

1

SCHLESINGER
AND MAYER
DEPARTMENT STORE/
CARSON PIRIE SCOTT

Louis Sullivan

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Louis Sullivan, Schlesinger and Mayer Department Store (Carson Pirie Scott), Chicago, 1903.*

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In his 1892 essay, “Ornament in Architecture,” Louis Sullivan summarized the aesthetic implications of the steel frame: if the structure of a building and its exterior walls are now separate systems, what is the relationship between the two? The essay features his suggestion that “it would be greatly for our aesthetic good if we would refrain entirely from the use of ornament for a period of years, in order that our thought might concentrate acutely upon the perfection of buildings well formed and comely in the nude.”¹ For much of the twentieth century, Sullivan’s Schlesinger and Mayer department store, later known as Carson Pirie Scott (1899–1903), was regarded as the physical manifestation of that impulse, a building in which ornament had been stripped away from all but the base and attic, revealing the naked form of the frame underneath. In this way it seemed to herald a new aesthetic in which the representation of technology replaced conventional forms of ornament. Considered in the urban and social context of late nineteenth-century Chicago, the Schlesinger and Mayer building illustrates Sullivan’s belief in the ongoing viability of architectural ornament, in particular as a representation of American democracy. This contextual reading suggests an alternative narrative of architectural modernism, one in which the curtain wall, so long understood as a form of structural expressionism, is also recognized for its decorative function.

A State Street Department Store

In 1891 the Schlesinger and Mayer Company consulted architects Adler and Sullivan about giving a unified architectural expression to their department store, then located in a series of adjoining buildings in the block bounded by State, Madison, Wabash, and Monroe Streets in downtown Chicago. The partners had achieved success with a series of projects combining technological innovation with decorative creativity, including the Schiller Theater (1886–92) and the Chicago Auditorium (1886–90). These projects dealt with complex functional requirements, including the need for large, well-lit interior spaces, as well as the desire for the expression of a civic and cultural identity suitable to a city of recent immigrants, many newly wealthy. While the department store commission came to nothing, in 1898, after his partnership with Adler was dissolved, Sullivan was commissioned to design a new 12-story flagship building for the company, replacing the existing one. The new building was constructed in two stages: a nine-story, three-bay building facing Madison Street, completed in 1899, and the main 12-story corner block with three bays on Madison and seven on State, completed in 1903. In 1904, the rival Carson Pirie Scott Company took control of the business and the building, gradually extending it southwards with a five bay extension by D.H. Burnham and Co. in 1906, and a three-bay section by

Holabird and Roche in 1961. Both these additions mimicked the style of Sullivan's original building.

One of a series of department stores built along State Street, the Schlesinger and Mayer Company sold mass-market luxury goods to middle-class customers, predominantly women. State Street itself was the vision of dry goods magnate Potter Palmer who had it widened and developed as the city's premiere commercial boulevard in the 1860s. Along with his early partners, Marshall Fields and Levi Leiter, Palmer was responsible for the first commercial "palaces" built there, all influenced by the great Parisian department stores: Blondel's Grand Magasin du Louvre (1866); Laplanche and Boileau's Bon Marché (1869–76); and Paul Sedille's Au Printemps (1883). Each of these buildings exploited an iron structure to create huge, open shopping floors illuminated with copious natural light. In Chicago the architect William Le Baron Jenney, one of Sullivan's early employers, established a new precedent for buildings of this type with the second Leiter building and the Fair stores (both 1891). Though these were considerably plainer than their French counterparts, they were unprecedented in their enormous size. With these buildings, eight and eleven stories high respectively, Jenney inaugurated the hybrid skyscraper-department store type.

The skyscraper appeared in the early 1880s when, in the middle of a real estate boom, property owners began using a method known locally as the "Chicago construction" to build 12-, 16-, and even 20-story buildings. This method was made up of a series of related technologies including an internal metal structure, elevators, electric lighting, steam heating, and so-called curtain walls: lightweight assemblies of brick, terracotta tile, and plate glass connected to the frame with anchors and brackets. Faster to erect than masonry, this method allowed the construction of tall buildings with large volumes that produced significantly increased rental revenue for their owners. For architects, the method presented an accompanying aesthetic problem: what should the Chicago construction look like? In early experiments, such as Holabird and Roche's Tacoma building (1889), the inner frame was expressed on the exterior via an undulating wall of unusually large windows. While the Tacoma mimicked the brown color of masonry buildings, Daniel Burnham and Charles Atwood offered a radical new aesthetic in their design for the Reliance building (1895). The original home of the Carson Pirie Scott company, the Reliance presented an obviously non-load-bearing curtain wall of cream-colored glazed terracotta tile inset with unusually large panes of plate glass. This wall of windows was folded into a series of bays projecting out over dark brown granite and bronze framed display windows at the street level.

