

Real Estate

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

In Chicago, More Landmarks to Live In



Photographs by William Zbaren for The New York Times

By ROBERT SHAROFF

CHICAGO
AT a recent cocktail party held for buyers at 600 North Fairbanks, a new condominium project here, the architect Helmut Jahn looked over the crowd of about 150 people and asked how many had actually bought apartments in the building.

After counting the raised hands, he said, "You mean the rest of you are just here to get a free drink?"

Hardly. The rest were there, in fact, to meet Mr. Jahn, the designer of the project and a "starchitect" before the word was invented.

Gary Rosenberg, chief executive of Urban R2 Development, the project's developer, said the event exceeded his expectations. "People were just very appreciative of the chance to rub elbows with him," he said.

Chicago, of course, has a long history of celebrity architects, beginning with the father of them all, Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright spent the early years of his career in suburban Oak Park, where he built a large house and studio. The surrounding neighborhood is site of several Wright-designed houses — is one of the most sought after in the city, in addition to being a major tourist attraction. In downtown Chicago, meanwhile, the premier "starchitect" buildings are 860 and



880 North Lake Shore Drive, two steel and glass apartment buildings designed by Mies van der Rohe over a three-year period starting in 1949.

The buildings, featured in architecture history books and often referred to as among the most influential structures of the 20th century, are perennial favorites with the city's creative community.

"It's like living in a museum," said James Kinney, president of Rubloff Residential Properties, a large downtown real estate brokerage firm. "People either love them or hate them. But the fact that Mies designed them is a definite marketing factor."

The tradition continues today with Mr. Jahn's project and another by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. Both projects are in Streeterville, a lakefront enclave.

Of the two projects, Mr. Jahn's is closer to completion. The condo building — a 41-story curvilinear tower sheathed in glass and featuring amenities like an enclosed rooftop pool — began construction in early March and is scheduled to be completed in 2008.

The building has 227 units, at prices ranging from \$330,000 for an 825-square-foot one-bedroom unit, to \$2.3 million for a 3,200-square-foot penthouse. Buyers have signed contracts and made down payments on three-quarters of the units.

"We're selling to sophisticated people who



have an interest in design," Mr. Rosenberg said. "There's no question in my mind that Helmut's celebrity has been helpful in generating traffic and recognition."

Alexander Gorun, a financial consultant who recently bought a three-bedroom unit in the project, said: "Helmut designs glass palaces. If it's done right, it's going to be great."

Also impressed was Chester Suski, a senior art director at Playboy magazine, who bought a two-bedroom unit. "Most buildings, you don't know who the architect is and it shows," he said. "But this is going to be a landmark."

All of this is something of a vindication for Mr. Jahn, a former enfant terrible of the architecture world who dominated the Chi-

cago architecture scene in the 1970's and 1980's with bold post-modern buildings.

In 1985, the disastrous reception accorded his James R. Thompson Center — a state office building in the North Loop that resembles a flying saucer done in shades of pink and blue — seemingly ended his career here. Since then, he has mainly been active overseas, completing a series of well-received projects in cities like Berlin, Shanghai and Bangkok. He also returned to his modernist roots.

Although aware of his reputation for over-the-top design, Mr. Jahn downplays that aspect of his work at 600 North Fairbanks.

"Experimental is always a dangerous word in architecture," Mr. Jahn said. "You don't experiment with buildings because buildings have to work. A residential building is essentially a lot of very tight cells. There are usually very strict parameters depending on the market as to the number and size of the units. A lot of the tension of a building like this, regardless of whether you are a famous architect or someone who has done apartments over and over again, is you have to follow these rules."

Mr. Calatrava's design — commissioned by the Fordham Company, a local developer known for high-end projects — is an artfully twisted 124-story glass tower that would be the tallest building in the United States. (The country's current tallest building, the Sears Tower in Chicago, is 110 stories.) In

addition to 300 condos, the building will also contain 150 hotel rooms. "I try to make my buildings different, unique," said Christopher Carley, president of Fordham. "My feeling is people will pay a premium for beautiful architecture. It's about pride of ownership and the status of being in a certain building."

The project — called Fordham Spire — was announced last summer and received front-page coverage in both The Chicago Tribune and The Chicago Sun-Times.

'STARCHITECT' CITY

Clockwise from far left, the Streeterville neighborhood of Chicago; the architect Helmut Jahn; a model of his recently started condominium project, 600 North Fairbanks; Chester Suski, who recently bought a two-bedroom condo there; and a model of the Fordham Spire, designed by Santiago Calatrava, planned to become the nation's tallest building.

The company set up a Web site for interested buyers immediately after the announcement and collected more than 1,000 names within 45 days. No units have yet been sold because the project was announced well before the final architectural drawings were done. Mr. Carley said that the sales process would start later this spring. When it does, prices will be among the highest in the city. The range is \$630,000 for a 700-square-foot one-bedroom unit to \$20 million for a 10,000-square-foot duplex penthouse. If all goes well, Mr. Carley said, he hopes to break ground early next year and be finished in 2010.

One prospective buyer is Evangelina M. Belizario, a psychiatrist. "It's about the chemistry between me, the location and the artist," she said. "I want to live there. But I think in the long run it will be a good investment."

The question of who actually designs the units in a condo building can be tricky. Most architects, celebrity or otherwise, make no pretense of being interior designers. Indeed, both Mr. Rosenberg and Mr. Carley describe the process as a give-and-take that begins with the architect doing the initial floor plans, which are then tweaked by marketing professionals and interior designers.

Over all, observers see several factors at work behind the recent national emphasis on starchitects. "Whether it's Brad and Angelina or Frank Gehry and Santiago Calatrava, America is in love with celebrities," said Connie Dickinson, president of the DickinsonGroup, a marketing and public relations firm in Chicago that specializes in devising marketing plans for developers.

Ms. Dickinson says other factors are at play. "Design has cachet today," she said.

Real estate professionals see it differently. "It's about marketing," said Mr. Kinney of Rubloff. "Whether or not you actually get a premium, it allows a developer to try."