

## Architecture

# The Chicago Style—On Its Way Out?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT IS the rare course in art and architectural history that does not mention the Chicago school of architecture. It has become synonymous with the word skyscraper.

Although the details of this late 19th-century American contribution to the art of building are being restudied and refined by scholars, with the roots of the tall building now allocated to New York and other cities, Chicago is still marked by a unique body of skyscraper construction so united in purpose, expression and achievement as to have earned the privileged right to the name style—the Chicago Style.

As a style, it is the flowering of a kind of building new to the world at that time, a form developed from the vigorous pursuit of technology and art in the service of commerce. It is marked by structures of strength, beauty and lasting significance, reaching their highpoint in the work of a master, Louis Sullivan. They gave Chicago at the turn of the century both a style and a spirit—something that is commonly called culture.

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Much of the world knows this. Some Chicagoans do. Others don't. But many are being made aware of it by the fact that Chicago is currently grappling with the problem of protecting this unique heritage of architecture and urbanism through landmark designation.

A rough thing, saving old buildings. Take two Chicago examples, the Carson Pirie, Scott store, originally Schlesinger and Mayer, 1899, with additions of 1903-04 and later, and the Old Stock Exchange Building, 1893-94. The store is the work of Louis

Sullivan; the Exchange is by Adler and Sullivan.

Dwarfed by Chicago's newest skyscrapers, these buildings still maintain a tremendous presence; the parallel that springs to mind is the great Italian Renaissance palaces. There is a clarity and power about these structures of the 1890's that makes many of their towering 1960's neighbors look effete. Shadowed, they lose nothing; they are mute testimony to the one-upmanship of excellence.

Both of these Chicago buildings have been hitting the bumps of the landmark designation process. Those bumps are real and hard. They are economic and procedural, and no one in his right mind pretends that these problems don't exist. Nor can they be easily solved. But how they are solved will have a lot to do with the quality and character of American cities.

These two buildings are more than prime illustrations of the Chicago Style in art histories. They are prime real estate. Both are in the Loop, where redevelopment and land values have been booming.

The Old Stock Exchange, remodeled for offices and known now as 30 North LaSalle Street, has had close to 100 per cent rental occupancy. Recently, the owners filed their intention to demolish and build a bigger, more profitable structure in keeping with the rising price of the land.

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In accordance with Chicago's preservation ordinance, the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks notified the owners of the building of the intention to declare it a landmark. In accordance with

the laws of real estate, the owners refused the designation.

As the Chicago ordinance works, the Commission cannot designate a building after an owner's refusal. (The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission has this power. After public hearings, it can make or withhold designations, whether they are contested or not.)

In Chicago, if designation is refused, the matter goes to the City Council. The Commission's recommendation for landmark status is taken under advisement by the Council's Committee on Cultural and Economic Development (what a curious title; rarely in our society are the two not in mortal conflict), and there are public hearings. The Council votes for or against designation.

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Last August, the Chicago City Council voted, 37 to 5, against designation for the Old Stock Exchange. It did so largely as the result of the opinion of the Building Managers Association of Chicago (151 buildings, 44 million square feet of office space worth three quarters of a billion dollars). The Building Managers stressed economic hardship. They stated that determination of the willingness of a government agency to purchase the building should be a necessary prerequisite of landmark designation, "so as to avoid unnecessary harm to the owner." What this says, in effect, is that no building should be named a landmark unless the financial solution is in hand first.

Big joke. Just see all those crisis-pressed, impoverished municipalities waiting with wads of cash in hand for landmark purchase. The whole

idea of landmark designation is to afford that providential breather that might make it possible to find economically feasible ways to keep these buildings before the wrecker's ball hits. At best, it is no more than a delaying action, the gift of time. When the ball hits, the cost to the public interest is far greater than the cost of the delay to the investor, who may have to wait a year, as in New York, to get richer. The public interest is not part of the Building Managers equation.

A taxpayers' suit is now being studied for the Stock Exchange. It is held by dissenters that due process of law was not followed in making the decision on the basis of economics versus esthetics. According to the Chicago law, designation is to be made solely on whether the building is of landmark quality. The dissenters point out that under the law, consideration of economics, or ways and means of purchase if an owner wants to demolish, is the job of the City Council's Finance Committee, after designation has been made.

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Acknowledging the threatening implications of Chicago's action, the Congressionally-chartered National Trust for Historic Preservation has taken an alarmed stand. A special advisory committee for historic preservation law has been formed, focusing on the Trust's considerable work in the field, an Office of Legal Resources has been opened and a conference is planned.

The other Chicago case, the Carson, Pirie, Scott store, has run a slightly different course. The building is in good hands; store executives have maintained it as an important Sullivan work. Noti-

fied by the Commission on Historical and Architectural Landmarks of its intention to designate the building, the Carson, Pirie, Scott board signified its willingness.

But there was a hitch. The store has only a lease-hold interest in the building and 20 per cent ownership of the land. Several of the other owners refused the designation. Prominent among them were the Field Natural History Museum and the Pension Board of the Methodist Church.

The church was worried about its investment for its pensioners. The Field Museum, through one of those perfectly proper legal absurdities, was worried about its tax-exempt status. Only the Field Museum pressed its opposition. There is nothing quite like institutional altruism.

The matter went to the City Council. This time, on Nov. 5, the Council voted for designation. Obviously, Carson's attitude and lease-ownership arrangement presented no immediate preservation problem; speculative ownership of the Old Stock Exchange did. To designate a building because it is safe and to bypass it because it is in danger is an exercise in hypocritical futility. Still, the Carson action is hailed by preservationists as a signal victory, and it is one: the first valuable Loop parcel to be accorded landmark status.

Chicago is now in the process of choosing what kind of a city it wishes to be. It will either default, or show its legendary drive and shrewdness by finding answers. They will be answers for what passes, in these uncertain times, as civilization, and much of the civilized world is watching.