

Chapter 1

History



Fleishhacker Pool, constructed 1925, San Francisco, California (HABS photograph from San Francisco Room, San Francisco Library, Civic Center)

Magnificent Play

Recreation Shaping the American House

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Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in Light.

—Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, 1923

Le Corbusier's text is one of the foundation stones of the Modernism we came to know in the twentieth century. Along with the integration—and worship—of modern technology, and the elimination of historical reference, the abstraction of form became a self-evident verity of architecture.

But I do not find this description of Modernism entirely satisfying. It does not explain a large amount of contemporary architecture we have seen over the last fifty years, especially in the vast suburban cities that are a hallmark of the era. A more convincing and thorough story about the role of light in architecture in the twentieth century should speak also of the glow of the television set, the glint of sunlight off backyard swimming pools, the flash of a microwave timer, and the view through the picture window. In the middle-class American residence, the blessings of Modernism truly came home.

The remarkable changes in middle-class family life between 1900 and 1950 were reflected in the design of both mass-produced and architect-designed

houses. The family shrank in size, but increased in its interactions. Socializing became less formal. Appliances altered workloads. The car opened the suburbs to more homes. The home became the center of play, pleasure, and relaxation, taking on aspects of the resort and of the pleasure garden, and luxuries once exclusively the domain of the wealthy. These cultural forces resulted from the increased leisure time and growing prosperity of the average American family.

These forces culminated after 1950. This transformation was not, of course, limited to private space. The public arena also became more focused on large-scale, highly designed, and carefully planned recreational venues, typified by the opening of Walt Disney's Disneyland in Anaheim, California, in 1955. As the housing industry exploded after World War II, fueled by pent up demand after years of economic depression and a sudden postwar baby boom, builders and architects sought to give their clients and customers something more than basic shelter.

This house of suburbia reflected the changes in social life. Turning its back on the street (the venue of crime, danger, and decay in the old inner city neighborhoods that new suburbanites had escaped) the suburban house created its own social



Figure 3. Bathroom interior view, 1960s (Author's collection)

guests, and strangers. The large courtyard, a scene for dining and fiestas, was the forerunner of the twentieth-century patio.

With this model, the Ranch House's backyard became a specialized place for barbecues (whether portable or with built-in brick chimneys) and social gatherings. The swimming pool, once the glittering jewel of Hollywood movie star homes, became a commonplace fixture of many middle-class homes and their backyards. The changing role of children influenced backyard design, too. The backyard became a place designed for exercise and games: horseshoe, tennis, Wiffleball, swimming, touch football, Frisbee, croquet. And children could have jungle gyms, sandboxes, slides, and play houses.

Indoors, the house became an integrated locus of the very latest mid-century entertainment technologies of cathode rays and transistors. Though televisions were restricted to single units in the common family rooms in the early 1950s, by the 1960s multiple TVs found their way into bedrooms as well. Live music had been represented in nineteenth century middle-class homes by the piano, but was augmented by the Victrola, record player, hi-fi, and then stereo—often available in portable models. Radios likewise had been the bulky residents of parlors in the 1930s; miniaturized by the transistor, they became common in bedrooms, kitchens, and workshops.



Figure 4. Interior view from an advertisement from the Mobile Home Manufacturers Association (Look, 15 September 1962, 91)

Architects responded by blending the new entertainment technology into the spaces and structures of their designs. John Lautner's 1947 Carling House in Los Angeles is but one example of a Modern architect integrating new audio technology to create an aural environment as part of the architecture. A hi-fi was included in a built-in cabinet that served as the side table to the couch—which was integrated into the wall that pivoted out, complete with musical accompaniment, to become a part of the outdoor terrace. With these technological advances integrated into the architecture, the modern house became customized with music and entertainment in a way never before imagined.

The kitchen likewise changed from a utilitarian space for food preparation (often isolated and strictly functional because it was used by a servant, not the family) to a hobby and conversation area in mass-produced houses. Walls dividing the kitchen from the sitting room were broken down, and the new blended space was articulated by islands, low counters, and built-in seating. Gourmet cooking hobbyists demanded stoves and refrigerators and appliances for more sophisticated cooking, at the same time that microwave ovens and ice makers offered speed and convenience.

From TVs to hi-fis to mechanical pool sweeps, modern technology changed the way people used their homes, and the homes reconfigured to adapt to these lifestyle changes. Modernism was brought to the masses, and architecture responded. The traditional uses and divisions between public and private space altered; the public theater became the

private home entertainment system; the front stoop became the backyard patio; the hot spring resort became the Jacuzzi spa. People became more inward looking as their home—and the friends selectively invited there—became a one-stop venue for entertainment. The tendency toward isolation, however, was hardly absolute. As these adaptations continued, they also connected the family home to the larger world in more ways than ever before with television, VCRs, and the internet. And though recreation led this residential design revolution, work (also aided by modern technology) eventually invaded as the home office as well.

Textbook Modernism had called for the integration of modern technology into homes for the benefit of the resident. It often focused, however, on the framework of the home—the standardized steel, glass, and wood structures that made buildings elegant in the hands of High Art architects. Consumer Modernism, in contrast, balanced modern technology with human uses to improve convenience and pleasure. This produced a moderate Modernism in the Ranch House that adapted traditional elements while providing modern conveniences.

How, then, do we most accurately assess the mid-century house? As a magnificent abstract volume bathed in sunlight, or a reflection of the full range of complex social, cultural, marketing, and technological influences in a leisure society? The answer is obvious: measured by the impact of recreation on the American house, Modern architecture is the manifestation, simply, of “masterly, correct and magnificent play.”

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Figure 5. The backyard patio as a social gathering space, 1960s (Author's collection)

A Sporting World

The Building Legacy of Chicago's Athletic Clubs

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In an effort to recapture a sense of community and counter the impersonality of the burgeoning cities, urban Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought a sense of community through new, voluntary associations. Some organizations were temporary, designed to accomplish only a specific purpose; others were permanent institutions that met a multitude of needs over time. Membership was established according to any criteria the organizing group chose, such as common interests, sex, ethnicity, occupation, or religious status.

The sport club was a preferred alternative to other voluntary associations because sports did not threaten deeply-held personal beliefs and because sports provided a milieu for fellowship and common purpose. Athletic activity, which is necessarily subordinate to rules, encouraged a temporary equality between members. The parity of play strengthened the bond between members, easily transforming the sports club into a multi-faceted social agency. Almost incidentally, the sport club of the nineteenth century provided a tremendous impetus to the growth of American sport.

Numerous downtown athletic clubs were formed in Chicago after the Civil War, reaching a height of popularity during the Roaring Twenties. The larger

of these early athletic clubs—some with membership reaching two to three thousand people—were responsible for the construction of impressive buildings to house their athletic and social functions. Those clubs organized to serve a particular sporting activity often built facilities closely related to that activity, whether it was golfing at the South Shore Country Club or yachting at the Chicago Yacht Club. Certainly not all clubs were for Chicago's affluent society; parks and other public facilities served the growing athletic interests of community clubs and social organizations representing the general populace.

Early athletic clubs, especially those established by and for the wealthy, have left us with a rich and diverse architectural heritage. Some of the city's most opulent clubhouses are still used by the same clubs responsible for their construction, while others have been adaptively reused over the years. Among the most prestigious of Chicago's late nineteenth century athletic clubs was the Chicago Athletic Association, also known today as the Chicago Athletic Club. Its early sports rivalry with the New York Athletic Club is legendary among sports historians.



Figure 1. Circa 1910 postcard showing exterior of the Chicago Athletic Association (Curt Teich)

A private gentlemen's club with meeting and banquets rooms, athletic facilities and sleeping quarters; a common facility plan in early athletic clubs

The Chicago Athletic Association (CAA) was founded in 1890 by prominent citizens of Chicago including Marshall Field, A.G. Spalding, Cyrus McCormick, and Henry Ives Cobb. Its mission was "to encourage all sports, to promote physical culture, and to cultivate social intercourse and friendly relations among members of the Association."¹ The first executive meeting, held in the architect's office with Henry Ives Cobb serving as chairman, initiated the search for a building site and a discussion about clubhouse design.

Choosing a site at 12 South Michigan, their building soon was constructed in a southern Romanesque style, inspired by buildings along the Grand Canal in Venice. Cobb's knowledge of the construction of the new Bartlett Gymnasium at the University of Chicago aided in the planning of the CAA's athletic facilities. Interior lounges and dining rooms were

the responsibility of George Healy and Louis Millet, who helped create the internationally acclaimed Chicago Auditorium Building, the world's largest theatre, hotel, and office building at the time. At the CAA, they imported Tabasco mahogany from Mexico for use in the lounge and billiard rooms, and tesserae pavement from Shropshire, England, for the lobby. Healy crafted exquisite wood carvings and Millet fashioned colorful stained glass panels to further embellish the club rooms. The Chicago-based Brunswick Company supplied billiard tables and built the bar, café, and lounge rooms "to architect's design."² The inauguration planned for the club's opening in 1892 had to be deferred as a result of a disastrous fire. Recovery was slow, with the building opening department by department, as work was finished. With the highly refined materials and treatments used in the finish of the building, costs consumed all revenue. However, vigorous programs for athletics, bicycle tours, and social events encouraged quick membership growth, which helped settle accounts with contractors and vendors.

The Chicago Athletic Association's sports history dates back to 1895 when their "Pigskin Squad" defeated Harvard, Yale, and a dozen other universities and clubs to take the national football championship. Opportunities abounded for members to participate in active sports such as track and field, swimming, diving, water polo, football, baseball, fencing, tennis, and rowing. Members interested in less physical activities, such as billiards, cards, and bowling, were also accommodated.

In 1905 the CAA decided to add an annex, designed by the Chicago architect Richard E. Schmidt Jr. The annex included a grand banquet hall, many private dining rooms, and additional bedroom suites for members and distinguished guests. Wives and sisters of CAA members now enjoyed their own lounge adjoining the ladies entrance and a large dining room. In 1926 Schmidt designed a ten-story addition to the annex, providing even more guest rooms and clubroom suites.

