

THE ST. NICHOLAS HOTEL AND THE VICTORIA BUILDING

by David J. Simmons

During the period from 1890 to 1893, the architectural team of Adler & Sullivan designed nine projects for the St. Louis market. Four of these commissions reached fruition and three survive today. The St. Nicholas Hotel lasted just one decade before being rebuilt as an office building by Eames & Young. It has not received the appreciation or scholarly attention accorded to its three sister works (even the comparatively little-known Union Trust Building). The understanding of its history has been plagued by confusion, mistakes, and misconceptions. Dismissed by architectural pundits of the past generation as a minor structure with odd ornamentation, this hotel demands a fresh evaluation, free of nay-saying criticisms and skyscraper ideologies. Seen in this context the hotel looks bold, beautiful, and balanced, proclaiming its status as a masterpiece from the genius of the master.

Nathan Ames founded a pork processing and packing business shortly after his St. Louis arrival in 1841. After his death in 1852, his sons Edgar and Henry expanded the business. During the Civil War, their contracts with the Union Army to supply the troops with pork products brought them great wealth. They invested these funds in St. Louis downtown real estate. Together they purchased the new Lindell Hotel for one third of its value. At the same time Edgar acquired the future site of the St. Nicholas Hotel at the northwest corner of Eighth and Locust.

In 1860, Lucy Virginia Semple, daughter of a United States Senator from Illinois and future chief justice of the Illinois Supreme Court, traveled by packet downriver from the family residence at Elsah to St. Louis in search of a suitable (rich) spouse. Beautiful, charming and well educated Lucy possessed a keen intellect and an independent spirit rare for a woman in this period. In St. Louis she met wealthy Edgar Ames, a man noted for his integrity, generosity, and civic-mindedness. Their marriage produced two girls and two boys. When Edgar died in 1867, the court valued his estate at \$2.5 million. After five years of litigation, the court allocated the hotel's future site as part of Edgar's bequest to his children.

Twelve years passed, and the Ames Estate wanted to im-

prove this property with a large office building. Both architects Isaac Taylor and Edmund Jungendorf submitted plans for the project, and the Estate selected Jungendorf's Gothic Revival design. Measuring 96 feet on Locust by 115 feet along Eighth Street, his Ames Building would rise eight stories above the ground floor, attaining a height of 118 feet. At the corner of the building a tower extended upward an additional 24 feet. Jungendorf located the main entrance on Eighth Street. Besides the entrance hall and accessories the ground floor contained four stores. Each floor above the ground story had 22 offices, for a total of 176. Other building features included an open light court in the rear, two elevators, and cast iron staircases throughout. The cost was estimated at \$200,000. In 1884, prior to the start of construction, Mr. Jungendorf suddenly died, and the Ames estate terminated the project.



Drawing labeled "Hotel St. Nicholas, St. Louis, MO, Adler & Sullivan, Chas. K. Ramsey, Associated Architects" Published in American Architect and Building News. October 5, 1895 (Vol. L, No. 1032). Previously published in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, November 13, 1892.

Early in 1892, Edgar Ames' two sons, Henry Semple Ames and Edgar Ames, decided to erect on this site a hotel of modest size. The likely source of their inspiration was the excitement generated by another hotel project just six blocks away on Fourth Street – the new Planters Hotel. Unfortunately for the brothers, the Planters project offered a special challenge to their vision of a first-class hotel.

Fronting 420 feet on Fourth Street, the 11-story Planters Hotel utilized a traditional design packaged in a modern idiom. Representing a total investment of \$2 million, this hotel featured 414 bedrooms, 8 elevators, grand public rooms, and a staff of 300 people to serve its guests. How do you meet the challenge of a grand hotel when your hospitality is less than one fourth its size and cost? The Ames hotel had to be distinct. The brothers discussed their project with their mother, who recommended architect Charles K. Ramsey to plan their new building. He had designed her home at 3842 Lindell Boulevard in 1889. When the brothers consulted Ramsey, he suggested bringing in Adler & Sullivan to design the project, and the brothers agreed.

