

Unbuilt Beauty

The recession and other factors killed some gorgeous projects

By Lee Bey



A pair of towers called X/O and designed by Lucien Lagrange for a South Loop site would have been prominent on the city's south skyline, had they been built.

Daniel Burnham is credited with having a thing or two to say about making “no little plans.” The small stuff won't stir men's blood, he said, and “probably will not themselves be realized.”

Burnham's dictum, though poetic, doesn't quite hold up, particularly as of late, because despite their blood-stirring power, scores of big Chicago plans have found themselves unrealized. That has been particularly true on the residential design front, where such talked about mega-projects as the Chicago Spire and 2016 Olympic Village ultimately failed to materialize.

Each plan fell apart for its own reason. Could have been the economy; could have been politics, bad timing or old-fashioned rotten luck. But the results are the same: A project that stirred men's blood was not realized.

Architect Dirk Denison, FAIA, knows. In 2004, he began designing Culver House, a seven-story condominium building with first floor commercial space, which was to be located at 926 N. Clark Street across from Washington Square Park on the site of the former S.K. Culver water cooler factory building. With Denison as architect and developer, Culver House would have been a glassy,

neo-modernist building with a unit mix that included full-floor and duplex apartments. Underground parking, rooftop gardens and a heightened landscape plan were envisioned. Denison planned the building as a LEED Gold project, making use of low-e glass for the expansive curtain wall, and positioned to take advantage of light from the south. Rainwater harvesting and exterior and interior thermal mass walls were also planned.

“It was my life's work,” Denison says now.

The project had the initial support of then-Ald. Burton Natarus (42nd)—aldermanic support is key to development in Chicago—and was making its way through the building's green permit process when the city councilman suggested a community meeting on the process. Denison says he and his team readily agreed.

But a funny thing happened as Denison made his way through the forum.

“We presented and the whole thing devolved into [Natarus] making a big deal in front of the community, saying ‘Don't you want brick? This building is so large; it's so much bigger than the neighbors.’” The property was later downzoned—Culver House was to be built using existing zoning—effectively killing it by 2006. Denison says the project had plenty of letters of support, but two neighbors complained, including one who felt the new building would block natural light from reaching her yard. That neighbor ended up purchasing the old Culver factory and converted it into a single-family home. Natarus lost his bid for re-election in 2007.

Yet Culver House ended up having a life after all. Word spread through design circles, and Denison has been asked to discuss the building internationally. The project has found its way into architectural journals. It even won an Unbuilt Design award from AIA Chicago in 2010.

“I saw so much support in the architectural community,” Denison says. “My colleagues were so supportive—even the development community.” The project has led to two recent discussions for possible commissions for buildings that could utilize the ideas that were behind Culver House.

“But I don't think I'll be taking on the developer role again,” Denison says.



The site plan shows Culver House would have been a long, narrow building with niches that looked out onto landscaped places.

Dirk Denison envisioned the nine-story Culver House as a highly transparent structure with an integrated landscape plan.



Rendering courtesy of Dirk Denison Architects

Another lost beauty is The Peshtigo, which was planned for 500 N. Lake Shore Drive, an angled 58-story residential tower, which would have been a stylish neighbor to the Chicago Spire and to Lake Point Tower across the Drive. Designed by Ralph Johnson, FAIA, of Perkins & Will and built for Related Midwest, the 358-unit Peshtigo promised rooftop gardens and a 75-foot outdoor pool. Landscapes would have been irrigated by captured stormwater collected in a 5,500-gallon tank.

The project was set to begin in 2008, but faltered. Johnson politely declined to talk to me about the building's architecture or his feelings about the project, but Crain's Chicago Business reported in January 2009 that pre-sales were weak, thus hobbling the project's ability to get off the ground.

The economy doomed a slate of other proposed downtown buildings, such as the 74-story Mandarin Oriental, a hotel/condo tower planned for Lake Street and Stetson—billed as “Where the fortunate 500 call home”—which was supposed to be completed and opened in 2010; and Teng & Associates' Waterview Tower, a proposed 1,000-foot tower at 111 W. Wacker. That one was slated for 2009 completion, and developers built nearly 30 stories before the →



Rendering courtesy of DeStefano Partners

High-rise entries in the pantheon of unbuilt recent projects include Canyon Ranch, which would have towered over St. James Cathedral.



