Two Tales of a City

Rebuilding Chicago's Architectural and Social Landscape, 1986–2005

By Gail Satler. Foreward by Lee Bey

(DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006. Pp. xvi, 256. Illustrations, index. $39.95.)

Gail Satler's *Two Tales of a City* is a coffee-table book that aims to make an argument. In this sense, it resembles historian Timothy Gilfoyle's recently published *Millennium Park: Creating a Chicago Landmark* (2006), a thick volume loaded with photographs and maps that also includes a detailed account of how Chicago's most famous contemporary monument came to be. Satler's discussion of recent Chicago planning and development initiatives, though running to under 250 pages of text and photographs, manages to cover Millennium Park, the downtown Loop's refurbished State Street corridor, developments along the main and south branches of the Chicago River, and a variety of other residential, commercial, and transportation infrastructure projects around the city. Indeed, the sheer number of sites that Satler visits and interprets seems to hinder her in developing a coherent overall interpretation of contemporary development trends in Chicago.

The gist of Satler's assessment of contemporary Chicago physical development seems to be that in the mid-1980s a local design renaissance emerged, attributable to planners, architects, and other design professionals reengaging with the hallmarks of Chicago's older architecture. For example, Satler's description of the mid-1990s State Street makeover reserves high praise for the group of designers who incorporated Prairie-style motifs in the new State Street signage, street furniture, and subway entrances, in so doing reaffirming this iconic commercial district's place identity. At many other points, Satler's narrative implies that a recent explosion of new economic creativity has rejuvenated local architectural practice. Though Satler never mentions "creative class" guru Richard Florida, her line of discussion parallels his claims regarding the emergence of a new urban dynamism.

Writers on architecture and cityscapes tend to fall into one of two presentational camps. On the one hand are the Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte-style empiricists, who treat buildings, plazas, and streets in their three-dimensional detail and relentlessly question "how they work" for their users. The other camp—which has included many renowned architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Louis Sullivan—writes as if sidewalks, facades, and public spaces were merely starting points for deeper explorations of life's fundamental truths. Satler tips her hand as a deep explorer early in this volume, when she warns that the reader should expect "incongruities and sometimes startling juxtapositions"

(p. 10). This, indeed, is the case. On many occasions she breaks off from the discussion of a particular building or site to relate the often abstract formulations of leading sociologists (past and present) such as Robert Park, Manuel Castells, and Saskia Sassen. None of these observers is especially noted for his or her interpretations of the physical city, and Satler's frequent recourse to their commentary rarely amplifies her own descriptions.

Gail Satler's account of recent Chicago physical development, documented as it is by a large number of photographs (evidently taken by the author), would have resulted in a more cogent statement had she placed greater trust in her own eyes and experience as guides to how Chicago's new physical spaces "work" for their residents.

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Irma
A Chicago Woman's Story, 1871-1966
By Ellen FitzSimmons Steinberg

(Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004. Pp. xxi, 231. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Clothbound, $49.95; paperbound, $19.95.)

Memoirs and autobiographies continue to intrigue historians and general readers. While the lives of famous individuals have always been sought after and Americans remain fascinated with celebrity, the memoir has, since the advent of the new social history in the 1970s, benefited from another trend: interest in the lives of ordinary people. Ellen FitzSimmons Steinberg, author of *Irma: A Chicago Woman's Story*, tells us that "by her own admission, [Irma] was 'nobody famous'" (p. xiii). Steinberg goes to considerable lengths to present the story of Irma in the woman's own words—"the more than half a million words Irma wrote during her adult life" (p. ix)—even though she left no sustained manuscript that reflects her own ordering of her life story. Steinberg spent more than twelve months transcribing Irma's diaries, journals, letters, and other papers. She carried out additional research, spoke with family members, and then "placed Irma's writings within a temporal-social-religious framework to explain what might otherwise be unfamiliar to a reader" (p. ix).

Steinberg's reconstruction verges, in places, on being a new creation, explaining, for example, that "the stories in the early chapters" of *Irma* are "whole cloth woven from various entries and remembrances Irma made