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## How Chicago's Architectural Style of Today Developed from The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893

by Jane York

(English 1102)

Chicago is one of the rare cities that showcases the spirit and culture of its residents in its center with gusto and various towering giants of buildings that came from small men. It is the Americana style in all of its glory, the streets filled with accompanying sense to enrich a visitor's gaze of the scene. Chicago is a wonderful example of American urban and modern architecture, if not possibly the best city to visit in order to really understand how the United States developed Post-Industrial Revolution. Chicago, over the years, has not been afraid to showcase both the past and the present alongside each other in harmony. Any resident of Chicago should know the rich history and culture that has inched along the grand expanse of Lake Michigan, because it is indeed one to be proud of. However, the grand architecture of Chicago did not appear overnight, but it did have a major catalyst: The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. It was there among the great Chicagoan architects that the city truly gained a unified vision that it still upholds today. The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 elevated Chicago's architectural style into a well-mixed blend of innovation and neoclassicism— rebuilding Chicago from the charred ruins of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 inspired Chicago visionaries to spread their creative wings and showcase all of their talents in one place.

The World's Columbian Exposition was a great opportunity for Chicago to showcase its power as a major US city; in 1880 it was the fourth largest city with a population of half that of New York City's, 500,000 people (US Census). Chicago was one of the fastest cities to grow in the United States in the 19th century. The most influential fair beforehand had been the Paris Exposition of 1889 that wowed all visitors and brought Paris world-wide acclaim. The shining beacon of the fair had been the Eiffel Tower, and the Chicago Council wanted to replicate that by building a revolutionary monument of their own (Larson 34).

The key catalyst that drove Chicago's officials to host the World's Columbian Exposition was, not surprisingly, the Chicago Fire of 1871. The fire itself caused 2,000 acres of damage in the heart of the city (Zukowsky and Brueggman 18). While it caused irreparable physical and financial damage, the fire was viewed as a bitter-sweet blessing to others, mainly architects and who jumped at the newly-rise opportunities with a wolf-like hunger (Zukowsky and Brueggman 18). Immediately after, reconstruction was kick-started by ambitious builders, but temporarily halted by the predictable economic panic and depression of 1873-1874 (Zukowsky and Brueggman 19). All in all, it was no wonder that Chicago's tycoons and own mayor, Carter Harrison, jumped at the opportunity to reclaim Chicago's honor by hosting the World's Columbian Exposition.

Before the Chicago Fire of 1871, Chicago was not seen as the planned and architectural hub that it is today. Because the city changed so quickly, from a fur trader outpost in the early-middle 19th century to a major urban center in the late 19th century, structure was mostly built on wood and was often not structurally sound in terms of surviving a catastrophe like The Fire (Zukowsky and Brueggman 36). The Inbound Freight House of the Illinois Central Railroad<sup>1</sup> and The Water Tower<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix Figure 1.1

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix Figure 1.2

in the heart of present Chicago's shopping district are one of the only buildings to survive into the present day (Condit 8). Even so, the buildings did not avoid complete destruction without some damage— the Inbound Freight House was originally built in 1855, and yet its interior, which was made of wood, had to be replaced immediately after (Condit 8). Conversely, the Water Tower Building was built just before the Chicago Fire in 1869 but did not suffer as much damages as The Inbound Freight House.

The biggest key players in the World's Columbian Exposition are even today big Chicago names. The Chicago Council that oversaw the Exposition appointed renowned Chicago architect Daniel Burnham along with his partner John Wellborn Root to oversee the architectural composition of the fair (Larson 36). Although Root died shortly after in 1891, two years before the fair, Burnham made sure that his legacy was felt and often referenced his dear friend in the Fair's making. Their architectural firm, Burnham & Root, was rivaled by the other big company in town: Adler & Sullivan. Although their ideologies were not mutually compatible— especially in the fair where Burnham had the upper hand— their influence after the Fair was palpable. The other major architect was actually not even a Chicago resident: Frederick Law Olmsted was Burnham's prime recruiting target, based on his talents as a landscape designer. In fact, he was the man who planned Central Park in New York City (Larson 50).

Daniel Burnham and John Root were an unstoppable duo in the Chicago architectural scene. It was Burnham himself who was chosen to lead the other architects into a unified vision of the fair. His style was much more classical than, for example, Louis Sullivan's. In fact, Burnham willingly wove a unified style of Neoclassicist elements in the Fair, which was favored by the East Coast— theirs was the style to be emulated if the need was to showcase respectability and grandeur (Condit 112). Indeed, Burnham was a stickler for translating classical elements into modern high-rise buildings; this outlook earned him bitter criticism from Sullivan who believed that he hindered Chicagoan architectural evolution (Zukowsky and Brueggman 112). Of all the buildings conceived by Burnham, "...nearly all relied on the classical tradition for their formal character," (Zukowsky and Brueggman 112). One of Burnham's primary influences was French architecture and although he himself did not design any building featured in the Exposition, he made sure that they all adhered to a somewhat united classical style (Zukowsky and Brueggman 22).

On the other hand, Louis Sullivan was an up-and-coming architect that wanted to push the boundaries of architectural style, in a way that would have been called 'avant-garde' in his time. Sullivan's biggest commissions came when he was partner to Dankmar Adler, another successful architect. They were assigned to build the Transportation Building<sup>3</sup> (Nickel 83). Though sadly this building did not survive after the fair like some other did, it was a magnificent display of Adler & Sullivan's capabilities. It was a long rectangular shape whose primary focal point was the Golden Door<sup>4</sup> (Nickel 83) it was cast in cement plaster (reinforced with jute) that led to creating embellishments such as "...planar surface of rhythmic architectonic forms such as arches, spandrels, and lintels." (Nickel 83) This easy material led Sullivan to decorate the facade even further with easily applicable stencils decked in bold colors that were sadly not translated into the photographs taken. (Nickel 385) Because the building lined the right side of the fair's pool, it made quite an impressive reflection upon the surface when the waters calmed.

