

MARINA CITY 24/7: THE NEW NEW TOWN

Jeanne Lambin

INTRODUCTION



Figure 1. Adler and Sullivan's
Stock Exchange, 1894

Two years after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 devastated the city, architect, Louis Sullivan traveled by train to Chicago. In his work, "Autobiography of An Idea" architect Louis Henri Sullivan described his arrival in Chicago, "the train neared the city; it broke into the city; it plowed through miles of shanties disheartening and dirty gray. It reached its terminal at an open shed. Louis tramped the platform, stopped, looked toward the city, ruins around him; looked at the sky' and, as one alone, stamped his foot, raised in hand and cried in full voice: THIS PLACE IS FOR ME!"¹ Indeed it was, Chicago became Sullivan's city. Sullivan was not alone. In the years following the Fire, Chicago became the architects' city: H.H. Richardson, William Le Baron Jenney, Daniel Burnham and John Wellborn Root. Uniting technology, artistry, and innovation, they remade the city and from the rubble rose a city of skyscrapers that heralded the arrival of a new architecture, appropriately named Chicago School of architecture.

The metal skeleton was born in Europe, but it was transformed in the United States, in Chicago. Building after building, block after block, year after year: Burnham and Root's Montauk Building (1882), Jenney's Home Insurance Building (1883), H.H. Richardson's Marshall Field's Wholesale Warehouse (1885), Holabird and Roche's Tocomo Building (1889), John Wellborn Root's Women's Christian Temperance Union (1892), Burnham and Root's Masonic Temple, Adler and Sullivan's Schiller Building (1892), Adler and Sullivan's Stock Exchange (Figure 1, 1894), Holabird and Roche's Republic Building, 1909. The list of buildings read like a veritable who's who in the skyscraper social register.

The scope and scale astonished, as the British painter, John Lavery told Chicago poet, Harriet Monroe, "These great Olympian buildings strike me as having beauty of a very high order...there has been nothing on earth like it since Egypt built the pyramids."²

The spirit of innovation was tempered by the onset of the Great Depression and then by United States entry into World War II. Following the economically induced slumber of Depression and War, Chicago awoke to once again become a hub of architectural innovation, heralded by the arrival of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe who emigrated from Germany in 1938. Mies took the helm at the Illinois Institute of Technology (formerly the Amour Institute of Technology) and became one of the most influential architects in Chicago, the United States and beyond. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill brought corporate modernism to the world. Perkins & Will, C.F. Murphy & Associates, Harry Weese & Associates and a host of other architectural firms designed tall buildings that once again earned them and the city an international reputation for world-class modern architecture. The skyline shifted and changed under their influence. The city of big shoulders became the city of big skyscrapers. Many called it the Second Chicago School. One of the most innovative inspired and under-appreciated architects to emerge from the period was Bertrand Goldberg who designed

dozens of projects, from hospitals to public housing, throughout the city. His crowning achievement Marina City, completed in 1968 announced a new way to think about urban life, urban planning, and urban buildings. Carl Condit described Marina City as “a stunning exhibition of the unparalleled and inexhaustible power in the city’s great building tradition.”³

BERTRAND GOLDBERG

Bertrand Goldberg was born in Chicago in 1913. He received his training in architecture from 1930 through 1936 at several institutions, including the Cambridge School of Landscape Architecture (now incorporated into Harvard University); the Bauhaus in Berlin, Germany; Armour Institute of Technology (now Illinois Institute of Technology) in Chicago. He worked in the offices of George Fred Keck (1935) and Paul Schweiker (1935-36) before organizing his own firm in 1937. While he was at the Bauhaus, he worked briefly in the office of Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe. Goldberg fled Germany and the Bauhaus in 1932 after being told by his landlady that the police were coming for him. Although he was there for only a year, his time at the Bauhaus had a profound effect on him. According to Goldberg, the essence of the Bauhaus was the awareness that architecture was no longer just about office buildings, churches or houses for the rich, “it was going to do something else.” Ultimately, that “something else” was what Goldberg would spend his entire career exploring.