Between 1887 and 1895, Adler & Sullivan designed seven new hotel projects but built only four of them. Three commissions dealt with a hotel as part of a multifunction complex. The Auditorium located in Chicago represented their most ambitious work in this genre. It combined a 4,200-seat theater, a 400-room hotel, and a 136-room office tower. Its heavy and massive exterior reflected the Richardson Romanesque style but lacked artistic coherence. Its brilliance lay in its clever arrangement of internal spaces and magnificent décor, rich in Sullivan's exquisite ornament.

Both the Seattle Opera House project of 1890 (theater, apartment hotel, and stores) and the Chattanooga Chambers of Commerce Building project of 1891 (hotel and offices) were never built. Another project, the Hotel Ontario in Salt Lake City, Utah, was started in 1890 but abandoned after its foundation was built. Adler & Sullivan did succeed in building two other hotels, neither possessing much architectural significance: Hotel Minnetonka, a two-story wood-frame summer resort, erected in 1894 at Lake Bluff, Illinois, and Hotel Victoria, a three-story wood-frame building erected in 1893 at Chicago Heights, Illinois. Although limited by cost and size, the St. Nicholas commission presented the architects with an opportunity to create something memorable, unique, and artistic. Sullivan accepted the challenge and designed a beautiful and picturesque hotel. It eclipsed their other works of this genre except for the interior of the Auditorium. As we examine the St. Nicholas Hotel, it will become evident that we must rank it among their best works – a masterpiece.

Sullivan traveled to St. Louis to meet with his clients and Mr. Ramsey. He examined the building site and found three neighborhood buildings of interest. The Fagan Building at 816 Olive, designed by C. B. Clarke in 1888, displayed an unusual architectural design but a top-heavy appearance. The Turner Building at 304 North Eighth Street, designed in 1884 by Peabody & Stearns of Boston, possessed a steep gabled roof flanked by tall chimneys. The Mercantile Club Building at the southwest corner of Seventh and Locust, designed by Isaac Taylor, also had a steep

roof with a castle-like appearance. Adler & Sullivan had participated in the Mercantile Club Building competition in 1891. Sullivan also looked at a sketch of Isaac Taylor's new Planters Hotel, the competitor. When he returned to his Chicago offices he re-examined the plans for the Seattle Opera House, especially its tower with steep roof, balcony, and paneled balustrade. Then his ideas for the new hotel crystallized.



"Hotel St. Nicholas, St. Louis" from John Albury Bryan, Missouri's Contribution to American Architecture, p. 95. Bryan produced this publication for the second national AIA convention in St. Louis, held at the Chase-Park Plaza in 1928.

It would be domestic in appearance rather than commercial. A bold and unexpected design focused on the banquet room on the top floor. Part of the design would vaguely resemble a European hunting lodge, enriched with Sullivan ornament. The hotel plans were completed by November 1892. On December 11, 1892, the St. Louis newspapers announced the project. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* carried a sketch of the hotel's Locust Street front. The brothers anticipated an accelerated construction schedule and the hotel's opening in November 1893. Charles K. Ramsey would supervise its construction.

In the spring of 1893 contractors cleared the site. The *St. Louis Daily Record* reported the issuance of a building per-

mit for the St. Nicholas Hotel on June 28, 1893. The new hotel needed to be in operation before the Planters Hotel opened, otherwise, the magnificence and size of the latter would marginalize the former. Unfortunately, the financial panic of 1893 derailed the project's schedule and extended construction to the end of 1894. During this period construction loans became either nonexistent or very difficult to obtain.

Notice of the grand opening celebration for Link's Union Station and Taylor's Planters Hotel came in September 1894 amid universal praise. By contrast, the St. Nicholas Hotel started to receive guests without public notice or newspaper fanfare, sometime after the beginning of 1895. The *Post-Dispatch* mentioned the new St. Nicholas for the first time on March 10, 1895. The hotel operated at capacity during that previous week starting March 3, 1895. The mystery of its unpublicized opening remains unresolved.

To build this hotel cost about \$350,000, and the owners spent another \$90,000 to furnish it. The rate for rooms with private baths ranged from \$2.50 to \$4.00 a night. Rooms with shared bath facilities rented from \$1.50 to \$2.00.

