



An Interview with Dan Protesse and Geoffrey Baer

Q: How did the idea of 10 Buildings That Changed America come about?

A: Most Americans never give a second thought to their built environment. They don't ask themselves, "Who built this? How does this building affect me? How does it fit into the fabric of my city?" It's almost as if these landmarks were handed down from God.

But the buildings around us have a powerful effect on our daily lives. They can enliven or deaden the street and the community, they can make our work and errands more convenient or annoyingly complicated and they can help or hurt the environment.

Yet getting people to care about architecture and design, to stop and think about their built environment — even for a second — is a huge challenge.

We asked ourselves: "How do we get Americans to think about these things?" *10 Buildings That Changed America* was our answer.

Q: Why a list of ten buildings? Is that a magic number?

First, we know people love lists. You can't open a magazine or go online without seeing a list of "America's ten most educated cities" or "the ten greatest rock songs of all time".

People love lists because there's an inherent dramatic tension in them. What's going to be next on the list? Did my favorite building make the list? How dare they not include my favorite building on the list!

Second, we chose this concept because it serves as a kind of one-stop shopping for architectural history. Sure, we could have done a ten-part, ten-hour series about American architecture, but would anyone watch?

Q: What were some of the criteria you used in selecting the buildings?

The criteria we used were wide-ranging and expansive. We want to be clear first that this is not a "10 Best" List. It's also not the ten buildings that changed America. This list should serve as a conversation-starter, not the end of the discussion.

We gave ourselves a few ground rules: The design of each structure had to be considered groundbreaking in its time because of the architect's stylistic or functional innovations, or because the architect used existing architectural language in innovative ways.

Each building had to prove highly influential — inspiring future architects and making a visible impact on America's built environment.

Each building had to be uniquely American in some way. Viewed collectively, the ten buildings illustrate how Americans have used architecture to express their nation's identity since 1776, exploring the question, "What should an American building look like?"

The ten buildings represent a variety of time periods, styles, and geographic regions. Some are located in major metropolises; others are in mid-sized cities and suburban settings.

No two buildings were chosen from the same architect or even the same city.

We decided that all of the buildings would be extant buildings in America, though the architects need not be American.

Monuments, communities, campuses, developments, and landscape architecture were not considered.

They represent a variety of uses, from public buildings to houses of worship, from office buildings to homes, from airport terminals to factories and concert halls.

We also wanted to shine a light on several lesser-known buildings — structures that have had little to no exposure on PBS or other networks.

Some people have asked about the Triangle Shirtwaist factory, which changed the laws about how factories were built, or the World Trade Center, but we didn't select buildings because of the events that occurred in them. The buildings we included were chosen because they impacted our built environment.

And lastly, the buildings helped choose themselves. They had fascinating stories to tell — about the people who made them and why they were built, the families that lived in them, what happened after they were built and how they changed our lives.

Q: Did you consult with any other experts or architects to come up with your list?

Yes, we had a panel of advisors. We asked the opinions of 16 architects and historians from across the country, all of whom offered completely divergent lists. From those lists we compiled a list of about 100 buildings, and then started the difficult task of winnowing it down to just ten. It was a painful process!

Q: What would you like people to take away after watching the program?

We want people to look around their cities and towns and think about the structures they live with every day. Many people don't know the history of the buildings in their communities, who made them and why they were built. We live in Chicago and people say, "Are you including the Hancock Building? Or Soldier Field?" And we'll say, "No, but the Robie House made the list." And they aren't familiar with it.

Or in St. Louis we'll tell them we were including the Wainwright Building and they'd never heard of it.

Sure, we want architecture buffs to enjoy the show, but we also wanted to create something that would appeal to people who were less knowledgeable about architecture, who perhaps don't think about their built environment, and to introduce these concepts to that audience and perhaps younger viewers who are unfamiliar with architecture and design.

We have a place on our web site where everyone can suggest their favorite buildings — creating a dialogue is something we always wanted to do.

Our hope is that this program is the start of a larger conversation about our built environment. Again, it's not the end of the conversation — it's the beginning.

Q: Do you have plans to continue the series?

We'd love to. We'll be taking a look at those comments on the web site, and talking to people at screenings and events around the country over the next few months. We're curious to see what people have to say, what they think, and what other ideas they might have.