

Architectural rebound

After years of dull home design, Chicago is back

by Barry Pearce

In 2003, architecture critic and local blogger Lynn Becker wrote a cover story in the *Chicago Reader* calling on developers to “stop the blandness.”

Incredibly, they listened. At least many of them did.

As Becker was writing, there already were hints of serious changes afoot in local residential design. A number of builders had been steadily creating track records for progressive projects, and dissatisfaction with a series of terrible towers in neighborhoods like River North was taking its toll.

The vast bulk of major developments, however, were not especially well-designed, this at a time when a building boom was remaking the city's skyline. But in just four short years, Chicago has seen a sea change in residential design.

Glass and steel are suddenly in fashion. Facades are curving and shimmering and even spiraling skyward. Architects are experimenting with massing and color, balconies and rooflines.

Plenty of new designs are still vintage-looking, borrowing their styles from the Art Deco or Victorian eras, adding French touches here and English motifs there, and that probably will always be the case. Lots of homebuyers say that buildings of stone and brick with clear caps and clear bases and an air of history are “warmer” than more contemporary designs.

And once upon a time (not so long ago), the market offered little else. Now that the tides have turned, homebuyers – at least those looking for condos – have a wider variety of home styles from which to choose than ever before. Low-rise housing,

unfortunately, is still dominated, with some exceptions, by fairly similar, fairly retro-looking designs. Mid-rises, however, have started to show signs of evolving; perhaps the zeitgeist is working its way down the architectural ladder.

Will a softening market stop this trend dead in its tracks? While it already has slowed the pace of building, it's not likely to hurt the movement toward modern design. The successes of developers (ranging from Donald Trump to CMK Companies) with contemporary projects across a broad range of price points for a broad spectrum of buyers have been too well established.

If anything, a tougher market encourages builders to separate their products from the pack, and unique design is one way to do that. Virtually anything will sell in the sort of boom years Chicago recently experienced – and anything did. Now, when buyers are concerned with keeping up with inflation at resale (as opposed to keeping up with the Rockefellers), developments that set themselves apart have something significant to tout.

The movement toward “green” building, which is gaining ground in Chicago, will only increase the trend. Modernist projects ranging from the West Loop's Emerald to Lakeshore East's 340 on the Park have inextricably linked environmentally-friendly development with contemporary architecture, and buyers appear to be responding.

Below are just a few of the most interesting residential designs in development in Chicago. Thankfully, there are now many more where they came from.

235 Van Buren

A previous collaboration between developer CMK Companies and architect Ralph Johnson, of Perkins & Will, resulted in *Contemporaine*, an architectural tour de force in River North. This time around, the developer and designer have paired up for a much different project, a 46-story high-rise with more than 700 units – one of the largest new developments to be announced this year downtown.

Like the much smaller River North building, 235 Van Buren draws on Johnson's sculptural approach to design. In some ways, it's two buildings – the north façade turns strong horizontal ribbons of concrete and glass toward the Loop and the south façade presents a wall of glass punctuated with playfully irregular balconies to the endless cars streaming in and out of the city via the Eisenhower Expressway.

Many architects dislike balconies in high-rises. Developers and marketers insist on their presence in residential buildings, but designers often go along grudgingly, convinced their structures would be more elegant without these tacked-on appendages. That attitude tends to show in balconies that look, well, tacked-on. Johnson, by contrast, embraces his balconies, which in turn, embrace the city, their cantilevered forms jutting into the urban environment and, to use his image, “spinning off the building's column in a fashion similar to a pinwheel.”

The exuberance of those balconies is contained in a restrained concrete frame, which also draws attention to an eye-catching corner roof element (a Johnson trademark) and references the building's very different flip side. The concrete southern wall of the base, striated with angled horizontal lines, echoes its neighbor, the highway, while the base's northern side turns a friendly glass face – and neighborhood retail – to Van Buren Street.

The building has a deep footprint, which can make getting adequate light and ventilation to back bedrooms an issue. Johnson used some tricks from loft construction, including partial-height walls to “borrow” light from the fronts of units, where wide expanses of glass maximize it.