Provided with a steel frame and curtain walls, the St. Nicholas Hotel rose seven floors above ground level for a total height of 125 feet. A light court at the center of the rectangular-shaped hotel insured ample natural light for all guest rooms. The hotel extended westward along Locust Street, its principal front, for 92 feet and 114 feet north along Eight Street. The plan for the Locust Street façade displayed a vertical thrust slightly angled outward. Another angle at the rooftop descended in the opposite direction at a 60° grade. When the angles collided, the building reached its point of destination, its central focus, its dramatic climax. To enhance the dramatic effect of the hotel, Sullivan deployed various angles, increasing increments of ornament, dramatic architectural devices, and a palate of color and shadow.

Lacking ornament, the light brown sandstone base of five bays appeared to be somewhat recessed. At its center the arched, deeply recessed main entrance admitted people to the hotel's first floor six feet above the pavement and to the ground floor six feet below the pavement. Windows for both levels were set in slightly recessed arched areas. Dressed in buff-colored brick and sand-colored Winkle terra cotta, the shaft of the Locust Street façade extended upward five further stories and focused on four vertical rows of steel-framed oriels (a type of bay window), each rising from the second floor to the fifth floor, with a balcony on top at the sixth-story level. Clad in terra cotta encrusted with Sullivan ornament, these oriels used floral motifs for the corbels and for the top and bottom framing, with the famous snowflake pattern for the spandrels. These ori-

els delineated the edges and center of the shaft and suggested pillars of support for the balconies above. Since form follows function, the hotel rooms that had oriels or balconies also had private bathrooms.



An example of the so-called "Snowflake" spandrels on the bay windows. These four pieces, possibly not all from the same spandrel, were auctioned on December 18, 2007 at Christie's, New York, where they brought \$34,600 (Sale 1942, Lot 276).

On the seventh floor were the two most important and dramatic architectural devices – the cantilevered long balcony and the steep gabled roof, which produced the climactic element of Adler & Sullivan's design. A cantilevered balcony seemed to float in mid-air. A steep roof extending beyond the plane of the wall covered the balcony, protecting it from inclement weather. Sullivan concentrated his ornament in this area. Even the flowing geometric pattern of the red roof tiles contributed to his decorative scheme. He ornamented the balustrade's terra cotta panels on the long balcony. A series of fifteen glass-filled doors in the south wall of the banquet room opened onto the balcony. Stone columns with decorated caps framed each opening. More ornament embellished the edges of the building at the roofline and the tops of the paired chimneys that framed the gable ends.

On Eighth Street Sullivan introduced a similar design with simple lines and less adornment. Three vertical rows of oriels delineated the façade's two sections – the tall gabled south three-bay component and the five-bay north component. At the top of the south component, he framed the banquet room area into a triangle formed by the sides of the gabled roof and the shorter balcony. A large transom win-

dow filled with stained glass stood over glass doors that opened onto the balcony. To the north, the roof gable was turned north-south underlined by twelve windows with ornamented frames and a modest ledge. The Eighth Street entrance was situated below the middle oriels.

The hotel interior tended to be modest, projecting a domestic ambience. Except for the banquet hall, it attempted to avoid elegance in favor of an Arts & Crafts approach. Many of the public areas had rich hardwood or marble mosaic floors. The main entrance passed through the vestibule into a grand rotunda which connected the hotel office with marble stairs to the second floor and with the gentlemen's reading and reception area at the west end and the gentlemen's dining room at the east end. Two private dining rooms, a ladies' reception area, and the ladies' dining room occupied the first floor north. The ground level had a café, bar, lavatories, kitchen, bakery, and pantry. The basement accommodated the heating apparatus, electric light plant, laundry, and storage. Between the second and sixth floors, 93 bedrooms offered such modern amenities as steam heat, electric lights, outside windows, a house telephone, and a private or connecting bathroom. Many bedrooms could be opened up to form suites. Every bathroom sparkled with white tile floors and wainscoting, with a white porcelain sink, toilet, and tub. Two electric elevators provided high-speed transport. On the seventh floor an elegant vestibule connected the banquet hall/ballroom at the south end with the gentlemen's smoking lounge and ladies reception area, both with toilet facilities to the north. A service area including kitchen and pantry occupied the rest of the seventh floor north.