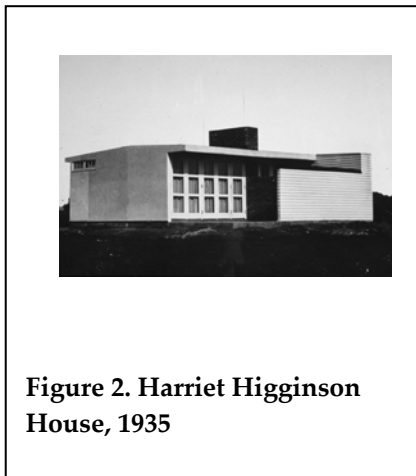


Figure 2. Harriet Higginson House, 1935

From single-family homes to a prefabricated one-piece bathroom unit, Bertrand Goldberg’s early work was decidedly varied; characterized by a spirit of innovation and experimentation. His first commission was a canvas covered house (Figure 2), designed for a client who “wanted to be able to keep her house clean with a garden hose.” Later designs reflected an interest in prefabrication and industrialization, from a mobile ice cream parlor to a rear-engine automobile. During World War II, Goldberg was active under the Lanham Act designing war-worker housing and mobile penicillin laboratories for the U.S. government. After the War, he designed a number of single-family residences, a warehouse, a union headquarters, an apartment, a public-housing project, and a number of prefabricated housing experiments.

Although, Goldberg lived in the city and had built a number of projects in the city, including the Drexel Homes and Gardens, a privately funded and developed public housing project, it wasn’t until he met real estate magnate William Zeckendorf in New York that he really considered the issue of *urbanism*. As stated by Goldberg,

The role of the city in society had never occurred to me in those days until some time in the fifties when I met Zeckendorf in New York. I mean he put his money where his mouth is. Zeckendorf had enormous investments in the city. That was his business. But he understood that the city was also a money machine. He understood what people did in the city caused them to make money for realtors in the city. I became sort of interested in another aspect of architecture; not interested in alone in architecture as a series of individual projects...but to see how those various projects began to influence other people’s lives, who weren’t our clients necessarily, became a matter of interest to me so I became really interested in this thing called urbanism.⁴

Goldberg was not only interested in the economic impact of city dwelling but also the social. He believed in cities, density was the answer, not the problem. Yet, while Goldberg's own interest in urbanism was increasing, the general public's interest appeared to be waning. Although the population of the city had swelled during World War II when Chicago became a center for war related industrial production, the trend did not continue after the war. Federal loans favored new suburban development, sixteen years of Depression and war had taken its toll on the housing stock of the city, and GI's returning home wanted a new house in the suburbs, not an "old" brownstone near the city center. Each month, thousands of residents left the city. Between 1945-1959, seventy-seven percent of all housing starts in the Chicago area were in the suburbs and three quarters of those were single-family homes. Apartments were being built in the city, but the majority of high-rise buildings that were being constructed were appearing in areas like Lincoln Park, north of the city's center.

While suburban development mushroomed, urban construction stagnated, particularly in downtown. The Inland Steel Building, completed in 1957 and designed by the firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill was the first building to be constructed in the Chicago Loop in almost three decades. The costs of this disinvestment were tremendous. As noted by Goldberg in his Oral History, since World War II the Federal government, "had invested for every person who lived in the suburbs or who lives out side the cities more than \$3,000—in contrast to a figure of about \$85 for every person who lived in the city."⁵

A CITY WITHIN A CITY

Goldberg had learned from Zeckendorf that people wanted to live downtown. He had suspected as much. In talking about the subject he quoted Aristotle, "men come together in the city to live, they remain their in order to live the good life."⁶ A survey of inner-city housing needs conducted by the Real Estate Research Corporation confirmed his suspicions. The study published in April of 1959, concluded that the demand for apartment space within walking distance of the Loop would swell. According to architectural historian Carl Condit, the International Union of Janitors was the first organization to act on this knowledge. The Union President, "saw an opportunity to invest in his health and welfare fund in a way that would simultaneously bring a good annual return and increase the available jobs for building service workers."⁷ William McFetridge and Bertrand Goldberg formally joined forces when the Union awarded Goldberg the Commission for the development of a 3 1/2 acre vacant site in the Central Business District on the north side of the Chicago River between State and Dearborn Streets. On this site, Goldberg envisioned a "city within a city," a 24-hour-a-day complex that reflected place where differing functions reinforced one another, sustained one another, even depended upon one another, the services in the complex could not be supported by a commuting population in order to make them financially feasible, they needed a captive population to support them. As stated by Goldberg, "we cannot burden either business with buildings used thirty-five hours a week or apartment buildings used only at night or on the weekends, with our tax loads. We can no longer subsidize the kind of planning that enjoys only the single-use of our expensive city utilities. In our 'cities within cities' we shall turn our streets up into the air, and stack the daytime and nighttime use of our land."⁸