By 1974, women were admitted as members in the association. Today the CAA remains a private membership club, offering a wide variety of facilities including cardio and strength training equipment, a full boxing ring, squash and handball courts, basketball court, golf practice range, lap pool, and other amenities such as massage therapy,

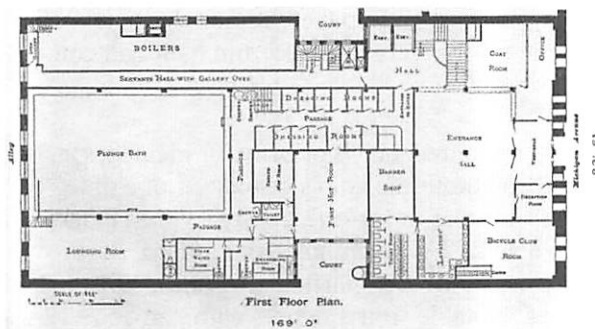


Figure 2. Circa 1890 first floor plan by Henry Ives Cobb, showing the plunge pool, dressing rooms, first and second hot rooms, and steam vapor room at the CAA (Ryerson and Burnham Archives, Art Institute of Chicago)

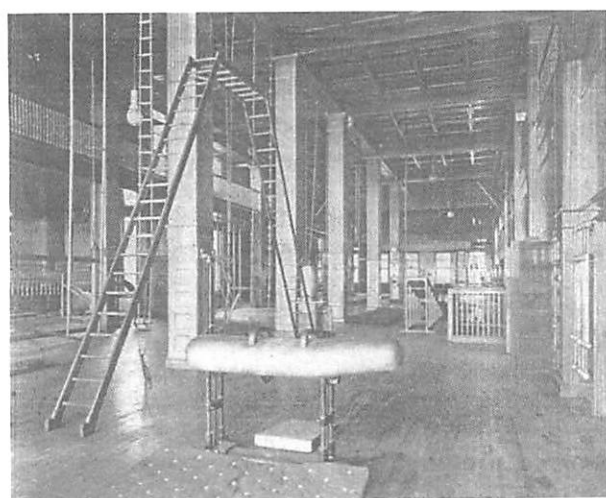


Figure 3. "The [CAA] gymnasium, with its accompanying rooms for boxing and fencing, occupies the entire floor space of two stories, and is an interesting exhibition of the ingenious contrivances that can be made for making a man exercise the different muscles of his body. It was a *carte blanche* production, and it would need a man with an interpreter to know what to do with half the things he sees." (Duncan Edwards, "Life at the Athletic Clubs," Scribner's Magazine, July 1895)

whirlpool, and steam room. The building includes three restaurants, twenty private meeting rooms suitable for groups up to 400, and fifty-two smartly appointed lodging rooms.

Let's put the club back into athletics³

The Illinois Athletic Club (IAC) was founded on 11 November 1904, becoming the second of Chicago's most prestigious men's clubs. The group was formed under the leadership of William Hale Thompson, then captain of the Chicago Athletic Association football team and chairman of the club's athletic committee. He and several hundred

members of the CAA had become dissatisfied with the growing loss of interest in athletics at CAA and proposed the creation of a rival club to rekindle the competitive flame.⁴

In 1908 a clubhouse was constructed at 112 South Michigan Avenue in "modern French style." The facade of the twelve-story building was of Bedford stone and the lower stories were embellished with rusticated stylobate courses, ornamental balconies, bronze statuary, and grilles. The eleventh story was banded with a frieze recalling the story of the Olympian games. Drawings published in the *Inland Architect and News Record* in April 1908, reveal that the interior plan included a rotunda, kitchen, dining room, grille room, gymnasium, library, Pompeian swim tank, billiard room, and bowling alley. The *Inland Architect and News Record* also reported that:

The problems thought most important in working out this building were the perfect lighting of all compartments; the construction of the principal rooms free of columns and obstructions; the perfect lighting and ventilating of the gymnasium; the economical operation of the service compartment, and the safeguarding of the people attending the entertainment swimming events and boxing entertainments given by the club.⁵

The architectural firm of record was Barnett, Haynes, and Barnett of St. Louis, consisting of George D. Barnett, John I. Haynes, and Tom P. Barnett. Organized in 1893, their practice thrived for twenty-five years and included work on prominent buildings throughout the United States.

After twelve years of continuous use, Illinois Athletic Club members voted to make improvements in the building. A primary area of concern was the second floor dining room. The need for private dining facilities resulted in the addition of a mezzanine gallery or balcony with twelve individual boxes. Each box was ornamented with a club seal representing various athletic clubs throughout the country in recognition of their athletic development and clean sports within club life. A separate entrance and elevator were also constructed so that women could dine discreetly upstairs when not escorted by men. The interior arrangement and appointments of the building have been frequently changed in the spirit of improvements for members' comfort and appearance. Over the years, the living quarters, card



Figure 4. Circa 1912 postcard view of the Illinois Athletic Club (Curt Teich)



Figure 5. Paris, 1924, Games of the VIII Olympiad. IAC member Johnny Weissmuller, later of Tarzan fame, represented the United States and was a freestyle swimming triple gold medalist in the 100m, 400m and 4-by-200m relay events. (IOC Olympic Museum Collections)

room, and barbershop were remodeled, the athletic rooms were updated, and handball courts were added.

Sports remained a high priority for members at IAC throughout the club's history. At one time twenty-nine of thirty-one freestyle world marks were held by IAC swimmers and in 1932, thirty-two members of the IAC participated in the Olympic Games. Notable sports figures who patronized IAC included Johnny Weissmuller, Michael McDermott, Norman Ross, and William Bachrach.⁶

In 1988 the Illinois Athletic Club sold the building at 112 South Michigan Avenue and it became the Charlie Club Health Club. Four years later the School of the Art Institute of Chicago purchased it and converted it into a student dormitory with new artists' studios and a ballroom/dining room restored to its 1916 appearance.⁷

Sometimes athletic clubs for women were developed amid unrelenting ridicule. Scrappy reporters ran stories predicting the women would shortly "plant pond lilies in the swimming pool, turn the gymnasium into a continuous pink tea reception and use up all the club stationery to make curl paper."⁸ ***A few men suggested that instructing women in the expert use of Indian clubs and dumb bells could be a menace to society.***

The idea for a woman's athletic organization devoted to the beauty-preserving art of physical culture originated with Mrs. Paulina Harriette Lyon, an energetic and resourceful member of Chicago's elite. She envisioned a club that would minister to the needs of the whole woman—a retreat where health, grace, and vigor could be restored. With the aid of Mrs. Philip D. Armour, Mrs. William Hale (Medora) Thompson, Mrs. C. K. G. (Blanche) Billings, and Mrs. William R. (Nellie) Linn as benefactors, the Woman's Athletic Club of Chicago (WAC) was incorporated on 13 September 1898.⁹ Six classes of members were established by invitation only. Membership rolls grew rapidly and included a large part of the city's commercial elite.

For the first clubhouse, the ladies leased the lower half of a six-story building at 150 South Michigan Avenue. They remodeled the space to include handsome parlors featuring Flemish oak paneling

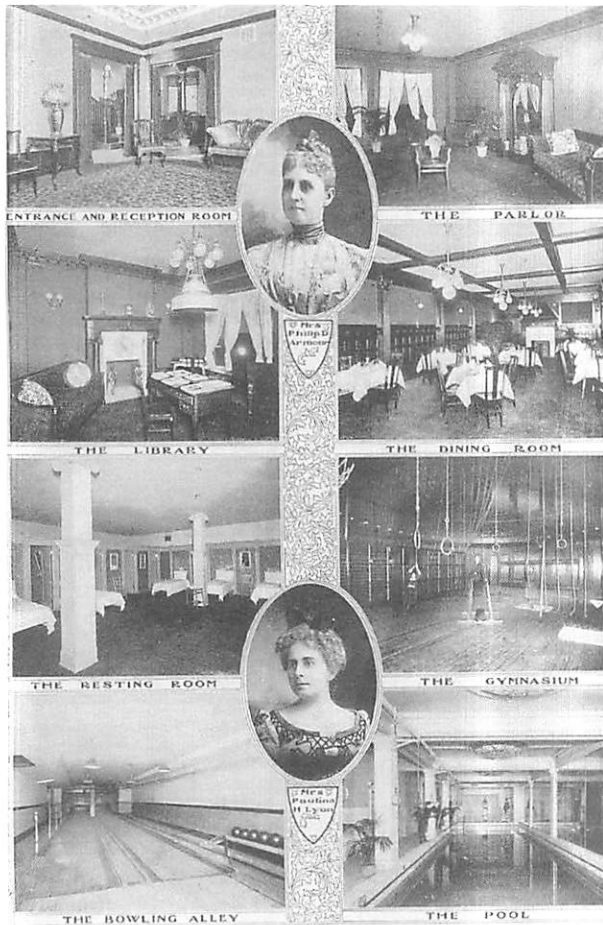


Figure 6. The rooms inside the first Woman's Athletic Club clubhouse (WAC)

and imported fireplaces, a library, café and tea room, gymnasium, natatorium with a pure white marble pool, a bowling alley, and space for hairdressing, manicures, and Turkish baths. The club considered food service essential to its atmosphere of relaxed hospitality. The first tearoom was "quaint" and the menu did not include much beyond bouillon, salads, sandwiches, chocolate, and fruit.¹⁰

With the building's sale in 1908, the Woman's Club moved to the first two floors of the International Harvester Building at the corner of Michigan and Harrison. All of the expensive fittings from the old clubhouse were removed and installed in the new space. The marble swimming tank was taken apart piece by piece and reinstalled in the basement, where it was bordered by lockers, steam and slab rooms, and a shower bath. The new rooms were much more open and designed with an eye for simplicity and comfort—large living and dining rooms, parlors, gymnasium, sun parlor, multiple