The banqueting hall was the hotel's largest and most imposing space, measuring 90 feet by 40 feet, and rising to a height of 35 feet. Its tented ceiling was embellished with oil-stenciled floral and geometric motifs. A large fireplace decorated the west wall. Washed in light and glitter, it light colors and polished surfaces were bright and glistening. Natural light entered the room through glass-filled openings in the south and east walls. The polished white maple floor was stained a golden color, and the polished curly birch paneling was glazed a light honey color. Two large bronze gilt chandeliers shimmering with crystal completed the glittering effect. The two balconies acted as places of refuge from the formality of the great room.

For ten years the St. Nicholas Hotel cast its spell on out-of-town guests and the local community until change doomed its existence. During its first year of operation, it received national attention when it hosted the 29th annual convention of the American Institute of Architects from October 15 to 17, 1895. Its ballroom experienced many lavish celebrations and debutante parties. This hotel's domestic character imparted a sense of intimacy and familiarity to its guests which made them feel at home in these surroundings. In

the summer of 1902 Ames Realty sought to build an eight-story addition. They had obtained a 35-foot frontage on Locust Street immediately west of the hotel. Nothing came of this project.

Numerous historical accounts have alluded to a fire at the St. Nicholas Hotel either in 1902, 1903, or 1905. While many writers have discussed this event, none has fixed the date of its occurrence. An examination of the St. Louis fire reports issued by the St. Louis fire and police departments and printed in the *St. Louis Daily Record* has found no evidence of a fire at this hotel during these periods. Furthermore, contemporary newspaper accounts of the hotel's sale or conversion to an office building never mention a fire at this location.



A doorknob from the St. Nicholas Hotel. From Patty Ramey, *Antique Doorknob Collectors of America*, www.antiquedoorknobs.org/Nicholas%20Hotel.html.

What actually precipitated the change was the need for refurbishment after ten years of wear and tear. Ames Realty had wanted to expand the hotel to make more money, but the hotel's design precluded any change without damage to its looks. Once the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition had closed, all St. Louis hotels witnessed a sharp decline in guestroom rentals. At this point, Ames Realty decided to sell the property. It was valued at \$818,000. A business syndicate headed by M. M. Stephens, former mayor of East St. Louis, bought the hotel for \$700,000. On March 12, 1905, the *St. Louis Republic* and the *Post-Dispatch* reported the sale. The new owners formed the Marlborough Realty Company to manage the property. Like the previous owners, they envisioned an expanded hotel of 250 guest rooms.

They soon changed their strategy, however, in favor of an office building conversion. They contacted the architectural firm of Isaac Taylor, one of the city's most prestigious, to handle the conversion. The commission meant at least \$20,000 to the firm. Oscar Enders, Taylor's chief designer and close associate for 16 years, considered Louis Sullivan to be a genius and his architecture sacred. When Ike told Oscar about the commission, he refused to work on the project. Oscar called the St. Nicholas Hotel a masterpiece. Any change to it would destroy it. To preserve their working relationship, Taylor turned down the commission with regret.

Marlborough Realty then engaged the architectural firm of Eames & Young to complete the conversion. The *St. Louis Republic* reported this undertaking on April 30, 1905. Eames & Young had just completed an addition to the Union Trust Building at Seventh and Olive, another Adler & Sullivan design.

Thirteen days after the hotel closed on May 8, 1905, the Southern Illinois Construction Company started work. The transformation proved to be arduous, complex, and costly. The construction company removed the hotel's roof areas, demolished its seventh floor, and tore away its two balconies. When they rebuilt the seventh floor, they placed a two-story addition on top, capped by an overhanging cornice and covered by a flat roof. A modest ledge at the seventh floor level filled the crevices left by the removal of the balconies. Windows of standard size replaced the small windows between the oriels. After dropping the first floor six feet to the pavement level and realigning the ground floor to be the basement, contractors installed first-floor retail stores and moved the building's main entrance to Eighth Street. On the building's west flank they built a nine-story addition to match the rest of the structure. The architects struggled with the office layout in the new building. The close proximity of support columns in the guest rooms disrupted their office designs. By the late spring of 1906, the contractors had finished the building and local businessmen hastened to rent its space. Project costs exceeded \$400,000. In September 1906 most of the offices in the newly named Victoria Building had been rented.