STACKING THE DAYTIME AND NIGHTTIME: PLANNING AND PRECEDENT

Planning began in earnest that same year. Initially, Goldberg proposed a mixed-use complex of several buildings punctuated by two massive square forty-story apartment towers embracing a total

of 1,120 apartments. The riverside site would include a marina and thus be called Marina City. However, the footprints required by both apartment towers would have overwhelmed the site and realizing this, Goldberg submitted a wholly different vision for the site⁹ and this time the towers were *round*.¹⁰

In the revised design, Goldberg envisioned a complex of five buildings: a 300,000 square foot, two-story commercial building, a sixteen-story commercial and office building (288,000 square feet), a theater building, a marina and two cylindrical sixty-five story residential towers, each containing 450 apartments and enough parking for 450 cars.

The unconventional shape of the towers was enough to cause would-be investors to shy away, never mind the concept of a mixed-use complex downtown which, at the time, was unheard of. Ironically, mixed-use buildings were not completely unprecedented. Adler and Sullivan's Auditorium Building supported a theater, hotel, restaurant, office and commercial space. Early commercial buildings throughout the city enabled people to live above the store. In Marseilles, France, Corbusier's Maison de l'Unite de Habitation, completed in 1952, included apartments, shops, a hotel, an open-air theater, and a rooftop wading pool all contained in a building surrounded by parkland.

Alternately, the planned *community* was certainly not a new idea either, there were dozens of models from the American Greenbelt towns of the 1930s to the British New Towns designed to relieve the congestion of crowded city centers. All of these models however, needed massive amounts of land and were planned for undeveloped areas *outside* of existing densely populated urban centers.

Within urban areas there was urban renewal. Many renewal projects focused solely on new residential development or land clearance for public housing. Although some urban renewal projects included mixed-uses, those that did were also undertaken on a massive scale.¹¹ Furthermore, the planning for many of these renewal projects was only in its initial stages when the plans for Marina City were being finalized. Thus they wouldn't have been much help to Goldberg.

By many accounts, Marina City was one of the earliest attempts in the United States to bring a "new town" to the old downtown, to the heart of the city center on a small-scale. Michel Ragon describes the project as, "the first mixed use center city complex in the United States to include housing."¹²

The realization of the project was not easy; there were many hurdles to overcome. The financing for the site was complex and involved, three Unions, multiple banks and the FHA or Federal Housing Authority which balked at the loan because they felt single-adults or couples living downtown did not meet their standard of a "family." Goldberg persuaded the Federal Government to accept the project by broadening their interpretation of what constitutes a family. To further complicate matters, combined uses were prohibited by the existing zoning, so Goldberg had to work closely with the sympathetic Ira Bach, the Planning Commissioner. Fortunately, Bach wholeheartedly supported the project and helped Goldberg get the necessary approvals.¹³ It would be more than a city within a city, it would be a new, New Town.

THE NEW NEW TOWN

Ground was broken on November 22, 1960. A multi-level commercial service block or "base building" spanned the entire site (Figure 3). The lowest level of the base building housed a marina

with storage for 700 boats and service facilities. Its upper-levels housed commercial services for the users of and visitors to Marina City these services included a grocery store, shops, a restaurant, pool, health club and entrance to the apartments. Goldberg conceived of this commercial level as a "street" for the new community. The top of the base building formed a plaza for the other buildings in the complex. The landscaped plaza area would eventually contain a skating rink and a sculpture garden designed by landscape architect Alfred Caldwell. Although most of the base building was located below street level, the waterside wall of the building was visible from across the river and also from the bridges spanning the river at Clark and Dearborn Streets. Composed entirely of glass divided by small mullions, the seemingly insubstantial façade, gave the appearance that the entire complex was perched atop a long glass box, hovering on stilts above the river (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Marina City during construction. 1961



