

‘Taking Shape’

The Traditionalist: Lucien Lagrange, the go-to architect for high-end residential towers in Chicago, explains what goes into creating the perfect pied-à-terre.

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How has your background influenced your work?

I was born in Monthlery, a suburb of Paris, in 1940 and moved to Provence when I was 7 years old. I grew up around a lot of cheerful, traditional stone farmhouse buildings. I moved to Montreal when I was 18 to go to school, and then, in 1972, I got a job with Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill in Chicago, where I quickly learned how to handle large-scale projects. When I opened my own firm in Chicago in 1985, I was one of the few architects interested in residential structures; everyone else had wanted to do office buildings, retail centers, and hotels. However, things changed with the housing boom of the mid 1990s. The demand changed from simple, efficient apartments to luxury condominiums.

In order to build a good condo – not just an apartment that someone can move out of in a year if they don’t like it – you have to consider people’s lifestyles, which is not only reflected by their income, but their location. In Chicago, people aren’t using their kitchens to cook every night, but they do want the space to function well for dinner parties when they hire a caterer. For instance, at Lincoln Park 2520, we designed kitchens with two sets of appliances and dining rooms that can seat 24 people. However, in Milan, where I’m working on a residential project, culturally, the wife is expected to cook every night, and everyone eats in the kitchen. You can’t just duplicate the American floor plan in Italy simply because both projects are geared toward a high-end buyer.

Chicago also is a city where a lot of its residents commute to New York. If the husband is waking up at 4 a.m. to get ready for a flight, and he doesn’t want to wake up his wife, there needs to be a partition between the sleeping area and the bathroom and closet area. We also realize that a

lot of people buying into our building will have art collections, so we’ll sometime build higher ceilings and create gallery-like setting, which is what we did at the Park Hyatt penthouses. The most important thing an architect needs to consider is how he can create order and comfort.

What makes your buildings successful?

Right now, six of the most expensive buildings in Chicago – 65 East Goethe, 840 North Lake Shore Drive, the Park Hyatt, Lincoln Park 2520, the Elysian, and the Ritz-Carlton Residences – are all my firm’s designs. That’s not something we necessarily set out to do, but most of our residential designs are very traditional, which is appealing in a mostly conservative city.

A building’s aesthetics are only part of it though. We also design with good layouts and transitions. In a nice residential building, you want a semipublic space between the street and the lobby. Once you enter the residential unit, you need a vestibule to take off your coat and to receive deliveries. You don’t want to open up your entire home right away. In the living room, there should be a dining room on one side and a library on the other. When you have dinner parties, you start with a drink in the living room, then move into the dining room, go back to the living room, then maybe finish with a drink and a cigar in the library.

Each building we work on is very different in size and concept, but at the higher end of the market, the common thread is that the buildings are very livable, with high-quality materials and finishes.

What is your ideal project?

I think I’m always working on my dream project. Lincoln Park 2520, which just broke ground, is a dream. It’s like three buildings in one. The

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property is on 3.25 acres and will have about 250 units and 19 townhomes. We designed it as a rectangular structure going east and west, facing Lincoln Park and Lake Michigan. Lincoln Park, which is very free flowing, lies in front of the building. And in the back, on 1.25 acres, we did a more formal French geometric garden. They have a nice contrast, so when you look out your windows, there will be different views from each side of the building.

What do you think your most significant contributions to the city have been?

The building with the biggest impact was the Park Hyatt tower. It was the first residential building to come online in the city after the recession, and it raised the bar for what a condo tower could be. When it was completed in 2000, it was the most expensive residential building in the city. Every unit has at least one corner exposure, ceiling heights range from nine feet to 14 feet, and the top eight stories each house a single-floor penthouse.

It also has a tuned mass damper, which weighs 350 tons and is suspended at the top of the building like a pendulum. When it's windy, the mechanism counteracts the movement at the top of the tower, so you don't get swaying or creaking. The Park Hyatt was the first residential building in the city to have that.

Each time we take on a new project, we raise the bar. Where the Park Hyatt had a maximum of three units per floor, the Elysian, a 60-story hotel and residential project I'm doing on the Gold Coast, will have a maximum of two units per floor. And, in a city where space is so highly coveted, we're designing a motor court to buffer the transition from the city into a kind of old-world Europe.

It seems that a lot of architects design cutting-edge buildings almost just for shock value. How do you feel about that trend?

If you want to create a piece of cutting-edge architecture, a residential tower is not the place to do it. I recently read an article about an architect in Silicon Valley, California, who was designing all of these really modern residences geared toward the young tech crowd. However, it turned out that even though they live in this high-tech world all day, when they come home, they want something comfortable that reminds them of grandma's house. Museums and concert halls can be cutting-edge, but a home needs to be comforting. In general, lifestyle is something that changes slowly. Right now, we may be seeing trends of bigger closets and bigger bathrooms, but humans essentially have the same desires now that they had 100 years ago.