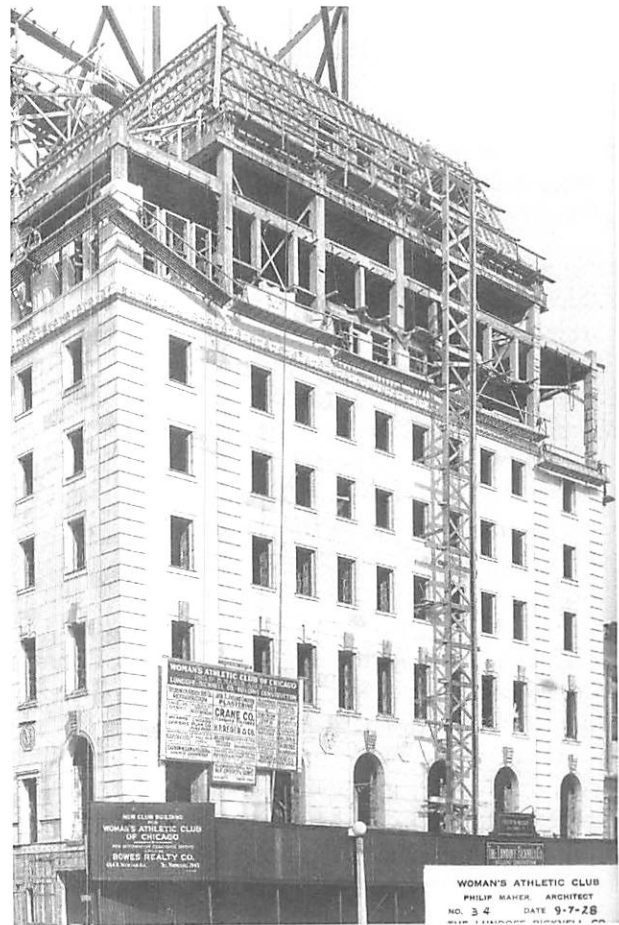


Figure 7. The current WAC building (the third home of the club) under construction in September 1928 (WAC)

kitchens, a natatorium, and rooms for hairdressing, manicures, massage, and resting.¹¹ Devotees came to the club for aesthetic gymnastics, dance classes, and swimming lessons. The aristocratic sport of fencing even enjoyed a brief vogue. When not using the gym or pool, members attended luncheons, lectures, recitals, theatrical performances, and dances.

With the expiration of the club's lease on the building in 1926, attention again turned to relocation. Within a year the club signed a ninety-nine year ground lease for a property at the northwest corner of Michigan and Ontario. Architect Philip Maher was asked to design the multi-story clubhouse with a basement pool, sidewalk canopy entrance on Ontario, and frontage along Michigan Avenue for six high-end shops to help offset the club's rent. On 25 April 1929, the doors of the new club opened. In 1998, as the club reached its centennial, membership numbered 1,058.¹² Some changes have occurred within the clubhouse over



Figure 10. Historically the symmetrically designed two story lobby at the MAC featured a double set of marble stairs curving up to the mezzanine, with buttress steeped side walls of marble, and brass hand rails. At the top of stairs were thick marble and terra cotta columns with capitals featuring lotus leaves and warrior heads. (NPS file)

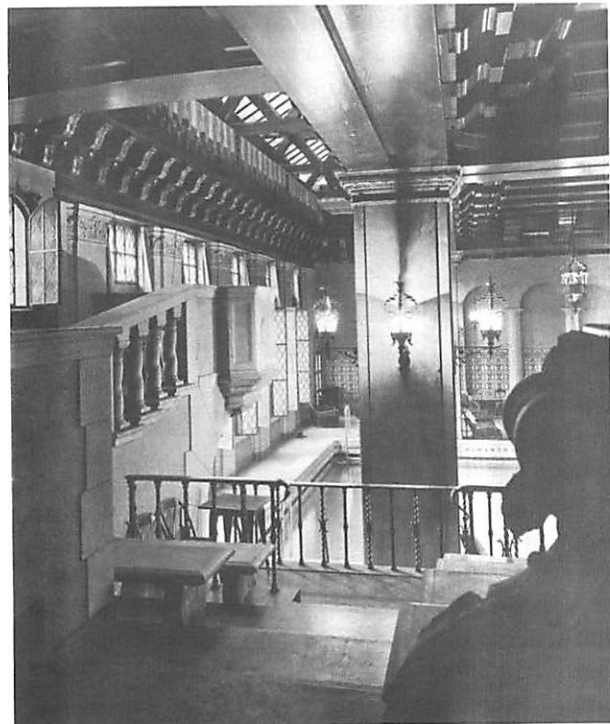


Figure 11. The men's swimming pool on the thirteenth floor at the MAC with its lounge, grotto, and spectator seating (Scimitar)

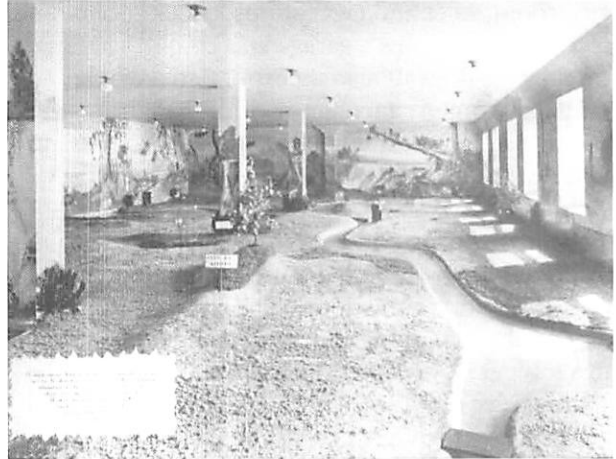


Figure 12. Eighteen hole golf course with wandering brook at the MAC (Scimitar)

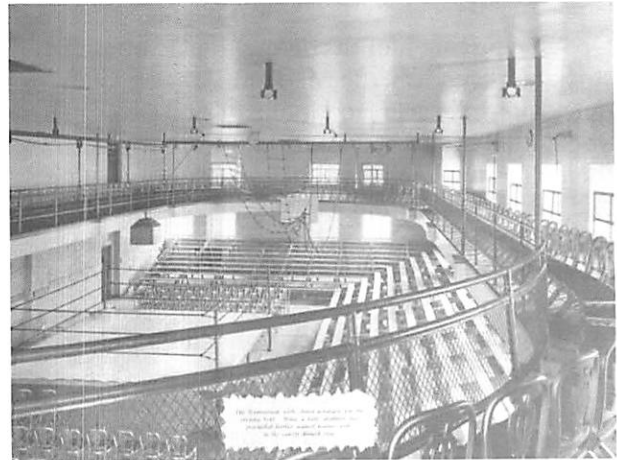


Figure 13. The MAC gymnasium with chairs arranged for the evening bout. "Many a fistic gladiator has pummeled leather against leather within the canvas floor ring." (Scimitar)



Figure 14. Typical guest room at the MAC (Scimitar)

grill room, valet and cigar shops, check rooms, and reception area, plus a garage and commercial space on the first floor. It also incorporated a whole range of women's facilities including their own dining room, swimming pool, lounge, card rooms, and beauty salons.¹⁵

The upper floors housed 523 guest rooms, including several two-story apartments and an observatory at the top of the dome. The design throughout was opulent, with marble, terra cotta, gold leaf, and many types of ornamentation. The interior public spaces were designed with the intent of having the guests move through a progression of different architectural styles arranged in loosely chronological sequence—Celtic, Byzantine, Medieval, Gothic, Spanish Mediterranean, Italian Renaissance, and French Empire.

Opening just six months before the October 1929 stock market crash, the Medinah Athletic Club quickly faced a grim economic future, closing its doors in 1934 and becoming bankrupt soon thereafter. Over the next fifty years, the building had many owners and assumed numerous identities—the Chicago Towers, the Continental Hotel, the Sheraton Hotel, the Radisson Chicago Hotel, and the Hotel Continental.¹⁶ Under this series of owners, many elaborate design features and spaces were covered, altered, and in some cases destroyed. In 1961, under the ownership of the Sheraton, a twenty-six story North Tower was added, providing a total of 937 guest rooms.¹⁷ By 1965, the top of the minaret and its spire had been removed. Within the next ten years, the owners replaced most of the original windows with metal sliding units that featured an aqua transom panel that visually linked them to the newly constructed tower. After three years of operation as the Hotel Continental, the building was closed in 1986 with the expectation of an extensive renovation.

In 1988, a group of financiers restored the hotel in a \$130 million project that received federal historic preservation tax credits. The property was divided into two separate hotels, with the InterContinental Chicago hotel occupying the historic portion of the building known as the South Tower and the Forum Hotel in the newer North Tower. The two hotels would share many “back of the house” functions. The project team included the architectural firm of Harry Weese and Associates of Chicago and the interior design firm Design

Continuum of Atlanta. The setback configuration of the building made the renovation very difficult. As the structure rises it moves progressively inward, requiring many different floor plans and guest room layouts. These challenges were compounded by a lack of information about the building's original design. Architects had to work from an incomplete set of original plans drawn on linen and an incomplete and inaccurate set of “as-built” drawings made by a previous owner to document revisions and alterations. The team relied heavily upon the *Scimitar*, a 1930 book of interior and exterior photographs showing how the building looked shortly after completion. Their goal was to reclaim the integrity and character of the original club.¹⁸ A number of the public spaces on the lower eight floors were deemed appropriate for the restoration that included murals in the ballroom and original interior finishes.

Sometimes clubs were formed to fill one specific need and later expanded to include another.

The first Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) was organized in 1844, with the mission of offering misguided or lost young men Bible study and prayer in place of life on the streets. The focus was to save souls with saloon and street corner preaching, and the dissemination of lists of Christian boarding houses, lectures, libraries, and meeting halls. By 1866 the organizational vision expanded to include “the improvement of the physical condition of young men.”¹⁹ With this goal came the construction of permanent buildings with gymnasiums and swimming pools, along with auditoriums and bowling alleys. By the 1880s, hotel-like rooms with bathrooms down the hall, called dormitories or residences, were designed into every new YMCA; a feature that continued in YMCAs until the late 1950s. Income from rented rooms was a source of funding for YMCA activities and staff salaries.

The Wabash Avenue YMCA for African Americans opened in 1913, successfully culminating a three-year fund raising drive supported by Chicago's most prominent businesses and citizens as well as residents of the immediate community. Robert C. Berlin, architect for the project, designed the five-story concrete structure, faced with dark pressed brick and trimmed with Bedford limestone. Located within a vibrant community later referred to as “Bronzeville” or the “Black Metropolis,” the



Moulding Christian Character In Men and Boys
The Wabash Avenue Department

Young Men's Christian Association

Young men coming to Chicago, register, lodge, or find a home in our thoroughly modern, well kept and convenient dormitory. Special rates and cordial welcome to transients.

