

NEW HOMES



Aqua, 225 N. Columbus Drive.

Dazzling designs

A handful of new towers and mid-rises represent the cream of the architectural crop

BY PHIL BERGER

The new millennium has been a good time for residential architecture in Chicago. After decades of banality, dictated either by developers' notions of marketability or stagnation within the architecture community, the streetscape has benefited greatly from a slew of interesting new buildings.

The project that has generated the most buzz among architecture cognoscenti is 600 North Fairbanks, designed by the firm of Murphy/Jahn. The German-born Helmut Jahn is one of the world's most celebrated architects, but he's taken his share of critical abuse in his adopted hometown, mostly by virtue of his first significant commission, the State of Illinois' Thompson Center in the Loop. When it was completed twenty years ago, it was vilified for its cost overruns and its ambitious design, which was wholly unlike anything built in the Loop before or ever since. Subsequently, he's done dazzling work – primarily in Europe – but even his later Chicago projects, such as 120 South LaSalle, the United terminal at O'Hare, and Oakbrook Terrace Tower, couldn't quite erase the stigma of his debut.

While it's unlikely 600 North Fairbanks will change that, it's certainly one of the most dynamic additions to the skyline in years. Jahn's solution to the parking structure dilemma is to face it in the same clear curtain wall as the rest of the building, so that the structure is a unified

whole. But what's probably best about the building is its strong, curving shape. Architects often say one of their most difficult design challenges is how the building turns the corner, and 600 North Fairbanks does it very well.

As cool as Jahn's building is, it's not even the most interesting of the new crop of high-rises. Probably the most prominent tower in terms of location is One Museum Park at 1215 S. Prairie Ave., which comes from the drawing board of Pappageorge/Haymes.

It's hard to say many good things about towers that Pappageorge/Haymes has designed for The Enterprise Companies over the past several years, but One Museum Park is another animal entirely. Jeff Renterghen, a senior associate at Pappageorge/Haymes, explains that the firm "has always pushed for a more modern statement," and they've certainly made it here. As an object in the landscape, it's breathtakingly bold and a little retro-futuristic: The building, sheathed in reflective blue glass, spreads out in wing-like flanges from a central ovoid column, like something out of a Buck Rogers two-reeler.

Sales have been strong enough at One Museum Park that the core of One Museum Park West – a smaller tower located just to the west – is already rising. It's a little deflating to realize that all the units facing west in One Museum Park are going to have their views obstructed

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One Museum Park, 1215 S. Prairie Ave.



Trump International Hotel and Tower, 330 N. Wabash Ave.

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— except that none of its units actually face west. The distinctive aspect of the building's design is its crescent shaped plan: The south and west sides of the building house circulation spaces or structural and mechanical components, and their reflective "windows" are really glass skins mounted to a concrete frame. So while the gleaming, streamlined form is arresting from all perspectives, the clear orientation of the building is toward the north and the east. The result is that "there's really no 'back' to the building, and no 'bad' units," Renterghen says.

Maybe the most successful and exciting of all the new towers is ParkView at Illinois Street and McClurg Court, which couldn't be more of a departure MCL Companies' disappointing offerings at the neighboring River East. The emergence of modernism has given rise to many variations on the glass and steel window wall. At ParkView, architects Solomon Cordwell Buenz go in a different direction, with plenty of glass but also copper-anodized aluminum panels and punctuations of yellow balconies that turn the whole thing into a powerful piece of form, texture and color. What's also great about the building is its fine sense of scale from the ground level. The difference between ParkView and almost everything else is that its parking levels are primarily underground, which makes an enormous difference in establishing a connection between the building and the street.

Devon Patterson, a design principal at Solomon Cordwell Buenz, says that the aim was to do something "sculptural and artistic" with the design. As built, it's all that and more. Solomon Cordwell Buenz investigated several different materials for the curtain wall, with the

intention of echoing the groundbreaking Time-Life building just a block away, which used Cor-Ten steel and bronze reflective glass to great effect. While ParkView is subtler in its surfaces, it makes a similarly strong statement.

Although most of the architectural excitement is about high-rise towers, at least one lower-density project deserves attention. With a few notable exceptions, multi-family developments from the past two decades have been pretty appalling, leaving a plague of red-brick "traditional" monstrosities throughout the city.

The Kinetic Condos at Rainbo Village, however, are an astonishingly fresh take on a standard Chicago building type: flats above stores. At Rainbo Village, located at 4836 N. Clark St. in Uptown, Pappageorge/Haymes used red brick, but in such a crisp, modern fashion — detailed with silver screens and canopies — that it's really the best of its kind. Its proportions and scale are ideal for its location, and the materials offer the correct context. It boldly says that it was built in the 21st century, and it's an excellent sign of good things to come.

It's dangerous to pass judgment on buildings before they're mostly completed, it's tough to resist comment on at least two works-in-progress.

The Trump International Hotel & Tower Chicago is so much bigger than anything else around it. People must have said the same thing about the John Hancock Center

decades ago, but the Hancock's positioning at its site — on a full city block, well behind the allowable setback line — made it a singular event, a "landmark" in the most literal sense. Although Trump takes advantage of its riverside location, it will never be the Hancock, but its slick skin and curved form are nicely executed. Overall, it looks as if it will be more pleasing than most of the buildings that bear its developer's name.

Aqua, the new tower at Magellan Development Group's Lakeshore East project, generated lots of attention when Studio Gang Architects unveiled its design. Some observers thought the building wouldn't match the "wow" factor of Jeanne Gang's graphic presentation, but they may be surprised. When you look at the building from a distance it reads as a simple, articulated rectangle — a typical Miesian expression. But it's only when you get close to Aqua that you sense its impact. The gently undulating swoops and swerves of the curtain wall balconies change with kinetic energy as you approach. There's an illusory element to the experience of riding or walking past it, as if you're passing a computer-generated image. It also suggests a highly refined variation on the skeletal masterpieces of the great Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi. Aqua is still under construction, and it's still unclear what the building will be like at street level, but so far, so good. NH