

You Can't Go Home Again?

BY TERRENCE DOODY

IN EARLY JUNE, I went on the Rice Design Alliance tour to Chicago with three things in mind. I wanted to see the city through the eyes of our professional guides. I wanted to gauge my affection and understanding of it against their expertise. And I wanted to learn about those things I didn't know. Great architecture is not simply self-evident. Its meaning and value are couched in history, in the tradition of forms, in theories and arguments. They are also couched in our personal experience and expectations, as well as in neighborhoods we don't even know about. All these different contexts came to bear on my big moment as we stood in front of H.H. Richardson's Glessner House.

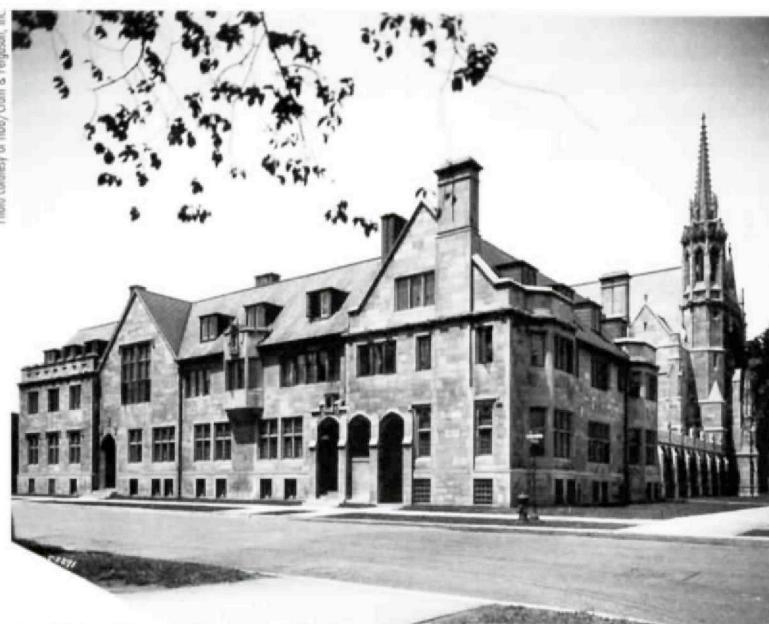
Our guide, Rolf Achilles, said we could see the corner of the old R. R. Donnelly printing plant down Prairie Avenue. In high school I had a summer job as a messenger that took me to that plant many times. I had no idea then that Prairie Avenue was a historic district; I knew it only as a neighborhood where I felt uncomfortable. And I am not sure that if I had seen the Glessner House by accident, I would have noticed it or known what I was looking at. For in fact I wasn't even aware of its existence until 1997, when I read about it. Because my in-laws live in Pittsburgh, I had encountered by then his overpowering Allegheny County Court House and, subsequently, had sought out Trinity Church in Boston. The Glessner House was not as big as I thought it would be from the pictures I'd seen. Its proportions contained and even refined the massiveness of the stonework, and I began to understand how proportion is much more important than any pure value we assign to size. A basic lesson, to be sure, but not one you can learn from reading. This intuition about proportion had affected me when we were in Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House and Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple, but it was only here I became really conscious of it.

I had a completely different kind

of big experience on our first afternoon. After lunch at the Arts Club, another place I'd never heard of when I lived in Chicago, we took the Chicago Architecture Foundation's cruise on the Chicago River through much more familiar territory. The cruise starts at the Michigan Avenue bridge, where the Wrigley Building and Tribune Tower stand as a gateway. I had always liked the Wrigley Building, with its white facades and the gap in it that now brings to mind Pennzoil Place; and I seem to have always known that the Tribune is a second-best building, an idea of architecture commensurate with Col. McCormick's idea of his own grandeur.

But from the river, in the slow tracking shot the boat provided, we could see in a long single glance about a hundred years of very distinguished building: from the neo-classical London Guarantee and Accident Building (Alfred S. Alschuler, 1923) on the river's south side; then north and just to the west, Mies's last skyscraper, the beautiful IBM Building (Office of Mies van der Rohe with C. F. Murphy Associates, 1971), which stands across the street from the towers of Marina City, by Mies's student Bertrand Goldberg, the coolest address on the planet when it opened in 1967. Then back on the river's south side, the spectacular curved tower of 333 Wacker Drive (Kohn Pedersen Fox, 1983), whose wall of green glass holds the river and sky in constant equipoise.