Rendering courtesy of Teng Associates

The Mandarin Oriental, a hotel/condo building, would have reached above the neighboring 2 Prudential Tower and the Mies-designed Illinois Center. A vacant lot occupies the site now.



Rendering courtesy of SOM

SOM's unbuilt 7 S. Dearborn would have been the world's tallest building when it was conceived in the 1990s. The building went unrealized when its developer couldn't find financing for the structure.

financing fell through, leaving—for now—an unfinished concrete shell that doesn't hint at the slender, elegant building that was to be.

The striking, 67-story cylindrical Canyon Ranch Living Chicago that had been destined for 65 E. Huron, just behind St. James Cathedral, also succumbed to the bad economy in 2008. Nearly 260 residential condos were planned, plus 128 hotel condominiums and a 100-seat gourmet restaurant. Designed by DeStefano Partners, the high-rise was scrapped when poor sales and more stringent lending rules crippled the project, a Related Midwest vice president told the *Chicago Sun-Times* then.

Then there is architect Lucien Lagrange's would-be icon X/O, a pair of condominium buildings that would have towered over the Prairie Avenue Historic District at 45 and 33 stories. The unusual-looking buildings, which would have bent as they reached the sky, were hit with a \$20-million foreclosure suit in September 2009 and never recovered.

Lest anyone get alarmed over the current unbuilt trend, take solace that Chicago's architectural history is littered with potentially significant buildings that were never constructed, and the city and the architecture industry recovered. Louis Sullivan in 1891 proposed a 36-story downtown skyscraper for the Odd Fellows fraternal order, complete with setbacks—almost like a gaslight era Sears Tower—that was never built. And Frank Lloyd Wright's broad, 25-story copper-clad National Life Insurance Building planned for Michigan and Pearson in 1924 never happened.

The Great Depression choked off many projects, including the magnificent Crane Tower, a 75-story Art Deco beauty that would have been the world's tallest building. It was planned for the air rights over the Illinois Central railyards, where the Aon and Illinois Center stand today. Walter W. Ahlschlager, who designed the swankier residential buildings in Uptown and the Roxy Theater in New York, was the architect.

In the 1950s, an entire neighborhood of towers—residential, governmental, institutional and otherwise—was planned and scrapped: The Fort Dearborn Project, a 151-acre redevelopment project bounded by the Chicago River's Main Branch, Ontario, Rush and a line just west of Orleans. Planned in 1954, the project called for everything from a new City Hall building—as part of a massive and governmental complex—a new University of Illinois Chicago campus, a theater, apartments and a monument to Enrico Fermi. The mix of private capital and governmental funding was thought to be the spark to get the project going. But the expected ball of money never materialized and the project went unbuilt. Sort of. While Fort Dearborn itself went unrealized, the University of Illinois wound up built on the near West Side; the government buildings were built at Federal Center and Daley Center downtown; and apartments came to River North under subsequent plans for the area.

More recently, the economic crash of the early 1990s claimed Miglin-Beitler Tower, a Caesar Pelli-designed tower nearly 2,000 stories tall and planned for Madison and Wells. Then in 1996,



Rendering courtesy of SOM

SOM's 2016 Olympic Village plan featured a neighborhood of mid-rise and high-rise buildings that could have been converted to market-rate residences after the games.