Men who know, enjoy their meals in our delightful cafeteria. Home-cooked wholesome food is served at minimum prices. Private dining room for parties.

Complete equipment in gymnasium, natatorium, game rooms, lobby, and class rooms, with a trained staff of secretaries and directors always at the service of the membership.

An attractive, scientific program of all-round activity is promoted throughout the year, varying with the seasons but constant in promoting the "More abundant life."

VISIT! JOIN! BOOST!
Address: 3753 Wabash Ave., Chicago, Ill.
Telephone: Boulevard 9540

Figure 15. YMCA advertisement, circa 1923 from Simms Blue Book (NPS file)

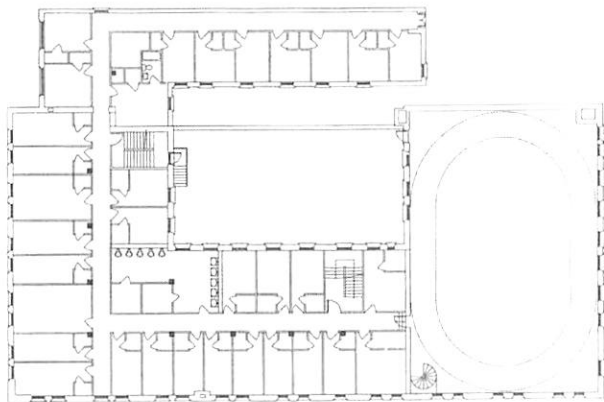


Figure 16. YMCA plan, showing historic third floor gymnasium with running track and hotel-like rooms with bathroom down the hall (NPS file)

building immediately became a hub for African American civic and social groups, and provided job training and housing for thousands who migrated from the South. The Wabash Avenue YMCA provided a wide variety of educational and social programs; its large assembly hall was used for civic meetings and functions; and the gymnasium and pool was a pleasant diversion for neighborhood residents.²⁰ In 1936, William Edouard Scott painted the mural *Mind, Body and Spirit* for the first floor meeting space, commemorating the guiding purposes of YMCA programs. A renowned early twentieth-century African American artist, he completed mural projects in a wide variety of locations around the city. In 1945, an addition was constructed on the south side of the building.

Gradually the Wabash YMCA and its programs fell on hard times. The neighborhood declined as residents and businesses moved out of the district. The construction of the Dan Ryan Expressway through Bronzeville, and the building of a newer and more modern "Y" facility nearby, contributed to the closing of the Wabash Avenue YMCA in 1969. In 1982 the empty building was sold to the nearby St. Thomas Episcopal Church.²¹

In 1992 a consortium of neighborhood churches joined to form a non-profit organization to bring the YMCA back to life. Originally known as the Wabash "Y" Renaissance Corporation, and then as The Renaissance Collaborative, the group was committed to preserving the building as well as providing much needed affordable housing for the community in the form of single room occupancy accommodations.²² Funding for the \$10.8 million rehabilitation project came from a variety of public and private funds, including federal historic preservation tax credits.

The rehabilitation work was completed in December 2000, providing 101 housing units that featured individual modern private kitchens and baths. The lobby, office spaces, pool, and ballroom with its 1936 mural were restored. The gymnasium became a multi-purpose room for basketball and other group sports, and a venue for community banquets. Other meeting rooms were converted to a small lounge, computer training room, an exercise room, and a weight room. A kitchen was added to support children's after school programs and adult functions in other parts of the building.²³ The

renewed activity in the building has engendered a sense of community and helped stabilize the neighborhood.

While the golden era of the architecturally rich athletic clubs has passed, we are fortunate to have numerous surviving examples to enjoy and appreciate. Some facilities such as the Chicago Athletic Association and the Woman's Athletic Club are still owned and operated by the original athletic clubs responsible for their construction. Others have long since closed as athletic facilities but have been sensitively adapted to new uses while retaining important vestiges of their past glory. Today we witness a renewed interest in promoting personal health through athleticism and a rebirth of sports centers and "health clubs." These new clubs continue to encourage the socializing and fellowship inherent to their predecessors, but without the private sleeping quarters and elaborate dining facilities that made Chicago's opulent clubhouses a home away from home.

This information was gathered and presented as a multi-paneled exhibit for the Preserve and Play Conference held in Chicago, Illinois, 5-7 May 2005.

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Notes

1. Chicago Athletic Association, "History of CAA," <http://www.chicagoathletic.com>.
2. Ron White, *Clubhouse Architects of the Chicago Athletic Association*, pamphlet, February 2003, August 2004, 1.
3. Jeff Carloss, "12 South Michigan Avenue," National Register of Historic Places Inventory, draft nomination form, 13 October 1983, Section 8. William Hale Thompson, later a mayor of Chicago, explained the formation of the club as follows: "At that time," he said, "I was captain of the Chicago Athletic Club football team and also chairman of the athletic committee. Here was a club that represented itself to be an athletic club, yet at one stage of its career it practically decided to go out of athletics altogether. Being interested in the athletic end of it, I did not like this prospect a little bit. Several hundred members became dissatisfied with the trend of affairs and talked about resigning. I advised them not to resign, because a lot of the members going out at that time would pretty near have broken up the club. Instead of resigning, I said, 'let's put the club back into athletics.'"
4. Ibid.
5. "Illinois Athletic Club," *The Inland Architect and News Record*, April 1908.
6. Carloss.
7. Chicago Department of Planning and Development, "Historic Michigan Boulevard District," 4 August and 6 October 1993, 56.
8. Celia Hilliard, *The Woman's Athletic Club of Chicago, 1898-1998* (East Greenwich, Rhode Island: Meridian Printing, 1999), 16-18.
9. Ibid., 12.
10. Ibid., 25.
11. Ibid., 36.
12. Ibid., 96-205.
13. Medinah Athletic Club, *The Scimitar, Official Publication of the Medinah Athletic Club* 4, no. 4, April 1930, Elmhurst, Illinois.
14. Susan Baldwin, "Hotel Intercontinental/Medinah Athletic Club," *National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form*, March 1992, 2.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. National Archives, Files of the National Park Service on the Federal Tax Incentives for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings, "Hotel Intercontinental/Medinah Athletic Club." Record center location #792753, file #78001124, accession #079-93-0002
18. Paul Glassman, "Byzantine Delight," *Inland Architect*, November/December, 1991.
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There's Room at the Top

Rooftop Recreation Resources

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Why the Rooftop?

In recent decades, the use of rooftop spaces for recreation and leisure has become a common feature of high-rise hotels, apartments, and office buildings in many American cities. Rooftop swimming pools, garden terraces, running tracks, and ball courts have enabled urban dwellers to pursue a range of outdoor activities high above the city streets. Despite the continuing use and construction of such spaces, little is known about the history and development of these recreation sites in the United States. This paper provides an introduction to the history of rooftop recreation, focusing on high-rise buildings in major cities such as New York and Washington, D.C.

The high-rise rooftop, through its depiction in the arts and popular media, has long been a place of cultural significance. The “romance of the rooftop” so often conveyed in film, literature, and music suggests that the rooftop offers more than just a sweeping view of the city. The use of the city rooftop serves as a social marker or a way to convey a particular self-image. How one uses the space tells much of one’s identity and the realities faced on the streets below. Rooftops can also provide a setting for introspection, as the seem-

ingly unending backdrop of city and sky encourages one to ponder how the individual relates to the broader world.

In his recent book, *Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies*, architect and author James Sanders explores the ways in which the social and geographical landscape of New York is represented in American films. In his chapter entitled “Lofty Perches: Penthouse, Terrace, Rooftop, and Skyscraper Nightclub,” Sanders writes:

For over a century, the insistent verticality of New York has offered more than distinctive profiles on the horizon: it has created the possibility of a remarkable array of elevated places, habitable perches high above the ground, settings for everything from flights of romance to the struggles of everyday life. From the soaring upper reaches of skyscrapers to the homely roofs of tenements, the need to make use of every inch of the dense city has encouraged the creation of an entire second plane of urban life, floating above the street . . .¹

In his analysis of various New York based films, Sanders shows how the rooftop provides a place in which one may exude a certain urban glamour and style, as with the rooftop terraces depicted in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) or *Annie Hall* (1977). This space, however, can also signify a certain



Figure 1. *Dancing on the Waldorf roof, New York, 29 March 1909 (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, George Grantham Bain Collection. LC-B22-6734-7)*

longing, a need for escape from one's present realities. This alluring aspect of the rooftop is also illustrated in the Drifter's 1963 hit song, "Up on the Roof." Consider the first verse: "When this old world starts getting me down/And people are just too much for me to face/I climb way up to the top of the stairs/And all my cares just drift right into space/On the roof, it's peaceful as can be/And there the world below can't bother me." Here, the rooftop is portrayed as a refuge, a place to be alone with one's thoughts. However, the roof need not remain a wholly solitary space, as the song concludes, "there's room enough for two up on the roof."

The image of the rooftop that is invoked in "Up on the Roof" or the above-mentioned films is representative of the various cultural meanings that have been ascribed to the rooftop during the twentieth century. As stated by Sanders, city rooftops create a "second plane of urban life," providing viable spaces in which a variety of activities may be pursued, including play and relaxation.

