

Architecture: Sullivan's Powerful, Inspired Legacy

54 Drawings Shown in Low Library

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IN Chicago, the Garrick Theater is gone. In Salt Lake City, the Dooly Block is down. New York's Bayard Building has been defaced by remodeling.

Real estate and parking lots are taking their inexorable toll of the works of Louis Sullivan, one of this country's — and history's — greatest architects, the man who bridged the architectural revolution of the 19th and 20th centuries, fathered the skyscraper, and taught Frank Lloyd Wright.

At Columbia University, an exhibition of 54 fragile Sullivan drawings opening this evening commemorates the genius whose massive buildings are more vulnerable than these bits of yellowed paper with their delicate calligraphy.

On public display for the first time, the sketches are part of a group of 122 drawings that Sullivan gave to Wright just before he died in 1924. They were purchased recently for the Avery Library collection at Columbia from Wright's widow, with the help of a foundation grant. The price was high enough to make real estate men blanch. Chalk it up as one of those ironies of modern values that fascinate our cultural historians.

By another irony, the exhibition is installed in the rotunda of the Low Memorial Library on the Columbia campus, that choice piece of Roman megalomania by Sullivan's architectural arch-enemies at the turn of the century, McKim, Mead and White.

This New York firm stood for everything that looked classically, expensively and safely backwards when American building was in a turmoil of radical development. Sullivan faced forward: he was a prophet and poet of modern architecture and one of its notable American pioneers. Eccentric, inspired,



Louis Sullivan's drawing of a detail of design for gilded plaster in the first McVicker's Theater in Chicago.

stubbornly original, lover and victim of life in the best tradition of his Irish heritage, he possessed the powerful creative flame that belongs to a limited number of men in any age.

A few pencil strokes on a letterhead delineate the definitive solution of a skyscraper, that challenging new building type of the 1890's that reduced strong architects to esthetic weaklings. An inch of light lines sketched on the back of a calling card evokes the grandeur of great building.

These small, important, fragmentary, almost gossa-

mer pencil drawings, which will be on view through Feb. 10, are predominantly of Sullivan's famous and often controversial architectural ornaments. Its lush, interlaced jungle of geometric organic and whiplash forms enriched and defined his buildings as a kind of signature and trademark.

His contemporaries thought his ornament saved his off-beat solutions from cold and incomprehensible unfamiliarity. His heirs of the 1930's rejected it as traditional trimming and preferred to admire the bare upper stories of his buildings.

Today, we return to it with

Columbia Exhibits Part of Rare Sketches

gratitude for its undeniable sensuous beauty, seeing it as the catalyst between structure and expression that made Sullivan's famous dictum "form follows function" neither the sterile nor the limited doctrine of its later interpreters.

The drawings on view range from early sketches made when Sullivan was at the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris in the 1870's, through decorative studies for his masterpieces in the 1880's and '90's. There are details for the Auditorium Building, McVicker's and Garrick Theaters and Getty Tomb in Chicago; the Transportation Building at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair; the Guaranty Building in Buffalo; the Wainwright Tomb in St. Louis.

The designs were translated into filigreed friezes and cartouches, panels and borders of plaster, bronze, terra cotta and gilded wood. In Sullivan's own words, "hard lines flow into graceful curves, angularities disappear in a mystical blending of surfaces."

When the Garrick Theater was demolished in the early 1960's, pieces of its ornament went to museums across the country. Bootlegged bits are prized by private collectors. The story of modern architecture after Sullivan is the search for the way back to the logic, strength, sensitivity and richness of his early, still unbettered solutions.