

15 December 2011
Updated 26 September 2014

The Rookery Building **209 South LaSalle Street**

Introduction

Welcome to The Rookery. Thank you for joining us today.

While on the tour, please remember the following rules:

- This is an active commercial office building – please respect the tenants.
- Stay with the interpreter at all times.
- Walk softly when you are on the mezzanine – it has a glass block floor which transmits sound.
- Still photography is permitted, but it is necessary to stay with the group. No flash on the third floor.
- Please remember that our time is limited.

Stop One (Light court outside of Trust Offices)

- Planning for The Rookery began in late 1885 and the building was completed in early 1888.
- The contract to design The Rookery was awarded to the firm of Burnham and Root, which was founded in 1873 by Daniel Burnham and John Wellborn Root and was one of the leading Chicago architectural firms of the time. Burnham would meet with clients and develop the overall concept and plan for the buildings, while Root would develop the detailed plans and infrastructure.
- When completed at a total cost of \$1.5 million, the building, one of the tallest and largest buildings in the United States, was referred to as a “Skyscraper”. Including the light court and lower level, it had 350,000 square feet of space, 600 offices, and a daily population of several thousand workers. The 11 story Rookery is the oldest remaining “tall building” in Chicago
- Newspapers of the day referred to The Rookery as “A Great Building”, and it was. The developers, Boston-based brothers Peter and Shepherd Brooks insisted that it be a premium building in order to attract the best tenants. The building had the latest elevators and the most modern fireproofing. The light court, intended to be a grand meeting place; had both electric and gas lighting (it was still unclear at the time as to which technology would prevail in the future.)
- The building would also serve as a prototype for the “modern” office building in Chicago, at least partly because its overall design and central light court and light shaft adapted so well to the square lots prevalent in the city.
- Early tenants included: North American Accident Insurance Co., Burnham and Root, Northern Trust, Samuel Insull (utilities entrepreneur), Elbert Gary (the

founder of U.S. Steel), Carter Harrison Sr. and Jr. (both former Chicago mayors), John Gates (a financier who made his early millions in barbed wire), Illinois Merchants Trust, and John Nuveen and Co.

- In 1905, Frank Lloyd Wright was hired to modernize the light court and the lobbies. As designed by Root, the light court was primarily ornamental iron with a Victorian feel. Wright's remodeling was sensitive to Root's original design, but served to unify and enhance the luxurious light filled lobbies and central court.
- "Rookery" seems to be a strange name for a prestige building in the financial district, but there is an interesting history to the name. After the great Chicago fire of 1871, on this site a temporary city hall was erected, including a fire station with horses and oats. The horses and oats attracted large numbers of birds, and a "rookery" is "a breeding place of...gregarious birds". But "rookery" is also a name for a place where cheats or swindlers would gather, and city hall at the time had a reputation for corruption. Whether due to the gathering of birds, the aura of corruption, or some combination of both, the building became generally known among Chicagoans as The Rookery. While the new building was being developed, the Brooks brothers wanted to give it a more dignified name and submitted 22 possible choices. This was all in vain, however, as the public continued to refer to the site and the new building as The Rookery. The Brooks brothers finally gave in to popular sentiment, although the name did not originally appear anywhere on the building.

We'll be going outside now – please be careful when we cross the street.

Stop Two (Southwest corner of Quincy and LaSalle

- The building is basically a hollow cube – it is 178 feet on the LaSalle Street side, 168 feet on the Adams Street side, and approximately 165 feet tall. The interior light shaft above the light court extends upward for the full 11 story height.
- Structurally, The Rookery is a transitional building. Prior to its construction, almost all buildings used thick masonry walls to support the great weight of the structure. Later tall buildings would have an iron or steel skeleton frame to support the weight, with the wall surface serving only as a "curtain" or "skin". The Rookery has both types of construction. The LaSalle and Adams frontages have conventional masonry load-bearing walls, at least partly to project an image of dignity and solidity. On the Quincy Street and Rookery Court sides, however, a different solution was needed. At the time, the most desirable tenant spaces were the first and second floors (people still didn't quite trust those new elevators), but the Court frontages were relatively narrow with limited light. To allow for maximum window size, Root designed the first two floors with cast iron skeleton construction, and used masonry construction for floors three through 11. The interior light shaft, however, is completely skeleton construction to allow for maximum window size to provide light and ventilation.
- Decoration on the facades is primarily Moorish, adapted by Root from an 1856 book, *The Grammar of Ornament*. Root used this elaborate decoration to relieve the otherwise rather austere exterior. The archway over the entrance is

Romanesque, perhaps derived from or suggested by designs of the architect H. H. Richardson.