Early History

During the early 1900s, the creation of rooftop recreation and leisure space increased as the amount of open space decreased in major cities like New York and Chicago. Urban areas experienced rapid development and growth throughout the later half of the nineteenth century, leaving little space for local recreational activities. As the quarterly of the America City Planning Institute noted in 1929, "If sufficient spaces had been



Figure 2. *Boys playing games on the roof of a skyscraper, New York, circa 1919 (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, George Grantham Bain Collection. LC-B22-308-9)*

provided in the cumulative plans of modern cities for post-19th century requirements, the use of roofs and terraces for recreation would not need to be considered to-day."²

Some of the earliest examples of formal rooftop usage include leisure and dining venues located on many theaters and luxury hotels, such as the Garden Terrace of the Waldorf Astoria (Figure 1). The enjoyment of such spaces was of course limited to those of a certain social and economic level. Informal use of tenement rooftops was most likely more commonplace, though often illegal (Figure 2). During the early 1900s, the unmonitored use of the residential rooftop for recreation, especially by children, was seen as both



Figure 3. *Immigrant children learning to play on the roof garden of the Washington School, Boston, 1915 (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, National Child Labor Committee Collection. LC-H5-946)*

dangerous and a nuisance to building managers and tenants. These concerns, along with the growing public interest in child welfare and labor reform, contributed to the large number of formalized children's playgrounds built atop schools, hospitals, settlement houses, and neighborhood associations during the early decades of the twentieth century. Typically enclosed by cage fencing, these sites enabled children to play safely in the open air while under the watchful eye of adults (Figure 3).

The use of rooftop spaces for activities such as children's playtime was part of a much larger trend in rooftop activity during the early 1900s. A *New York Times* article from 10 March 1929, discussed how individuals from all walks of life used city rooftops for sundry activities. Entitled "New York Roofs Hold a Life of Their Own," the article explored various sites throughout the city: penthouse terraces, pigeon cotes in Chinatown, open air theaters, solariums, Times Square roof gardens, even bathing facilities atop a settlement house (15 cents for a 25-minute bath, complete with towel and soap). Confirming the wide range of rooftop activities found throughout the city, the article concludes, "A tour of the roofs of Manhattan . . . is a pilgrimage in a strange and airy land that brings the voyager to unexpected discoveries."³

Miniature Golf

Among the more distinctive "unexpected discoveries" were the miniature golf courses that proliferated on city rooftops. Miniature golf enjoyed widespread popularity in America during the later half of the 1920s and into the 1930s—it was a relatively inexpensive game that anyone could play, and did not require membership to an exclusive team or club. Originally termed "garden golf," the game was first played with a putter on real grass courses. The invention of a surface made from hard-pressed cottonseed hulls in 1926 allowed players to set up imitation grass courses just about anywhere, including the rooftops of Manhattan.⁴

Some of the earliest rooftop courses were located in New York City's financial district, as early promoters hoped to attract frazzled businessmen on their lunch breaks.⁵ As the business scheme proved successful, rooftop courses soon became a popular feature at luxury hotels. By 1930, there were over 150 rooftop courses in New York City



Figure 4. *The High-Ho Golf Club, circa 1928, the Stevens Hotel, now the Hilton Chicago (Hilton Chicago)*

alone.⁶ In Chicago, one of the more famous rooftop courses was constructed atop the Stevens Hotel on South Michigan Avenue (now the Hilton Chicago). Built in 1927, the twenty-eight-story hotel provided a variety of recreation, leisure, and entertainment venues, including a 1,200 seat theater, a five lane bowling alley, two rooftop gardens, a concert music library, a recreation room, a children's "Fairyland" playroom, and an indoor ice rink.⁷ The rooftop High Ho Miniature Golf Course was a particularly unique attraction, and was featured in a booklet of postcards published by the hotel in the late 1920s (Figure 4). A newspaper ad issued by the Stevens in 1930 proclaimed the course to be "one of the most interesting real turf outdoor putting courses in the country," with games being offered daily from 9:30 a.m. to after midnight.⁸

Radio City Music Hall

The famed "sports garden" at Radio City Music Hall was among the more ambitious urban rooftop recreation projects in the years before World War II. On 3 July 1934, the Publicity Office of Radio City Theatres at Rockefeller Center issued a press release announcing the opening of a rooftop playground for Radio City's 600 employees—everyone from the service staff and ushers to the dancers, musicians, and executive officers. The press release stated, "Up on the huge roof of the Radio City Music Hall—high above the flies of the stage and the heat of the street—tennis courts, handball, volleyball and shuffleboard equipment have been installed. Gay blue-and-orange deck



Figure 5. The Seville, located at 1401 N Street, NW, in Washington, D.C. Completed in 1965, the Seville is one of over a dozen apartment buildings with rooftop pools constructed in midtown Washington during the early 1960s. (L. Van Damme)

chairs and red and white awnings have been placed, making the sun-soaked spot one of the most colorful in town.”⁹

In an effort to further distance the space from its urban locale, Radio City’s rooftop playground was covered with over 22,000 square feet of cork turf, painted green to resemble grass. Along the 50th and 51st Street sides, the playground was framed with dwarf Japanese yews, pink and white flowering hawthorn, and cherry and cork bark trees. The building’s parapets were masked with eight foot tall ivy plants.¹⁰

The sports garden was part of a collection of rooftop gardens at Rockefeller Center that included the twelve Gardens of the Nations of the RCA Building, the formal gardens on the roofs of the British Empire Building and La Maison Francaise, and the landscaped rooftops of the Italian and International Buildings.¹¹ Many of these rooftop gardens are still in existence today. Though inaccessible to the public, they “give office workers in nearby skyscrapers bird’s-eye views of hedges, wildflowers, fountains, lawns, reflecting pools, ivy-laden arches and brick patios.”¹² Radio City’s sports garden, with its views of doormen playing handball and sunbathing Rockettes, was permanently closed during the 1970s, due to increased complaints from neighboring offices.



Figure 6. The rooftop pool of the Seville is still used today. The pool’s original tile remains, as does the surrounding wood fencing. The roof was replaced in the late 1990s, during which the pool deck was repaved. (L. Van Damme)

The Rise of the Rooftop Swimming Pool

In the years since World War II, the major trend in high-rise rooftop recreation has centered upon the swimming pool. While a small number of rooftop swimming pools were constructed prior to the postwar era, the most significant period of development for rooftop pools occurred during the 1960s with the high-rise construction boom in cities like New York and Washington, D.C.¹³ The increased use of aluminum and steel in pool manufacturing also contributed to the growing number of rooftop swimming pools.

The first rooftop swimming pool in New York was installed in 1961, at the newly constructed Gracie Towers, a twenty story co-op located near the mayor’s residence on the city’s East Side.¹⁴ As the decade progressed, more pools began appearing atop new high-rise apartment buildings across the city. The trend eventually gained the attention of the *New York Times*, which published a feature article during the summer of 1966, stating, “For some New Yorkers over the weekend, a trip to the ‘beach’ was no more than an elevator ride.”¹⁵

The rooftop “beach” was also made available to guests at many of the city’s new motor lodges as well. During the early to mid-1960s, almost a dozen motels were built in Manhattan alone, including

the Sheraton Motor Inn, the City Squire Motor Inn, the Holiday Inn, Loews Midtown Motor Inn, and the Lincoln Square Motor Inn, all of which had rooftop swimming pools. Many of the motels offered specials for neighborhood residents to use the rooftop pools. The Sheraton Motor Inn, for example, offered a day rate from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., “complete with room service and pool privileges.”¹⁶

The postwar high-rise housing boom in Washington, D.C. also included construction of rooftop swimming pools. A key player in advancing this trend was Abe Pollin, a Washington-based developer (and present-day owner of the city’s MCI Center). In 1965, the *Washington Post* called Pollin a “trail-blazer” as he “pioneered the development of intown apartment building with top-deck pools.”¹⁷ One of Pollin’s apartment buildings, the James, was the first high-rise in Washington to have a rooftop pool. Located in a previously overlooked area in midtown Washington, the James was opened in 1961. By 1965, the neighborhood surrounding the

James—approximately two blocks north and east of Thomas Circle—included twelve new high-rise apartment buildings, all of which had rooftop swimming pools. Most of the apartment buildings survive today, many with their original rooftop pools. The Seville, located on the corner of 14th and N Streets, NW, was constructed in 1965 and was featured in the *Washington Post*’s article on the midtown apartment boom (Figure 5). The Seville’s original rooftop pool continues to be used in present day (Figure 6).

In addition to rooftop pools, midtown Washington’s new apartment buildings offered residents a variety of amenities intended to enhance daily life. In its report on Abe Pollin and the midtown apartment boom, the *Washington Post* provided a list of almost twenty new standard features, including party rooms, gymnasiums, dishwashers, “eye-catching lobbies,” laundry rooms, valet service, and “even heat in some of the pools.”¹⁸ The *Post* also described the new residents:



Figure 7. An illustration of the changing skyline of midtown Washington, D.C. A new high-rise condominium and its rooftop terrace now overshadow the rooftop swimming pool of a 1960s apartment building. (L. Van Damme)

“All the buildings cater to adults. There are many bachelor and bachelor girls among the residents east of 15th. Many of them have jobs in downtown offices and they walk to work.”¹⁹ Given the changing socioeconomic conditions of the mid-1960s, with more young adults delaying marriage and opting to find jobs after high school or college graduation, the new high-rise apartment building, with its rooftop pool and other amenities, no doubt offered residents a unique environment in which to meet others.²⁰

The addition of rooftop pools to the newly constructed motels and apartment buildings in New York and Washington, D.C. indicate a change in attitudes toward travel, leisure, and urban living during the 1960s. With more American families vacationing via the automobile, the city motel—with its more affordable prices, available parking, and a swimming pool for the kids—helped increase tourism in major cities. Rooftop swimming pools atop high-rise apartment buildings illustrate the changing demographic and expectations of the city’s tenant population. The apartment building no longer served only as a place in which to hang one’s hat, so to speak. By the mid-1960s, high-rise apartment living—with its rooftop pools and gymnasiums and air conditioning—had evolved into a *lifestyle* for many middle and upper income residents. As the president of the Consulting Engineers Council of Metropolitan Washington noted in 1966, “Years ago, apartment buildings were simply a basic answer to the housing problem, providing four walls and a roof, and little else. Today, we must create and maintain buildings with year-round comfort requirements and other features that contribute to a high degree of livability.”²¹

Conclusion

For over a century, high-rise rooftops have provided space for play and relaxation. These spaces deserve closer examination, exploring their cultural and social significance when the meaning of city life was being redefined. During the first half of the twentieth century, rooftops provided recreation space as open lots in the city disappeared beneath constant and increasingly dense new development. Both socialites and tenement dwellers imbued rooftops with cultural meaning as they sought alternatives to the congestion of the streets below.