Little remained of the St. Nicholas Hotel in the new Victoria Building except the steel frame, oriels, some of the brick and stone walls, and part of the Sullivan ornament. Eames & Young employed this ornament as a memorial to Sullivan's genius. When the Victoria Building opened, architectural critics around this country savagely condemned it as a marriage made in hell between the genius of Adler & Sullivan and the mediocrity of Eames & Young. This evaluation was wrong. Let us not fall victim to the same mistake. In designing this building, Eames & Young had no intention of replicating an Adler & Sullivan work or imitating the firm's architectural style. They intended that

the Victoria Building would stand on its own merit and not on its relationship to the St. Nicholas Hotel. The remodeled building was to represent the work of Eames and Young and no one else.



"St. Nicholas Hotel, Adler, Sullivan & Ramsey, Architects" from the *Souvenir of the 29th Annual Convention of the American Institute of Architects, held at the hotel in 1895.*

Fronting 128 feet on Locust and 114 feet on Eighth Street, the nine-story Victoria Building represented a modern American contemporary style. The exterior of this rectangular building focused on three areas of ornamentation. At its base cast iron panels stamped with geometric designs and painted brown clad the first floor piers and encircled the relocated main entrance on Eighth Street. A second area of interest and its most unusual feature dealt with the clever arrangement involving the vertical rows of bay windows decorating the shaft of the Locust Street façade. Employing a geometric progression, these rows grouped into a one, two, and three combinations as they moved east to west across the façade. Last, the ornamental frieze framing the ninth floor fenestration duplicated the floral motifs taken from the balcony balustrade panels at the St. Nicholas. A number of Adler & Sullivan designs employed this concept of horizontal framing, including the 1891 project for the Chamber of Commerce Building for Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Nine retail stores, a large buffet, entrance hall, and the grand rotunda occupied the first floor space, which rose to a height of twenty feet. Three outside entrances accessed the first floor. White marble walls, ceiling, floor, columns, and staircase adorned the grand rotunda. Three high-speed electric elevators transported people to and from the 270 offices. Each office offered its tenants ceilings twelve feet high, walls of stippled plaster in a buff color, floors of flexolithe (a cement and wood chip mix), an outside window, and mahoganyed birch woodwork and doors. Every office was heated by steam and lighted by electricity. Some offices had running water. Toilet facilities served every floor. With this transformation, the Victoria Building became a modern high-class office operation with an attractive and imaginative exterior. As one of the best local office structures, it responded to the needs of the downtown business community for 67 years.

In 1957, the owners of the Victoria borrowed \$650,000 against its value from the American National Insurance Company, located in Galveston, Texas. For the next fourteen years the Victoria enjoyed an occupancy rate above 90%, and its owners continued to make payments on the loan. Then in 1971, A. G. Edwards Investment Company, the largest tenant, moved out, leaving 110 offices vacant. Although the Victoria remained half full, its owners defaulted on the loan and the American National Insurance Company foreclosed on the property. The building at this point still produced enough income to pay its real estate taxes, operate the facility, and provide routine maintenance. The insurance company hired Clarence M. Turley Jr., local realtor, to manage the property on an interim basis. He made some attempt to find new tenants or to sell the property, but without success. In 1972 the insurance company informed the remaining Victoria tenants of their decision to demolish the building. They said they could not afford remodeling, which would be needed to make the building more competitive. Some people wanted to save it and sought to enlist the aid of the two leading St. Louis architectural critics: George



Ground floor decorative panels from the Victoria Building.



The Victoria Building, photographed for the Historic American Buildings Survey by Lester Jones on July 31, 1940.

McCue, art critic of the Post-Dispatch, and Professor Buford Pickens of Washington University. Unfortunately, both men considered the Victoria worthless. Pickens said it best: “A Victorian wonder which has lost its integrity.” However, these critics hoped that someone would retrieve a few of its artifacts before its destruction and that did happen. Now the critics and the rest of us have a few crumbs, but would it have been better to have the whole pie?

