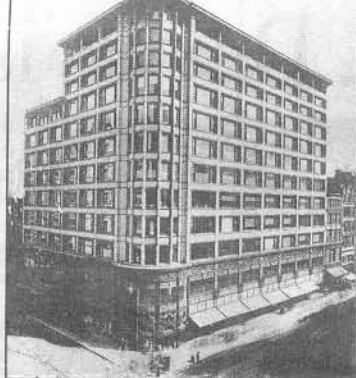


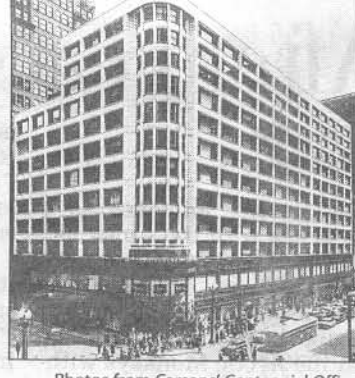
Tribune photo by Nancy Stone
Building's lid-like cornice, along



1904: Louis Sullivan's Carson Pirie Scott & Co. store began in 1899 as a nine-story section on Madison Street. In 1903, a 12-story addition wrapped around the State and Madison corner.



1921: By the 1920s, the department store's façade was sorely in need of cleaning. The store now stretched southward along State as a result of a 1906 addition by D.H. Burnham & Co.



Photos from Carsons' Centennial Office
1954: By the time Carsons celebrated its centennial, the store's exterior was cleaned. Its cornice was removed around 1948, giving the store an inappropriate streamlined look.

completed in 1903, the 12-story store was a revolutionary application of the fireproof, steel-frame construction Sullivan had expressed so poetically in his skyscrapers.

Its two-story base, with ornamental iron versions of vines, berries and flowers and garlands, wrapped around the store's latest wares like the frame of an old master painting — a perfect synthesis of art and merchandizing. The white terra grid of the upper floors carried the eye horizontally down State Street even as the rotunda at the corner of State and Madison flaunted a pronounced verticality, anchoring the building like a stake at the zero-zero point of Chicago's numbered street grid. Nobody ever turned a corner more beautifully.

All this culminated in the building's top floor, where recessed windows and ornate columns created an elegant open-air loggia. With bulging capitals resembling giant acorns or seed pods, the columns shot off final, ornamental fireworks before the thin, terra cotta cornice (so different from its heavily bracketed Victorian predecessors) made a crisp transition into the sky.

When Carsons took off the cornice around 1948, probably because it was falling apart, the recessed windows and ornate column capitals also disappeared. The topless look conformed to midcentury modern tastes, making the building resemble a streamlined object, all uniform and machinelike. The cornice no longer pressed down on the building, accentuating its rock around the block. Instead, the building's energy dissipated into the sky.

Putting back the top involved the usual detective work that preservationists do — gathering original drawings and old photographs, then searching

them for visual clues. But it also entailed educated guesswork because the historic documents revealed only the outlines, not the precise contours, of Sullivan's ornament.

"There was no image that said, 'that's it,'" Harboe recalled. There was a debate at one point: When in doubt, should the designers leave things out?

Fortunately, they decided to fill in the blanks, a wise move because they had guidance from Samuelson, one of the nation's foremost Sullivan experts.

He hauled out pieces of his extensive Sullivan fragment collection and even lay down on the floor so he could properly critique models of the new ornament. After all, like the stone gargoyles peering out from medieval cathedrals, Sullivan's topside terra cotta ornament had an exaggerated scale so it would appear to have proper proportions when seen from more than 100 feet below. The replacement pieces would play the same visual trick, even though they would be made of lightweight glass-fiber-reinforced concrete that is fastened to the building's steel frame.

Exquisitely layered spaces

The results are richly rewarding, whether you crane your neck from the sidewalk or have the privilege of inspecting the new top from the now-empty 12th floor, which the School of the Art Institute will occupy later this year. The State of Illinois already has filled the offices on floors 8 through 11.

From the 12th floor, behind windows that are now properly recessed, you witness firsthand Sullivan's ability to create exquisitely layered spaces. There, just outside the windows, are the elements that form the layers: the rounded columns and their delicate bands, the lush column capitals and the dazzling ornament of the overhanging soffit. Here, precisely as Sullivan intended, the ornament seems to grow naturally out of the building rather than being slapped onto it like a postage stamp.

Kudos to the sculptors who replicated Sullivan's ornament — Andrzej Dajnowski, director of the Conservation of Sculpture and Objects Studio in Forest Park, and Sten Eisentrager of Lincoln, Neb. Their work, consisting of clay models that were translated to rubber molds from which the pieces were made, is so skillfully done that it is almost impossible to tell the difference between new and old.

There are problems, however, and they include the occasional window divider that blights the fixed-pane portion of the building's three-part Chicago windows (as all architecture buffs know, the two flanking sides of these windows are operable). More troubling is the lack of restoration work on the building's

ornamental iron, which is rusting in spots.

The developers say that's Carson Pirie Scott's obligation, not their's. A spokesman for Carsons did not respond.

Still, those are quibbles. It is extremely gratifying to see this restoration done and done so well.

Every time a masterpiece like this is restored, it raises Chicago's visual IQ, encouraging tomorrow's buildings to be as good as yesterday's. Sullivan surely would have approved. While he put progress before precedent, he believed that the past served as a foundation for the future. The serendipity of this restoration is that it reveals his genius at the very time we most need to see it.

bkamin@tribune.com