

The valley's top modern architecture

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A few weeks ago, I did a piece on historic preservation that took a counterintuitive approach: I set forward a list of buildings that we really shouldn't save, even as they edged toward the 45-year mark that would give them some protection.

Today, a few days after Thanksgiving, it's time for the opposite side of the coin. Which buildings or places from this generation should we save? What are the best pieces of architecture in Silicon Valley over the past 35 years or so?

A few caveats first: I'm not a professional critic, which is probably just as well. My bias leans toward public buildings. We pay for them. And with a couple of exceptions, I care more about the space between buildings, and how they relate to one another, than I do about iconic structures.

Here, then, in no particular order, are my eight nominees:

Plaza de Cesar Chavez - Now that the fountains are working again, the plaza is without question the jewel of San Jose's downtown, the place you'd most want to see on a poster. It combines history with a clever twist in the grid of sidewalks. Somehow the park makes all the buildings around it better. Landscape architects: Hargreaves Associates.

Stephen Schott Stadium - A baseball park on a list of the valley's best architecture? Well, yes. The 6,800-seat stadium, on the edge of the Santa Clara University campus off the El Camino Real, is not just nicely appointed, with great sight lines and comfortable seats. Against the backdrop of new university housing in right and center fields, the \$8.6 million stadium also seems as if it belongs where it is, in the same way Camden Yards belongs to Baltimore. Architects: HOK Sport.

San Jose Marriott Hotel - The slender downtown Marriott illustrates what can happen when an architect is forced to work creatively with a tight site. Its color, style and elegant window treatments make the 504-room hotel stand out, particularly when viewed from the north. I'm less wild about the Scandinavian-wood style of the interior, which has little to do with San Jose. But the curved walkway facing the convention center plaza is memorable. Architect: Hornberger & Worstell.

Central Park Library, Santa Clara - Libraries have gotten lots of attention from architects recently: A few of the branch libraries in San Jose, particularly Rose Garden and Almaden, are standouts. Santa Clara's \$37 million main library sets the gold standard. It's handsome from the outside - blue tile roof and pavilion-style architecture. And the inside of the 80,000-square-foot building is simply stunning, with intelligent use of windows and the latest in high-tech connections. Architects: Smith, Fause & McDonald and Group Four Architects of South San Francisco.

The Googleplex, formerly SGI - This might be the exception to my rule. Most Silicon Valley corporate headquarters are too utilitarian (Hewlett-Packard) or too self-aggrandizing (Oracle) to count. But the part of Google's Mountain View campus that once was the headquarters for Silicon Graphics, later SGI, is an iconic piece of Silicon Valley architecture that

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should be preserved at all costs. The high ceilings, exposed ducts and lack of right angles fix it as different. Original architect: Studios Architecture.

Circle of Palms - After the Plaza de Cesar Chavez, this was ex-Redevelopment Chief Frank Taylor's second great triumph of downtown public space. Now the holiday home of Downtown Ice, the square is wedged between the Museum of Art and the Fairmont Hotel. Its proportions are right, the history is engraved in the pavement and it remains a superb place for people-watching. Architect: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Credit also Tom Aidala, then-architecture guru for the redevelopment agency.

Mountain View Civic Center - The center that includes City Hall and Mountain View's performing arts center was made to look like an Italian piazza, with salmon-colored buildings and a gray-green tile roof. The story is that it wound up being more ornate than the architect wanted. But it all works, from the open spaces to the vaulting interior of the 77,000-square-foot City Hall. It's been the centerpiece of downtown Mountain View's revival. Architect: William Turnbull.

60 S. Market St., San Jose - Done cheaply, modernistic design can be very bad: Think of the schlock put up in the 1970s, which made up the bulk of my don't-save list. Done well, it can approach song: That's what I think of the 15-story granite office building opened in 1986 at 60 S. Market St., which works because it gently repeats its themes as it steps back from the street (best seen from the air). A quality urban building that works well with its neighbors and offers ground-floor shops as part of its garage. Architect: Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum

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