After the city issued a demolition permit on January 17, 1973, the owners dismantled the Victoria at a cost of \$130,000 and converted the site into a parking lot. Some 37 years later the site still remains a parking lot. What a waste! We have reviewed the greatness of the St. Nicholas Hotel and found it to be a masterpiece. We have examined the Victoria Office Building and found it to be a good example of a high-class office facility from the turn of the 20th century. Neither building survives. Their loss has diminished the architectural heritage of this city. All that is left is a parking lot, the bane of 20th-century architecture.

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THREE SULLIVAN BUILDINGS LOST LAST YEAR

Michael R. Allen

During his life, Sullivan’s designs resulted in the construction of 238 buildings. By 2006, only 39 remained standing. In 2006, fire struck three of the remaining buildings, all in Chicago. Two of these, the Wirt Dexter Building and the Harvey House, have been demolished while the shell of the former Pilgrim Baptist Church lingers awaiting reconstruction. After so much of Sullivan’s work was lost in the early twentieth century, architectural historians rehabilitated the reputation of the master of the Prairie School. Unfortunately, the strong scholarly reputation of the architect has not prevented senseless destruction of his work.

PILGRIM BAPTIST CHURCH (KEHILATH ANSHE MA'ARIV SYNAGOGUE)



Pilgrim Baptist, December 2006

Completed in 1891, the Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv Synagogue at 3301 S. Indiana Avenue was one of Sullivan’s most important works in his partnership with Dankmar Adler. The imposing synagogue consisted of a three-story base of Bedford limestone surmounted by a recessed fourth story topped by a dramatically steep hipped roof. This upper structure was actually the top of the open auditorium. A massive arched main entrance was wide and low, suggesting a cavern entrance into a mighty rock-hewn structure. The arch pattern was repeated on the third floor windows. Ornate terra cotta spandrels with foliage motifs added further decoration to the base. The building benefited from the imposing nature of its broad form as well as the tension between its heavy earthbound stone base and its shingled upward-pointing top. The interior space was likewise imposing. The auditorium featured a curved balcony on three sides under a massive arched ceiling. Adler’s triumph, the plaster ceiling, was suspended from large wooden trusses in the hipped roof on top of the building.



Pilgrim Baptist, 1964

The Bronzeville neighborhood surrounding the synagogue began to change in the early twentieth century; the Jewish population disappeared and African-Americans became the dominant ethnic group. In 1922, the African-American Pilgrim Baptist Church purchased the building. Pilgrim Baptist's music director was Thomas A. Dorsey, a prominent figure in the development of American gospel music. The church was in the midst of putting a new roof on the landmark when on January 6, 2006, a roof torch started a fire that completely destroyed almost everything save the limestone walls of the building. What the congregation lacked in cash it made up for in good will. Donations allowed for stabilization of the walls, and earlier this year the church announced that it had hired the architectural firms Johns & Lee Ltd. and Quinn Evans to begin drafting plans for reconstruction. The cost of rebuilding, not known but likely over \$10 million, may prohibit full restoration, although Landmarks Illinois is optimistic that the selection of Quinn Evans will lead to a respectful design.

WIRT DEXTER BUILDING

The six-story Wirt Dexter Building stood at 630 S. Wabash Avenue in the Chicago Loop. Completed in 1887 and designed by Sullivan and Dankmar Adler, the Wirt Dexter Building was an early example of Sullivan's masterfully prosaic expression of building form and structure. A granite base was the most ornamental part of the brick building. Here, the architects used cast iron for the building framework rather than the conventional mill method wooden frameworks used for contemporary loft buildings. The cast iron allowed for large window openings that gave the building an impressive lightness. Recessed spandrels and windows between somewhat narrow piers drew the eye upward. Within three years, the Wainwright

Building was under construction in St. Louis, carrying forward structural ideas whose infancy was evident on the Wirt Dexter. Only four floors lower than the Wainwright Building, the Wirt Dexter celebrated its verticality with as much aplomb. Adler and Sullivan did not pursue the strangest and most modern idea used here: exposed iron support piers on the rear elevation. Critic Lynn Becker speculates that this was modern architecture's first exoskeleton.

