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The Chicago School of Architecture: A History of Commercial and Public Building in the Chicago Area, 1875–1925

CARL W. CONDIT • CHICAGO AND LONDON: THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 1964

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Very few scholarly books catch fire with a large public. *The Chicago School of Architecture* by Carl W. Condit (1917–94) is one that did. Since it appeared in 1964, it has almost certainly been the most widely read and influential book on the history of Chicago architecture. One can hear echoes of it almost any day from the guides on the architectural boat tours plying the Chicago River or at hearings of the city's landmark commission.

Condit, who first trained as an engineer but then received a PhD in literature, taught for many years at Northwestern University.¹ *Chicago School* is by far his most influential book, but that influence is, at first glance, not easy to explain. It was not Condit's first attempt to trace the skyscraper's evolu-

tion. That was *Rise of the Skyscraper* (1952), which had little of the impact of his 1964 volume. Nor did Condit originate the term “Chicago School” or his basic plotline: that a small group of Chicago architects, including Louis Sullivan, John Root, and others, rejected nineteenth-century academic traditions and created a new and original architecture based on modern materials and needs. That argument had been proposed by European architects and historians before World War II.²

Most puzzling perhaps about *Chicago School*'s continuing influence is that subsequent scholarship, and even Condit's own later writings, have undermined many of the book's basic premises. For example, a central argument—that William Le Baron Jenney's Home Insurance Building (1885; demolished 1931) was the first fully skeletal building and thus the basis for Chicago's claim to being the skyscraper's birthplace—has been discredited. Scholars have also cast doubt on the “Chicago School” formulation itself.³

Of course, the fact that the skyscraper's actual evolution, like that of many important historical developments, is now acknowledged to have been a halting and often messy process suggests why Condit's book became so influential. Condit, a major authority on the history of engineering, must have known what he was sacrificing to make his book palatable for a general audience. And palatable it was. No longer were those familiar old buildings in the Loop dingy relics of a bygone era. They could now be seen as among the most important landmarks in the history of global culture.

To explain the full impact of this book, though, one must also take into account the context in which it was launched. Although for years Chicago had been one of the world's fastest-growing cities, with many Chicagoans hopeful that it would become the world's largest, by 1964 the region's growth was stalling while Los Angeles and other, newer cities surged. Suddenly Chicago was a mature, older metropolis.

What Chicago did not lose after World War II was intense local pride, unbounded ambition, and deep-seated anxiety about its place vis-à-vis New York. While it was increasingly difficult for Chicagoans to claim primacy in economic or cultural developments, Condit's claim that Chicago invented the skyscraper, and was therefore the birthplace of modern architecture, became the most resonant assertion anyone has made about the city's standing in the history of world culture. *The Chicago School of Architecture* was exactly the right story for its time and place, and Condit told it in a highly convincing way. It was so convincing and such a powerful argument that its influence has continued long after some of its central claims have been rebutted. Certainly no architectural history has contributed so much to redefining the image of a city for its own citizens and for the rest of the world.

FACING Historian Carl Condit's 1964 book was the first in-depth study of the city's influential architectural heritage, especially in the development of the skyscraper.