The final star of the show was Frederick Law Olmsted, the acclaimed landscape architect of the East Coast. Daniel Burnham personally sought him out to see if he would take the job, that was how much he was in vogue at the time (Larson 51). In fact, Burnham respected his opinion and

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix Figure 1.3

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix Figure 1.4

vision so dearly that Olmsted got the honor of picking the Fair's location, which was in Jackson Park in Chicago's South Side (Larson 54). Olmsted supported Burnham's vision of a Beaux-Arts style Fair wholeheartedly and planned the layout and decorations of the landscape accordingly (Schuyler 4). He made the landscape come to life by finding a balance between the natural world and the illusion of The White City (Schuyler 5).

One of the biggest influences the World's Columbian Exposition had was in following through with the already explored style and distributing it to the actual city of Chicago. During this period (non-coincidentally) The City Beautiful movement was gaining huge traction, especially in Chicago. When developing the layout of the Fair, both architects and landscape designers came together and united their ideas into what they would consider proper features of a great city such as Chicago (McGabe 125). It was from this time period that Chicago's iconic lakefront park expansion was dreamed up and accomplished— this impressive waterfront is why many consider Chicago's views that are wholly unobstructed by high-rises to be one of the most beautiful in America (McGabe 131). The other aim of the City Beautiful Movement was a proposal for Chicago to be mathematically and aesthetically planned out to be both economically and visually useful. In fact, it was Chicago's golden boy Daniel Burnham who wrote a book in 1909, *Plan of Chicago* (McGabe 131). His plan is the reason why today Chicago has wonderful preserved parks, a more finely-constructed transportation system, and the Loop's layout as the heart of the city (McGabe 132).

Only a few buildings from the fair have survived to this day, as they were planned to be temporary structures. The building that was used as The Palace for Fine Arts<sup>5</sup> is now Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry. Chicago's residents can also still come to the former World's Congress Auxiliary Building<sup>6</sup>, which now sits at the cross between Adams street and Michigan avenue – now, it is repurposed as The Art Institute of Chicago. Of course, these two major buildings had to be rebuilt from more sturdy materials, as their original ones would not have lasted into this day and age (Larson 348). Even so, both of these buildings are renowned for being one of the first buildings that come to people's minds when talking about great Chicagoan architecture.

Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was the architectural version of a renaissance in one of America's greatest cities. Like a phoenix born anew from flames, so too did Chicago rise from the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 to rebuild an even greater city, with even more spectacular buildings. Because so many architects could come together in a short amount of time to the Fair, they could (and did) put all of their collective talents into one pot to create a unique and monumental Chicago style of architecture. This is the reason why today, Chicago is one of the best cities to walk around in, a great city for seeing jaw-dropping scenic sights, and one where architecture has inspired people as much as people have inspired it. Many other American cities have been ashamed of their industrial past, but the beauty to Chicago is that it showcases the past side-by-side with the present to create a cohesive and historically-rich environment. To walk through Chicago's streets is to feel the city's spirit just by sight when standing in the shadow of people's sky-soaring visions that came to life.

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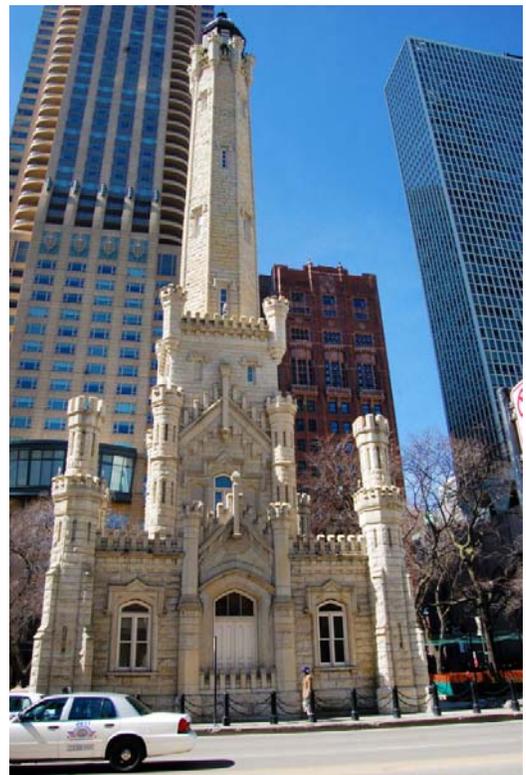
<sup>5</sup> See Appendix Figure 2.1

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix Figure 2.1

Appendix



*Figure 1.1:* The Inbound Freight House of the Illinois Central Railroad. (Taken from Flickr.com)



*Figure 1.2:* The Water Tower (Taken from Emily Upton)



*Figure 1.3:* The Transportation Building (Taken from Flickr.com)



*Figure 1.4:* The Golden Door (Taken from Flickr)



*Figure 2.1:* The Palace of Fine Arts, now The Museum of Science and Industry (Taken from Flickr)



*Figure 2.2:* The World's Congress Auxiliary Building, now The Art Institute of Chicago (Taken from Google Earth)

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