



CHICAGO REINVENTING A LEGACY

ONCE HOME TO ARCHITECTURAL HEROES SUCH AS LOUIS SULLIVAN, FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT AND MIES VAN DER ROHE, CHICAGO HAS LONG BEEN IDENTIFIED AS THE USA'S ARCHITECTURAL CAPITAL. BUT IN RECENT YEARS, WITH A GENERATION OF NEW ICONIC BUILDINGS EMERGING ACROSS THE STATES, CHICAGO SEEMED TO HAVE LOST ITS CRITICAL EDGE. GIAN LUCA AMADEI REPORTS ON THE CITY'S RECENT ATTEMPTS TO CREATE A 21ST-CENTURY ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY THROUGH ENVIRONMENTALISM AND REGENERATION

Created in 2007 at a cost of £770,000, the green roof on Chicago's 1911 City Hall saves the city around £33,000 a year in energy costs.

In 2004 leading architects and politicians decided that Chicago's future architectural heritage would not be based on a particular style of architecture, or on a series of great names, but by becoming the USA's greenest metropolis, and a flagship for post-industrial regeneration.

To show the possibilities to architects and developers as well as to the public, Stanley Tigerman, one of the leading figures on the Chicago architectural scene, launched an initiative 'Visionary Chicago Architecture', that culminated recently in a book and exhibition. It consisted of 14 projects designed by local architects that focused on new gateways and the visual impact of the city on its millions of visitors.

Following this, The History Channel organised a national competition inviting architects from Chicago, Los Angeles and New York to imagine their city 100 years from now. Sarah Dunn and Martin Felsen from Chicago-based UrbanLab were

announced as winners of the Chicago section of the competition. They called their idea Growing Water. A simple system to harvest water, UrbanLab foresaw Chicago with a series of 'eco-boulevards' flowing into Lake Michigan. Waste water and rainfall would be collected and filtered naturally using micro-organisms and plants in a graduated system to clean the water.

'A hundred years from now water will be the new oil' says Felsen. 'For each gallon of fresh water we take from Lake Michigan, we put back just one per cent of it.'

Among US cities, Chicago has led the way in tackling the green agenda, thanks in part to Mayor Richard Daley and the city's environmental department. The first evidence of their work was the creation of Millennium Park in 2004. What was once a disused rail yard in the heart of Chicago, has now been given back to the city as a major public park.

'Some of us have been critical about the project,' says Chicago-based architect Doug Garofalo. 'We could not predict its success. The project was delivered to the city late and over budget [Millennium Park was supposed to have been completed in 2000], and yet it is unbelievable what has been done for the image of the city both nationally and internationally.'

Millennium Park is a fascinating example of regeneration in a city centre. Such traditional elements as the fountain, the monument and the green have been reinterpreted to reflect the needs and desires of a contemporary city. In this relatively small site, interventions by artists and architects including Anish Kapoor, Frank Gehry and Jaume Plensa complement each other. And the project is still evolving – a new wing for the Art Institute of Chicago, designed by Renzo Piano, is scheduled to be open for the public in 2009.

'The city government has been really smart and courageous,' says Saskia Sassen, the Ralph Lewis Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago. 'It has just entered a whole new phase of environmental interventions, and neither New York nor LA come close. The irony is that Chicago's built on a past of heavy manufacturing, meat packing, massive trucking and trains.'

The scars of Chicago's industrialised past are still all too visible despite attempts by Mayor Daley to increase the number of green spaces in the city centre.

'The interesting thing about Chicago and other American cities that were built on the banks of rivers, is that industry originally needed to be close to water for production or transportation reasons,' says Sarah Dunn, of UrbanLab, who is also assistant professor of architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC).

'Now areas by the river or by disused train lines are becoming available for redevelopment. But the question remains, will the city administration and developers take advantage of this opportunity or will they turn their backs on the river and just do what they've always done?'

Projects such as Millennium Park have sparked new vitality in the city centre, and as Garofalo says, 'Chicago's city centre is now perceived as a desirable place to move to, as opposed to the trend over the past 30 years, which saw people moving out to the suburbs.'

'Chicago's downtown is one of the few in the US that has actually gained residents,' confirms Sassen. 'There are retired, older people there who are now deciding to move downtown because they can have a much better and more interesting life. Grand old office buildings have been changed into great apartments and run-down warehouses have been turned into wonderful restaurants,' she says.

'But some of this – although not all of it – has come at the cost of much suffering and losses for



The Gary Comer Youth Center by John Ronan Architects has brought optimism to a neglected part of south Chicago, otherwise known for crime and poverty. The building has a range of facilities and a green roof, which forms a kitchen garden

poorer, frequently immigrant, households and smaller businesses. This type of growth revives urban downtowns economically, but it can destroy the complex social fabric of cities that should always be marked by a diverse social and cultural mix,' she adds.

This shift in the social and demographic distribution of population in Chicago has had direct repercussions on the market for affordable housing. Currently the Chicago Housing Authority has in action a 'Plan for Transformation' that should deliver 25,000 dwellings – both new and refurbished – by 2009. The housing authority is replacing high-rises with mixed-income inner-city homes, usually consisting of one-third public housing, one-third affordable housing and one-third available at the market rate.

'The proposed and recently completed schemes are far from cutting edge,' says Garofalo, 'but some of them are good. For example, the ones by Peter

Landon or the ones north of Cabrini-Green, an area renowned for its housing estates.'

More adventurous projects have emerged to promote art and culture. These include the Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC) located in a neighbourhood in the south of Chicago. This project, again completed by Garofalo Architects, although small in size and budget brought immediate benefits to the surrounding community.

HPAC has been promoting local and national art since 1939 as well as providing affordable art classes for children and adults across Chicago. For more than 20 years, HPAC rented the former Del Prado Hotel in the city centre. A few years back UIC agreed to rent HPAC a building that had been used to house the university's printing services for the peppercorn rent of \$1 each year for the next 35 years so long as HPAC renovated and transformed the space. It was open to the public last summer.

The project comprises multiple exhibition and

studio spaces, reference and community facilities, and a top-notch cafe. A digital system projects images on the facade, where doors open on to a front courtyard.

The completion of the Gary Comer Youth Center is another tangible sign of Chicago's regeneration. The project, completed by city firm John Ronan Architects in May 2006, has gained the status of a local architectural and social landmark in a much-deprived area. A former warehouse, it now houses a range of facilities for the community: from a gymnasium that becomes an impressive theatre at the flick of a switch, to a green roof that doubles as a working garden to support cookery classes. It was funded by Gary Comer, a billionaire who'd grown up in the area when it was merely run-down rather than a slum and who decided to give something back when he made his fortune.

Despite such projects, Sarah Dunn of UrbanLab thinks the city needs to do more to commission small firms to work on local projects: 'There isn't as much choice as there could be for architectural students. They have to choose either to work for a very large firm or a very small one, and I guess there aren't many of those, either.'

'Universities like the Illinois Institute of Technology gained students thanks to new buildings by Rem Koolhaas and Murphy/Jahn Architects on their campuses,' says Dunn. 'But the majority of students coming out of college end up working for large practices that might not be doing projects in Chicago.'

But when it comes to managing resources, Mayor Daley, has been leading by example. The roof of the 1911 Chicago City Hall was grassed over – not just to collect rain water and cool down the building, but also to house hives for about 100,000 Italian honeybees. The collected honey is now sold to raise money for local galleries and artists. For the Windy City, going green is an art ■