house appear fused with the earth. Frank Lloyd Wright's Bloomfield Hills Usonian homes continue to be a shining example of Bloomfield Hill's architectural importance.

For well over a century Bloomfield Hills has been at the forefront of new architectural movements. The impacts of Architects such as Minoru Yamasaki and Frank Lloyd Wright have been profound not just on Bloomfield Hills but the world as a whole. With Bloomfield Hill's storied

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<sup>16</sup> "Usonian-Style House," Mansion Global, last modified March 23, March, <https://www.mansionglobal.com/library/usonian-style-house#:~:text=Usonian%20homes%20were%20most%20often,to%20as%20%E2%80%9Cgravity%20heat.%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>17</sup> "Usonian-Style House," Mansion Global.

<sup>18</sup> Jackie Craven, "What Is a Usonian House?," ThoughtCo., last modified July 3, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/usonian-style-home-frank-lloyd-wright-177787>.

<sup>19</sup> "Usonian-Style House," Mansion Global.

<sup>20</sup> Feighan, "Affleck House," Detroit News.

<sup>21</sup> "Affleck House," Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, accessed March 11, 2024, <https://franklloydwright.org/site/affleck-house/>.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Peck, "How the Smiths Brought a Frank Lloyd Wright House to Bloomfield Hills," Seen the Magazine, last modified April 1, 2019, accessed March 11, 2024, [https://www.seenthemagazine.com/homes/design\\_decor/how-the-smiths-brought-a-frank-lloyd-wright-house-to-bloomfield-hills/article\\_004d1233-1443-50f8-ae99-dfdae734ff.html](https://www.seenthemagazine.com/homes/design_decor/how-the-smiths-brought-a-frank-lloyd-wright-house-to-bloomfield-hills/article_004d1233-1443-50f8-ae99-dfdae734ff.html).

architectural history, it's undoubtable that it will continue to remain at the forefront of modern architecture.

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