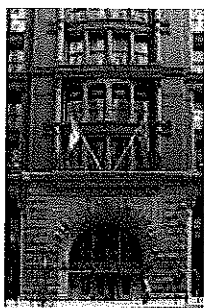


## Rookery

### Society of Architectural Historians--Buildings of the United States



#### **Rookery, 1885-88**

209 South LaSalle Street

#### **Burnham and Root**

Renovation of lobby, **Frank Lloyd Wright**, 1905; William Drummond, 1931

Restoration: Hasbrouck-Hunderman, 1983-84; Hasbrouck Peterson Associates, 1984-85 and 1989-90

Building renovation: Booth Hansen and Associates, begun 1985;

McClier Corporation, 1989-90; consulting architect Takayama and Associates, 1989-90

**When Daniel Hudson Burnham (1846-1912) and John Wellborn Root (1850-1891) formed their architectural partnership in 1873, the two young men were so poor they have between them, as Burnham put it, but "a full color box and one stick of India-ink." Eighteen years later, when their partnership ended with the untimely death of Root at age forty-one, they had 270 residences and commercial buildings to their credit, over forty in Chicago. Of their numerous skyscrapers in the Loop, only two survive, the Rookery and the Monadnock Building.**

The theme of the Rookery is light. The large site is almost square (177 feet 8 inches by 167 feet 6 inches). Fronting on LaSalle and Adams streets to the west and north and on Rookery and Quincy courts to the east and south, the eleven-story building is situated so that air and light enter from all directions. At the ground level, two-story oriel windows face the two major streets, and flat panes of plate glass, separated by only the narrowest of mullions, face the more shadowed side courts. On the upper floors, tiers of double-hung windows are set between narrow columns. To bring light the interior of the enormous commercial structure, the architects created an open light well and surrounded it with a ring of offices in a form that has been dubbed the doughnut.

The exterior is richly decorated with tourelles and Romanesque arches, as well as Islamic arabesques and other details of Moorish and Venetian origin. At the LaSalle Street entrance are two carved rooks, Root's whimsical allusion to the building's name, derived from the temporary City Hall that had occupied the site after the Great Fire of 1871. The dilapidated structure had attracted pigeons and presumably crows and so was derisively called The Rookery., an epithet that clung to the site despite the determined effort of one of the investors, Peter Brooks of Boston, to devise a more dignified name. Besides Brooks the other investors were his brother Shepherd, also a Bostonian, and the Chicagoan Owen Aldis; they were represented by E.C. Waller, who as a very young man had accompanied Burnham on a trip to the West to prospect for gold. Although they had not struck it rich, they remained friends all their lives and often did business together. It had been Waller who had secured a ninety-nine-year lease for the site at Adams and LaSalle from the City of Chicago and begun negotiations with the two Brooks Brothers for a large new building in the heart of the financial district.

Burnham, a masterful organizer of spaces, probably had a hand in the floor plan, but it was Root, the firm's chief designer who enclosed the first two floors of the light well with a glass-and-iron roof, creating a light filled interior court. The stairs to the second floor were cantilevered into the space, but the flights to the upper floors were encased in an oriel tower located in the light well. The court, surrounded by retail spaces and flooded with light, provided a lively center for the building. Light bounced off the innovative white-glazed brick walls of the light well, entering the inner offices of the court and filtering into the first-floor shops through the Luxfer-prism glass brick of the mezzanine floor.

This brilliantly organized design plan is a summation of what Burnham and Root had been working toward since their Chicago, Burlington and Quincy General Office Building of 1883 (demolished). The Burlington, with its rather awkward light court, was, according to Donald Hoffman in *The Architecture of John Wellborn Root* (1973), "the first office building in Chicago in which a significant amount of space was sacrificed for lighting." Root's far more sophisticated design for the court of the Rookery transformed a functional space into an aesthetic masterpiece. As Meredith L. Clausen commented in *Chicago Architecture, 1872-1922* (1987), Root probably was inspired by the interiors of Bon Marché (1869-76) and Le Printemps (1881), the innovative French department stores he would have seen on a trip to Paris with his wife and daughter in 1886. However,

the Rookery's dramatic, light-filled airy court was an imaginative design concept for the heart of an American commercial building.

