

Work that speaks for itself

Mining Chicago's treasure chest of architectural artifacts for inspiration

by Dana Dubriwny

Manuel Hernandez spent his adolescence in Mexico's San Jose Casas Caidas, which translated means "Village of Fallen Houses." Under the encouragement of his grandfather, a furniture carpenter who designed his own carpentry tools, and his father, a construction worker, Hernandez knew at the age of 13 that he wanted to design buildings.

"On the weekends I would go with my dad to some of his remodeling jobs," Hernandez says. "I didn't like the dirty work, but I enjoyed being in that environment. I would see my dad working off plans, ask my dad who did them, and tell him that I wanted to do that."

Hernandez returned to Chicago in time to enroll in Carl Schurz High School, and there he competed in the building design category of the annual Newhouse Architecture Competition. Taking cues from the high school's prairie-style design combined with the contemporary character of the neighborhood, Hernandez created a complimentary yet modern gymnasium addition that won him second place in the competition.

His competitive achievement landed him at Skidmore Owings & Merrill where he completed a summer internship working

on projects such as the NBC Tower in Chicago and the Canary Warf in London. Of the experience he says, "I met a lot of good people, and I knew that I could thrive in that environment."

He went on to enroll in the architecture program of the University of Illinois at Chicago. The intense five-year program offered more than just design knowledge; it enforced structure and a certain comradere among his peers.

"It was a great time of discipline and total immersion into architecture," he says. "I think that the reason why classmates bonded so well is because we survived the architecture program. It really was a sort of architectural boot camp, and not everyone makes it. Out of a class of approximately 100, only about 25 graduated."

Citing a passage from Stephen Ambrose's "Citizen Soldiers," Hernandez describes his relationships in the architecture program much like those created in combat. He even jokingly refers to his classmates at "foxhole buddies".

Following his graduation in 1992, Hernandez entered a lackluster job market with limited architectural options. Rather than settling for a design role that was less than his expectations, he took a position at Shah Engineering Inc.

There he spent two years working under the guidance of Manu Shah, learning to apply structural detail to projects that

included Sears retail stores and businesses destroyed by hurricane Andrews in Florida. Learning the invaluable trade of structural engineering, Hernandez was able to apply his new found skills at his next position at Elias G. Pappageorge Architects.

Throughout the next eight years, Hernandez honed his design, organization, scheduling and precision in detailing abilities. This, says Hernandez, greatly improved his thinking about the realities of construction and project budgeting.

And it was this kind of experience that made it possible to found his own firm, IK+Associates. Not even a year since its inception, the firm is working on several residential projects including a 67-unit condominium building and a seven-story multifamily structure in the South Loop. Hernandez says business has resulted from word-of-mouth filtering based on the firm's attention to project detail and a portfolio that "speaks for itself."

"The approach that I take with my current work is one of what I call 'strategic articulation'. After a building has been programmatically designed, I go back and look for strategic opportunities in the building in which to highlight a certain important area — whether it's an arch over an entrance, creating patterns of brickwork on areas of the facade or rounding a corner of a building at street intersections."

Another design strategy Hernandez uses

is fragmentation, which involves breaking up a building into several varying components. This approach, says Hernandez, gives an otherwise overwhelming building more proportionality, thus making it easier to create a smooth integration into its neighborhood.

In regard to the future of his firm's practice, Hernandez says he hopes to expand his portfolio to include public and civic buildings including libraries, schools, museums, gymnasiums, theaters and banks. "These building types bring with them a whole new set of parameters and challenges that need to be approached differently from residential or commercial projects," he says.

On the brink of embarking on new project types, Hernandez emphasizes the importance of keeping his ideas fresh. Noting that inspiration is the key to innovation, Hernandez says his muse is the city itself.

"For inspiration I don't look at architectural journals. Instead, I 'mine' Chicago's neighborhoods. Chicago is a treasure chest of architectural artifacts; you just have to pay more attention. Almost every building in the city has something to offer, no matter how small or obscure a building may be.

Some of the lesser-known buildings in the least popular neighborhoods have areas of tremendous detailing that can inspire the design of an entire new development."