

In Downtown Chicago, Architects Return to 'Less Is More'

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By Robert Sharoff



After a decade-long stretch of neo-this and neo-that apartment buildings, the city is returning to its modernist roots.

A handful of new projects—the tip of a residential building boom that has transformed the downtown area in recent years—have reaffirmed the city’s commitment to a style of architecture it basically invented in the late 19th century and refined for much of the 20th century into the “less is more” buildings that dominate through their powerful forms and ingenious construction.

The buildings that have caused the most stir are Erie on the Park, Kingsbury on the Park, Skybridge and Contemporaine.

The first two—which are cater-corner from each other in River North, a SoHo-like neighborhood just north of the Loop central business district—are the first new steel and glass residential towers to be erected downtown in many years.

The designer is Lucien Lagrange of Lucien Lagrange Architects, one of the most prolific residential architects in the city.

Skybridge and Contemporaine, meanwhile, are by Ralph Johnson, who is the head designer of Perkins & Will, a firm with a long history of corporate and institutional work in Chicago.

Skybridge is just west of the Loop in a neighborhood known as Greek Town while Contemporaine is in River North.

For Mr. Lagrange, the buildings are something of an about-face. His work up until now has been firmly in the “neo” mode. With Erie and Kingsbury, however, Mr. Lagrange is reverting to his early days when he worked as a designer

under Bruce Graham—the architect of such landmark structures as the Sears Tower and the John Hancock Center—at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

Erie came first. The spark, he says, was the building’s irregular site. “The developer had an impossible piece of land,” Mr. Lagrange said. “It wasn’t clear anything could be built there. We looked at it and eventually decided to try a building shaped like a parallelogram. So it evolved into being a very modern building.”

Mr. Johnson, by contrast, has been a determined modernist for many years. What he has not been, however, is a residential designer. Skybridge and Contemporaine are his first residential projects.

“I like residential because it’s flexible,” Mr. Johnson said. “Offices are blank, tenantless spaces, so you’ve got to keep them simple and boxy. But with these buildings, the success is more about the sculptural qualities.”

None of the buildings qualify as the most expensive in Chicago.

“You can get a one-bedroom at Skybridge for \$300,000 and a two-bedroom at Erie on the Park for the low \$600,000’s,” said Thomas A. Gorman, a sales associate with Baird & Warner, a large residential real estate firm here. “The prices have brought in a younger buyer.” They are, however, undeniably the buildings of the moment. Erie on the Park and the Contemporaine in particular have emerged as magnets for the city’s creative community.

“I had my eye on the Contemporaine from Day 1,” said Steve Liska, chairman of Liska & Associates, one of the city’s top graphic design firms. Mr. Liska recently bought a three-bedroom unit

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on the 10th floor of the 15-story building. “The architecture is so unique and interesting,” he said.

Julie Thompson, communications director for Leo Burnett Worldwide, one of the city’s largest advertising agencies, says the opportunity to live at Erie on the Park actually influenced her decision to move to Chicago.

“I was living in Minneapolis and had a job offer here,” Ms. Thompson said. “And I said the only way I’m moving back to Chicago is if I can live in that building.” She added that three other Leo Burnett executives also reside there.

Colin Kihnke, president of the CMK Development Corporation, the developer of Contemporaine, said he “wanted a building people will talk about.”

He got one. Inspired by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, the glass and concrete tower with numerous cantilevered balconies appears to float above a four-story glass box base. It looks like no other residential building in the city.

The building has 28 units, all but three of which already have been spoken for at prices from about \$400,000 to \$1.7 million. At the top are four spectacular penthouses with large terraces and dramatic 20-foot and 32-foot atriums.

“Luxury in modern terms means openness, space and transparency,” Mr. Johnson said. “Not finishes. The finishes here are pretty basic.” Jon Butcher, a local manufacturing executive, recently bought one of the penthouses for about \$1.7 million and is spending nearly as much on elaborate additions that include a Japanese garden. “It’s some of the most exciting space I’ve ever seen,” Mr. Butcher said. “You walk out of

the elevator and you’re facing a waterfall and a dozen one-ton pine trees.”

Erie on the Park is a 25-story tower with distinctive exterior bracing that recalls the nearby John Hancock Center on Michigan Avenue. The Hancock Center is known in Chicago as “Big John.” Erie has already been nicknamed “Little John” in the local news media. The building also has a number of irregular setbacks that allow for dramatic terraces.

The building has 125 units that range in size from 800 square feet to 2,400 square feet. Prices range from \$300,000 to around \$1 million.

“We sold 70 units the first weekend it was on the market and the rest within three weeks,” said W. Harris Smith, a principal with Smithfield Properties, the developer of the building. “It was sold out six months before construction began.”

Kerry Grady, a partner with the local graphic design firm Grady, Campbell, bought a 1,700-square-foot unit. “The fact that it was a modern building was important to me,” he said. “You want to be proud of where you live. I still get excited about living in the building.”

Ms. Thompson, meanwhile, says she wants to buy a second unit in the building as an investment. “I think the building will always have intrinsic value because of the design,” she said. “Once you go glass, it’s hard to go back.”