

THE ROOKERY RENAISSANCE

Preservation's Touchstone

*Complete at last,
Chicago's restored
Rookery Building
sets the standard
against which all
future commercial
renovations must
be judged.*



Chicago architect Gurny Harbøe has likened the Rookery Building, originally designed by Burnham and Root, to an epic novel. By this he presumably means that it is like a work by Dickens, Balzac, or Tolstoy, an immense and complex structure overflowing with energy and teeming with unexpected detail. This it certainly is, but it is also epic in another sense. In its life of over 100 years, it has witnessed placid years and unexpectedly turbulent ones. It has been both witness and key player in a number of stories, including the rise of LaSalle Street as Chicago's premier business street, the development of the office building type, the role of Chicago in American history, and, more recently, the debates over historic preservation in the United States. The story is far from finished, but the reopening of the Rookery to the public on May 6, 1992, marks the end of a chapter and provides a convenient point at which to stop, review the plot, and assess events so far.

THE FIRST 100 YEARS

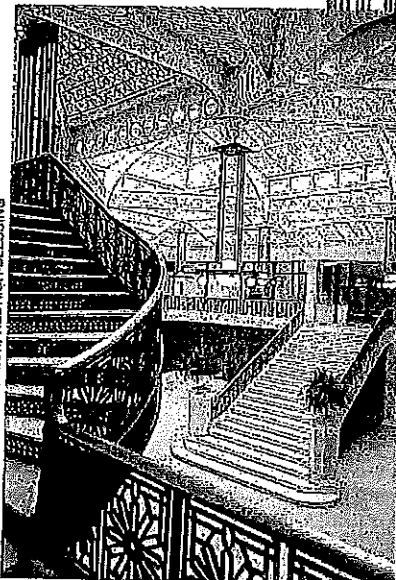
The Rookery Building occupied a prime place in the middle of the great Chicago building boom of the 1880s and early 1890s. In many ways, this was Chicago's great moment on the stage of world history. Before the Civil War, Chicago had been a frontier town, one that had grown with astonishing speed on the basis of manufacturing and trade; but one that still lacked the financial and managerial infrastructure, as well as the educational and cultural resources, that characterized older, established cities. It was during the brief span of years that extended from a severe business downturn in the middle 1870s to a similar decline in the mid-1890s that Chicago, in what seems in re-

spect an impossibly concentrated burst of activity, came to maturity as an economic

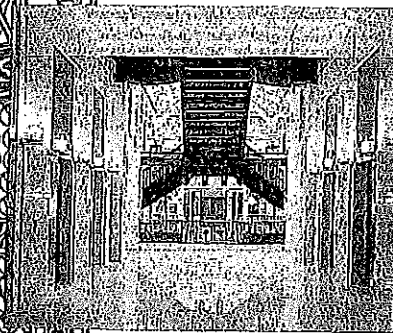
BY ROBERT DILLIEMANN

COURTESY OF THE ARCHITECT

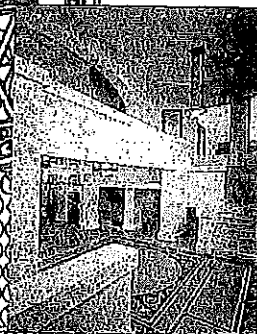
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK MERRICK, HEDRICH-BLESSING



From Burnham and Root's ornamental stair, the light court looks much as it did in 1910, immediately after Wright's restoration.



Although no images existed of the second-floor lobby, McCler's restoration harmonizes with the original design.



The LaSalle Street lobby again sparkles with Wright's original gilt decoration. The patterns were recreated by computer.



Restored to its original two-story height, the Adams Street lobby is perhaps the most Wrightian of spaces within the Rookery.

Framed by Burnham and Root's entry arch, the light court glows when seen through the restored Drummond doors.



force and laid the foundations for the social and cultural institutions that would allow it to claim a place among the world's great cities.

No building standing today better mirrors these changes than the Rookery. It was, first of all, a prime example of the most conspicuous type of business building of the day: the high office building. Before the mid-19th century, offices had usually been attached to a place where commodities were made or traded. The first buildings devoted entirely to offices were constructed by companies, most notably insurance companies, for their own employees. Soon, individual entrepreneurs started to put up office buildings on speculation—that is, they erected them with the intention of leasing them to anyone who could afford to pay the rents.