- Supporting the enormous weight of the building presented an engineering challenge. Technology did not yet exist to drill down to bedrock (approximately 70 feet below the surface), and the Chicago soil was unstable. Root resolved the problem by creating a “grillage” foundation system which dispersed the load across a grill-like web of iron rails encased in concrete, in effect floating the building on a giant snowshoe.
- When we go in, notice the images of laughing Rooks (a European crow) carved into the arch over the entrance. John Root had quite a sense of humor, and he wanted to ensure that if the Brooks brothers succeeded in providing a more dignified name for the building, everyone would still remember that its “proper” name is The Rookery.

We’ll be going back inside now. Again, please be careful crossing the street.

Stop Three (Foot of grand staircase)

- Burnham and Root and its successor firms were leaders in architecture for well over 100 years. Daniel Burnham was also the Chief of Construction for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition (the Chicago World’s Fair) and the co-author of the 1909 Chicago Plan, which still helps to guide the city’s development to this day.
- Lesser known, however, is a man named Edward Waller. Waller was a real estate developer who had devised the Central Safety Deposit Company as the legal entity to build the Home Insurance Building (generally considered to be the first skeleton construction building) and he used the same entity to develop The Rookery. He was a boyhood friend of Daniel Burnham, and worked with Burnham in developing the concept and general plan for The Rookery. After completion of the building, Waller was named as the Building Manager, a post he held until 1930. It was in this capacity that he hired Frank Lloyd Wright to remodel the lobbies and light court in 1905.
- Waller was both a friend and client of Frank Lloyd Wright’s, but Wright’s hiring was somewhat of a risk. Until this time, all of Wright’s local work had been residential; his only non-residential work was the Unity Temple in Oak Park, IL, also designed in 1905 but not completed until 1909.
- In The Rookery, Wright refaced much of the interior space in broad planes of white marble incised with gold leaf gilding, the design being based on Root’s work. In the light court, he encased Root’s original columns in white marble, and replaced most of Root’s elaborate ironwork with simple, geometrically ornamented grillwork derived from Root’s designs. Wright also replaced Root’s electroliers which flanked the main staircase with white marble planters and installed pendant lighting. These changes served to modernize the interior and unify the two lobby areas with the light court, while still being sensitive to Root’s original design.

Pause (Foot of oriel stairs)

- By 1905, Wright was primarily known for his Prairie Style, but this work is not in the Prairie Style. The only resemblances to Prairie are the urns flanking the grand staircase (similar to urns he used on a number of residences) and the lights (similar to those in Unity Temple, but with a hint of the Arabic).
- The oriel stairs on this level feature both Root and Wright. As you look at the stairs, notice the railing on the left – that is Root's original design. On the right, however, is Wright's adaptation of that design, which he also used throughout the light court.

Stop Four (Third floor elevator lobby)

- The oriel stairs on this level and above are original John Root designs; Wright's remodeling included only the light court and the two lobbies.
- Because the stairs are outside the west wall of the light court, they qualified as a fire escape under the building code, so no fire escapes needed to be built on the front or the sides of the building.
- The light shaft has light-colored glazed bricks and terra cotta ornamentation to provide the greatest possible illumination to the interior offices. Because Root's design for the light shaft provided ample light and ventilation, The Rookery was one of the first buildings where interior offices were considered as desirable as exterior offices.

Stop Five (North side of grand staircase)

- This is a great example of the synthesis and integration achieved between Root's original design and Wright's remodeling.
- The railing is Wright's adaptation of Root's design, as we saw on the mezzanine.
- The sides of the stairs were originally ornamental iron, which Wright replaced with marble, incised and gilded with a pattern derived from a design that Root had used on an arch in the LaSalle Street lobby.
- The grates next to the floor are the original Root design.

Stop Six (Exposed column)

The time now is 1931...

- A building tenant wants to expand its space on the second floor and take additional space on upper floors; it is at the height of the Depression, so management is responsive.
- William Drummond is hired to oversee the renovation; he was in Wright's office in 1905 and worked on the 1905 remodeling. Drummond hires Francis Barry Byrne as the contractor; Byrne had also been in Wright's office and had worked on the 1905 remodeling.
- They decked over the two lobbies, making both of them one story in height. A stairway is added descending from the mezzanine to the main floor, approximately where we are standing.
- The original floor is covered over.

