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Architects laud Bell Labs building's innovation

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KEYPORT BUREAU

HOLMDEL — Seth A. Leeb believes the now-empty Bell Labs office has as much historical significance as the Gateway Arch in St. Louis.

Bell Labs is a key symbol of America's technological progress, just as the Gateway Arch celebrates the western expansion of the 19th century, according to Leeb, president of the New Jersey chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

"It was a building that took the latest technology at the time," Leeb said. "The design of the building, having these giant atriums and these facilities that fostered technological research" made it cutting-edge.

The 2 million-square-foot research facility on Crawfords Corner Road, with a mirrored-glass exterior, was constructed in 1962 and expanded in 1966 and 1982. It was designed by famed Finnish architect Eero Saarinen. Saarinen was the mastermind behind the St. Louis Gateway Arch and the TWA terminal at John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Lakewood developer Ralph Zucker signed a deal this August to buy the complex from Alcatel-Lucent, the corporate parent of Bell Labs.

Officials at Zucker's company, Somerset Development, are working on creating a plan for the redevelopment of the massive structure, which they intend to present to the Holmdel community within the next few weeks.

Zucker said the complex's history will be part of plans to use the buildings for offices, conference centers, health facilities and recreation.

"There are some monuments there around the site, we will try our best to keep those," Zucker said in an interview. "Our approach will be to open the building up to the public. Some of the memorabilia and history we'd

like to display at the site. The answer is yes, but we don't have definitive plans."

Architects consider the building a landmark. Michael Calafati, historic resources chairman of AIA's New Jersey chapter, said Saarinen shaped the future with his completely new and innovative designs.

"Bell Labs is a survivor of a time when American technological prowess was unsurpassed, namely in the generations immediately following World War II," Calafati said.

"The architecture of Bell Labs was both reflected and fostered the innovation behind this power ... but the Bell Labs building itself is the vessel of innovation of the technology we take for granted today," Calafati said.

The quarter-mile-long rectangular building — where 5,600 people were employed as recently as 2000, and where Nobel laureates Arno Penzias and Robert W. Wilson once worked — pioneered the use of reflective glass in curtain wall construction, the hallmark of modern architecture, Calafati said.

The exterior glass "greatly reduced solar heat gain," Calafati said. "The layout of interior office and lab space provided extreme flexibility in the arrangement of spaces that could adapt as needs changed."

Retirees of Bell Labs, such as Matt Balkovic, 70, of Holmdel and Gerry MacPherson, 60, of Tinton Falls, said they would like to see the elegance of the building preserved.

Balkovic began working as an engineer for Bell Labs from 1960 until his retirement as director in 1998. MacPherson was a third generation Bell Labs employee who worked there 34 years. He started in 1968 as a draftsman and worked his way up to a senior technical associate.

"I really hope that the people

that are looking at the building right now find a way to productively use (it)," Balkovic said. "I would really like to see the building reused for a lot of reasons."

Larry Chase of Alaska remembers his introduction to the building.

"Shortly after beginning my Bell Labs career, I drove to Holmdel to get a guided tour," Chase said. "I was blown away by the huge atrium, seven stories high, and its enormous hanging plantings, indoor rock gardens, etc. 'Impressive, right?' said the scientist who was showing me around. 'This is how God would have designed the Garden of Eden if He'd had an unlimited budget.'"

Sitting on 473 acres off Crawfords Corner Road, the facility that housed Bell Labs is deemed eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Holmdel Committeewoman Janet Berk said the building has an historical importance to the community because so many people in the township were employed there. Redeveloping the building, Berk said, is probably the best way to go because it offers lots of potential and help for the township's tax base.

The terms of the agreement between Alcatel-Lucent and Somerset Development for the purchase of the building are confidential.

Zucker said that he hopes the township will approve a plan that is "profitable and sustainable."

Despite the building's history, "no one is going to buy it to make it a museum," Zucker said.

Preferred Real Estate Investments in Conshohocken, Pa., contracted to purchase the Bell Labs building in March 2006. But before the deal could be sealed last November, Preferred backed out of the contract without explanation.

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