The Rookery was a compendium of nineteenth-century technology in the transitional decade of the 1880s, when the metal-framed skyscraper was evolving and caissons —shafts driven down to a firm foundation and filled with concrete— had not yet come into common use as foundations. Supporting the enormous bulk of the Rookery on the marshy soil of Chicago may have seemed daunting to Root, but he solved the problem by using an improved form of the rail-grillage footings he had first employed in the Montauk Block (1881-82, demolished 1902). Also referred to as a floating foundation, this technical innovation was a raft of concrete reinforced with layers of steel rails that spread the load of a building. Carl W. Condit suggests in *The Chicago School of Architecture* (1964) that Root "thought of the raft as a steel foundation with a concrete envelope to prevent rusting." A century later, as the Rookery was undergoing restoration, virtually no settling was discovered.

Above ground the sides fronting on Rookery and Quincy courts are supported by iron frames, and those facing LaSalle and Adams streets, although resting on masonry piers at the base, also have, as Hoffman states, "metal in the lintels,...beams within the masonry,... [and] hoop iron girding the fabric." A structurally independent iron frame, completely exposed and sheathed in glass at the court levels, encloses the light well. This skeleton made possible one of the earliest appearance of ribbon windows; they line the light well above the court, providing daylight for all the inner offices.

When completed in 1888, the eleven-story Rookery was hailed as the largest and finest office building in the country. It quickly filled with prestigious clients, including the firm of Burnham and Root. In 1905 the owners commissioned the young architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who had at one time had an office building, to give the light court a more modern look, one in keeping with the new century. His treatment was sensitive to Root's design by radically altered the court's appearance, substituting white and gold for Root's wrought-iron tracery. Some twenty-five years later, in 1931, William Drummond made other alterations to the court and lobbies—and less sympathetic alterations followed. Among the glories of the original building were expansive, two-story lobbies facing Adams and LaSalle, which opened paths of light from the entrances into the central court. At some point they were divided to provide more rentable footage, their great second-floor windows were painted black, and the glass ceiling of the court was tarred over.

The Rookery was entered in the National Register of Historic Places in 1970 and designated a Chicago Landmark by the Chicago City Council in 1972. In 1982 the Continental Illinois National Bank and Trust Company bought the building and vacated it, intending to restore it and occupy all eleven floors. The exterior was cleaned and exploratory work began on the exterior. In 1988 the building was sold to the Rookery Partners, and the new owners resumed work on the restoration of the landmarked features and the renovation of the office floors.

1990 saw the reopening of this exceptional old building, one of the finest achievements of the first Chicago School. The restoration capitalized on the light well by roofing it with glass at the top to create a nine-story atrium. The dramatic oriel stair, constructed entirely of cast iron and glass, is now protected from further deterioration by the new roof. The court has been restored to its intended function as a source of natural light by removing the layers of tar from its glass ceiling and lifting the floor tiles from the prismatic glass on the mezzanine level.

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*Corn Exchange*  
(1908-1985 Sheply, Rutan & Coolidge)

Home Insurance (1882-1931  
- William LeBaron Jenney)

Field Building (1934 - GAPW)

## Adams Street

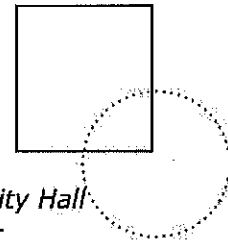
*Rand McNally*  
(1889-1911 - Burnham & Root)

Continental and Commercial  
Bank (1914 - D. H. Burnham  
Co) now J. W. Marriott

*Insurance Exchange*  
(1884-1912 - Burnham & Root)

*LaSalle Street*

The Rookery (1886 - Burnham  
& Root; 1905 - FLW; 1931 -  
Drummond)



*Temporary City Hall*  
(1872-1885 -  
John M. vanOsdel)

*South Reservoir*  
(1854-1885)

## Quincy Street

Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago  
(1922 - Graham Anderson  
Probst & White)

*Mallers (1884-1920 -  
John J. Flanders)*

*Gaff (1884-1920 -  
Stephen V. Shipman)*

*Counselman (1884-1920 -  
Burnham & Root)*

IL Merchants Bank (1924 -  
Continental Bank after 1928 -  
Graham Anderson Probst & White)

*IL Trust & Savings Bank (1896  
-1922 - D. H. Burnham Co.)*

*Grand Pacific Hotel (1873-1895 -  
W. W. Boyington)*

## Jackson Street

Chicago Board of Trade (1930  
- Holabird & Root)  
*Chicago Board of Trade (1882-  
1929 - W. W. Boyington)*