This was the case at the Rookery. The land was held on a 99-year lease from the city by the Central Safety Deposit Corporation, an organization controlled by the Brooks Brothers of Boston for the ostensible purpose of building safety deposit vaults. They did, in fact, build vaults in the Rookery, but the corporation was apparently something of a subterfuge to get around state laws forbidding speculative building by limited liability corporations.

The Rookery was first and foremost a privately owned vehicle for making money, but, like other big office buildings of its day, because it was so big and so prominent, it also had a major civic function. With all of its variety of tenants and services and the vast number of visitors coming and going to offices and shops, it had to operate like a small city within a city. The light court served as a kind of public square at the confluence of the corridors leading in from LaSalle and Adams streets.

The Rookery also marked a dramatic increase in the scale of buildings at the city center. The severing of ties that bound manual to office labor and the consolidation downtown of managers, accountants, lawyers, and other white-collar professionals had dramatic urban consequences. It created an explosion of demand for space at the very center of the city. As the history of architecture is usually related, a wave of new building technologies in the mid- and late-19th century—such as new advances in foundation methods, passenger elevators, structural systems, and fireproofing, heating, and lighting—arrived just in time to allow for the much larger buildings seen in late-19th-century American cities.

It seems more plausible to suggest that

the profound shifts in modes of economic production in the city during these years created a demand that further stimulated the development of technologies that were already known. Certainly almost every programmatic and technological feature seen at the Rookery had been used in earlier buildings either in Chicago or New York. What was new here was scale. The full quarter-block site made possible a building containing more than 600 offices, one of the largest and most expensive of its day. The Rookery, moreover, was the most conspicuous of a cluster of structures built in its immediate vicinity that consolidated LaSalle Street as the city's chief financial thoroughfare, a role it has continued to play for more than a century.

For a number of years, even after taller and more lavish buildings were erected in the late 1880s and early 1890s, the Rookery's great size, impressive light court, and unsurpassed location continued to make it one of the premier commercial addresses in the city. Early in the 20th century, however, the building's owners apparently believed it needed a face lift. In 1905, they hired Frank Lloyd Wright who, probably as much as budget permitted, replaced John Wellborn Root's intricate, curvilinear elements with designs of his own, often derived from Root, but much simpler. The most dramatic changes occurred in the Adams Street lobby, which Wright nearly completely rebuilt, and in the light court where Wright added new electrical fixtures and covered over many of the intricate cast-iron columns with broad, flat pieces of marble incised in shallow relief and gilt.

By the 1920s, the building must again have seemed old-fashioned as the much taller, sleek, set-back buildings of that era rose in the Loop. The Rookery owners reacted by staging a competition to remodel the building. The winner—Wright follower William Drummond—redesigned the entrance doors, the elevator lobbies, and, unfortunately, the street lobbies, destroying the original two-story spaces. At some point in the next decades, the glass in the light court roof was painted over, apparently to prevent leaks, and much of the glass wall of the light court was plastered over. By the end of World War II, the Rookery was only a shadow of its former self. Even disfigured, however, the major features of the building were still impressive, and in 1972, the Rookery became one of the first buildings to be declared a city landmark. It also was designated a National Historic Landmark, the highest level of federal landmark status.

THE ROOKERY RENOVATED

By the early 1980s, the impending expiration of the 99-year lease on the property precipitated action by city officials who realized that major new work was needed to keep the building competitive. They decided that the best way to ensure the continued profitability of the Rookery, while at the same time maintaining its architectural character, was to sell the land while retaining easements to guarantee the integrity of the exterior and key interior spaces—the lobbies, the light court, and the library of the former Burnham and Root architectural office on the 11th floor. They invited proposals.

No one wanted the building more than the Continental Illinois National Bank and Trust Co. The bank's existing main building was next door, and it already had an established presence in the Rookery through rental of ground floor retail space. The bank received title to the property in 1982 and announced a five-year restoration program. It commissioned Historic Resources Inc. of Chicago (later Hasbrouck Hunderman Architects, then Hasbrouck-Peterson Associates) to write an historic structures report on the building, produce a program for the restoration of the protected historic features, and oversee exterior cleaning. Then, it named Chicago's Booth/Hansen & Associates as architect.

