

Paris In Chicago

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By Barbara Ballinger

Build, and they will come. They certainly did when developer LR Development Co. and Lucien Lagrange Architects designed and constructed a condominium building at the prime Chicago location of North Lark Shore Drive and Pearson Street.

Facing Lake Michigan and Lake Shore Park, the building not only offers every modern amenity but also pays homage to the graciousness and detailing of the past with a striking limestone façade with arches and stainless and glass canopy, a zinc mansard roof and a majestic rotunda.

LR Development, which transformed the nearby Mayfair from a vacant hotel to a residential building and co-developed the 67-story Park Tower condominium, grabbed the site when the American Hospital Association's building there was torn down. It decided to construct not one condominium building but three, each with a different personality and all with the same high standard of excellence, says Laura Davis Sherman, LR Development's senior vice president of sales and marketing.

Because of its desire for individuality and luxuriousness, the developer held a design competition for the prominent corner site, with the building named for its address at 840 N. Lake Shore Dr.

Lucien Lagrange won the assignment, and designed a classically styled 26-story limestone building, inspired both by the 1920s era, Beaux-Arts-style residential buildings that line East Lake Shore Drive and the chic residences of Paris' finest arrondissements. His building does more, however.

It relates perfectly in scale and ambience to its older East Lake Shore Drive neighbors as well as

to the other two new buildings LR Development constructed — “The Pearson” and “The Bevedere.” And it takes maximum advantage of its site. Because buildings to the North blocked views, light and air, Lagrange oriented 840 toward the park and lake and added the rotunda so that each apartment has a large rounded room for even more spectacular viewing.

Lagrange constructed the two lower floors from a warm French limestone from Burgundy to offset Chicago's tendency toward grayness. “You can go a month without sun, so I felt it was very important to have a warm color that would allow light to come through windows,” explains Lagrange, who moved from France to Canada to attend McGill University and then to Chicago to work at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill architects before opening his own firm.



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Lagrange built the upper façade from a precast Illinois stone, which mimics the French material but was more affordable and easier to detail, he says. Tall windows in a human scale were recessed as they historically have been in many older Parisian buildings. Finished ceiling heights are over 9', and each unit has a terrace.

Owners were given the choice to buy space in varying degrees of completion since LR and Lagrange knew that the type of clients who would gravitate here had experience building and decorating, explains Sherman. Adds Lagrange, "With every building we gain a better understanding of the lifestyle of the people who move in," Lagrange says. Here, he anticipated owners with turbocharged social and work lives.

"A man," Lagrange explains, "might need to catch a plane at 6 a.m. and have to get up at 4 a.m. while his wife sleeps. They'd want a door to close off the sleeping compartment. Or he might come home from work at 5:30 p.m., have half an hour to get into a tux for a black-tie function, so one small bathroom for two to share wouldn't do. They might also be the ones hosting a cocktail party for an alderman running for office and need the kitchen to work for a caterer. These choices aren't just a question of luxury, but of how owners live and work in a certain social world."

For one couple, who purchased one of the upper-level apartments, Lagrange and his wife Jessica, who runs her own design firm, Jessica Lagrange Interiors, had the advantage of having worked with them on two of their homes. This was to be different—an urban pied-a-terre, so they could dip their toes into city living after raising two children in a large suburban home.

The traditional definition of pied-a-terre—a

temporary or second lodging—does not do justice to the home's sprawling square footage. But space was just one of many attributes that appealed. Having owned new and old homes, they liked the flexibility the new construction affords rather than the limitations they find older structure impose, says the husband, who was intimately involved in the initial design, including determining where outlets went. "Life has been good to us, and I believe you can never spend too much money on your home. We wanted to walk in and feel comfortable and soothed, with an elegant yet casual feeling," he explains.

Jessica Lagrange faced other challenges: to design rooms that would suit the couple's regular entertaining and allow them to display part of their art collection.

While the couple met with Jessica regularly to take the project from conception to completion, she also was given tremendous latitude to develop her vision, she says. "These were absolutely dream clients who believed in us," she says. "We envisioned a residence that would be more international and sophisticated than their other homes and have classic bones such as old reclaimed floors that creaked and beautiful moldings that looked like they had always existed. But we also wanted to add some hipness in furnishings and accessories. We wanted the effect to be unforgettable," she says.

To accomplish the program, she shopped antique stores and shops in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Paris with the goal of giving rooms a slowly acquired panache. "We'd start with a rug, which would lead to another choice, or we'd find lamps for a credenza that would go behind a sofa, and they'd lead to something else," she says.

But she also knew to call on specialist for certain

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tasks. When it came time for the kitchen, where the owners like to congregate, she consulted with Mick De Giulio of de Giulio Kitchens to fashion a functioning French-inspired workspace. For the lighting, essential to display artworks, she hired Fisher Marantz Stone in New York.

Art consultant Patty Gilford of Patty Gilford Fine Art, who had helped the couple acquire much of their collection, helped place works, which focus on Chicago artists from the 1920s-'40s. "Like most serious collectors, he buys for the artwork rather than a particular site," Gilford says.

For wall colors and unusual decorative treatments, she hired Hester Decorating Co. and Armand Lee & Co., both in Chicago. The powder room's walls and ceiling were given a finish known as eglomise, or glass gliding, to simulate a jewel box. The library was paneled in a pecky cypress that has an old-world look. Unlacquered brass knobs, which reflect another period luxury, were found at Nanz in New York.

The visual effect is of new and old blending seamlessly in neutral backgrounds or ones in the couple's favorite blue. The apartment has also functioned perfectly. One cocktail party meant to host 60 grew to 200. "It held up perfectly," recalls the husband.

Recently they purchased an additional 3,400 square feet. Among the additions will be a bigger closet for the husband. "It's going to be the ultimate alpha-male closet with every bell and whistle such as a massage table and wine bar," he says animatedly.

With all units purchased, LR Development and Lagrange have each moved on to new projects. Lagrange is designing the new Ritz Carlton residences on the site of the former Terra

Museum, which will emphasize the ultimate in service. LR Development is building a 343-unit condominium building at 340 E. Randolph St. and a 62-story elliptical glass condo building at 71 E. Huron St.

But no matter what other buildings are added to the Chicago landscape, 840 is expected to remain a benchmark of success. "To have a truly luxurious residence, you need a prime location, and this offered the views and setting," says Sherman. But it also offers a quality outside and inside that makes it a welcome addition in its very tiny neighborhood.