

ARCHITECTURE

Triage returns the Manhattan to its roots

Project restores many old charms

By Blair Kamin

Tribune architecture critic

It is oddly revealing, one week after assessing Santiago Calatrava's daring proposal for a 115-story Chicago tower, to be writing about the renovation of a 16-story skyscraper that caused just as much of a sensation in its day — the Manhattan Building at 431 S. Dearborn St.

Today, no one bats an eyelash at 16 stories. But in 1891, when the Manhattan made its debut amid a height-challenged city of squat Victorians, 16 stories was headline news. "Hercules," the crowds visiting the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 called the Manhattan, referring to both its height and a fortresslike sense of girth that matched such contemporaries as the Rookery and Auditorium Buildings.

Designed by skyscraper pioneer William Le Baron Jenney, the bearded *bon vivant* who campaigned with Generals Grant and Sherman during the Civil War, the Manhattan reigned briefly as the city's (and, perhaps, the world's) tallest building. Its long list of innovations includes being one of the first skyscrapers to use skeletal construction throughout.

But yesterday's urban mountains are today's foothills. The skyline's ever-evolving character suggests a link to Einstein: When it comes to skyscraper height, everything's relative.



Photos for the Tribune by Michael Walker
When the 16-story Manhattan Building at 431 S. Dearborn St. made its debut in 1891, it was the tallest structure in Chicago.

Gone condo

The interesting thing is that this is the Manhattan's *second* renovation. The first, a gut rehab completed in 1982 by the Chicago firm of Hasbrouck-Hunderman, turned the then-moribund high-rise from offices into apartments, helping fuel the resurgence of the Printers Row historic district. The building went condo in 1997. The recently completed fix up, which took three years, cost \$4.5 million and was carried out by the BauerLatoza Studio of Chicago, shows how a new generation of preservationists is tending to Chicago's aging landmarks.

As time marches forward, the landmarks march backward, coming tantalizingly closer to their original state — or at least as close as condo association budgets will allow. Now, as before, the preservationist must practice triage, deciding where to spend precious funds. Only these days, there are fewer battles to fight with boorish bureaucrats and clueless contractors. Consider some of the horror stories from the first renovation.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which helped finance the project, wanted cheap, through-the-wall air-conditioning units stuck into the Manhattan's façades. The preservation archi-

tect on the job, Wilbert Hasbrouck, objected. HUD backed down.

And how about this one? Contractors were taking sledgehammers to the Manhattan's original elevator grilles and balustrades, with their gorgeous naturalistic metalwork. Hasbrouck told them: "You can't do this...Those things are worth a lot of money." Much of the metalwork was donated to museums. A few of the grilles adorn the building's civilized lobby, with its dazzling plaster ceiling.

In those days, the now-gentrified neighborhood was "pretty rough," with homeless people camping out on the dark streets, Hasbrouck recalls. But urban pioneers came anyway, attract-



The Manhattan was designed by skyscraper pioneer William Le Baron Jenney.



Many of the building's terra cotta pieces have been restored or replaced.

ed by the advertising pitch: "Live in a landmark and walk to work."

Nearly 20 years later, there were new enemies to confront: Water penetration and a lack of building maintenance. They were causing chunks of terra cotta and other pieces of old masonry to rain down on the Loop. While that didn't happen at the Manhattan, the dangerous trend provided the impetus for its second renovation.

After the City Council passed a beefed-up façade-maintenance ordinance in 2000, the condo association of the 105-unit building made emergency repairs and hired BauerLatoza to inspect the Manhattan and design a renovation. Its team, led by principal Edward Torrez, has done fine work, making the Manhattan look as robust as ever.

The architects restored or replaced many of the building's terra cotta pieces, including those that help form the smiling and frowning masks that stare down at pedestrians from the bottoms of round bay windows.

Asphalt roofs atop the bays were replaced with copper. Crumbling hollow-clay tile on the building's upper north and south walls gave way to new walls of oversize brick. The brick looks a bit too reddish right now, but it should duplicate the Manhattan's earlier brown-toned look once it gets the appropriate amount of smudging from Chicago's polluted air.

Fixing flaws

Some cosmetic surgery was needed to correct faults of the first renovation.

Hasbrouck replaced old wood window frames with aluminum — a step, he says, that he would rather not have taken, but was necessary because of a tight budget. For BauerLatoza and their clients, ditching the aluminum windows would have been prohibitively expensive. Yet the architects made lemonade from lemons, adding a beaded window surround that's based on Jenney's original design. It gives the windows a new sense of depth and texture.

Happy ending? Not quite. A preservationist's work is never done.

There is more on the “we’ll get around to it next time” checklist, such as washing the building’s exterior, which remains particularly dirty on the back side that faces the Harold Washington Library Center. Also on that list: Bringing back the striking naturalistic ornament that once adorned the now-bare columns framing the Manhattan’s entry.

“I would have loved to restore those,” says Torrez, with a deep sigh. He adds: “I’m afraid people are going to say in 20 years, ‘Why didn’t they wash this [building]?’”

“You have to do what you have to do.”

That’s the way real historic preservation jobs get done. One only hopes that they are all carried out with the same skill and sensitivity the architects showed old “Hercules.” For triage, this looks pretty good.

bkamin@tribune.com

Short anatomy of a skyscraper

Perhaps it’s a bit ungainly — more about being big than being tall, as one historian has said — but the 114-year-old Manhattan Building at 431 S. Dearborn St. is nevertheless one of Chicago’s most significant early skyscrapers. Here are some of the building’s distinctions and innovations:

■ Briefly was Chicago’s (and, perhaps, the world’s) tallest building.

■ One of the first skyscrapers to use an internal skeleton of metal throughout.

■ A pioneer in using structurally sophisticated wind bracing.

■ For many years, the lone skyscraper with setbacks, in which the mass of the building steps back from the property line, an innovation adapted by Chicago architect Louis Sullivan.

■ Also a pioneer in cantilevered foundations, which transferred the building’s loads away from the property line and worked with the setbacks to prevent the Manhattan from overloading its smaller neighbors.

■ A forerunner of the famous, three-part “Chicago window” of the Chicago School of Architecture, with projecting window bays that brought the maximum amount of light into the interior.

■ Declared an official Chicago landmark in 1978.

— Blair Kamin