Figure 4. Marina City at Night

An intriguing blend of sculpture and structure, the round, "corn-cob" shaped apartment buildings, the Marina Towers, rose up from the plaza and as described by critic Allan Temko, supported themselves as they ascended, "lifting so slenderly that they swayed visibly in the wind. People wondered if they were unstable, but they were uncommonly strong and efficient."¹⁴ were the focal point of the complex. Each tower contained 40-stories of petal-shaped apartments (896 total, four less than originally planned) supported above 20 stories of continuous, helical ramp parking, providing parking for 450 cars. Because the apartments did not begin until the 20th floor, each apartment enjoyed a splendid view. Studio apartments comprised 75% of the units, one bedroom apartments 15% and two bedroom apartments. Even before the Towers completed there were 3500 applications from prospective tenants hoping to rent one of the coveted apartments. The first apartment tower was completed in 1962 and eager tenants moved in while the second tower was still going up. The second tower was completed later in the year.

At the time of their completion, the Marina Towers were not only the tallest apartment buildings in the world but also the tallest reinforced concrete buildings. Goldberg felt the circular form offered an interesting, an efficient alternative to the arrangement of interior space and an expedient method of construction. The cores acted virtually as their own cranes. In addition, he was attracted to its aerodynamic and structural properties. The apartments were cantilevered off a concrete core which

contained the elevators, stairs, and mechanical systems. It also made the building exceptionally strong. Fifty percent of gravity forces were carried by the concrete core and seventy percent of the horizontal bending and shearing.

Tucked between the apartment towers and the office block was the saddle-shaped theater (Figure 5) looking alternately futuristic and primordial. The comparatively small building peeked out from between the two larger buildings flanking it. It was a wholly unusual



Figure 5. The Theater, c.1968

design, made possible by an innovative combination of space frames, arched beams, and sprayed concrete. The structure was covered in lead sheathing which acted as a sound deadening material for the interior spaces and provided a dramatic contrast to the neighboring structures in the complex which were all made of glass and concrete. Originally designed for live theater, the building was ultimately used as television studios, with three smaller movie theaters below.

The sixteen-story office building was located at the back or northernmost portion of the site. Goldberg often described the building as a fence, separating Marina City from its surrounding area. Supported by load-bearing concrete mullions, the office block, perched above a square commercial block with additional office space. The roof of the commercial block supported a plaza for use by the office workers.

Because of his Bauhaus training, Goldberg was interested in the interplay between industrial processes and buildings. As a result, he was acutely aware of the impact that mechanical systems could have on building.¹⁵ Goldberg decided to make the buildings all electric. Electricity was provided by numerous small horsepower motors rather than one or two large motors and as a result tenants were able to control their own heating and cooling. According to Goldberg, it was the first all electric building in the city.