From the outset, everyone agreed that the bank would restore the exterior and protected interior areas of the building but gut the rest of it to create new, state-of-the-art office space. To make the building more energy efficient, to stop leaking through the original light court roof, and to protect the terra cotta cladding of the light court walls, the architect and client decided to roof over the top of the interior court with a metal and glass roof reminiscent of the original one at the second floor level.

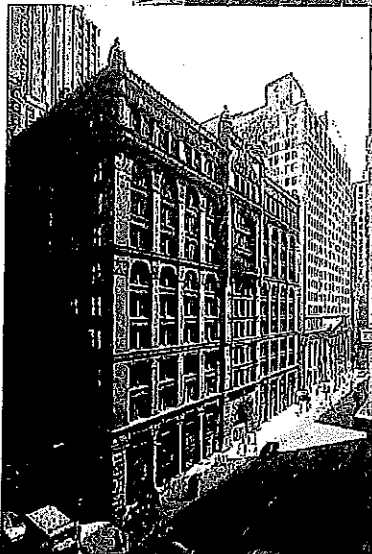
Much more complex were the decisions involving the main public spaces. It might have been tempting to try to restore the Rookery to its Burnham and Root appearance, but this would have required the removal of genuinely old fabric, including some interesting work by Frank Lloyd Wright, and the substitution of new designs for which there was insufficient evidence. Eventually, 1910—or shortly after Wright had finished his work—was chosen as the general period to which these areas would be restored.

Exterior cleaning began in early 1983. Although the exterior was generally in remarkably good condition, the parapet walls were in a perilous state. They had to be stabilized by a rebuilding at the rear before cleaning began.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CONTINENTAL BANK



PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK MERRICK, HEDRICH-BLESSING



As one of the nation's first tall office buildings, the Rookery has been an architectural landmark since its completion in 1886. Now completely restored (left), the exterior again reveals the highly expressive ornamentation of the original design (above).

In the fall of 1983, the Chicago Architecture Foundation sponsored a ball in the newly cleaned building. Preservationists were jubilant. Continental Bank and the Rookery seemed like a perfect fit. The restoration team was experienced and enthusiastic, and because the bank was using the structure for its own purposes, it was willing to undertake a more extensive renovation than anything yet seen in Chicago.

Unfortunately, at just this moment, local newspapers reported major financial losses at Continental Bank. The resulting reorganization of the bank stopped all renovation work, and the building remained vacant for several years. Finally, in 1988, Chicago bond trader L. Thomas Baldwin III acquired title to the property and organized a new development team. NMB Vastgoed Fonds N.V., a Dutch real estate fund, came in as joint venture partner, with additional financial backing from Chevron USA. McClier Architects and Engineers, a recently created and highly successful Chicago architectural firm, took over as architect and restoration architect under the direction of Thomas (Gunny) Harboe, project architect. Wilbert Hasbrouck continued as consultant to the owners, and Broadacre Development Corporation—the firm responsible for the ongoing Monadnock restoration and the rehabilitations of the North Pier Terminal and the Traders Building—also came aboard for a brief time.

Observers might have predicted that the shift in personnel and the change from an owner-occupied to a speculative building might prove detrimental; particularly as the inevitable cost-cutting started. Miraculously, the opposite occurred. Much of the credit for this must go to the client, Baldwin, an extraordinarily successful trader in U.S. Treasury Bond Futures, obviously loved both the building and Chicago. Although he and his partners intended to make money in the end, they committed themselves to doing a meticulous job on the restoration work, even if it meant having to wait longer to recoup their investments. Baldwin's project manager, architect Carl Groesbeck, watched every step of the way to ensure quality work.

As the new team started work, they made a number of changes. Structural engineers Tylk, Wright and Gustafson, using rare expertise in cast-iron structures, determined that removing all of the original tile arch construction to lighten the building was not necessary as had earlier been thought. Rather than enlarging the elevators and the core at the LaSalle Street

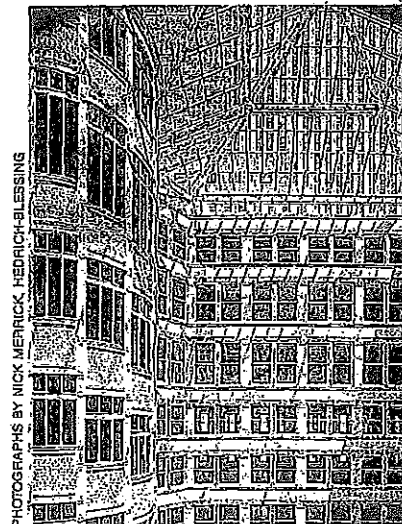
side, McClier decided to add a core at the rear (east side) of the building, which allowed them to keep the existing LaSalle Street elevators and with them the original spatial sequence of that lobby. Earlier drawings of the light court had shown a marble or terrazzo floor. Although it was quite expensive, Baldwin agreed to replace the entire floor in mosaic.

