



The art of architecture

CMK's Contemporaine raises condo to art form in River North

by Dan Schuyler

“One day I get a call from Colin. He’s only 30 years old, you know, and he likes modern...likes pushing the envelope and going against the grain. It’s part of his kick. He told me what he was after, and I knew we would be a perfect fit.”

So spoke Ralph Johnson, the renowned Perkins & Will architect, when asked how he and Colin Kihnke, of CMK Development, collaborated to create Contemporaine, a 30-unit 15-story luxury glass tower underway on the southwest corner of Grand and Wells, in River North.

“Chicago is the home of modern architecture,” Johnson said. “The foundation of modern architecture began here. Then some 25 years ago it fell out of favor. It gave way to classicism, to a retro-attitude. The perception developed that people favored traditional, and developers decided to give the people what they wanted. They’re still doing it, but there is a movement afoot to get away from wedding cake and cookie cutter buildings and to take the kind of design risks that put Chicago on the map architecturally over 100 years ago. The Contemporaine is a very structurally integrated building, yet it is functionally traditional.”

Contemporaine does indeed feel integrated, as if the structure was placed on the site rather than constructed there. The four-story base contains the lobby, 2,000 square feet of commercial space and a heated garage – all of which is fully glazed, affording a view of the whole interior, garage ramps and all, and creating an immediate sense of intimacy with the life of the building.

Levels five through 15 contain the condominiums and continue the wall of glass, with floor-to-ceiling windows in each unit. The residential space is slightly cantilevered over the base of the building, and from the outside, appears to be supported entirely by a 45-foot concrete column, the Herculean underpinning upon which the integrity of the structure relies.

Scanning upward, attention immediately focuses on the blunt-edged balconies, or “Ralph Johnson specials,” as Kihnke calls them, which jut out of the sides of the building in a bold attempt to bring the personality of the structure to the street and the neighborhood. At the top, slim columns hold up portions of the roof, performing a task somewhat less arduous than that of their ground floor companion.

The lobby is loaded with slate, stainless steel and wood, which flows

into the two stainless steel doors of the high-speed elevators. The 2,000-square-foot commercial space will be occupied by Svenska Mobler, a high end Scandinavian art deco furniture boutique, whose only other store is in Los Angeles.

“There are 28 residences, and the majority of the floors contain three or less units, so the living atmosphere is quite intimate,” said Scott Hoskins, managing broker at CMK Realty. “The mix includes six two-bedroom units, 14 three-bedroom units and eight penthouses.”

The condos range from 926 to 2,800 square feet, priced from the \$350s to about \$1.5 million. At press time, 20 of the 28 units were under contract.

Glass walls and skyline views create dramatic spaces throughout the building, but Hoskins says, the penthouses are real showstoppers.

“The penthouse floor plans are all unique, and four of the penthouses contain atrium rooms, each with two magnificent glass walls soaring 20 or 30 feet high,” Hoskins says. “All of the units have floor to ceiling windows with an independent electric baseboard heat system underneath. The units are replete with hardwood flooring, granite tops, marble floors and high end finishes. The kitchen cabinetry

alone cost upward of \$30,000.”

Hoskins emphasizes that “from a living standpoint, we view this as a boutique intimate residence, and for this reason we purposely offer few amenities. As a result, the assessments will be relatively modest.”

Construction of the building began in July of last year, and first occupancy is expected by the end of this year.

Developer Colin Kihnke half-jokingly labels Contemporaine as “a pursuit of my hobby.” When pressed, however, he will admit that it is not only a real estate development, but also the embodiment of his ideals.

“When you envision a real estate development, you think of location, price point and cost,” Kihnke says. “Contemporaine goes way beyond that. I view it as an objet d’art, as a sculpture, as artwork that stands alone. This is really my first push to create a sculptured piece of art, and I really believe that people will buy because of what it is.”

Kihnke cannot fully explain how he developed his offbeat approach to real estate development. “I guess I was born this way,” he says. “I always liked modern things, and the more I came to understand modern architecture, the more I appreciated it. Now I think of it as an art form.”

And as the future. Recently, local media have been full of stories about the poor quality and retro design of most buildings constructed during Chicago’s ’90s boom. Kihnke was one of just a handful of developers building modern residential developments during that period and can take credit for helping to build a track record for modern design as it becomes more accepted in the residential market.

“I think to some extent, I can define the market with projects like Contemporaine,” Kihnke says. “I started my career with a conventional approach, but I always tried to offer something different. Ten years ago, no one in Chicago was really thinking modern. Five years ago there were a few. Now, a lot more developers are thinking like me. People are getting sick of box buildings and painted concrete. People want space, or at least the illusion of space. Contemporaine has larger units for the most part, but even a 900-square-foot apartment can look huge with proper design and materials. I truly believe that in this day and age, if I had price point and location, the Chicago market would absorb a huge number of modestly priced ultra-modern residences.”