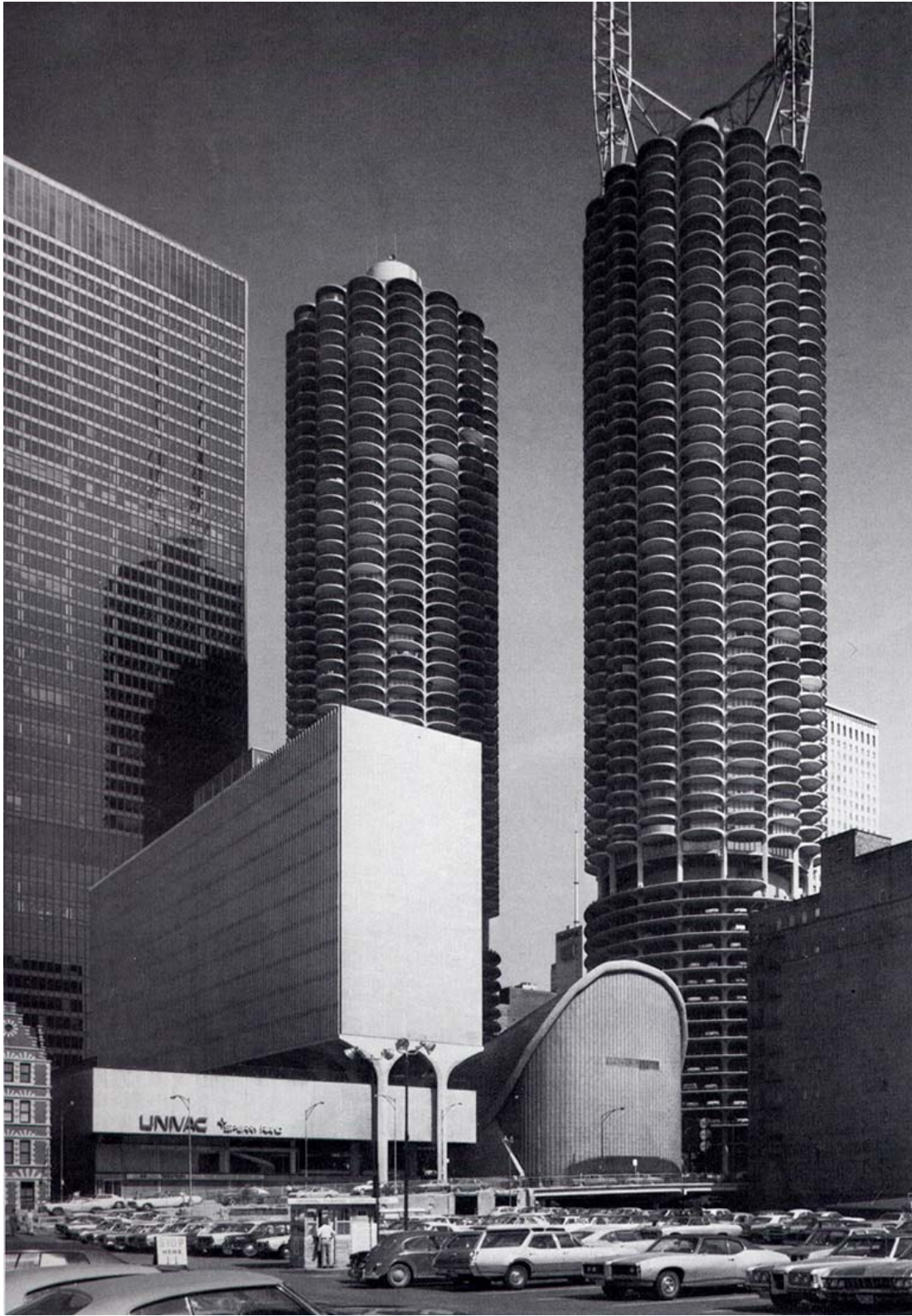


Figure 6. Marina City, view to southeast

By 1964, the building boasted a lobby boutique, florist, TV station, travel agency and drug store. The entire complex was completed in 1968 (Figure 6). It was an immediate sensation. Indeed, according

to Carl Condit “no privately sponsored apartments have attracted more attention or have been more extensively involved in the urban ecology than the Marina City project which was conceived initially by Goldberg and planned in detail by the architects and engineers in his office.”¹⁶

The Vision

Marina City was the culmination of three decades of thought and development for Bertrand Goldberg. The complex was a reaction against single-use zoning, which Goldberg viewed as wasteful and unsustainable. Goldberg saw the city as synonymous with civilization, and if civilization was to survive so to must its cities. With 635 dwellings per acre, Marina City was one of the densest modern residential developments in the United States. Goldberg believed in density. He felt it was necessary to sustain urban life. The building was built, not just as a return on investments for its developers but as an investment in city living. It was successful on both levels. In 1974, only two percent of the Towers residents actually worked in the complex but 80% were within walking distance of downtown.¹⁷ Goldberg took the most urban form of architecture, the skyscraper and put people in it.

The Towers, described by Carl Condit as a “staggering display of structural virtuosity,”¹⁸ were also a visceral reaction against the post-and-beam architecture that dominated American architecture, as stated by Goldberg, “never in the last three thousand years has the post-and-beam been so limited in its ability to construct the spatial dreams of our architects.” Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on one’s viewpoint, it was the post-and-beam and the architects who embraced it that would continue to dominate American architecture.