Even as construction proceeded, adjustments were made as a result of new discoveries or unexpected anomalies in the old building. It was an agonizingly slow process. By the Rookery's reopening, the renovation had taken nearly a decade and had required the work of dozens of major players.

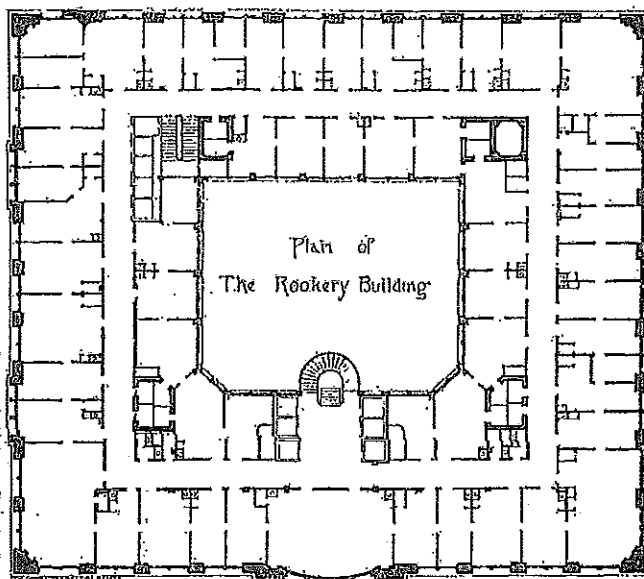
ASSESSING THE NEW ROOKERY

The reopening of the Rookery, as much as any other event in recent years, marks major changes undergone by Chicago and its economy and signals transformations in the field of historic preservation. Today's LaSalle Street is vastly different from the place where the Rookery was born. Almost completely gone from the Loop are manufacturing, warehousing, and wholesaling activities; much of the other routine business activity, likewise, has departed for new and far-flung business centers. Increasingly, what remains in the Loop is the extreme high end of business, headquarters for corporations, and banks and law firms; particularly those tied to what has become Chicago's most conspicuous economic engine—its futures markets. As the city center has increasingly depended on the synergy that has developed among high finance, the city's premier cultural insti-

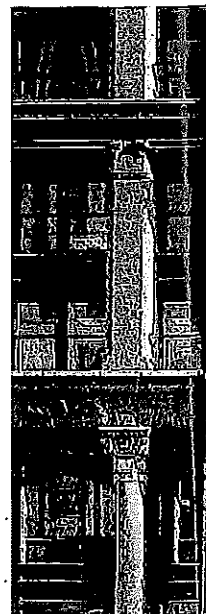
The original plan of the Rookery (below left) consisted of small offices and secured vaults. While some vaults remain, the renovated plan (opposite far right) shows an open configuration and a new core that has been added on the east. A roof-level skylight (below) now protects the original light court, while the exterior (below right) glows with revitalized detail.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK MERRICK, HEDRICH-BLESSING



PLAN COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



tutions, and tourism, the importance attached to the city's historic and architectural heritage has increased.

The Rookery represents the single, most extensive and expensive restoration ever undertaken of an historic American rental office building. Only a few years ago, most real estate analysts might have predicted that it could only have been renovated up to what the real estate industry calls class "B" space—office space that does not provide all the amenities of the most expensive, recently constructed buildings. Sometimes this kind of restoration has proven to be ideal, as is the case at the Monadnock, where a more gradual and less extensive renovation program, a less conspicuous location, and a marketing strategy aimed at small tenants, has permitted a restoration in which something close to the original interior office floor layouts has been maintained. In most cases, however, the renovation of old buildings to new "B" space results in cutting corners on materials and losing the feeling of a place.

