ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A Major Chicago Firm At Its Centennial

It probably shouldn't, but it still comes as something of a surprise to find American architectural firms celebrating their 100th anniversaries. Last year it was the centennial of the founding of the firm of McKim, Mead and White, which coincided nicely with what might be called the rediscovery of their work. Rediscovery is probably the wrong word, since McKim, Mead and White buildings have continued to be an important part of the public consciousness — consisting, as they do, of a large number of monumental public and institutional structures of the late 19th and early 20th century. What made the occasion special was a kind of McKim, Mead and White revival for a younger generation, a reevaluation that recognized the firm's sophisticated and skillful use of the academic, classical tradition that was consigned to the dust heap by the modernists and remained generally untouchable for the last 50 years. That renewed and generous appreciation made a very nice birthday party.

The most recent centennial celebrant is the Chicago firm of Holabird and Root, which, as Holabird and Roche, was central to the development of the skyscraper in the 30 years from 1880 to 1910, and to what is known, internationally, as the Chicago School.

Probably no single firm reflects more accurately the complete span of American architectural practice over the last 100 years, which includes a varied and quite valid sequence of styles. It has had its esthetic ups and downs. The office began with the pragmatic and innovative emphasis on engineering and esthetic clarity that characterized the early Chicago skyscrapers, which changed to the fashionable and sometimes tortured eclectic conceits with which tall buildings were clothed just before and after World War I. This was followed by the original and elegant "modernistic," or Art Deco, designs of the 1930's, and then a return to something akin to the early structural pragmatism in the "modernism" that followed World War II.

As appreciative as I am of the grand achievements of McKim, Mead and White, give or take a fair number of impressive potboilers, I find myself more interested in the vicissitudes of the Holabird and Root story. It lacks the lordly masterworks of the Eastern establishment firm, but it tells us a good deal more about invention, adaptability, changing taste and the struggle to survive as part of the American architectural mainstream.

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I like the kind of tradition in which two and three generations of distinguished architectural names like Holabird (father, son and grandson in the one Chicago firm) and Root (father and son, anchoring two Chicago firms), continued to practice in the same city — particularly a city that has claimed to deal primarily in progress and change. I like it better than the instant, academic tradition in which a firm like McKim, Mead and White wrapped itself so splendidly and successfully for a borrowed style of life and design, that descended into spiritless aridity in the work of its later members.

Holabird and Root produced sound rather than spectacular buildings. Even at its time of greatest strength, from 1880 to 1910, there were other firms and individuals in Chicago, from William Le Baron Jenney to Louis Sullivan, who made the great leaps forward in structure and style. But if other architects built greater buildings, few built consistently better ones. The office's claim to fame is based on that most interesting and important chapter in American architectural history, the development of the skyscraper, a field of design and construction in which it held a leadership position for a surprisingly long time. There were changes in partners and philosophy over the years, but it continued to produce top-rank tall buildings right through the 1920's and 30's.

Chicago's great contributions in the 1880's and 90's were the technological achievements of steel-frame construction and related engineering, and the handsome visual expression of that new technology. The Chicago Style became one of the strongest and handsomest esthetics of modern times. (Revisionists are adding many styles and schools to the Chicago story that have been overlooked in the critical preoccupation with the tall building, but that does not change its significance or supremacy; there is really no point in trying to stand history on its head.)

Holabird and Roche specialized in the careful, logical adaptation of structural means to functional ends — which resulted in the creation of a distinct design formula for the new, large business buildings whose rise skyward was made possible by the metal frame and the elevator.

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The historian Carl W. Condit has characterized that formula as "a basic norm or type exactly developed to fit a particular set of conditions." Historian and critic William H. Jordy calls it an architectural type virtually beyond "design," something so well suited to its use that it led inevitably and properly to mass duplication. He makes it clear that it was "a superb type."

The formula became the skyscraper style. To a stroller of Chicago's streets today, these early buildings still have an extraordinary impact. The visible scale and pattern of their structural frames, filled with the generous expanses of bayed or plain glass known as "Chicago windows," have an

Hedrich-Blessing

The Old Colony Building in Chicago

architectonic clarity and force that is only achieved through a sensuous and rational reference to structure. Architecturally, this is a hard act to follow.

It was exactly suited to the needs of business and builders. Boldly stated in Holabird and Roche's Tacoma Building of 1886-89, the formula was carried further in the Marquette Building of 1894, which definitively established the supremacy of the structural frame. The solution was at its most refined in the Republic Building of 1904-09. (The Tacoma and the Republic were both demolished in the 1960's, and the architectural vandalism is continuing in the 70's. What remains of the Chicago School owes a great deal to the pioneering efforts of the Chicago Heritage Committee, and much of what is gone was beautifully recorded by Richard Nickel, who lost his life in the collapse of an Adler and Sullivan building that he was photographing in the process of demolition.)

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With a Boston builder named Peter Brooks, Holabird and Roche laid out the fundamental principles of the new commercial construction. They stressed the provision of light and air, and the importance of the quality of public facilities, like lobbies, elevators and corridors. Above all, there was to be no second-class space, because it cost as much to build and operate as first-class space. Proper materials and good details were to simplify operation and maintenance.

Like so many others, Holabird and Roche succumbed to the avalanche of eclecticism after 1910, but the firm never had a sure hand for academic revivalism. In 1928, after a change of partners, the office emerged as Holabird and Root, and in the 1930's it produced a brilliant succession of "modernistic" skyscrapers of a radical, streamlined elegance that included the Chicago Board of Trade, the Palmolive, now Playboy Building, and the Chrysler Building at the Chicago World's Fair.

The 1940's brought the war, and the 50's saw a lot of uneven and pedestrian work. In the 70's, some of the senior partners retired; today the principals are Eugene A. Cook, John A. Holabird Jr., Gerrard S. Pook, Gerald Horn and Roy D. Solfisbury III. The firm is now embarked on a search for quality and style that is yet without a name; it reflects the newer, younger partners and the esthetic pluralism of current architectural trends.

Meanwhile, the old Chicago — their Old Chicago — is tumbling down around them. The city has been shamefully delinquent in protecting its early skyscraper heritage. Building codes and economics militate against preservation and new projects constantly call for landmark demolition. The British magazine, The Economist, in a recent feature on Chicago's historic architecture — which is more admired abroad than at home — deplored "the loss of many of the buildings that have inspired reverence for the city." The second hundred years are the hardest. ■