333 Wacker was exactly the kind of newer building I wanted to hear about. The kind of older building I wanted to discover was then the cruise's best surprise: the Montgomery Ward & Co. warehouse (Schmidt, Garden & Martin, 1908), which also follows the river's curve and is as elegant as an Iowa barn. Back at the other end of the river and of our trip, east of Michigan, I recognized this warehouse's perfect counterpart: the NBC Tower (SOM, 1989), with its useless, orthogonal, perfectly Po-Mo flying



One of Chicago's favorite buildings: Fourth Presbyterian Church.

buttresses that pay homage to, of all things, the Tribune Tower. Does this kind of ironization, I asked, now make the Tribune itself Postmodernist? And make its nostalgia prophetic?

My more serious question of Rolf Achilles was: Is there another American city that has a comparable concentration of fine buildings across so many historical styles? I know that if you stand in the center of Boston Commons, you can see, starting with Bulfinch's statehouse, about two hundred years of architecture, but I am not sure all of it is as distinguished as Bulfinch's. (In the old town square of Prague, you can see in a long glance examples of Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Neo-classical, Baroque, Beaux Arts, and modernist building standing hip to hip, but that's another neighborhood altogether.) Rolf couldn't think off-hand of another place, and there's a lot of classical Chicago School architecture you can't see from the river. I was pumped with pride.

After the river tour, we were taken into two of Mies's apartments at 860-880 North Lake Shore Drive. The first one had a northeast corner view, looking up the Drive and out onto the water. Its window-walls made the outside-inside distinction seem trivial because the view was — delicately put — not unsublime. All my adult life I had wanted to see these apartments from the inside, and it was worth the wait. They were, in every way, perfect. Consequently two days later, the Farnsworth House, which I hadn't learned about until much later, didn't have the impact on me it had on one of the other pilgrims, an architect who said she had studied pictures of it forever. I felt that, for its full effect to take hold, the Farnsworth House had to be lived in rather than merely visited. It is deeply peaceful because its artlessness makes it seem inevitable; and like all great art, it fulfills at once the need it creates.

Ninety minutes later that Saturday morning, we were at Lake and

Kenilworth in Oak Park at Wright's Unity Temple. I grew up in Oak Park, on Kenilworth, have friends who bought a Prairie-style house, have been in Wright's home-studio and in Fallingwater. I had not been in Unity Temple, however, and it blew my little mind. To enter it, you are turned away from the world and into the building, perhaps into yourself as well, to the sanctuary, which is a cube filled with light. Its flat ceiling makes no gesture toward transcendence, so as you look into the sanctuary's center, you look across it as well to the other congregants: you see yourself in them as they see themselves in you, and in this relationship Wright defines the sacred.

(Later that evening, I said to my brother Dan, who lives in Oak Park, that Unity Temple was the most moving church I had ever been in. He asked if I had even been in the Duomo in Florence. Very good question. I had been. And I am prepared to do further research on this matter when the RDA mounts its Oak Park-Firenze trip.)

The moral of my story, therefore, is yes, you can go home again. It's great. And it is even more fun if you try to look at it as though it were someplace else. From my window in the Hotel Burnham, looking north, I could see on my right Burnham's Marshall Field building, where I went as a child to see the *real* Santa Claus; on my left, the great Picasso in Daley Plaza, which I was lucky enough to see unveiled at its dedication in 1967; and straight ahead, my favorite of all, the John Hancock Center. This view is nothing like the one from my bedroom window on Kenilworth. And I had just learned something too cool about the Fourth Presbyterian Church, which stands across the street from the Hancock. This is one of everybody's favorite buildings and probably the first one I ever responded to, in my messenger days, as architecture. What I learned is, it was designed by Ralph Adams Cram, who also did Rice. Made me feel right at home. ■