Attorney Wirt Dexter commissioned the building and leased it to R. Deimel & Brothers, a furniture manufacturing firm. A famous later tenant was the George Diamond Steakhouse in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1996, Chicago designated the building a city landmark. Unfortunately, the building fell vacant in the past twenty years. On October 24, 2006, workers using a torch to cut apart a boiler in the basement of the Wirt Dexter Building caused the start of a massive fire that damaged the building severely. The Chicago Transit Authority pushed for immediate demolition since the rear of the building abutted an elevated train line. Emergency demolition began on October 26, 2006 and took several weeks to complete.



Wirt Dexter Building, October 24, 2006

THE GEORGE M. HARVEY HOUSE

Less than a week after the Wirt Dexter Building burned, the George M. Harvey House in the Lakeview neighborhood suffered a destructive blaze. The Harvey House, located at 600 W. Stratford Place, was

RICHARD NICKEL'S CHICAGO: A REVIEW

by Michael R. Allen

the last extant frame building designed by Adler and Sullivan. George Harvey was an insurance executive who commissioned the house in 1888. Lakeview was then a fashionable suburban address enjoyed by upper middle class and wealthy residents like Harvey. Adler and Sullivan turned to a wood frame for the house, completing one of only three wooden buildings by the partnership. The three-story house was a departure from the rugged American style of the pair, with its clapboard, hipped roof and gabled dormers more reminiscent of Cape Cod than north Chicago. However, a wraparound porch and porte cochere (later removed) punctuated the house with an idiosyncratic style. Inside, woodwork and stenciled ornament provided stylistic patterns unmistakable as the work of Louis Sullivan.

In 1962, historian and photographer Richard Nickel identified the house as the work of Adler & Sullivan. Although altered on the exterior, the house remained occupied and its future seemed stable. Then, in June 2006, owner and occupant Natalie Frank told the alderman for the neighborhood that she was considering tearing the house down for a taller, wider condominium building. Neighborhood opposition and preservationist action led to Frank's decision to rescind her plan and instead restore the house. This decision was fortunate, since Nickel had earlier discovered original blueprints that could have guided the house's restoration. On November 4, 2006 at 1:30 a.m., a fire broke out on the second floor of the house when no residents were home. The house collapsed and was subsequently demolished.



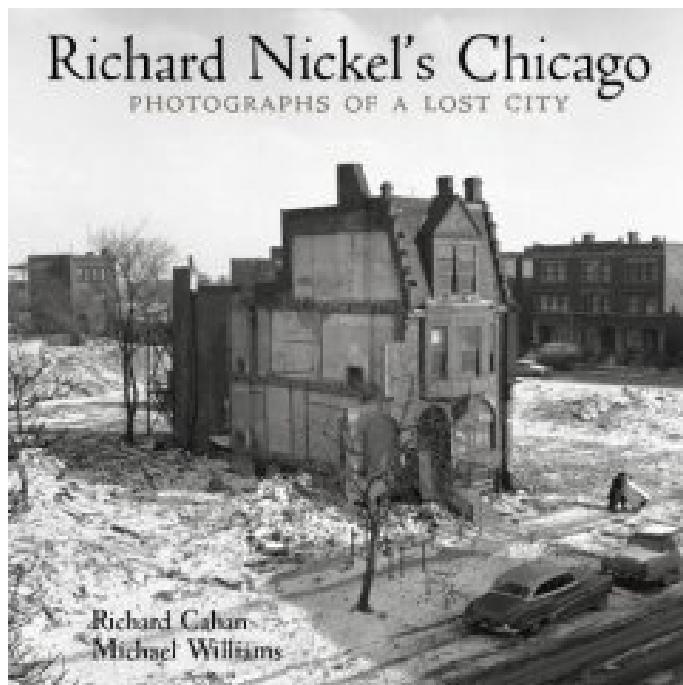
The George M. Harvey House in better days

David Norris said about his friend, photographer, salvager and historian Richard Nickel, "I think what Richard had to teach was that if you find some way to express your deepest convictions, you should exercise that talent to the very utmost of your ability. . . even if it leads somehow to your destruction." Nickel died in 1972 while rescuing interior ornament from Louis Sullivan's Chicago Stock Exchange building, then under demolition. The attitude toward his life's work that Norris summarizes is readily apparent in the vivid, arresting images in *Richard Nickel's Chicago: Photographs of a Lost City*, published at the end of 2006. The book amasses many of Nickel's images of condemned Louis Sullivan buildings, as well as his glimpses into other long-gone parts of Chicago: Chicagoans enjoying the carnival at Riverview Park; a Loop landscape prior to the Congress Expressway; downtown offices with stenciled lettering on frosted glass doors; young people making a strong show of protest at Grant Park in 1968; other hallmarks of a vibrant urban culture in which the built environment is both backdrop for human action and a pivotal character.

