

This is a book of ideas, an exploration of the ways in which Chicago has developed a particular mythology around its role as the quintessential American city and how that self-image has, at times, been contradicted and enriched by its relationship with the world beyond the shores of Lake Michigan.

Over its relatively short existence Chicago has displayed an energy and confidence that both excited and repelled the “Old World”. When much of the city was destroyed in the fire of 1871 Chicagoans saw this as an opportunity to start afresh and create a metropolis the equal of any other in the world. With fearlessness and eager embrace of modernity Chicagoans built taller and faster than anywhere else on the planet. In pursuit of rapid construction excessive ornamentation was stripped back and a distinctive design ethos emerged – the (first) Chicago School of architecture.

This book seeks to challenge this somewhat one-dimensional view of Chicago as a city driven by expediency and the demands of capitalism through showcasing its role in the development of architectural thinking.

Key to Chicago’s re-evaluation of itself

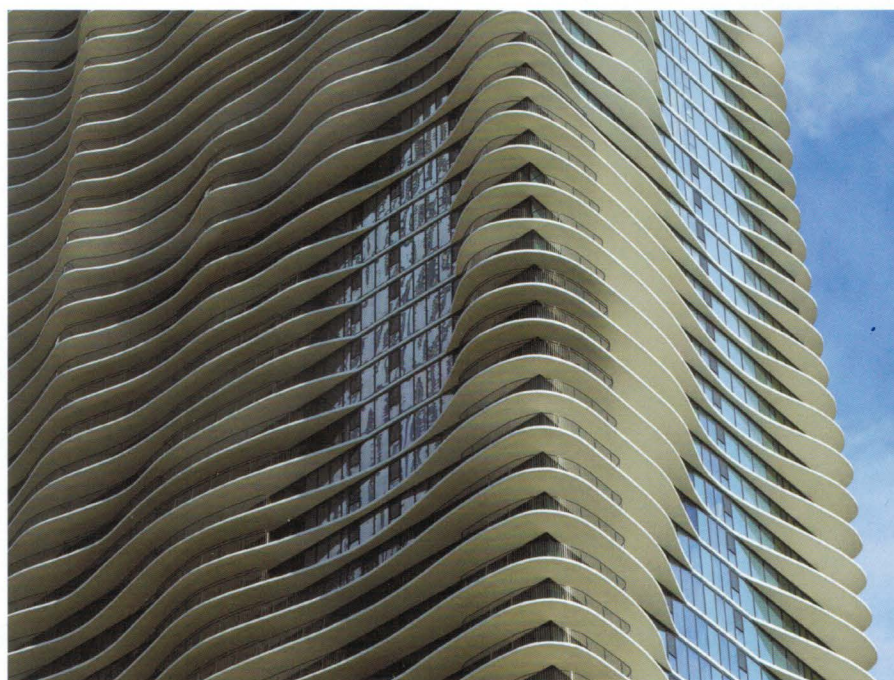
were the MoMA exhibitions of the 1930s in which curators Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson were able to draw parallels between the “International Style” they saw in Europe and the stripped-down skyscrapers particular to Chicago. Hitchcock portrayed the buildings not as a vernacular product of the new industrial age but as the artistic creations of American architects; a “Fountainhead moment” when the merit of the designs was fully appreciated for the first time. This also served to divorce modernism from its socialist European roots and offer it up for American consumption, no strings attached. The subsequent appointment of Mies van der Rohe to the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) as head of architecture cemented Chicago’s position at the centre of “Internationalism” and established the Second Chicago School as the dominant force in urban design for the second half of the 20th century.

It is this linear progression of Chicago’s architectural story that this book’s editors are keen to challenge. They explore the legacy of Konrad Wachsmann at IIT seeking to give architecture the organisational logic of industry, the irony of how Chicago (a city comprised of 75 per cent suburbs) can claim to be at the forefront of new urbanism and how Alvin Boyarsky’s spell in Chicago led on to his stewardship of the Architectural Association. Adolf Loos’s proposal for

the Chicago Tribune Tower is mulled over as though it were text – a newspaper “column” that supports nothing but itself, a bad joke aimed at the supporters of decoration on buildings who Loos railed against in Ornament and Crime. Project as critique. The Hancock Tower is viewed as an Archigram concept made concrete – a vertical town with swimming pools, restaurants and shops disconnected from the city below, aloof and apart.

One key essay discusses the impact of two major architectural exhibitions of the 1970s, which pitted the traditional view of Chicago architecture (steel-framed Miesian office buildings) against the Salon des Refusés (Chicago-based architects such as Cohen & Tigerman) who wanted space to develop their ideas outside contemporary corporate architectural practice, unrestrained by the prevailing norm. From that exhibition we are offered two alternative readings of Tigerman’s 1978 collage Titanic – that Mies’s Crown Building is sinking beneath the waves, technology over-reaching itself (Tigerman’s view when he created it) or that modernism was “... rising, like a submarine, out of our shared past to build a more sane, if un-stable and uncertain, future”. It’s a pretty safe bet the authors would choose the latter.

PETER ROBINSON RIAS



AQUA TOWER, STUDIO GANG ARCHITECTS, 2010. STEVE HALL © HEDRICH BLESSING