

## *Chicago Skyscrapers, 1871–1934*

By Thomas Leslie

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013. Pp. xi, 234. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.)

Post-Fire Chicago was an intense construction site for decades. Between 1871 and 1934, 330 major buildings were erected—some of them short-lived, others still standing today. This book is a sweeping and thorough examination of the forces that shaped that long generation of building construction—soil conditions, fire, materials, programs, technologies, clients, and codes. Descriptions of the constant changes in these forces are intertwined with accounts of Chicago architects' quick responses to the opportunities that they afforded.

*Chicago Skyscrapers* is also an account of the architectural history and criticism that have surrounded this activity. The buildings of this era have occupied critics and historians for decades. The author cites early writers such as Montgomery Schuyler and Thomas Tallmadge and incorporates critiques from *Inland Architect* and the *Chicago Tribune*, as well as the writings of architects of the times. The book is rooted, in part, in the writings and debates about what was christened the “Chicago School”—a term employed by Carl Condit in his iconic 1952 book *The Rise of the Skyscraper*, critiqued numerous times since. Leslie proceeds in what he refers to as a “developmental narrative,” one that categorizes “Chicago’s tall commercial structures in terms of architecturally and constructionally distinct types,” making it easier to ex-

plain “the city’s skyscraper evolution from five-story mill construction at the time of the Fire to a type recognizable by 1934 as the basic template for tall building construction throughout the twentieth century” (p. xv).

Leslie divides his book into chapters dealing consecutively with a range of constructive types. He chronicles the movement from early taller masonry buildings to skeletal frames, wind-braced frames, and terra-cotta skins, through to twentieth-century towers with more solid curtain walls that took advantage of changes in codes, more sophisticated construction methods, electric lights, and elevators. Readers move through time with a constant awareness of changing developments in design and construction. Floating foundations unique to the city are challenged by piles and ultimately replaced by caissons, which were first used in Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan’s Chicago Stock Exchange. Fireproofing begins with masonry walls and columns; terra cotta was soon discovered to be a lighter and equally effective cladding. Leslie also charts the movement from wrought iron to cast iron to steel and the accompanying improvements in connections from bolts to rivets. As building skins become lighter and more skeletal, the development of the plate glass industry proves equally critical.

Leslie brings other forces into play, as well. With the growing professionalism of engineering, construction itself becomes more sophisticated, as scheduling and material handling are coordinated to manage ever tighter construction schedules. Such careful timing represents a far cry from the early years when an architect presided over a group of laborers and craftsmen.

This book should be read closely—it is full of information and dense descriptions. And because it is highly detailed, it is fair to note that it could have used more editing. There are a number of places where small but puzzling errors occur. For instance, in his discussion of Adler and Sullivan's early work, the author says that five buildings illustrate his point, and immediately lists and thoroughly discusses six structures. Charles Atwood's death is noted twice as 1895 and once as 1896. The exact date—1896—is important, given the fast-paced building activity in which he was engaged. Also, a prominent photograph of Adler and Sullivan's *McVickers Theatre* appears, but there is no reference to the building in the text.

These flaws aside, the book provides a thoughtful and fascinating view of an immensely active time in the history of Chicago architecture. As Leslie notes, "Chicago in these decades was a city of laboratory-like conditions that enabled architects, engineers and builders to learn from one another's successes and failures... Architects changed their design approaches both incrementally and radically as improvements were tested and proven, and they were agile in adapting their sense of style to new materials or techniques. Out of this crucible of deadlines, tight margins and informed gambles on new techniques a new tradition of commercial building emerged that, if it was not a 'School,' was nonetheless an approach unique to Chicago, an approach whose influence spread globally as a conceptual and aesthetic ideal" (p. xxi).

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