With its large windows and dramatic chromatic distinction between base and upper stories, the Reliance was a precedent for the Schlesinger and Mayer building. In its design Sullivan drew on the formula he had established for tall office buildings in the early 1890s: a single block divided into three horizontal layers, with a two-story "mercantile base" decorated in a "sumptuous" way in order to "attract the eye"; above this, an indefinite number of office tiers; and finally a decorative attic

4 The Early Twentieth Century

that signified the vertical termination of the building.² Adler and Sullivan's Wainwright (1891) and Guaranty (1895) buildings exemplify this approach. In most buildings of this type the dimensions of the individual office units dictated the width of the structural bays. In the case of the skyscraper department store, however, the structural bays were wider, designed to maximize open floor area for the display of merchandise and allow the large windows necessary to light it. The wider spacing of the bays may explain why, in contrast to the Wainwright and the Guaranty, Sullivan gave the windows of the Schlesinger and Mayer store a horizontal orientation.

Even more significant than the wider bays, the "mercantile base" was given special prominence. Unlike other commercial buildings, where the street level occupants were tenants, here it was the owner of the building and the expression of the Schlesinger and Mayer Company's identity was of primary importance. Working with his assistant, Grant Elmslie, Sullivan developed a distinctive dark green metallic frame for the street-level display windows. The design of these windows was part of a larger effort to brand the store with a specific visual identity. Beautiful and intricate, the foliated decorative motif contained within the geometric frames was repeated in the store's interior in the form of sawn mahogany panels, ornamental plasterwork capitals, and bronze-plated lighting fixtures. This motif even influenced the graphic design of Schlesinger and Mayer's newspaper advertising. With its stylized natural forms, this ornamental scheme echoed the art nouveau style popular in France, for example Frantz Jourdain's Samaritaine department store (1905), which included decorative ironwork and polychromatic terracotta tile with a floral motif.

The most obvious feature of the Schlesinger and Mayer building is the dramatic contrast between the base and the façade above. Clad in a pale cream-colored terracotta tile, this façade is unornamented except for the inset borders of the window frames. Above this an unbroken cornice appears to float above deeply recessed windows at the attic level. Connecting these horizontal layers, a rounded tower unites the State and Madison façades and acts as the main entrance to the store. Though it echoed the grid, Sullivan's design for the upper façade stood apart from the bulk of the building behind it. He employed no rhythm of vertical projecting bays, as in the Tacoma and Reliance, merely the simple repetition of cell-like windows. He chose not to follow the convention by which the interior structure was expressed on the exterior as a series of pronounced vertical piers mimicking the classical orders. Instead the pale-colored screen appears to stretch tightly across the surface from one edge of the building to the other like a thin veil. This veiling effect is particularly pronounced because the horizontal spandrels are deeper than the vertical mullions. Sullivan raised these mullions from the surface of the wall only on the tower where they are grouped close together, enhancing the appearance of a single surface wrapping around the corner, at which point it is puckered, or folded. It was this aspect of the building that would attract the attention of the architects and critics of the early twentieth-century avant-garde.

The Articulated Frame

By the late 1920s, the construction of the Schlesinger and Mayer building, or Carson Pirie Scott as it was now known, was considered a crucial moment in the evolution of the modern style, the first overt expression of the curtain wall. Now the building was thought of primarily as a skyscraper and its function as a department store was given secondary importance. Attention was focused on the upper levels of the façade, and the ornamented base and cornice were treated as vestigial, a nineteenth-century relic. In 1924 the American critic Lewis Mumford described such ornament as the “last gesture of traditional architecture,” clinging to the highest and lowest stories of the “draped cube.”³ In 1939 the Museum of Modern Art in New York claimed Carson Pirie Scott as a native precursor to the International Style. Because of this “one great and prophetic building,” which “frankly exhibits its cage-like steel skeleton, sheathed only in terracotta,” the Museum declared, Sullivan “may claim his place with contemporary European pioneers of the Modern Movement, [Adolf] Loos, [Otto] Wagner, [Hendrik] Berlage, and [Henry] Van de Velde.”⁴ In this way the International Style was understood as a spontaneous movement arising not in the context of Europe alone, but also in the United States. The Swiss critic and historian Sigfried Giedion cemented this view in his canonical *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941), where Carson Pirie Scott figures as a forebear to the steel and glass façades of Walter Gropius’ Fagus Factory (1913) and Gropius’ entry to the Chicago Tribune Tower competition (1923).

