

IN PERSPECTIVE

SPRING 2026

LOVE IT OR HATE IT

Architecture is often held to be public art that we cannot escape. As such, it can generate controversy. Consider Simmons Hall, a student residence on the MIT campus in Boston, Massachusetts.

In 2004 the Boston Society of Architects awarded it the Harleston Parker Medal which has been bestowed annually since 1923 on the “most beautiful piece of architecture, building, monument or structure” in the Boston area. A great honour to be sure.

And, in 2025, Simmons Hall was the inaugural winner of the annual *Aesthetic Atrocity Award*, given to the “ugliest new building in the United States” by the Architectural Uprising, an international populist organization based in Sweden. What are we to make of this?

Since in everyday experience one observes that many individuals form their own opinions, any subjective question is likely to yield a range of answers. Nevertheless, the distribution within that range and whose opinions have been included can be important. It is doubtful that the selection of the winners for either of the above-mentioned awards had a significant statistical base. Most people did not have a say.

A SURVEY

Perhaps it was the wish to be consulted that generated considerable interest at the CMA’s 2025 summer exhibition in an interactive display that sought opinions

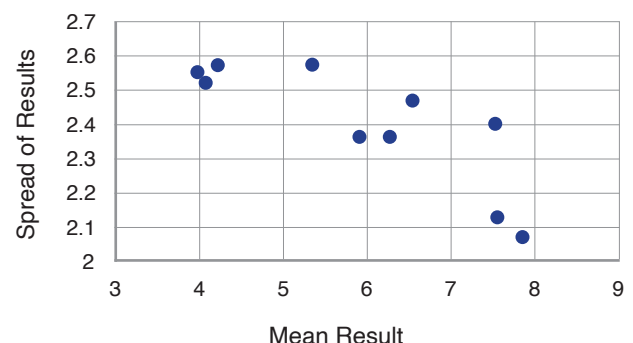
on the attractiveness of buildings. A computer application presented images of structures to viewers and then collected their ratings anonymously. The average score, as well as the spread of results, for each building were then calculated automatically by the system. The results of the survey are shown below.



Simmons Hall by Steven Holl Architects, completed in 2002.

The average score is a measure of the overall appeal of each building, allowing comparisons between them. The spread of results assesses the degree of unanimity amongst respondents for that building. A low spread suggests that there is a high level of consensus in the replies, while a large spread indicates more disagreement.

Our objective was to include a variety of buildings in the survey, but otherwise there were no defined selection criteria except that a public domain image would be available.



The correlation of the mean result for each building to the spread of results for that building.

While it was expected that some buildings would be better liked than others it was a surprise to find that the higher the attractiveness rating of a building, the smaller the spread of results, as shown in the plot. In other words, the audience seemed to be more united in evaluating a building as attractive but less so in calling it unattractive. It would be interesting to explore this observation further.

Although, at 625, the sample size of the CMA survey was small, it did serve as a proof of concept for a means to obtain an opinion from a broader base than a select committee and also provide a measure of consensus on the result.

Questions about the attractiveness of buildings are usually based on their external appearance. However, less visible factors such as useability, the quality of construction and, more recently, environmental friendliness, also serve as bases for evaluation. With cultural shifts, changes over time are also to be expected.

The contentious issue of the aesthetics of architecture has been debated for millennia. As the built environment gradually replaces the natural environment how well we like the buildings we create becomes an increasingly relevant question.

RESULTS

The results of the CMA Architectural Aesthetics survey. 625 sets of responses were obtained on these 10 buildings.	 Mean 7.9 Spread 2.1 The Curtis Meyer House, Michigan, USA	 Mean 7.6 Spread 2.1 Isenberg Innovations Hub, Univ. Mass., USA	 Mean 7.5 Spread 2.4 Fogo Island Inn, Newfoundland, Canada
 Mean 6.5 Spread 2.5 U.S. Air Force Academy Chapel, Colorado, USA	 Mean 6.3 Spread 2.4 Wabano Indigenous Centre, Ottawa, Canada	 Mean 5.9 Spread 2.4 High Park Apartments, Mexico City, Mexico	 Mean: 5.3 Spread: 2.6 Epicenter Apartments, Seattle, USA
 Mean 4.2 Spread 2.6 Johannes XXIII Church, Cologne, Germany	 Mean 4.1 Spread 2.5 McMaster University Medical Centre, Canada	 Mean 4.0 Spread 2.6 Tuzla Bank, Bosnia and Herzegovina	Scores were recorded in arbitrary units on a scale of 1 to 10. Spread was determined as the standard deviation.

- Peter Brueckner

References

Creating Life from a Sponge: The Pre-history of Simmons Hall by Jeff Roberts. April 2, 2004.

"Simmons Hall, MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts." Photograph taken by Daderot, September 2005. commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Simmons_Hall,_MIT,_Cambridge,_Massachusetts.JPG