Architect John Desmond has left his imprint on the Baton Rouge skyline. Among the buildings he has designed or helped design are the LSU Union, the city-parish governmental complex, the Louisiana State Library, the Catholic Life Center, the State Archives Building, the Centroplex, the Louisiana Arts and Science Center and the Pennington Biomedical Research Center.

But Desmond, 65, says his best work is still to come.

"Architecture is an old man's game," he says. "Frank Lloyd Wright worked till he was 90. You learn more as you go along."

As a young man, Desmond had no intentions of becoming an architect. The son of a newspaperman, Desmond ex-

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At his work station

Town has nothing but praise for Desmond.

"I don't think anyone ever worked for me with the native talent John had," Town says. "John is a man of great integrity, and in my opinion, he is one of the finest architects in the country."

In 1950, Desmond established his own practice in Hammond.

One of his first projects was to build a "simple little frame house" for his mother in Hammond. He and his brother cleared the lot, used dynamite to get rid of tree stumps and took sand from a nearby river for the concrete foundation.

"It was nothing to look at," he says of the house.

Desmond designed and built other homes in the Hammond area, including a home for a man who later became chairman of the state Library Board.

The man was impressed by Desmond's work, and when it came time to hire an architect to design a new state library, Desmond was asked to apply.

He now says that job, more than any other, helped establish his reputation as an architect.

One of his next big jobs came when he was selected to design the LSU Union.

He knew immediately that he wanted the Union to be more than a place where students bought books and ate meals.

"I thought it should be a social meeting place, with theaters and art galleries, really the living room of the campus," he says.

The Union site — known on campus at that time as "sloppy hollow" — was sloped and in the middle of a grove of oak trees. Not only was it a rare thing to find a sloped site in Louisiana, Desmond made certain to take advantage of the landscape.

"I put the rooms around the perimeter so you could look out at the trees," he says. "And I raised the main floor to the second level so you could look out at the land. It was a simple concept."

The Union received its share of kudos. The book The Architecture of the United States praises the design of the Union and claims it is a fun building to use.

Bob Heck, alumni professor of architecture at LSU, says the Union "was a major step in terms of contemporary architecture."

Desmond says the Union, like many of his other buildings, is made to last.

"The whole stream of modern architecture is to take the functional elements and make them handsome, expose them, and try to organize them so they are the visible things," he says. "But, first and foremost, you want to make a good building. The Pennington building, the State Archives, they're low-maintenance, permanent-type buildings."

One of Desmond's toughest assignments was designing the city-parish governmental complex.

If there was not talk of a library or park-landscape. Desmond also has a talent for sketching and his drawings range from antebellum homes to medieval cities. In 1970, Clairtor's published a book of his sketches, Louisiana's Antebellum Architecture.

"I think it is one of the great architectural delineators, not only in Baton Rouge, but anywhere," says William Burks, an LSU architecture professor who worked at Desmond's firm for 14 years.

In the future, Desmond says he would like to design a hospital complex — "they usually wind up being a pretty ugly group of buildings" — but will avoid designing a prison.

"I would say that almost everything about a prison is negative."

To date, he lists the new State Archives Building, the Pennington Biomedical Research Center and a research center under construction at Tulane as three of the best buildings he has designed.

What's frustrating, he says, is seeing the Pennington building stand empty because the state does not have the money to operate it.

"Some people have called it the best research facility in the country. I don't know how good it is until they start using it."

The most enjoyment comes when you see a building work," he says. "Just to see it doing its function, that's the fun of it."