- The elevator doors are redone by Annette Cremin Byrne, Barry Byrne's wife, in an Art Deco style, incorporating birds in the design.

Now it is the late 1980s...

- Minimal maintenance has been done over the years. Sometime prior to 1957, the skylight in the light court, which had been leaking, was tarred over. Perhaps to offset this loss of light, most of the railings and marble in the lobby had been painted white. While still impressive, the light court is a shadow of its former glory.
- Tom Baldwin purchases The Rookery and decides to do a first class renovation and restoration of the building. He hires McCluer Associates, with Gunny Harboe as the lead architect, to do the renovation. They decide to restore the building to its appearance in 1910.
- All the glass in the light court ceiling is replaced, a new skylight is added at the top of the light shaft, and all of the white paint is removed. The lobbies are restored to the feel of Wright's work, but not as exact replicas.
- When the staircase from the mezzanine is removed, original mosaic fragments are found which are used as the basis for recreating the original floor. John Root's original ironwork is also found encased in Wright's marble column, and the decision is made to leave it visible.
- The upper floors are gutted and refitted as the sort of open space demanded by current corporate clients.
- The work is completed in 1992.

Stop Seven (Near shop)

- The Rookery can not be ascribed to any one individual. There was the original genius of Burnham and Root, aided by Edward Waller. Wright then took the guidelines given him by Waller for the remodeling, and respectfully synthesized Root's designs with his own design philosophies to unify the lobbies and light court and to enhance the overall statement. Drummond and Byrne responded to tenant demands and also updated the building for code purposes. Finally, Gunny Harboe did a sensitive restoration and renovation, in some cases combining elements from all of the previously involved architects into his own integrated creation. With his mechanical and infrastructure improvements as well as the upper floor renovations, Harboe made the building once again commercially viable as a premium office space.
- The Rookery is still a "Great Building". Because of the inspired original design, the sensitive and successful renovations, restorations, and remodelings over the years, and continuing strong building management, it remains today a premier office building in the heart of Chicago's financial district.
- Thank you for joining us today. We invite you to explore the gift shop, and also to visit our website, flwright.org.

Eleventh Floor Burnham and Root Library

- Soon after The Rookery opened in 1888, Burnham and Root relocated their offices to the 11th floor of the building. They remained there until 1906, when they moved to the newly completed D.H. Burnham and Co. designed Railway Exchange Building. (Note: as part of the restoration completed in 1992, mechanicals and infrastructure for the building were moved to the back, and this is the path we take to get to the library. Originally, visitors and clients would have used the regular elevators to get to the Burnham and Root offices.)
- In addition to the Rookery, they were responsible for, among many, the Monadnock, Federal Reserve, Marshall Field, and Reliance Buildings in Chicago, the Flatiron Building in New York, Union Station in Washington D.C., and a Federal government complex for the Philippines
- Burnham and Root located their offices on the 11th floor for two reasons: first, to have unhindered views of Lake Michigan and the World's Fair site in Jackson Park (the buildings to the east and south were lower than The Rookery); and, second, to give confidence to tenants that being so high in a building was perfectly safe.
- The initial planning and work for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago World's Fair) took place in the firm's 11th floor offices and in additional 11th floor space dedicated to the Fair. *The Devil and The White City* includes stories about planning meetings for the fair that were held in the Burnham Library and a famous photograph showing the great architects of the United States gathered with Burnham to prepare for the fair was also taken in this library.
- When the renovation started in the 1980s, only the south half of the library remained in anything like its original condition; the north half had been extensively modified and the remainder of the Burnham and Root offices had been destroyed. The restoration of the library was primarily based on photographs.
- John Root died suddenly in 1891 and his successor, Charles Atwood, had health problems. In 1893/1894, Edward Waller hosted a dinner in his home at which Daniel Burnham offered Frank Lloyd Wright four years of classical study at the Beaux Arts in Paris, two years of study in Italy, and a position as head of design for D.H. Burnham and Co. when he returned. Wright carefully considered this generous offer, but finally refused, feeling that he had moved beyond the classical movement in architecture. He responded to Burnham, "I've been too close to Mr. [Louis] Sullivan. He has helped spoil the Beaux Arts for me, or spoiled me for the Beaux Arts, I guess I mean."
- After this decision, Wright never looked back. His architectural career spanned over 70 years, and he died at the age of 91 in 1959.