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Shaping the City

By Roger K. Lewis, *Washington Post Columnist*
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Chicago Gets Gold Medal for Design

Chicago's 2016 Olympics bid was rejected, but the city hardly needs the Olympics. Chicago 2009 is already uniquely "Olympian" thanks to its soaring urban architecture and architectural legacy, its skyscraper-flanked downtown river, its Lake Michigan waterfront and its beautiful public parks.

Chicago is "my kind of town" and a kind of Mecca for many architects. Even if you are not an architecture aficionado, you can't help appreciating the Windy City's size and scale, bustling street life, aesthetic bravado and innovative design traditions.

And Chicago is not just a magnet for architects. Unlike residents of most other American cities, Chicagoans generally seem more knowledgeable about and more proudly respectful of their well-publicized architectural heritage. A conversation topic on a par with politics, sports and weather, Chicago's old and new buildings, along with the city's architectural heroes, get star billing and are among the city's top attractions.

Horizontal and vertical size is the most visible of Chicago's unique urban and architectural characteristics.

The Chicago metropolitan area stretches for dozens of square miles north, south and west of the lakefront. Like metropolitan Washington, Chicago is a sprawling mosaic of diverse municipalities, villages and neighborhoods. Fortunately, they are woven together by extensive networks of roads and transit.

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Chicago's downtown is huge, and during the past 20 years it has grown even larger. High-density commercial and residential real estate development has spread along scores of blocks to the north and south. Chicago's well-known Loop, the central business district encompassed by the century-old elevated transit line, today constitutes a small percentage of downtown.

Central Chicago is blessed with a rational grid plan of north-south and east-west streets forming comfortably walkable city blocks. And many east-west Chicago streets, perpendicular to the lakefront, afford views of the lake and lakefront parks.

But it's Chicago's vertical dimensions that are most awe-inspiring.

The city is famous for tall buildings, although its urban fabric is layered in height. The oldest layer of buildings, constructed after the 1871 fire that destroyed the city, are only a few stories high. With the advent of Otis's elevator, America's first skyscrapers -- short by today's standards -- appeared in Chicago. Instead of thick masonry-bearing walls, multi-story buildings were structured using steel skeletons to which non-bearing curtain walls of glass, terra cotta, brick, stone and metal could be attached.

Chicago lays claim to inventing the skyscraper, with authorship attributed to local engineers and architects. Their turn-of-the-century designs and aesthetic language became known around the world as the Chicago School.

Subsequently, buildings grew larger and soared higher as construction materials and structural technology advanced, and as land values and real estate market opportunities increased. The Sears Tower (recently renamed the Willis Tower), built in 1973 and reaching over 100 stories, was for many years the tallest building in the world. Half a century earlier, Chicago's Merchandise Mart was briefly the world's largest building in floor area.

Varying greatly in height, mass, geometric composition and materials, Chicago's buildings exhibit every architectural style and decorative motif: neoclassic, Victorian gothic, Romanesque, art nouveau, art deco and limitless varieties of 20th-century modernism.

Observing the city via the Chicago River is equally memorable. Threading through the heart of downtown, the river is one of America's most extraordinary urban spaces, a veritable architectural fiord. Countless historic and modern buildings rise next to the river. Whether on a boat or riverside promenade, you can readily perceive the city's fabric of streets and blocks, in part thanks to the iconic steel-truss drawbridges spanning the river at each street.

It's easy to understand why architects are such heroes in Chicago. Recall some of the talents who produced original work there during the late 19th and the 20th century: Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Daniel Burnham and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Architects following in their footsteps include Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as well as Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, designers of more Chicago skyscrapers than any other firm.

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A few years ago, Frank Gehry arrived on the lakefront scene with his trademark stainless steel shingles to design the curvaceously exuberant Jay Pritzker Pavilion, a band shell, in fabulous Millennium Park, along with the BP Bridge snaking its way from the park over a road and eastward toward the lake.

Celebrated architect Renzo Piano recently designed the latest addition to the Art Institute of Chicago, immediately adjacent to Millennium Park. The museum's new wing is rectilinear and rational, glass and pure white metal, elegantly composed and immaculately detailed. Its cool, controlled geometry contrasts sharply with the exploding form of Gehry's visually hot pavilion rising in the park a few hundred yards to the north.

The museum addition and Millennium Park, completed five years ago after substantial delays and huge cost overruns, reaffirm a Chicago tradition: Architecture and architects deserve to be front and center.

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When you realize that an elevator is a vertical Metro-rail — bringing pedestrians from one place to another with no car and no bus — you begin to understand just what a strategic role design can play in creating healthier more vital places.

We cannot solve our transportation problems by building more roads.

The simplest remedy to America's number one health problem — obesity — is simply walk more.

It is time that we build places smarter. We must maximize the sources and destinations of pedestrians within walking distance of rail stations. Design is the most important attribute.

Inserting tall thin buildings among short older buildings is the most intelligent way to grow an old urban neighborhood in a smart growth TOD (Transit Oriented Development) fashion without destroying it at the same time.

Neither the horizontal rail nor the vertical rail make sense without the other. They both need each other.

Please visit the Woodmont Triangle page of the website www.VirtualAdjacency.com and look at sections 9, 14, 26, 27, 28a. This will energize your brain — step one to getting your imagination in focus per Mark Twain's advice (see the Front Cover on the same web page.)

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