

WRIGHT'S EARLY CAREER

Joseph Lyman Silsbee (1848–1913)

Joseph Lyman Silsbee was born in Salem, Massachusetts to the son of a socially prominent Unitarian minister. Schooled at Philips Exeter Academy, he graduated from Harvard University in 1869. The following year he attended special classes in architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and worked for the Boston firm of Ware & Van Brunt. In 1872 and 1873 he traveled to Europe, and then returned to become a Professor of Architecture at the College of Fine Arts at Syracuse University.

By 1875, Silsbee had set up his own office and designed two Victorian Gothic structures: the Syracuse Savings Bank and the White Memorial Building. He moved to Chicago in the early 1880s and was listed in the 1882 Lakeside directory. The majority of his Chicago commissions were residences, including a series of houses in the Edgewater neighborhood and the interior of the Potter Palmer house on Lake Shore Drive.

Silsbee's first Shingle-style design in Chicago was probably All Souls' Church, which he designed for Frank Lloyd Wright's uncle, Jenkin Lloyd Jones in 1885. Soon after, he designed Unity Chapel, a simple shingle structure in Helena Valley, Wisconsin, near Spring Green, for the Wright family. In addition to designing in the Shingle style, Silsbee favored Richardsonian Romanesque and Colonial Revival-designs. His design for the West Virginia building at the World's Columbian Exposition is a prime example of Colonial revival design, incorporating columns, palladian motifs and a symmetrical facade. One of Silsbee's favorite commissions was a moving sidewalk system for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Located on a 2,500-foot pier behind the Administration Building, the system comprised 315 cars with seats for 5,610 people and was a forerunner of moving walkways.

Silsbee's office must have been an exciting place to work in the late 1880s. Frank Lloyd Wright, George Grant Elmslie, and George Maher were fellow draftsmen there in 1887. According to Grant Manson in his book *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Years*, Silsbee's suburban house was filled with Japanese art. Little is known about Silsbee's work after 1897 when his commissions ceased to be published in periodicals. Between 1907 and 1911, his son Ralph served as his associate. Silsbee's last project was a \$500,000 residence near Trinidad, New Mexico.

Louis Sullivan (1856–1924)

As a child growing up in Massachusetts, Louis Sullivan was more interested in exploring nature on neighboring farms than in attending school. His formal architectural education included approximately one year each at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. He worked for Frank Furness in Philadelphia and William Le Baron Jenney in Chicago before entering the firm of Dankmar Adler & Company in 1879.

Sullivan became a junior partner in 1881 and a full partner on May 1, 1883, when the firm's name was changed to Adler & Sullivan. Major commissions for the firm included the Wainwright Building in St. Louis, the Guaranty Building in Buffalo, the Transportation Building at the Columbian Exposition, and the Chicago Stock Exchange. As a result of Adler's talent in acoustical engineering, the firm created eleven theaters and opera houses, including the Auditorium Theater in Chicago, and served as consultants on the design for Carnegie Hall in New York. In 1895 the partnership dissolved. Sullivan, who relied on Adler to bring projects into the office, found himself with few commissions. Major designs Sullivan completed independently include the Schlesinger & Mayer Department Store (later Carson Pirie Scott) and a series of banks in small towns across the Midwest.

Sullivan understood the importance of promoting his architectural theories through writing. He believed

that historical styles should not be copied or even directly quoted for modern use, because they had grown out of their own social circumstances. A democratic America, like any other society, was obligated to develop its own language of cultural expression. He illustrated his concept of 'American' architecture in two building types—the urban skyscraper and the small-town bank.

In his famous 1896 essay, *The Tall Building Artistically Considered*, Sullivan emphasized that a skyscraper should be divided into horizontal elements, much like a column, with a capital, shaft and base. His design for the Wainwright Building illustrated this concept. The essay also introduced Sullivan's well-known maxim, "form follows function", which Wright would revise to read, "form and function are one". Modernists often misinterpreted this phrase as a harsh criticism of applied ornament in building. In "The Autobiography of an Idea", however, Sullivan explained that "ornament should appear, not as something receiving the spirit of the structure, but as a thing expressing that spirit". His buildings featured original ornament that combined foliage and geometric forms and functioned as an integral part of the design. Other important writings by Sullivan include: *Kindergarten Chats* and *A System of Architectural Ornament*.

Between 1906 and 1919, Sullivan designed eight bank buildings in small Midwestern towns including: West Lafayette, Indiana; Columbus, Wisconsin; and Grinnell and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. With help from George Elmslie, who replaced Wright as Sullivan's chief draftsman, he created his first "jewel box", the National Farmers' Bank in Owatonna, Minnesota. Bank vice-president Carl Bennett, typical of Sullivan's bank clients, was looking for an alternative to the classical design of small-town banks. Sullivan presented him with an original, rational design that included organic terra-cotta, art glass, and stenciled ornament.

Frank Lloyd Wright and the other architects of the Prairie School were influenced by Sullivan's design philosophy. Wright entered the office of Adler & Sullivan in approximately 1888 to help prepare drawings for the Auditorium Theater. This was a very productive and creative time for the firm and provided an ideal learning situation for Wright. During this period Wright acquired a great deal of knowledge about design and philosophy from Sullivan, his 'Lieber Meister'.

In addition to working on the design for the Charnley Residence and the firm's other residential commissions, Wright designed a number of 'bootlegged' houses after hours. The creation of these commissions violated a \$5,000 loan contract he signed with Sullivan in 1889. This loan had enabled Wright to build his Oak Park home. According to Wright's autobiography, Sullivan's discovery of the bootlegged houses was the reason for Wright's departure from the firm in 1893. After a period of many years, Wright and Sullivan resumed their friendship. Sullivan received occasional financial help from Wright between 1918 and 1924. Wright also was involved in the publishing of two books by Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea* and *A System of Architectural Ornament*, shortly before Sullivan's death in 1924.

Sullivan was buried in Graceland Cemetery near tombs he designed for Martin Ryerson and Carrie Eliza Getty. In 1946 the American Institute of Architects posthumously awarded him its Gold Medal.

Buildings designed by Sullivan that are still standing in Chicago include the Holy Trinity Cathedral (1899–1900); the Jewelers' Building (1881–1882); facades for the Gage Building (1898) and the William P. Krause Music Store (1922); the Standard Elevator Company Factory (1891); and the Auditorium Building (1889).

Unfortunately, the demolition of several key Sullivan structures marks the low point of Chicago architectural history. Treasures lost include the Chicago Stock Exchange, and the Schiller and Garrick Theaters. Even more tragic was the loss of architectural photographer and early preservationist Richard Nickel. While salvaging ornament from the Stock Exchange Building during its demolition in 1972, he was killed by falling masonry.

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