Richard Nickel's body of work is the result of chance. After serving in the Army immediately after World War II, Nickel was seeking a mission in life and use of the free tuition the GI Bill offered. Newly-divorced, the young man happened upon photography classes at the Institute of Design, founded and directed by Bauhaus transplant László Moholy-Nagy. There his primary instructors were noted photographers Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. Siskind taught a class in which he assigned his students to photograph the surviving buildings of Louis Sullivan. Because he was draft-exempt, Nickel was not asked to take pictures but was put in charge of the students' efforts and of an exhibition held at the Institute in 1954. No matter; the young photographer enthusiastically took up his assignment, the first step toward making the study of Sullivan's architecture his life's work. Under Siskind's direction, Nickel embarked upon a still-incomplete book entitled *The Complete Architecture of Adler and Sullivan*. After finishing his courses, Nickel continued the book project but began to get sidetracked. Chicago seemed to be disappearing around him, and Nickel responded by documenting doomed buildings, Sullivan's and others, by drawing floor plans and taking photographs and then, when demolition was certain, salvaging ornament.

Most of the images in *Richard Nickel's Chicago* were

never printed in Nickel's lifetime, making the book a remarkable document. Nickel took some 11,000 photographs in all but printed only contact sheets unless a client was willing to pay for development. He was able to capture each scene without ever seeing a large print. Somehow Nickel was able to deftly find the drama in the still life of many architectural scenes, and to carefully transmit the sorrowful scenes he witnessed directly. Those images are his best known, although most in the book are new even to his admirers. Less known are Nickel's gentle shots of people at festivals, expressing the glee, anger or longing in what seem to be private moments between subject and photographer. Those images demonstrate a breadth to Nickel's body of work previously unknown.



The architectural images convey both respect and resignation – a painful combination. The parade of lost masterpieces is staggering – Adler and Sullivan's Schiller Theatre, Meyer Building, Rothschild Building, Babson Residence, and Stock Exchange; Burnham and Root's Church of the Covenant and First Infantry Armory; Holabird and Roche's Republic and Cable buildings. Even the photographs of surviving landmarks such as the Rookery and the Auditorium Building have a weary gaze, as if the photographer has doubts of their permanence at the hands of society. Nickel conveys the glory of these buildings while showing Chicago's arrogant disregard for them; he poses wry scenes that are statements of protest, in which the beauty of the building speaks the loudest. Ever faithful to his subjects, Nickel avoids taking photographs that are easily digested or ignored. He prefers wide views and the occasional vivid close-up to iconic images. At first glance, the photographs can seem care-

fully workmanlike. Then, a detail jumps out – the postures of men standing in the foreground of a demolition scene, words on a church wall next to a gaping hole made by wreckers, the appearance of a church steeple in a photograph of a roof. As one studies the photographs, the intentional nature of the details becomes apparent. Nickel thought through his capturing of the details of every building he shot, just as the architects who designed them conceived of the intricate parts. Every foreground, background and shadow was chosen. The genius of Nickel emerges; he has taken photographs that reward a multitude of viewings and whose technique emulates the subjects' complexity as much as any documentation can. Nickel's photographs teach us the values of patience and observation, and of the power of making careful choices. These were the values that led Nickel to study and defend the works of Sullivan and other Chicago masters. These were the values that should have kept the buildings around as long as these photographs.

Cahan, Richard and Michael Williams, editors. *Richard Nickel's Chicago*. Chicago: CityFiles Press, 2006. ISBN: 0-9785450-2-8. \$34.95 from the publisher: <http://www.cityfilespress.com/>

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