

Carsons restoration would make Sullivan smile

By Blair Kamin

Tribune architecture critic

The great Chicago architect Louis Sullivan lived a roller-coaster of a life, ascending to the heights of his profession with soaring skyscrapers and ideas, then plummeting to a hellish existence that found him penniless and without work when he died. This year, which marks the 150th anniversary of Sullivan's birth, is proving no different — a whirlwind-inducing mix of triumph and tragedy.

Less than two months after fire severely damaged the Pilgrim Baptist Church, originally a Chicago synagogue designed by Sullivan and his partner Dankmar Adler, the restoration of one of his masterpieces, the Carson Pirie Scott & Co. store at 1 S. State St., is nearly complete. Around 1948, the store's lidlike top, or cornice, was sheared off, disfiguring one of the city's and the nation's finest works of architecture. Now, as part of a more than \$60 million redevelopment that has turned the store's top five floors into rental offices, the cornice is back, along with recessed windows and columns that culminate in a burst of Sullivan's intricate, nature-inspired ornament.

For architecture lovers, the restoration is a revelation, like hearing the finale of a Beethoven symphony for which the music was long lost. But the job has implications that reach



Tribune photo by Nancy Stone

Ornate new column capitals are part of the restoration of Sullivan's masterful Carson Pirie Scott & Co. store at 1 S. State St.

far beyond the southeast corner of State and Madison Streets.

It proves that sensitive preservation architects and skilled craftsmen still can do this kind of thing, even though skeptics claim otherwise. And it adds further weight to the mounting body of evidence that the Pilgrim Baptist Church can be rebuilt. Last week, structural inspectors hired by the City of Chicago to address public safety issues said that major portions of the South Side church's remaining exterior walls are likely structurally sound and could be used in a future reconstruction.

The credits in the Carson Pirie Scott & Co. drama go to large cast of characters, headed by Wheeling-based developer Joseph Freed and Associates, which bought the building a few years ago and leases space back to Carsons. The cast also includes the preservation division of Austin AECOM of Chicago, led by principal T. Gunny Harboe and project architect Bob Score, as well as Chicago cultural historian and Sullivan expert Tim Samuelson, who served as a consultant.

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The restoration of the Carson Pirie Scott store has put back the building with recessed windows, ornate capitals and a decorative soffit.

SULLIVAN: Extremely gratifying restoration

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There are sculptors, fabricators and contractors who deserve thanks, too, along with city and federal officials, who provided tax increment financing and historic tax credits.

In addition to bringing back the cornice, the key players

have repaired or replaced damaged parts of the store's terra cotta cladding. And they have rebuilt the monolithic white tower on Carsons' roof that originally hid the building's ungainly water tower but is now purely for show.

Even if the project as a whole lacks the luster and completeness of Harboe's top-dollar, top-to-bottom, inside-and-out restorations of the Rookery and Reliance Buildings, it nonetheless stands as a significant and artfully executed work — a timely reminder of Sullivan's greatness. The job is to be completed in April.

A misconstrued maxim

Born in Boston on Sept. 3, 1856, Sullivan died in Chicago on April 14, 1924 at age 67. In between, he shaped both epoch-defining buildings and his profession's thinking. He was the one who demonstrated that skyscrapers could be soaring, vertical things instead of horizontal piles. And it was he who coined the maxim "form follows function," which modernists later twisted into a puritanical dogma of severe, spiritless buildings stripped of color and ornament.

Sullivan meant something entirely different, as his perceptive biographer Robert Twombly has shown: A building should grow like a tree from the seed of a single, governing idea. This was the philosophy that a precocious Sullivan assistant named Frank Lloyd Wright would turn into the mystifying notion of "organic architecture."

The Carson Pirie Scott & Co. store was Sullivan's last major urban work before his career and life went into a steep descent, the result of multiple factors, including changing tastes and his refusal to compromise. Designed without Adler, with whom Sullivan split in 1895, and