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RESIDENTIAL  
RADICAL

COLIN KIHNKE  
OF CMK DEVELOPMENT

# RESIDENTIAL RADICAL

by Jason Fortune

CHICAGO 'S ARCHITECTURAL MAKEUP IS ONE OF VISIONARIES AND masterpieces. From the *Mies Van Der Rohe* designed Lake Shore Drive Apartments to the Sears Tower and Hancock Building that grace our city's skyline, we have undoubtedly been blessed with some amazing edifices. But some would argue that Chicago 's residential architecture has not kept in style or pace with its municipal counterparts, or with other more ambitious cities around the globe. Whether it's due to city planning or homogenization within the building community, it has been a difficult process for Chicago developers to break away from traditional methods and embrace the contemporary. But developer Colin Kihnke and his company, CMK Development, have become leaders in their attempt to transform Chicago's residential architecture.

Progressive, bold and intuitive are just a few words that can be used to describe Kihnke. Add idealistic, dynamic and straightforward, and you have the palette that paints one of Chicago's most ambitious residential developers of the new millennium.





Kihnke was exposed to the real estate business growing up, and from the time he was a teenager, he knew it was a direction that interested him. While finishing his senior year at North Park College, he landed an internship with The Habitat Company that would last for 18 months. “When I began [at The Habitat Company], I was a grunt making photocopies in the background. The program that I became involved with was the Scattered Site Housing Program,” says Kihnke. “You couldn’t find something more opposite to what I’m doing now.”

In 1995, Kihnke was 24 years old, and felt he had experienced enough of working for someone else. So he incorporated CMK Development. Starting with a small rehab, he then dabbled in real estate speculation, then began building new construction projects in the Bucktown neighborhood.

“From the first house we did, architecturally, we had a modern flair,” says Kihnke. What sets Kihnke apart from other developers is that he follows his instincts. “To me it’s strictly preference,” he states.

Some of Chicago’s citizens, however, don’t share his preferences. But opposition has not swayed his business goals nor his pride in his impelling designs. If anything, critics have only bolstered the strength of his vision.

“The market is not driving our projects; we’re driving our projects. I don’t [build] because someone is saying ‘if you do a building like that it will or won’t sell.’ If I’m going to build a building, I’m going to build something I like,” says Kihnke.

CMK has three components: construction, brokerage and development. Along with Kihnke, the core development team includes Matt Kihnke, Cindy Wrona, Scott Hoskins, Wesley Prinzen and Clayton Nelson. Running his company like a S.W.A.T. unit, Kihnke’s base of operations is a modest little office tucked away at 1637 N. Milwaukee Avenue. “We’re a small organization and we like low overhead,” he says. “At the end of the day, you only have a few people that are pulling the strings to make sure the contracts are in place.” And while Kihnke can now afford to hire GCs and managers, he started out like many developers, overseeing the field work himself. “I started in the trenches out there on the job sites,” he says. “I acted as my general contractor on the first 15 projects I did.”

Kihnke says that his company is also quick in its



execution. “We have the ability to find a piece of land, break it down, design it, get it on the market, build it and turn it over in a very quick period of time. We’ve never ‘land-banked’ projects. We know our product inside and out. We know what we want to see, and we know what we want to deliver.”

Perhaps you could call Kihnke a closet architect. He generates ideas and finds architects by simply walking into a bookstore, proceeding to the architecture section and thumbing through books. If something catches his fancy, he buys it and shelves it for later use. “I know what I like when I see it,” Kihnke bluntly states. “The architect is the artist, but he’s also the mechanic. You can have a

great looking building but the units don’t work.”

“I was looking through some books when I came across some of Ralph Johnson’s work from Perkins & Will,” he recalls. “I loved his work and waited for a time when I could work with him. When [The Contemporaine] site came around, I got it under contract, called Perkins & Will’s main directory, asked for Ralph Johnson, left him a voicemail and then set up a meeting. Two years later, we had The Contemporaine.”

Kihnke sensed the need to push buildings to more of a structural and sculptural discipline than had been previously used in Chicago residential construction, so Johnson, to him, was the perfect architect for this job.

“I THINK THE CONTEMPORAINE  
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FOR GENERATIONS TO COME...”

—Colin Kihnke

“Ralph Johnson is an extremely talented architect,” he lauds. “It’s extremely difficult to build sculptural buildings like The Contemporaine... but I went to Ralph and said, ‘give me a great building that we’ll love a hundred years from now,’ and I didn’t pull back the [financial] reins..”

The Contemporaine at 516 North Wells is the flagship of CMK’s buildings to-date, with residential units selling between \$500,000 and \$1,500,000. A modern sculpture built entirely of glass, steel and concrete, the structure is a major departure from the typical Chicago high-rise. The four-story base, where the parking garage is housed, is fully glazed where the passerby can actually see the cars moving up and down the ramps. The wall of glass continues upward into the residential units, which boast floor-to-ceiling windows and cantilevered balconies extending prominently over the street. Its unique, ultra-modern façade reaches to a peak in the sky, where a sculpted corner cut-out is centered around a 45-foot concrete column—a theme echoed in much of Johnson’s earlier work.

“I knew of Kihnke’s reputation as a developer that is interested in modern architecture, so I was happy to get the project,” says Johnson, director of design for Perkins & Will, which was recently ranked fourth most admired firm among the Top 10 national/international design firms by Contract magazine. “[Kihnke] was interested in putting a different kind of product out on the street. That was very exciting to me. I wanted to do something that was really dynamic, that respected the context but also added to the context, instead of fading into the background.” Johnson says The Contemporaine is like an updated version of the 1920s buildings that had wonderful spaces at the top. “It’s obviously a modern building,” he observes, “but it learned from the lessons of those romantic buildings.”

CMK Development has also just begun pre-construction sales for a new project at 630 North Franklin. “This is a project completely based on value,” says Kihnke. “What we tried to do with this building was take the same elements and same type of design features [that were used at The Contemporaine] and achieve our price points,” Kihnke says. 630 North

Ralph Johnson, director of design for Perkins & Will.



Colin Kihnke, president/founder of CMK Development.



# Progressive bold

1620 South Michigan



“THE MARKET IS NOT DRIVING OUR PROJECTS, WE’RE DRIVING OUR PROJECTS.”

—Colin Kihnke

Franklin units are affordably priced between \$159,000-\$479,000. The creativity, Kihnke says, is in striking the right balance between amenities and value to reach that desired price point.

In a city whose residential motif still strongly reflects history rather than history-in-the-making, Colin Kihnke is a bellwether for the residential modern architecture movement. “Kihnke is not just interested in developing buildings and selling them; he is interested in creating a legacy, which is unusual for someone that young,” says Johnson. “And I think it’s just the beginning.” Johnson says that though the perception of developers is that they can’t sell modern architecture,

he believes Kihnke is proving them wrong.

Sitting in his conference room, Kihnke gazes at a rendering of The Contemporaine pinned on his wall. When asked if he is happy with the outcome of the structure, he sits back in his chair. “It’s beautiful. I love the work Ralph did, and I’m very proud of the accomplishments of my team. I think The Contemporaine will be a Chicago landmark for generations to come.” And if Kihnke continues with the same momentum, CMK Development will have indeed transformed Chicago’s residential tableau with more landmarks for generations to come. c.a.