To command top dollar on LaSalle Street, as well as to justify the cost of bringing back lost architectural features, the developers of the Rookery decided to open up the upper floors; consequently, the old warren of small offices for insurance agents and coal brokers has given way to large open spaces of up to 25,000 square feet to accommodate major tenants. The Rookery leasing record will be closely watched by developers around the country as a test case for the proposition that old buildings can be remade into class "A" space.

It will be interesting to see what cli-

ents and architects do with these spaces. The record to date has been mixed. The Brooks Brothers store at the corner looks formulaic. All of the elements appear to have been chosen because they looked old rather than because they had any specific connection to this particular building. Ironically, the store would have looked quite respectable in a new mall. Seen in the context of a genuine old building, however, it looks slightly shabby. Perkins & Will's designs for the Quantam Financial Service's spaces on the third floor, while at first glance thoroughly modern and less sympathetic to the Rookery, evoke something of the spatial organization of the original building without destroying the dramatic openness created during the renovation.

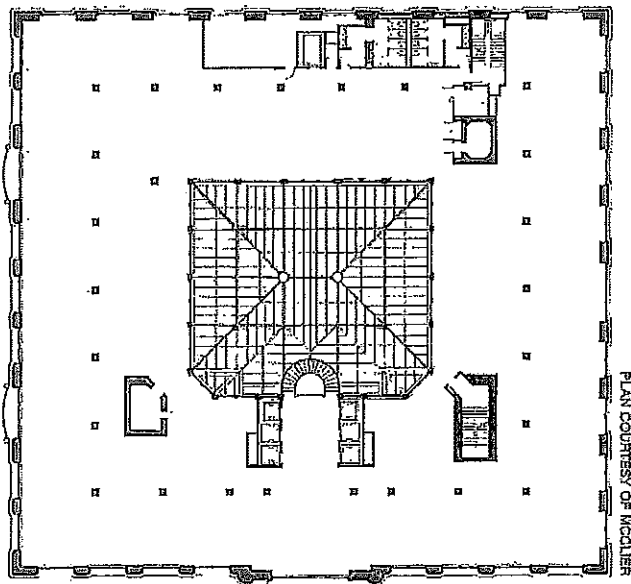
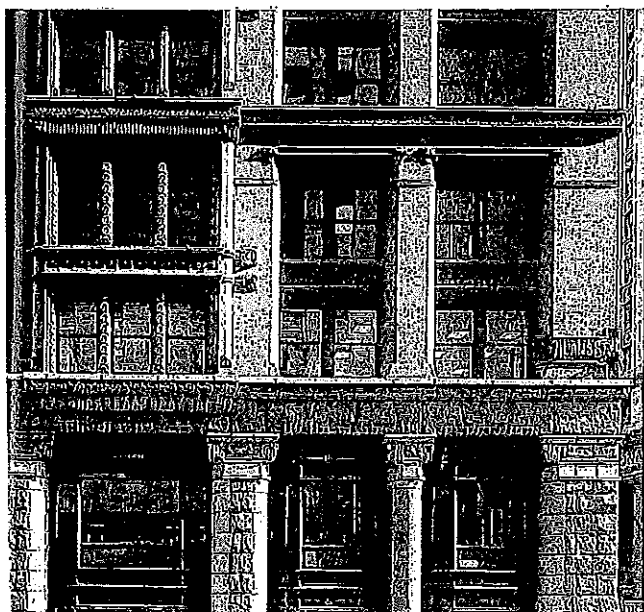
The Rookery restoration also heralds a new era in a complex process of consolidation and debate about what historic and architectural preservation ought to be. In recent decades, as this activity has entered the American mainstream, it has spawned furious debates about principles, many of them contradictory. Should the goal of preservation be to retain as much of the old fabric, even later renovations that obscure the original design, as possible? Or, should it be to restore a structure to its original appearance or its appearance at a given point in the past even if this involves removing genuinely old fabric and replacing it with refabricated elements from an earlier period? Should new materials attempt to mimic the old materials so closely that they form a seamless visual whole? Or should they be made quite distinct in appearance so that any careful observer can determine

what is old and what is new?

At the Rookery, many of these principles fell by the wayside. Because this was a commercial building, not a museum, with elements from several eras in complicated overlays, it dictated a more flexible approach. Perhaps this renovation marks a new maturity in the field of preservation, an era when moral imperatives no longer mask decisions that should be made on the basis of design.