In this historiographic framework, Carson Pirie Scott was one of a series of pivotal buildings that launched a global modern style, one in which the thick masonry wall was transformed into an “articulated frame.” For high modernists, the internal steel frame and the external curtain wall were conceptually interchangeable and universally applicable. This idea was to find its highest expression in the work of German émigré Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who inaugurated the “Second Chicago School of architecture” in the mid-twentieth century. Mies believed that great architecture was the aesthetic fulfillment of technology: “Construction not only determines form, but is form itself,” he wrote.⁵ In buildings such as the Lake Shore Drive apartments (1948–51) and the Seagram building (1954–58), metal and glass skins evoke the steel structure underneath. For Mies and other modernists, technology was a metaphor for the rational and efficient organization of modern society irrespective of national or cultural differences. In such a society, good architecture was the aesthetic expression of technology. “The revitalization of the building art can only come from construction and not by means of arbitrarily assembled motifs,” he claimed.⁶

The privileging of technological expression (which was thought to further the progress of modern society) over the application of historicist ornament (which was thought to retard it), dates to a turn-of-the-century discourse about the place of ornament in architecture and design. At a time when traditional social boundaries were less and less meaningful, the florid ornament of the Victorian era was

damningly associated with the bourgeois, or middle class. No longer an expression of social status, ornamented goods now signified a lack of taste. The Austrian architect and critic Adolf Loos famously derided efforts to invent a modern form of ornament, arguing that conventional decoration appealed only to the culturally backward, to criminals and primitive peoples. The German sociologist Werner Sombart linked the problem of contemporary design (its debasement through the proliferation of cheap, industrially-produced goods) to the rise of capitalism. Prompted by the need to increase both production and consumption, he argued, the market preyed on the base urge of consumers, particularly women, for the latest fashion. Around the same time, the Chicago economist Thorstein Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption,” meaning lavish spending on clothing, jewelry and extravagant houses in order to demonstrate one’s wealth. In this sense, aesthetes believed, the system of ornament had been corrupted by consumerism: the social status it once conferred could now be bought and sold. Veblen identified department stores in particular as an essential part of the “propaganda of culture,” inculcating the lower classes with a taste for fashionable rather than functional goods. In these terms the highly decorated base of Carson Pirie Scott was doubly problematic. Not only a throwback to an outmoded ornamental tradition, it was also designed specifically to promote the consumption of cheaply made, mass-produced goods.

Organic Architecture and the Textile Wall

Since the 1960s, the rise of post-modernism has brought a renewed appreciation of Sullivan’s ornament. Historians have focused in particular on his drawing and writing in order to understand how and why he produced such complex decorative façades, as well his intellectual influences and the social context in which he worked. This scholarship has shown that while Sullivan utilized innovative architectural technologies, he also regarded ornament as a viable form of modern expression, one that made manifest not universal social progress but the particular benefits of American democracy. Like many of his contemporaries in Europe and the United States, Sullivan rejected the thoughtless replication of historical precedent in favor of a philosophy of “organic” architecture. The definition of organic architecture varied greatly. Broadly speaking it meant architectural form derived from the inner function of a building, whether structural or programmatic, and not from the imitation of existing examples. Sullivan summarized this idea in his famous and frequently misunderstood aphorism: “form ever follows function.”⁷ The adoption of this principle implied no particular style: quite the opposite, the outward appearance of a building depended entirely on its situation. Classical or Gothic styles could be appropriate, depending on the manner in which they were used. In Chicago, “organic” architecture came to mean the “evolution” of European styles into a new American one as they were transplanted into the American

“west” (as Illinois and the Midwestern states were then considered). Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, architects in Chicago adopted a simplified version of the fashionable neo-Gothic style for their commercial structures. By the mid-1880s, influenced by the French architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, they began to think of the Gothic as a constructive system, one adaptable to modern functions and materials.

In these terms the steel frame rendered conventional forms of architectural expression derived from load-bearing tectonic systems (such as the classical orders) obsolete. Architectural historian Mark Wigley has suggested that, in their efforts to legitimate the curtain wall, Sullivan and his colleagues were influenced by the German architect Gottfried Semper’s “principle of cladding”: the idea that the origins of architecture lay not in post and beam construction but in the textile covering used to enclose space in early human societies.⁸ Semper’s theory was derived from the archetype of a “Caribbean hut” (a reproduction of which he saw at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851) in which the lightweight wall was a separate system from the masonry base and hearth. This idea was attractive to the Americans because it implied that the curtain wall might represent not a deviation from architectural tradition, but a return to its origins: that to dress a steel-framed building in a textile-like façade, what Sullivan called the “product of loom and mine,” might be entirely appropriate.⁹ Certainly many of his designs evoked textiles, especially his polychromatic Transportation Building at the World’s Columbian Exposition (1893), which he compared to an oriental rug.