Marina City won numerous awards. In 1991, the building won a Twenty-Five Year Distinguished Building Award from the American Institute of Architects. In his Oral History, Goldberg observed that it had taken twenty-five years for people to understand the building.

HARD TIMES

Mismanagement can be the death knell for any building no matter how innovative or architecturally significant. The buildings at Marina Towers were no exception. In 1979, in the face of financial bankruptcy, the apartments were sold as condominiums and the commercial real-estate was also sold. Suddenly, the apartment dwellers no longer owned the common areas of the building or controlled any of the commercial areas. Goldberg viewed the parceling of the real estate a mistake. He felt that each entity was dependent upon the other for survival. The ownership was mismanaged and the buildings were poorly maintained. Eventually the owners filed for bankruptcy. Various bankruptcy bailout schemes emerged, one called for the addition of additional commercial space on the plaza, another called for the demolition of the theater. Goldberg fought these proposals. Meanwhile the complex continued to deteriorate.

MARINA CITY TODAY

In late 1994, the commercial portion of the Marina City Complex was sold to a new real estate investor and developer. A \$100 million renovation began. In adapting the building for new use, there were some unfortunate alterations, additions, deletions. The House of Blues now occupies the theater and office building. The theater serves as a concert venue, bar and restaurant and the office building is a bar and hotel. Both buildings were gutted and a massive neon sign for the House of Blues is now affixed to the west wall of the theater. Some of the exterior elements of both buildings have been inappropriately kitchified with signange, superfluous exterior details, and fixtures that

relate more to the corporate identity of the House of Blues than they do to the architecture of Marina City.

One of the most egregious changes was the loss of the below grade-skating rink which was destroyed to make way for a Smith and Wollensky Steakhouse. The first level of the chain steakhouse occupies the former restaurant space, and is visible from the river. The once clean lines of the elegant glass walled exterior are now marred by an unsympathetic signage affixed to the glass wall. The signage however, pales in intrusive comparison to the jarring one-and-a-half story addition which appears to be erupting from the space once occupied by the skating rink, like an insidious corporate mushroom. The new building, best described as late American Intrusive, now dominates the once open plaza. Equally distressing, is the addition of a perplexing smoke glass bubble to the plaza which is also visible from the river and the street.

PROTECTION

In the late 1950s, while protesting the proposed destruction of Adler and Sullivan's Schiller Building, ardent preservationist, photographer and Institute of Design student, Richard Nickel asked, "Do We Dare Squander Our Architectural Heritage?"

Unfortunately, in Chicago, considered by many to be a mecca of Modernism, the answer was and is often yes. Alas, the first Chicago school is now missing many of its earliest and brightest students. Sadly, shockingly, but perhaps not surprisingly many of the buildings associated with the Chicago's rich architectural heritage have been demolished.

William Le Baron Jenney's Home Insurance Building considered by many to be the first steel-framed skyscraper, completed in 1884 was demolished in 1931. Age at time of destruction 47.

H. H. Richardson's Marshall Field's Wholesale Warehouse was completed in 1885 and demolished in 1930. Age at demolition. 45 years.

Burham and Root's, Masonic Temple. Completed in 1892. Demolished 1939. Age at demolition 47.

Holabird and Roche's Tacoma Building was built in 1889 and demolished in 1929. Age at demolition, 40.

Burnham and Root's Montauk building was completed in 1882 was demolished in 1902 at the tender age of twenty.

With the exception of the Sullivan's Stock Exchange, all of these buildings met their end before the existence of a formalized historic preservation movement in the United States---before the existence of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act and the creation of the National Register of Historic Places and the widespread prevalence of local landmark Commissions which can protect buildings through zoning, historic preservation ordinances, conservation districts and other tools.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by City Ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, thereby providing legal protection. The Commission is also responsible for reviewing any proposed alteration, demolition, or new construction affecting individual landmarks or properties in landmark districts. To be recommended for landmark status on the Commission, a building or district must meet at least two of the following criteria: critical part of City's Heritage, site of a significant event, Association with a significant person, important Architecture, important Architect, distinctive theme as a district, or unique visual feature. It must also retain a high degree of architectural integrity. (As of May 2002, 202 Chicago Landmarks have been designated by the City Council, including 4,500 properties in 34 historic districts. Of those 4,500 properties, less than ten were constructed after 1930.