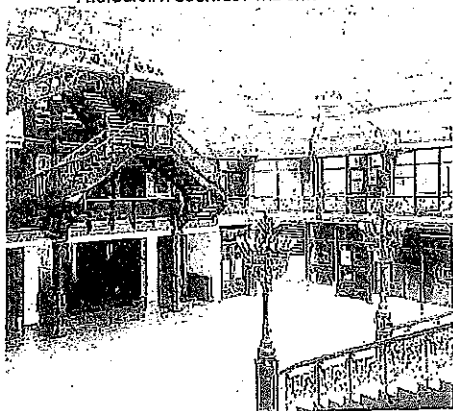
In the Rookery renovation, elements from each of the major construction periods were retained and important new elements added. From there, one passes through an existing, but restored, Drummond elevator lobby into the heavily restored light court that again combines elements from both Burnham and Root and Wright. This mixing and matching of elements could have resulted in confusion, but it did not. Instead, each subsequent phase seems to stand out in sharper relief, laying bare all of the successes as well as the occasional failure.

The original Burnham and Root building that has emerged is something of a surprise. On the exterior, the vivid cherry red of the facade—particularly seen amidst all of LaSalle Street's sober limestone walls—is startling, as is Root's terra cotta ornament, now more discernible since the restoration. In places, this ornament, particularly the swirling foliage around the base of the flagpole and panels identifying LaSalle and Adams streets, has an energy that nearly overwhelms the architectural elements. Elsewhere, odd plaques of interlacing geometric pattern that recall Islamic fretwork, and strange belt-courses that look like giant pieces of

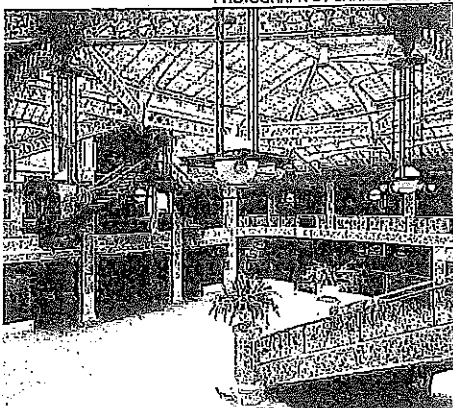


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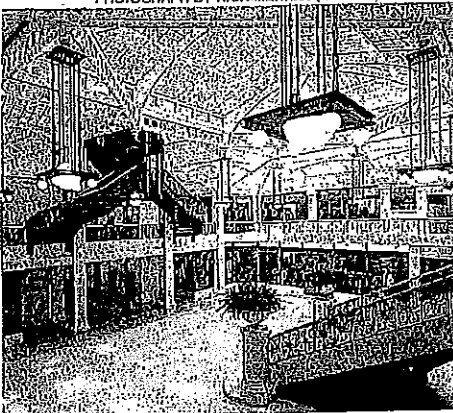
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY- THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY



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The original 1886 design established the light court (top) as the central space in the Rookery. It was renovated by Wright in 1910 (above middle), and much of the ironwork was covered with marble. The current renovation (above and opposite) restores the court to its historical splendor.

metal hardware tying the building together, are reminders of how unorthodox, how perfunctory personal, these facades were.

The gutting of the interior has clearly revealed the wide variety of floor-to-ceiling heights and the relative independence of the interior from the exterior. All of this reminds us of the conflicts between art and necessity and the manipulations that were necessary to accommodate both successfully. What survives of Root's interior decorative scheme also surprises. The light court—as seen before its numerous renovations in historic black-and-white photos—was reminiscent of greenhouses, railroad station sheds, department store courts, and shopping arcades. Rebuilt, reglazed, repainted, and gilt, it is still grand and still recalls these 19th-century building types, but it also seems curiously warm and domestic, more like a hotel lobby than a train shed. Even with the later Wright alterations, the restored interior suggests how startling the contrast between the cool, smooth, light-colored marble of the entryways and the almost frenetic intricacy of the light court's metal cage must originally have been.

The Wright renovations were probably intended to give the building a lighter, cleaner, more modern character. In some ways, it was a respectful remodeling, since Wright used motifs already found in the original design. In other ways, the remodeling was curiously unsympathetic and lacked proper scale, perhaps an overcompensation for a practice that generally dealt with small domestic spaces. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the most concentrated piece of Wright design, the Adams Street entryway, where every feature, particularly the huge urn that floats much higher in the space than one would expect, seems to have been designed for some other location. The other thing immediately obvious about the Wright work is how slap-dash the execution was. Marble slabs reach up to a point above eye level, then stop abruptly without transition to the earlier iron columns behind them. Incised decorations sprawl to the edges of panels, clashing with those on adjacent marble pieces. Like much of what Wright achieved, it is brilliant in decorative conception, but too little worked out in execution.