In the decades immediately following World War II, high-rise rooftops continued to serve as an alternative space for outdoor activities, but they also represented the changing tastes of middle-class Americans. The rooftop swimming pool, in particular, came to signify both the benefits of expendable income and a presumably affordable “luxury” lifestyle. No longer a far reaching trend, as accounted by the *New York Times* in 1929, or a unique attraction like Radio City’s Sports Garden, rooftop recreation was predominantly regarded as an indication of economic achievement. Throughout the 1960s, city newspapers focused heavily on the growing demand for rooftop pools atop apartment and condominium high-rises, but such accounts failed to place this development within the broader context of the urban housing market. No effort was made to compare this new “high degree of livability” to the housing options of those outside the upper or middle-class income bracket.

Today, rooftop amenities continue to serve as a social marker much like they did in the 1960s. Terraces and swimming pools have again become a common feature of new high-rise condominiums in redeveloped downtown areas. Consequently, the use of the rooftop for play or leisure is mistakenly viewed as a relatively new aspect of luxury city living. This lack of awareness about the history of rooftop recreation undermines efforts to recognize and preserve historic sites. This need not be the case, however, as illustrated by a recent photo taken from the rooftop of the previously mentioned Seville apartment building in Washington (Figure 7). In the foreground stands the rooftop of the Aristocrat, an apartment building completed around the same time as the Seville in the mid-1960s. The Aristocrat has since been converted into condominiums, but has retained its original aluminum rooftop swimming pool. Today, the pool is in the shadow of a newly constructed condominium building that includes a rooftop terrace. This view offers a striking juxtaposition of the past and the present, with both sites demonstrating that indeed there is room, and so much more, at the top.

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Notes

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3. "New York Roofs Hold a life of Their Own," *New York Times*, 10 March 1929.
4. Constance Bond, "We couldn't stop playing to save our soles," *Smithsonian*, June 1987, 120-123.
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7. Robert V. Allegrini and Geraldine Hempel Davis, *Chicago's Grand Hotel: A History of the Hilton Chicago* (The Hilton Chicago, 2002).
8. Display Ad 12, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 24 August 1930.
9. Radio City Theatres, Rockefeller Center, New York, "Great Theatre's Rooftops to be Turned into Summer Playland—for Performers," news release, 3 July 1934.
10. Garden of the Nations, Rockefeller Center, news release, 26 June 1937.
11. Ibid.
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14. "Swimming Pools Built on Roofs of Tall Motor Hotels in the City," *New York Times*, 25 August 1963.
15. "Stay-at-Home Swimming is Popular," *New York Times*, 5 July 1966.
16. "How to Keep Cool in the City: Swim or Skate on the Rooftop," *New York Times*, 8 August 1970.
17. John B. Willmann, "Ignored Central Neighborhood Revived by Apartment Boom," *Washington Post*, 7 August 1965.
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20. This new world of young, unmarried working adults in the city piqued the interest of the *New York Times* as well. In the 6 February 1966 edition of the *New York Times Magazine*, Harry F. Waters explores the realities of being a single working girl in his article, "The Disenchanted: Girls in the City." The article makes note of the ways in which the rooftop swimming pool has glamorized the "focal point of urban nesting"—the high-rise apartment building.
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The Mid-South Coliseum

How Race and Music Shaped an Entertainment Institution in Memphis

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In 2000, the Mid-South Coliseum, located on the city fairgrounds in Memphis, Tennessee, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. As the city's first domed auditorium, its architecture was compelling, but when assessing the property's significance the National Register nomination emphasized race and cultural history rather than aesthetics. Developed and constructed between 1960 and 1964, the Mid-South Coliseum was the first public auditorium in Memphis to be planned as an integrated facility. It is the only extant building in Memphis where such significant musical groups as the Beatles, the Stax-Volt Record Revue, Ike and Tina Turner, the Who, Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones, James Brown, and Elvis Presley performed. As such, the coliseum served as a center for cultural expression among Memphis youth, both white and black (Figure 1).

Building a Modern, Integrated Coliseum in an Era of Racial Conflict

Planning for a new, modern auditorium for the Mid-South Fairgrounds in Memphis began in late 1959. *Brown v. Board of Education* had been decided five years earlier, but Memphis, like most other major southern cities, had effected only token compliance with the legal decision meant to end Jim Crow segregation. And change did not

appear to be even remotely possible in the near future.¹ Over the last three years, racial tensions in Memphis had increased, in part because of the regional and national debate over public school integration and in greater part due to the first stirrings of residential integration.² Whites filed injunctions in the courts, walked picket lines, and had African American integrationists arrested for patently absurd charges.³ Explained an anti-integration spokesperson: "We don't have to put up with this sort of thing in our neighborhood."⁴

The fight over residential integration spilled into the 1958 mayor's race, which was won by City Commissioner Henry Loeb, a staunch segregationist.⁵ Though white political leaders were hard-line segregationists in words, a group of business and civic leaders believed that the "time had come" and that integration was occurring, and would continue to occur, in Memphis. As they saw it, the challenge was to manage this change so it would not disrupt the city.⁶ It was within this political and racial context that the pivotal decision to build a new city auditorium took place in 1959 and 1960.

The Mid-South Fair and Exposition Board, in consultation with city and county officials and with the endorsement of Mayor Loeb, Shelby County Commission Chairman David Harsh, and Tennes-



Figure 1. Postcard view of Mid-South Coliseum, 1960s
(Author's collection)

see Governor Buford Ellington (all three were strong segregationists), chose in the fall of 1959 to develop a new comprehensive plan for the Mid-South Fairgrounds and its various facilities and buildings. The county fair had been suffering from declining interest and attendance, attributed in part to its dated facilities and the increasing urban and suburban population of Memphis and Shelby County, which had little interest in such events.

In December 1959 the chosen consulting firm, Vandeburg-Linkletter Associates, Inc., of New York City began work with the design assistance of Ayres Houghtelling. Six months later, the firm presented its master plan, the centerpiece of which was a modern, multi-purpose indoor arena capable of hosting programs, concerts, and conventions. The planners called for "a 'blue chip' facility provided by the City of Memphis and of sufficient importance to set the architectural pattern and quality of all other new structures and facilities planned for the grounds."⁷

Nowhere in the description of the coliseum did the consultants discuss the need for segregated or separate facilities for blacks and whites. Rather the burning public question of segregation versus integration was treated in a tangential manner, with scattered references. The report, thus, is a classic text of "quiet desegregation" at work. The master plan was more specific on how the coliseum could serve Memphis as a modern community recreational point, as an exhibit facility, and as a paid entertainment facility.

Why was the concept of separate but equal missing from the plan? First, there was the precedent of downtown's Ellis Auditorium, a 1920s hall that had

in the past hosted both white and black concerts and programs; these were segregated events but both races did use the building. The continuation of that tradition is obviously what the planners wanted for the renovated and expanded fairgrounds facilities. The fairgrounds area had long served both white and black residents, although in a segregated fashion. Thus, the idea that the fairgrounds were shared space could neither be viewed as a "sellout" to integrationists nor as a new "precedent" opening up the segregated city. On the other hand, planners were acknowledging recent legal developments in regards to public segregation in Memphis and the influence of those events should be considered.

While there were strident cries across the South for defending segregation, no matter the cost, the wording of the new fairgrounds and coliseum plan was race neutral. Part of the credit goes to Vandeburg-Linkletter for not pandering to southern custom by including the concept of segregation in the master plan. Part of the credit must also go to city and county officials for not using the fairgrounds as a new battleground for the alleged virtues of a segregated South. But most importantly, credit lies with African-American groups who pushed legal efforts through federal courts to open up the city's recreational facilities, creating a legal environment where ignoring the mounting precedents in favor of recreational integration would have been foolhardy.

Designing the Coliseum

The court battles raged from 1961 to 1963, as the architects for the coliseum continued their work. In March 1961, city and county officials announced that Merrill G. Ehrman, a partner in the firm of Furbinger and Ehrman, would be the lead architect of the project. Ehrman, in turn, worked in association with Robert Lee Hall & Associates, a firm with prior experience in coliseum design. The design team planned the project by what was then called "a unique scheduling system":

... the "critical path" method was utilized, in which the building schedule was programmed on a data processing machine. When the system was ready for operation, each step in construction was printed on a separate line along with a schedule of dates. Included were the earliest feasible and latest possible

dates for beginning and ending each operation in order to keep the entire construction program on schedule.

The intricate planning and design work meant that it was two years before city and county officials conducted a groundbreaking ceremony at the fairgrounds. When construction of the facility began on 15 April 1963, the prevalent court ruling was that Memphis would have ten years—until 1971—to desegregate all of its public facilities.⁸ Indeed, immediately following the Supreme Court's 1963 decision in *Watson v. City of Memphis* striking down the city's strategy of gradual desegregation, city park officials ordered that all Memphis recreational facilities be desegregated, except for seventeen parks on the grounds, or adjacent to, still segregated white schools and the city-owned swimming pools. But the Supreme Court decision eliminated the possibility that recreational programs and entertainment events at the new coliseum would somehow be divided into segregated audiences. For the last year of construction and planning for the Mid-South Coliseum, the board knew that the facility would be an integrated space where audiences of white and black Memphians mixed as had rarely occurred before.

