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New high-rise heralds revival of modernism

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There's something fresh and wonderful at 516 N Wells Street in Chicago—an exposed concrete condominium high-rise that's butterfly light rather than tombstone heavy.

The new 15-story building, known as the Contemporaine and designed by Ralph Johnson of Perkins & Will, represents a welcome departure from the hulking apartment and condominium towers that have deadened the Chicago cityscape. Yet it is significant in a broader sense. It is one of several residential high-rises in Chicago that are frankly—and winningly—modern.

These buildings show that the Chicago tradition of taking the utilitarian and transforming it into art—a tradition born in the late 19th Century, when Louis Sullivan made the skyscraper "a proud and soaring thing"—is far from dead. Their high level of design quality also begs this question: Why should we (and City Hall) be willing to accept such awful stuff elsewhere?

Besides the Contemporaine, which was built by CMK Development Corp., the bright new buildings include Johnson's 39-story Skybridge at 1 N Halsted Street, where a trellislike bridge surmounts the empty space between two towers; Lucien Lagrange's 27-story Erie on the Park at 510 W Erie Street, which flaunts V-shaped structural braces; and Brininstool + Lynch's 20-story Vue20 tower at 1845 S Michigan Avenue, a boxy but attractive high-rise that asserts itself on the skyline with a projecting aluminum sunshade.

Completed in the last 18 months, the buildings have a lot in common. They reinterpret the architectural language of the 20th Century modernism rather than inventing entirely new forms. They also integrate inside and outside, another modernist device that helps make apartments seem bigger than they really are.

At the same time, the buildings do things that classic modernist designs don't. They have lively, articulated tops. They relate to the street rather than standing aloof from it. They are, in short, good neighbors—which also differentiates them from the new brand of "tower on a podium" high-rises.

A 28-story condo building, known by its address of 630 N State Parkway, offers a telling example of the dysfunctional effect such buildings have on the cityscape. Though tarted up with decoration, its podium is so big that it obliterates the pedestrian scale of the street. The tower plopped above this base has all the charm of Soviet housing.

A similar effect is present in towers such as the 50-story Fordham at 25 E Superior Street that are dressed in mansard roofs and other historical garb. They look like they're supposed to fit in. In reality, their bloated bases make them utterly generic.

In contrast to such weighty monoliths, the Contemporaine appears light and floating. That's no coincidence because, as Johnson freely acknowledges, the building, like Skybridge, draws inspiration from the work of the Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier. The later designs of this 20th Century master resembled enormous pieces of abstract sculpture, their concrete walls left in their rough state after they were shaped by wooden molds. Le Corbusier also likes to put his buildings on stiltlike columns to emphasize their lightness.



The Contemporaine condo high-rise at 516 N. Wells St. consists of a four-story parking garage topped by an 11-story residential tower.

Debt to Le Corbusier

Anyone looking at the rough concrete walls of the Contemporaine, or the tall and very slender concrete columns that distinguish its base and its summit, will instantly recognize Johnson's debt to Le Corbusier. Yet the building is surprisingly refined, even though its concrete walls aren't painted, unlike nearly all recent concrete high-rises in Chicago. The building and its concrete wall surfaces are small enough to ensure that the concrete never becomes overwhelming. Johnson is thus able to provide a model for better residential high-rises, his composition of clearly articulated parts constituting a powerful whole.

The most surprising of those parts is the four-story parking garage at the base of the Contemporaine. It's not the typical decorated podium, its garage hidden behind walls of concrete. Rather, it's a transparent structure faced in floor-to-ceiling glass—just like the condos above it. Through its modest scale, it relates perfectly to the Contemporaine's motley surroundings which range from old Victorians to the parking lot of Binny's Beverage Depot, complete with a neon sign shaped like a bottle.

This is the first Chicago garage in recent memory to have such abundant floor-to-ceiling glass. It ought to help convince the planners at City Hall that a garage can be attractive without pretending it is not a garage. Johnson further enlivens the garage by expressing the diagonal ramp that leads up to it from the street.

The dynamism evident in that gesture pervades this entire building, with Johnson relying on both erosion and projection to endow his design with sculptural excitement.

Notice how he carves out the corner to emphasize the entrance (he plays the same game to draw your eye to the void at the building's top). A 45-foot-tall concrete column further defines the space, and the balconies above the column seem thrillingly perched on it, like the plates a magician twirls on a stick.

Pinwheeling energy

The balconies are equally inventive. Some run across the face of the building. Others pop out from it like mini-diving boards. All of them have elegant glass walls, not those typical balcony picket fences that resemble prison bars. And instead of being hung symmetrically across the exterior, the balconies each project from a different spot of the Contemporaine, giving it a pinwheeling energy.

Other refinements—like the horizontal slot between the garage and the 11-story residential tower—add to the sense that the building is a series of floating parts. At the building's summit, a concrete wall folds over a big empty space like a piece of origami. This tough gives the Contemporaine a distinct skyline presence, something far too many high-rise buildings (even those much taller than this one) fail to provide.

Sometimes, of course, buildings can be beautiful sculptures that are utterly uninhabitable. But not this time.

Johnson has thoughtfully laid out the 28 condominium units, which are targeted to what real estate agents like to call the "upper bracket" (the units range in price from \$364,000 for a 2-bedroom, 1-bath to \$1.45 million for a penthouse). Their floor-to-ceiling glass helps bring outside inside, making the units seem more spacious. Exposed concrete ceilings are not for everybody, of course, but the units, with their hardwood floors and Euro kitchen furnishings, are elegant in an edgy sort of way. The only problem spot comes in the parking garage, where the narrow, very steep ramp carries traffic both up and down. (To avoid accidents as cars round the very tight corners, the developers might want to install mirrors.)

Applying similar principles

Vue20, another CMK project, shows how the principles behind the Contemporaine can be applied to a less-expensive building. It handsomely reinterprets Sullivan's idea of the skyscraper as a three-part composition, comparable to the base, shaft and capital of a classical column. More upscale than Vue20, Erie on the Park has its own modernist precedent, its V-braces recalling the structurally expressive x-braces of the 100-story John Hancock Center.

Buildings like these offer a much-needed reminder: Architecture is the art we live with—and live in.

We're in an age of spectacle buildings—fantastic sculptural creations such as Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles or Santiago Calatrava's Milwaukee Art Museum addition. They're terrific (and they draw tourists), but the risk is that they will blind us to larger issues, from the need to provide spirit-lifting shelter to the need to conserve scarce resources through ecologically sensitive "green" design. If we can only do the spectacle buildings right, then the present triumph of architecture will be more than a little hollow.