Next are the Drummond renovations that have been so bitterly decried by historians and preservationists. In fact, the parts that have been preserved here, notably the LaSalle and Adams street doors and the LaSalle Street elevator

lobby, are wonderful pieces of interwar Modernistic design, well executed in fine materials.

Finally, we come to the current renovation. This may have been the most difficult task of all, since the renovators were constrained not only by all of the economic and practical restraints that had bound previous renovators, but they also had to deal with a building that was no longer just real estate but had become art. Luckily, the small army of architects, engineers, and employees of city, state, and federal preservation agencies involved with the Rookery renovation included individuals who were not just competent, but who approached their tasks with passion.

One of the most gratifying things about the Rookery renovation is that it has not resulted in the scraping away of all of the building's history. It is clearly still an old building. Scar marks on the marble stairs of the light court, and pulleys, no longer functional, on the light court roof, remain, testifying to a long life. So do the windows. The existing wood sashes were in poor condition and not energy efficient. Replacing them with metal sashes was suggested, but ruled out by Illinois' Historic Preservation office. Fabricating new windows was prohibitively expensive. A careful survey of the existing windows proved that they could be salvaged by repairing them where necessary, then rotting them out to accept new insulating glass. It will be interesting to see how corporation executives, who accept marks of age and use on antique furniture, but tend to expect gleaming new surfaces in their office spaces, will react.

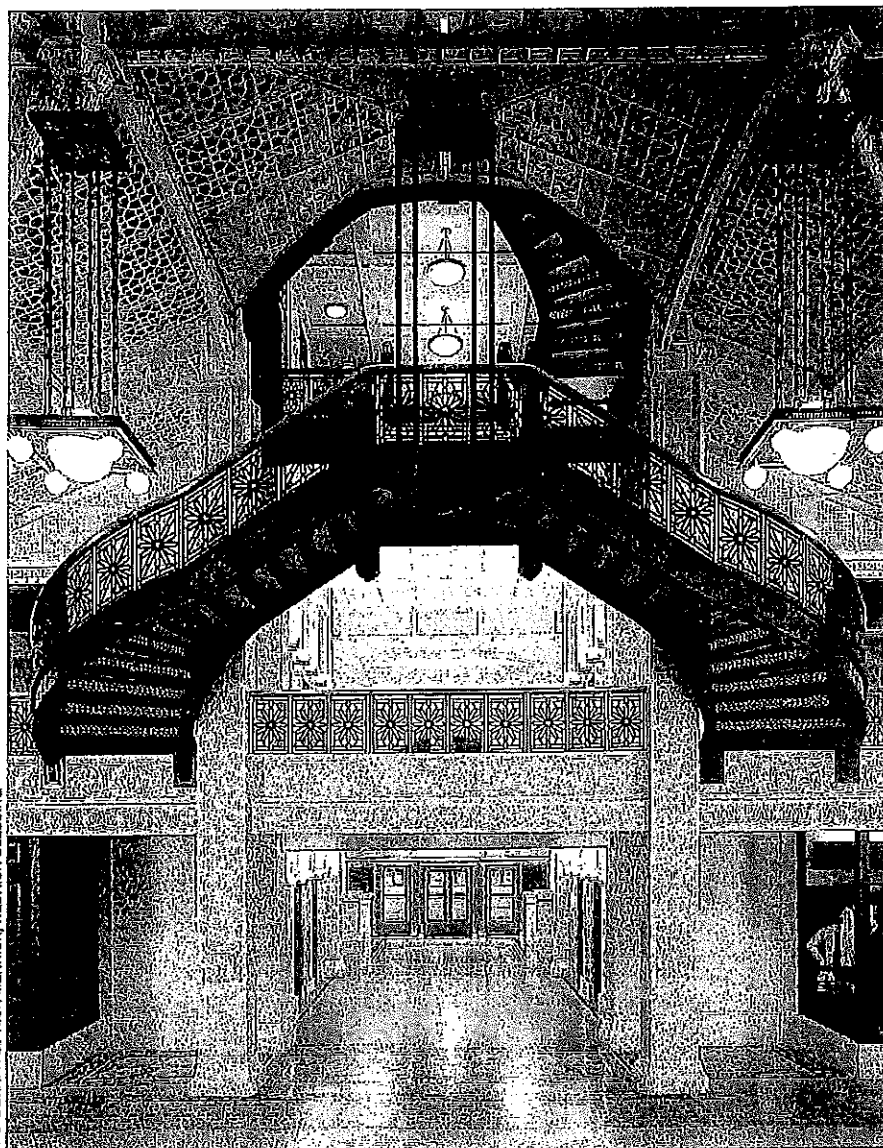
Where the architects have had to recreate old design features, they have shown great resourcefulness. One of the trickiest problems was recreating the incised designs on the marble panels for the rebuilt lobbies on LaSalle and Adams streets. Although original drawings showed the patterns, it was clear that the workmen had not followed the drawings exactly. Photographs showed the patterns as built, but only in oblique views. Draftsmen at Hasbrouck-Peterson overlaid the photos with a perspectival grid so that the patterns could be transcribed into orthogonal projection. Much to everyone's consternation, however, the finished drawings did not quite fit the spaces on which they were to be placed. Here, the computer came to the architect's assistance. Architects at McClier made a number of new measurements and fed all of the incised patterns into the computer, which stretched them slightly