The Coliseum as Cultural Common Ground

The first two events at the coliseum showed how, without fanfare, it was opened as a race neutral facility. The first program in late October 1964 was the Ringling Brothers Circus, which attracted a broad audience. The next program, and the first stage show, was the Goodwill Revue, sponsored by Memphis radio station WDIA, which holds a significant place in the history of popular music in the South. WDIA was the first southern radio station to adopt an all African-American format, having done so in 1948. WDIA's success led to radio stations across the country adopting black news and entertainment formats.⁹ Notable artists that performed at the Goodwill Revue included Brook Benton, Dee Clark, Johnny Nash, the Marvelettes, and Rufus and Carla Thomas. Otis Redding also sang, but he was then an almost unknown talent to many in the audience. The WDIA concert was the first sellout, and its estimated attendance of between 12,600 and 13,500—with some newspapers noting that whites attended with blacks—held a Memphis attendance record for a single concert event for many years.¹⁰

The evolution of the coliseum as the most significant concert venue in Memphis during the late 1960s and early 1970s slowly gained momentum over the next eighteen months. The Dave Clark Five, the first of the British Invasion bands to play in Tennessee, performed at the coliseum in December 1964. Local journalists timed the performance at twenty-three minutes in length, and these critics had no difficulty understanding the teen audience's screaming and swooning—after all they had seen it before with Elvis Presley—but they had difficulty with the sound and music that would slowly become part and parcel of arena rock concerts. One journalist asked his readers to “imagine standing in front of the stage—the loud twang-twang of electric guitars assaulting your right ear while 8,000 screaming youngsters screeched uncontrollably on my left side for thirty minutes.”¹¹

Memphis between 1962 and 1965 was the cultural birthplace of modern soul music that would take white American and European audiences by storm in 1967 and 1968. The Motown sound of Detroit was a carefully controlled and choreographed music aimed for a white audience. Much of the music coming out of Memphis was the opposite, and is often designated as such by being called “Memphis Soul.” Until the coliseum, the concert scene in Memphis was segregated by custom, if not by law, in tiny venues downtown and in West Memphis, Arkansas, with the occasional large concert at the Ellis Auditorium. Radio, however, was the great mixer and beginning in 1960, the Stax Records studio and record store became the place where the new Memphis Soul sound would emerge. As Brian Ward argues in his new history of the ties between Memphis Soul music and the Civil Rights Movement, the sounds from Memphis and the mixed audiences they attracted created an important public arena that enhanced racial identity and civil rights consciousness. The one place in Memphis that attracted the best groups and the largest audiences was the Mid-South Coliseum. When such magnetic artists as Otis Redding chanted, “A Change is Gonna Come” in 1966 and 1967, those in attendance knew he was singing to both present circumstances and the immediate past in Memphis.¹²

In the spring and summer of 1965, the Mid-South Coliseum became the concert performance center for Memphis Soul music, as the city's various African-American radio stations and record

companies put together different revues to showcase their artists and most recent recordings. “The Swingin’ Spectacular,” in May 1965 featured the Impressions, Jerry Butler, the Drifters, Joe Tex (his first major Memphis show), Major Lance, and Gene Chandler. Later in the summer two concerts included Stevie Wonder, Percy Sledge, Joe Tex, Rufus Thomas, Muddy Waters, Staple Singers, Homer Banks, and the Marvelettes. Along with the two concerts came the opening of the nearby fairgrounds swimming pool as the first public pool to be integrated in Memphis since the Supreme Court’s decision in *Watson v. City of Memphis* (1963). These events signaled the beginning of a new era for Memphis public recreational facilities—the color line had not only been crossed; it was erased, as far as the Mid-South Fairgrounds was concerned.¹³

The Beatles in the Land of Elvis

The variety of rock and roll groups that passed through Memphis that summer and fall set the stage for the 1966 arrival of the Beatles to Mid-South Coliseum. Shortly before their American tour began, Beatles singer John Lennon found himself in the middle of the greatest controversy the band had ever faced, when a small American fan magazine published, out of context, comments Lennon had made comparing the popularity of the group to Jesus Christ.¹⁴ The Lennon controversy became one way of expressing disgust with the new youth culture and its most public vehicle of expression, rock-n-roll music. Bonfires of Beatles records took place in Memphis on 5 August 1966. Over the next three days, Mayor William B. Ingram and city commissioners Pete Sisson, Claude A. Armour, and James W. Moore called for the cancellation of the concert.¹⁵

Despite the protests, the show went on (Figure 2). A group of Ku Klux Klan members in full regalia protested outside the coliseum and encouraged people to burn whatever Beatles items they had. As Thomas BeVier commented in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, “the sheets and hoods lent an incongruous touch to the stream of bell-bottomed trousers, paisley shirts, and high heeled boots worn by the Beatles’ faithful who filed by.” But to the Beatles and their entourage, the presence of Klan members in full regalia was much more than an “incongruous touch”—it was threatening. In 1966, few people with access to television had not seen the Klan’s outrages over the prior years and

understood the KKK’s capabilities. Although the Beatles never again wanted to play in Memphis, they continued to admire what they saw as the city’s most important music, Memphis Soul.¹⁶

The twice-yearly revues produced by WDIA at the coliseum continued to feature Stax stars in sellout performances (the November 1965 WDIA revue attracted the largest crowd for a coliseum concert).

After a wildly successful overseas tour, the Stax-Volt Revue returned to the Mid-South Coliseum on 29 July 1967 in a show by Otis Redding, Percy Sledge, and Arthur Conley. This concert came a month after the rousing reception given to Redding, Booker T. and the MGs, and the Mar-Keys at the Monterey Pop Festival, when the broader American rock scene encountered the Stax sound for the first time. Unfortunately, the day after a big WDIA revue on 9 December 1967—a concert featuring Sam and Dave, Bobby Bland, Muddy Waters, and Rufus and Carla Thomas—Otis Redding died when his plane crashed outside of Madison, Wisconsin. The accident also took the lives of most of the members of the Bar-Kays.¹⁷

Redding’s death was the first in a series of events to change the social context of the Memphis music scene. In February 1968, African Americans who worked for the city sanitation department went on strike to protest the unsafe working conditions, deplorable wages, and segregated operations. Thus began a six-week period of increasing racial conflict and turmoil, topped by a late March demonstration on city streets led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A week later, on 4 April 1968, a gunman assassinated Dr. King at the Lorraine Motel. When protest riots erupted, the city



Figure 2. The Beatles at Mid-South Coliseum, August 1966 (Mid-South Coliseum)

imposed a tight curfew and called in the National Guard. As race relations reached a new low, the show continued at the Mid-South Coliseum, but ironically those months did not witness the mix of white and black events so common in 1965–1966.

From 1968 to 1974, the Mid-South Coliseum became a must stop on every tour by the most influential performers, including repeated visits by James Brown, Led Zeppelin, Ike and Tina Turner, the Who, Elton John, Stevie Wonder, Bob Dylan and the Band, and, at last, Elvis Presley. These concerts, with their high stages, huge public address systems, and intricate lighting were a far cry from the early rock shows, where a small stage and a few guitar amps separated the performers from their adoring fans. It was an era of Big Rock, with loud, ear-splitting sound, long music sets, and increasingly theatrical performances, what historian Martha Bayles calls the “visual effect” of modern rock.¹⁸

Memphis was slow to end the vestiges of Jim Crow. In 1968, four years after the coliseum’s opening, there were no African Americans on the board of the Chamber of Commerce, the Future Memphis, Inc., local bank boards, the school board, or Rotary clubs. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in the city that spring and the National Guard occupied black neighborhoods. During some of the worst years of violence in the Civil

Rights Movement, the Mid-South Coliseum evolved into a cultural common ground for the various strands in American popular music that came to define a distinctive, significant era in American history. The Mid-South Coliseum is the only place in Memphis where one may step inside the arena and see where the internationally renowned performers of American soul music once danced and sang to thousands of fans. Black and white teenagers swayed together to the sounds of Stax, James Brown, and many others at the Mid-South Coliseum. In this southern city, that truth made this building an extraordinary place of its time. It is a Memphis monument to an era of creativity, hope, and achievement (Figure 3).

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Figure 3. Mid-South Coliseum, Memphis (C.V. West)

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The Federal Art Project in Chicago

The Politics of Art

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The New Deal and its variety of programs was a response to a deepening economic depression characterized by unemployment, insolvency, and desperation. There was little time for leisure by the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president in 1933. Yet his approach to economic restoration through individual activity led by government would lead to an enormous increase in recreation sites and opportunities from coast to coast. Many of these facilities were enhanced by new works of public art.

Thus began President Roosevelt's well-known "alphabet soup" of new federal agencies and laws: Agricultural Adjustment Act, Civilian Conservation Corps, Civil Works Administration, Public Works Administration, and Works Progress Administration, to name a few.¹ Seen together they were an effort to revitalize the economy, remake the government, uplift the spirit of Americans, and improve America's physical infrastructure, as well as its arts and culture. While the goals of these programs were not universally achieved, they did boost national attitudes and provided a genesis of hope during a bleak period of our history. It is interesting that during FDR's earlier term as governor of New York, he implemented a government funded art program as a way of stimulating

economic recovery and stimulation, albeit on a much smaller scale. He drew on this experience when creating the New Deal art programs.

There were four major art programs in the New Deal. Each program had different goals and different artistic levels of performance. The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was established in December 1933 and continued under the directorship of Edward Bruce until June 1934. The primary goal of PWAP was to furnish work for unemployed artists by decorating public buildings and parks. Artists were selected on the basis of their need for employment plus their professional ability. Bruce made sure that only the finest artists made his program roster.

Bruce also directed the Section of Painting and Sculpture (Section), which operated from 1934 to 1943. The Section was established to decorate new federal buildings with work of the highest quality. In contrast to PWAP and other New Deal art programs, this was not primarily a relief program. Artists were selected to work for the Section through regional and national competitions.

Between July 1935 and June 1939 the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), directed by Olin Dows (later by Cecil Jones), commissioned art from unem-



Figure 1. From "New Deal Alphabet Agencies," David C. Hansen, Virginia Western Community College

ployed artists to decorate older federal buildings. Because it was a relief program, 90 percent (later 75 percent) of the artists in TRAP had to come from the relief rolls. The quality of artist was on a par with the Federal Art Project.

The Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (FAP, also known as Project One, and in later years, the Works Project Administration Arts Program) operated between 1935 and 1943 under the direction of Holger Cahill. The primary mission of the FAP was to provide jobs for unemployed artists. Work done by WPA artists was available for allocation to tax-supported and partially tax-supported institutions. Each state had its own director and administrative staff. This was a relief program and 90 percent (later 75 percent) of the artists had to come from the relief rolls. On a national level, the Federal Art Project funded the creation of 2,566 murals, 108,099 easel paintings, 17,744 sculptures, and 350,000 fine prints (from 11,285 original designs), all at a cost of \$35 million.²

In Illinois the Federal Art Project employed over 700 artists, producing a total of 316 murals, 563 sculptures, 4,923 easel paintings, 750,362 posters, graphs, and charts, and 47 dioramas.³ Given that American society has always depended on and sustained the influx of immigrants, dioramas were important as a way to convey the story of history without depending on the viewer's comprehension of the English language as well as a way to appeal to children.