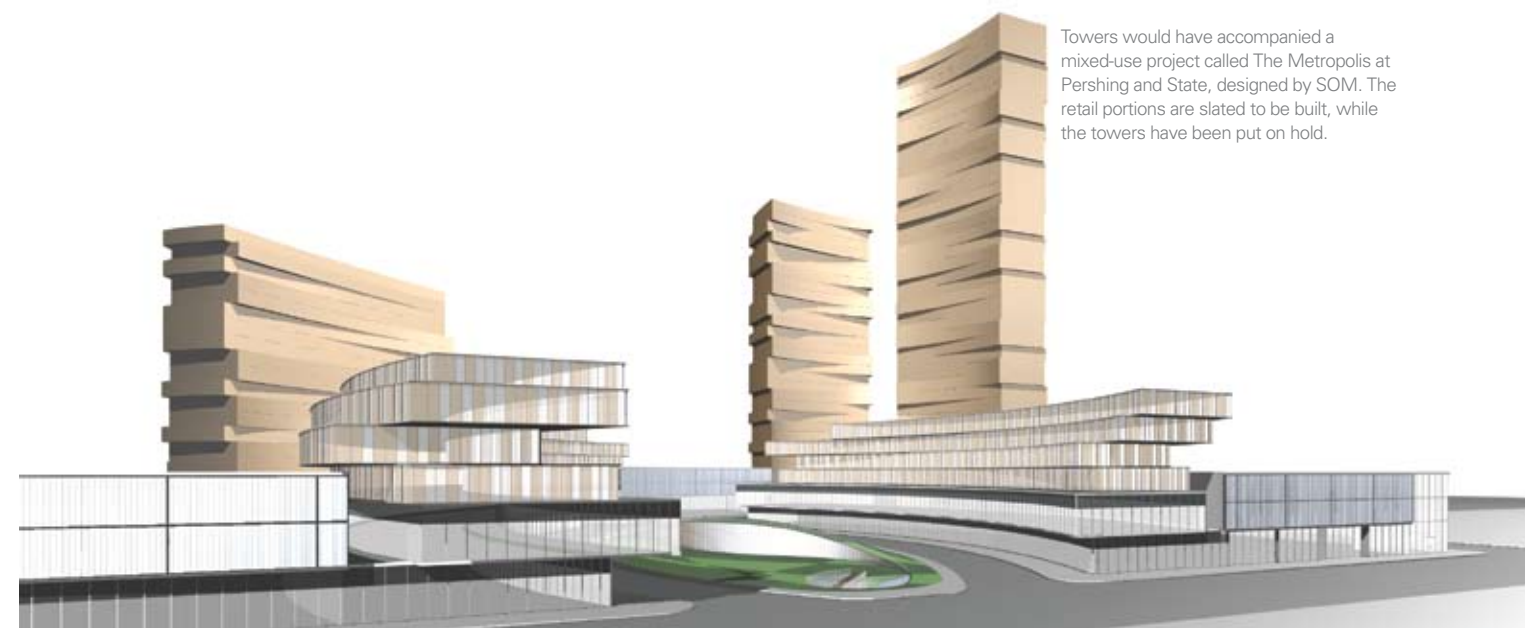
developer Scott Toberman planned to build 7 S. Dearborn, a slender mixed-use tower designed by Adrian Smith—then of SOM—that also would have been nearly 2,000 feet tall. After declining an offer by Donald Trump to join the project, Toberman was unable to find financing and, today, a different building stands on the site. (And Trump and SOM would do business together a few blocks northeast a few years later.)

There are unbuilt building schemes left behind by failed efforts to host the Chicago 1992 World's Fair, and, of course, same for Chicago 2016 Olympics.

SOM design partner Ross Wimer, FAIA, was part of the team that worked on the 2016 plan. The Olympic dream died in October 2009 before the buildings got to the design phase; Wimer says the village would have held a number of high-rise residential buildings that would have become market-rate housing at the close of the games.

Wimer says the International Olympic Committee wanted traditionally styled buildings no taller than eight stories, "so there was resistance to tall buildings." But the Chicago 2016 team managed to get permission to design some buildings as high as 20 and 25 stories, designed to LEED Silver standard, with some planned as LEED Gold, with harvested water runoff, daylighting, permeable paving and the other bells and whistles of sustainability.

SOM planned another South Side tower around the same time, Wimer says: a 20- to 30-story building at 39th and State that would have been part of The Metropolis, an ambitious retail and mixed-use development and park planned by Chicago-based Capri Capital Partners. Three towers were planned for hotel and/or residential use in the three-phase, 1 million-square-foot development. The fate of the towers is a refrain for our times. "It's a great location," Wimer says. "But it fell victim to the economy as well." **CA**



Towers would have accompanied a mixed-use project called The Metropolis at Pershing and State, designed by SOM. The retail portions are slated to be built, while the towers have been put on hold.

Rendering courtesy of SOM