to fit the space. The patterns were then made into a cartoon, lightly incised on the marble by sandblasting, and then chiseled out by hand. Finally the depressed areas were gilt.

Although almost all aspects of the restoration work have been successful, the record in areas requiring entirely new design has been mixed. The new roof atop the light court, for example, while perfectly serviceable, lacks conviction. It resembles the original light court roof in configuration, but it is made up of a smaller number of metal elements and is simpler in profile. One gets the sense that this cautious solution preserved the shape but ignored the spirit of the original that was a structural tour de force. It probably would have worked better if the designers had either followed the old structure more closely or departed altogether from it. I can't help but wonder what a Santiago Calatrava (who won the competition for the completion of the Cathedral St. John the Divine in New York) would have made of this problem.

Conversely, by following this same restoration approach, the second floor elevator lobby turned out well. Here, very little of any aesthetic value survived, and little documentary evidence about the state of the lobby in earlier eras existed, so the architects were obliged to create a new design. What they did was to use bronze elevator doors not unlike those by Drummond, but without any incised pattern, and marble similar to that employed by Burnham and Root and Wright, again without the patterning. The excellent proportions of the space and the fine materials create a wonderfully calm and dignified space, the perfect foil to the energy that permeates the restored areas. In fact, this space provides one of the best places from which to contemplate the restored Rookery. Looking in one direction, the visitor gets a view across the open metalwork of the flying bridge into the light court. In the other direction, the marble of the LaSalle Street lobby and entry arch frames a view of the activity of the street. It is a noble space, elegantly treated. By contrast, the elevator lobbies in the upper floors, not by McClier, are uncomfortably fussy.

A final feature, the turning of a corner of the light court into a kind of interpretive display, was an inspired decision on the part of Harboe and McClier. The demolition of a later staircase on the west side of the court uncovered a fragment of the original mosaic floor. It was this lucky survival that allowed an accurate reproduction of the mosaic floor over the entire light court. Rather than



PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK MERRICK, HEDRICH-BLESSING

merge the new work with the old, the fragment was marked by a thin brass border, allowing visitors to contrast the original with the new. In some ways, this was a courageous act. Even though the new floor is magnificent, it is interesting to note how much richer and more vibrant the old mosaic work was despite the most strenuous attempts on the part of everyone involved to match the original mosaic colors and installation technique.

Immediately adjacent to this, one panel of Wright's decorative marble has been removed from a column to afford a glimpse of the intricate Burnham and Root cast-iron column inside. This allows a direct comparison of the two approaches and permits the visitor some

small sense of the kinds of discovery the architects experienced during the course of the restoration.

This interpretive display is a small detail, but perhaps as much as any other feature, it serves as a reminder of the epic story represented by the building. The Rookery renovation represents a milestone in the history of Chicago and LaSalle Street. It marks a new level of maturity in the field of architectural preservation, and it sets the standard against which all subsequent renovations of commercial structures must be judged.

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