Working on the national Federal Art Project, artists were expected to work a minimum of 120 hours per month and produce a specific number of artworks in that period. There were different grades of artists, a categorization that was flexible and subject to change depending on the FAP administration. Artists at the top level were paid \$87.60 to \$94.90 per month. On 9 July 1935, this salary was raised to \$103.40 per month.⁴ Because there was a requirement that most of the artists employed under the WPA be on relief, artists in Illinois were required to take a Pauper's Oath, swearing that they were without financial resources. Some artists refused to work for the WPA simply because of the humiliation of such an oath. There was also a requirement that family members could not be simultaneously employed. As a result married couples such as Gustaf Dalstrom and Frances Foy, Frances Strain and her husband Fred Biesel (later Illinois State Director of the FAP), or twin brothers such as Ivan and Marvin Albright (Zsissily) would alternate being on the payroll every 2-1/2 months yet continue working on WPA art projects, thereby reducing their artist's salary in half. For many artists, being able to continue in their profession and have artistic materials provided as part of their payment (some of which they were allowed to use for their private projects) gave them a sense of pride and hope that sustained them during the Great Depression.

In order to qualify for a mural, an organization had to be supported at least in part by tax dollars. This meant that most hospitals, libraries, city municipal buildings, and other public facilities were eligible. They were called cooperating sponsors and were required to supply or pay for materials and shipping. Once the sponsor had applied for a "permanent loan" of a work of art, the supervisor of the Mural Unit and the sponsor would agree on a "suitable" subject. Final approval always rested with the sponsor. The artist would create a preliminary sketch, which, once accepted by the sponsor and the local mural supervisor, was sent to the national offices of the WPA in Washington, D.C., for final approval.

The content of these murals was often guided into "safe" subject material. The government strongly preferred representational subjects over abstract ones. However quite a few were approved that were abstract; Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Ilya Bolotowsky were early WPA

artists whose work showed foreshadowing of their future styles. Nonetheless, it was understood that the subject must appeal to the client (i.e., sponsoring organization). Edward Bruce, head of the Section, was quoted as saying,

Forget about Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci and the like. Just design something that will make the local people proud of their community—and it will make them proud of themselves.⁵

Some state directors, such as the Illinois director, Mrs. Increase Robinson, took this directive to a new level. She was quoted as saying “artists of a controversial disposition would not be retained on the Project.” Her aggressive control of content led to Robinson’s famous quote:

No nudes, no dives, no social propaganda . . . Nudes are not acceptable for public buildings. In the congressional library at Washington they may be, but our paintings are to be used in Illinois. There’s a difference, isn’t there.⁶

The irony is that the Federal Art Project provided paid models to top level artists. These models were allowed to pose nude for the artist, but the paintings produced by these nude sessions were not exhibited publicly.⁷ The artists themselves often preferred uplifting themes. Donald Vogel, an Illinois WPA artist, stated:

However depressed times were, I was determined to paint pleasant happy pictures. I felt a great need to paint pictures that made people feel a bit better, and perhaps even smile from having seen them.⁸

There were three Illinois Federal Art Project (IAP) directors: Increase Robinson, 1935–1938, George Thorpe, 1938–1941, and Fred Biesel, 1941–1943. All three had a unique impact on the development of New Deal art in Illinois.

Increase Robinson was born Josephine Dorothea Reichmann on 2 April 1885 in Chicago to upper middle class parents. She came from an artistic family and was a member of the Chicago Art Club and the Chicago Society of Arts. Prior to the WPA, Robinson worked as a painter, teacher, lecturer, and gallery owner (Diana Court). During her tenure as the Illinois state director of the Federal Art Project, the Chicago Artists Union (CAU) strongly disapproved of Robinson’s treatment of FAP artists as well as her anti-union stance. In

October 1936, the Chicago Artists Union brought charges against Robinson which led to the first of several investigations conducted by Holger Cahill’s office of her labor practices.⁹ The CAU organized an Artists’ Sit-down Strike at the WPA Illinois Headquarters in Chicago from 12 to 19 December 1936.¹⁰ The strike ended due more to Chicago’s cold winter weather rather than any labor concessions from Mrs. Robinson.

Personality, politics, and culture all contribute to the implementation of public policy. It is no surprise that a person of such strong tastes and attitudes as Increase Robinson clashed with the Chicago Park District (CPD) over the issue of mural and art production. In addition to the four national New Deal art programs operating in Illinois during the Depression, there were also locally sponsored art projects that received federal monies but were not under the usual FAP supervision of Holger Cahill. These included art projects sponsored by the Chicago Park District, the Chicago Board of Education, and the Jane Addams Hull House Program. All of these local projects had WPA financial support but each was independent of the others. The director of the Illinois Federal Art Project reported to Holger Cahill in Washington, D.C. The local city programs reported directly to District WPA Director H.K. Seltzer.¹¹

The result was an imbalance of power with vigorous competition for federal dollars and control. In a bold political play, Robinson tried to usurp the local Chicago Park District art program and its WPA funds. Robinson wrote passionate letters to Cahill stating that the Chicago Park Board was absorbing all the qualified artists in Chicago, artists she desperately needed due to the lack of qualified artists on relief in Chicago. She petitioned to be put in charge of assigning all artists in the IAP and the CPD. Cahill countered her petition to be put in charge of the Chicago Park Board artists by increasing her quota of non-relief artists, thereby freeing her from the constraint of poverty as a qualification for her artists. Robinson responded by saying that whether on relief or not, there simply weren’t enough good artists in Illinois to allow the Chicago Park Board to hire artists.

Mitchell Siporin, the great mural artist who was working for the Chicago Park District after being rejected by Robinson as an artist for the WPA/FAP

program, wanted to transfer to the FAP and wrote to Cahill asking for his help in getting reassigned. Robinson had refused to try and negotiate the transfer of individual artists such as Siporin, preferring to be put in charge of supervising the park district art projects. The Chicago Artists Union sprang into action, led by its president, Sidney Loeb, who wrote to Cahill the following:

As to the artist painting doors for the park district, there are at least two artists in this classification that I know of. Why one of them, a man able to execute murals ranking with the best in the State and employed painting 'Ladies' and 'Gents' on Mondays and Wednesdays is not a matter that an interested local art administration does not see fit to interfere with, can be answered by saying that an administration that believes Illinois to be fearful of nudes certainly must consider the decoration of toilets to be one of the fine arts.¹²

In his letter, Loeb was referring to Siporin and Robinson, the IAP administrator at the time. Cahill finally intervened and negotiated the reassignment of certain park board artists to the FAP and Robinson without curtailing the Chicago Park Board art projects.¹³

There is no doubt that as a public servant, Robinson was a study in fascinating contradictions. Robinson was finally removed as state director in March 1938 due mostly to scandals and increased political pressure from the Chicago Artists Union.

During the years of the Federal Art Project, the Art Institute and the Chicago Park District worked together to bring fine art into the lives of the common citizen. At the preview for an exhibit of old Masters of American art, Robert Dunham, president of the consolidated park system, stated:

To enrich the lives of the people—that's our job, and we feel that one way to do that is to make its treasures more easily and less expensively accessible to citizens dwelling remote from the loop.¹⁴

The funneling of federal monies into the hands of local organizations such as the Chicago Park District was a quick and effective way to increase the public's involvement in the FAP. Certainly the number of people using Chicago's parks justified such a policy. In 1935, total yearly attendance at Chicago Park District facilities and events was estimated at 48.5 million, which included almost 400,000 attendees of the arts and crafts classes

funded in part by the WPA.¹⁵ Also in 1935, the WPA approved funds for theatrical programs in the Chicago parks and field houses, as well as the development of recreational leisure time service to supplement the ongoing recreation work being done in the park.¹⁶

Not only did public exposure to art and art related activities increase, but jobs were created. In 1938, the WPA funded \$4,058,278, matched by \$1,359,622 paid by the Chicago parks. This funding provided for 5,236 jobs.¹⁷

While the public was extremely supportive of the WPA activities in the Chicago Park District, the media kept a suspicious and critical eye on the programs. An article published in the *Chicago Tribune* in November 1935 stated, "A park recreational program for Chicago with a government outlay of \$4,000,000 to cover practically every form of boondoggling has cleared the red tape hurdles of the Federal Works Progress Administration, it was learned today."¹⁸ A few months later, another article entitled "Better Homes for Guppies One of WPA's Goals," expressed dissatisfaction with the funding of park programs:

The teaching of aquarium building in the myriad hobbies and art classes in Chicago parks was cited yesterday by V. K. Brown, recreation director of the park district, as an indication of the breadth of the Works Progress Administration's recreational program in the parks. Boondoggling activities have reached a new high, with 2,000 WPA employees massed at the various fieldhouses and community centers to conduct programs of athletics, hobbies, crafts, club work, dancing, social games and compilation of literature on these subjects.¹⁹

The role of public art in recreation today is significantly diminished in importance from the time of the New Deal. During the Depression era there was a need for inspiration and hope that public art helped fulfill. The fierce political struggle between Robinson and the Chicago Park Board demonstrates how high the stakes were during the Depression. Art as a part of the Chicago park system provided visual proof that the country was moving forward. It was a symbol that the country was on the road to recovery, in part because public art gave the American people a sense of history and a pride of place, a commonality forged in their shared economic struggle. Politics can influence the direction of public art policy, but the need to

provide the citizenry with a vision of a better life, be it one of leisure or of economic survival, continues. Government support of such public programs as murals in recreational facilities is still needed today, so that the inspiration of our artists' visions can create works of art that are appreciated today and by generations to come.

For the past six years, Nancy Flannery has maintained a domain at www.wpamurals.com, which is devoted to publishing information and photographs regarding New Deal art and artists. Ms. Flannery currently serves on the Board of the Midwest Chapter of the National New Deal Art Preservation Association. A videographer for twenty years, Ms. Flannery has produced various documentaries on New Deal subjects, including "The Oakton School WPA Murals," "Henry Simon, Illinois Artist," and "Evanston Public Art." She is currently working on facilitating the restoration of the Oakton School murals in Evanston, Illinois.

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