This leaves the question of what Sullivan was trying to express with his unshamedly draped surfaces. His method of dividing the façades of his tall buildings into three horizontal zones followed the organic principle of “form follows function,” at least in an abstract sense. But though he was well aware of what he called the “social conditions” that produced the new building type – real estate conventions, structural technology, interior program – he had no interest in expressing them directly. Rather, he shared with the American transcendentalist movement the belief that the role of art was to make visible the invisible spiritual world behind the material one. In this sense ornament was the highest form of architecture, the emotional expression of the inner “life” of a building. In the case of his own practice this meant making manifest the energy he saw inherent in the urban landscape of Chicago, a city he described as crude and raw but full of “big things to be done.”¹⁰ Just as Jenney and Adler utilized the steel frame to construct buildings suited to those big deeds, Sullivan experimented with cast-iron, plate glass and terracotta tile to render them visible in decorative form. His ornamental plant motifs were above all a metaphor for growth: the fertility of the natural landscape symbolized for him the social and economic potential of the American Midwest. In this sense he sought to naturalize the capitalist processes that produced the department store and the skyscraper in two distinct ways, linking their invention to the biological process of evolution and their appearance to organic forms found in the surrounding landscape.

8 The Early Twentieth Century

While the ornamented Carson Pirie Scott building undoubtedly had a commercial function – to draw attention to the store and to establish an image for the company as a purveyor of affordable luxury – Sullivan sublimated that pragmatic function into a broader, social one. Together with his protégé Frank Lloyd Wright, he linked organic architecture to the concept of democracy, which he understood not as a formal system of government but as a philosophy of individual freedom and self-reliance particular to the United States. The tall office building symbolized the power of the American businessman to achieve great things via sheer will. Architectural historian Joseph Siry sees the department store as a related, but different form of democratic institution.¹¹ For department store owners, shopping was more than a leisure activity; it was also an aid to assimilation, a means for personal self-improvement if not reinvention. In an era of great social instability, it played an important role in the fashioning of new Americans: here the immigrant from Ireland, Germany, or Bohemia could learn how to dress, behave, and ultimately succeed. In this context architectural ornament derived from the plant life of the Midwest was not the expression of individual social status, either inherited or bought, but of the new society being forged there.

Though Sullivan became increasingly pessimistic about the future of American society in the later years of his life, his Prairie School followers carried his particular vision of American modernism into the twentieth century. For Wright, it was the single family house rather than the tall commercial building that best represented organic architecture. Opposing both the aesthetic and political bases of European functionalism, he continued to experiment with abstracted natural forms, not only as ornament, as in his turn-of-the-century Prairie Houses, but also as the basis for planning in his idealized Broadacre City (1932–35) and later Usonian Houses. In the same tradition, Sullivan's friend, the Rochester architect Claude Bragdon, created a system of "projective ornament": geometric motifs designed to replace traditional forms of decoration. He realized these most successfully in a series of sound and light displays during the 1910s. Designed to accompany community singing concerts, they were intended to foster both musical and political harmony.

The early twentieth-century critique of ornament in design was that it was obsolete, no longer a meaningful form of aesthetic expression in modern society. Corrupted by the rise of capitalism, it served only as an indicator of wealth, not social position or even taste. In its place, modernist architects forged an aesthetic of technology, one in which decoration was supposedly abandoned in favor of the sober representation of the "facts" of a building: its function and method of construction. In this understanding, the curtain wall was the rational and universal expression of social progress achieved through technology. Sullivan's Schlesinger and Mayer/Carson Pirie Scott served as a symbol of the birth of this idea, its plain upper stories presenting a stark contrast to the ornamented display windows below. But Sullivan himself did not see architecture in these

terms. Part of a group of Chicago-based architects searching for the appropriate expression of the steel-framed skyscraper, he argued that, judiciously applied, ornament was necessary in order for a building to exceed the realization of mere pragmatic need. Ornament, he claimed, had an ongoing role as the expression not of social status or technological progress, but of the potential of an entire nation.

Notes

- * Sullivaniana Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital File #19101.080609-09. Image credit: © The Art Institute of Chicago.
- 1. Louis Sullivan, "Ornament in Architecture" [1892], in *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*, ed. Louis Sullivan [1918] (New York: Dover, 1979), 187.
- 2. Louis Sullivan, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered" [1896], in *Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings*, ed. Louis Sullivan [1918] (New York: Dover, 1979), 205.
- 3. Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* [1924] (New York: Dover, 1955), 78.
- 4. Museum of Modern Art, "Architecture in the United States," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 6, nos. 1 and 2 (February 1939): 8.
- 5. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Notes for unpublished lecture circa 1950," in *The Artless World: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, ed. Fritz Neumeier (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 325.
- 6. *Ibid.*
- 7. Sullivan, "The Tall Office Building," 208.
- 8. Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses. The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995).
- 9. Sullivan, "Ornament in Architecture," 187.
- 10. Louis Sullivan, *Autobiography of an Idea* [1924] (New York: Peter Smith, 1949), 200.
- 11. Joseph Siry, *Carson Pirie Scott: Louis Sullivan and the Chicago Department Store* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

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10 The Early Twentieth Century

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