THE FUTURE

Just as Chicago lost many of the buildings from the first Chicago School, it is danger of loosing the best buildings from the second Chicago School and Marina City is no exception. Despite its iconic status, despite the fact that it is one of the most photographed buildings in the city, despite its structural, stylistic and social innovation, despite, despite, despite, one of Chicago's most important buildings is unprotected.

Many of Goldberg's early residential designs have been destroyed or dramatically and unsympathetically altered. His larger projects have not fared much better, Prentice Hospital faces an uncertain future, the Astor Tower was dramatically altered when the exterior louvers were removed, a factory design is virtually unrecognizable. A bright spot is the listing of his Hilliard Homes on the National Register of Historic Places. This innovative public housing complex is being restored using the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Credit and the complex will be reused as mixed income housing.

In the past tenants of the Towers had made rumblings of pursuing landmark designation, as has the city but to date, no formal steps have been taken. For now, Marina City will remain an unofficial landmark. A monument to a vision of urban living and architectural innovation that we are still trying to realize.

¹ Louis Sullivan. *The Autobiography of an Idea*. New York, Dover Publications, 1924, 197.

² Lavery, John, quoted in Lowe, David. *Lost Chicago*. New York: American Legacy Press, 1985. p. 142).

³ Carl Condit, *The Chicago School of Architecture*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964, 219.

⁴ Betty Blum, ed. *Oral History of Bertrand Goldberg*. Chicago. Art Institute of Chicago, 1992, pg. 155.

⁵ Betty, Blum, *Oral History of Bertrand Goldberg*, 157.

⁶ Bertrand Goldberg, *Marina City Part I-1959, Part II-1962*. Speech given at seminar on "Architectural Aspects of Edmonton Civic Center Plan. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. September 27, 1962.

⁷ Carl Condit. *Chicago 1930-1970: Building, Planning and Urban Technology*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974, pg. 65.

⁸ Paul Heyer, *Architects on Architecture, New Directions in America*, New York, Walker and Company, 1978, 53.

⁹ Carl Condit. *Chicago 1930-1970: Building, Planning and Urban Technology*, 68.

¹⁰ Goldberg kept meticulous records and his work is well documented through drawings, photographs, correspondence and other ephemera. His archives have been donated to the Art Institute of Chicago. Interestingly no

conceptual drawings of Marina Towers remain. Goldberg's son Geoffrey believes the drawings were destroyed in a flood.

¹¹ Pittsburg's Golden Triangle, in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, included a 36-acre park, a 23 acre office complex, and a 27-story apartment building. Planning began in 1943. The project was not completed until the mid-1960s. Portland Center in Portland Oregon, covered 36 acres integrated complex of apartment towers, low-rise building sites, offices, convenience retail stores and generous, landscaped public places (designed by Lawrence Halprin). Planning for the project did not begin until 1961 and the last of the residential towers were not completed until the 1970s. William Zeckendorf's and I.M Pei's development for southwest Washington DC was not completed until the 1970s.

¹² Michel Ragon. *Goldberg on the City*. Paris. Paris Art Center, 1985, 33.

¹³ It also probably helped that Bill McFetridge was very politically connected.

¹⁴ Allan Temko, "Bertrand Goldberg" in *A Guide to 150 Years of Chicago Architecture*, Chicago, Museum of Science and Industry, 1985.

¹⁵ Paul Heyer, *Architects on Architecture*, 51.

¹⁶ Carl Condit. *Chicago 1930-1970: Building, Planning and Urban Technology*, 65

¹⁷ Joan Maiman, "Marina City Marks 40th Anniversary." *Inside Chicago*, May 7-13, 2003.

¹⁸ Condit, 53.

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Louis Sullivan. *The Autobiography of an Idea*. New York, Dover Publications, 1924, 197.