

Three: 156 WEST SUPERIOR RESIDENCES

Chicago, Illinois

Miller/Hull Architects' light steel-and-glass mid-rise tower showcases an innovative exposed structural system.

By Blair Kamin

Architect: The Miller/Hull Partnership—David Miller, FAIA, lead designer; Kurt Stolle, AIA, project manager; Brian Court, Doug Mikko, project team

Architect of record: Studio Dwell Architects—Mark Peters, AIA

Client: Ranquist Development

Consultants: Thornton Tomasetti Engineers (structural engineers)

Size: 22,300 square feet

Cost: \$6 million

Completion date: July 2006

Sources

Structural system: Kingery Steel Fabricators

Exterior cladding: Peerless Products (metal/glass); Van Poppelen Brothers (masonry); Cerami Construction Company (concrete)

Roofing: Sika Sarnafil US

Doors: Vitralum Industries (entrances); Star Contractors Supply (metal doors); Stock Building Supply (wood and sliding doors)

Hardware: Schlage (locksets); Von Duprin (exits, closers); Arlinea custom (cabinet hardware)

Interior finishes: USG Sheetrock (acoustical ceilings and suspension grid)

Paint: Benjamin Moore

Floor and wall tile: Ann Sacks

Chicago's skyline boasts such muscular, structurally expressive towers as the John Hancock Center, the brooding, X-braced giant that is the city's Eiffel Tower. The 100-story Hancock was affectionately called "Big John" after its completion in 1969. Now it has a diminutive sibling, a nine-story condominium building by David Miller, FAIA, and Seattle's Miller/Hull Partnership that might well be called "Little John."

Miller once worked in the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill studio of Bruce Graham, FAIA, the architect of both the Hancock and the even taller Sears Tower. He freely acknowledges his debt to Graham and the Mies-influenced Second Chicago School of Architecture. Yet his building, known by its address of 156 West Superior, puts a fresh spin on this tradition, while offering a model of midblock infill design.

Program

Located in the gentrifying River North area, a few blocks west of Chicago's North Michigan Avenue shopping district, 156 West Superior was initially designed as a seven-story building that would slide just beneath the 80-foot limit where the costly provisions of Chicago's high-rise code kick in. But the developer, Ranquist Development, wound up adding two



stories because the economic benefits of the extra floors outweighed the added costs of sprinklers and other code-required features.

This shift improved the project's proportions, but the brief remained challenging: design a high-end, but not top-drawer, residential mid-rise for less than \$200 per square foot. Capturing unobstructed views in three directions, including prime south views of the Loop skyline, was essential to selling the units. And each unit would require its own parking space, a demand that has led developers of larger Chicago residential towers to plop their building atop street-deadening parking-garage podiums.

In addition to these internally driven requirements, Miller had to respond to the external needs of

architecture and urbanism: first, giving the building a presence that belied its Lilliputian size; second, making it a good neighbor on a mix-and-match block that includes weathered brick low-rises, a new condo high-rise, and an old Howard Johnson's motor court. The 11 condo units and 12 parking spaces were to be shoehorned into a narrow midblock site that measures 44 feet wide by 100 feet deep.

Solution

In keeping with the principles of the Second Chicago School, Miller and the architect of record, Studio Dwell Architect, made structure the essence of their solution, though their approach is loose enough to fit under the rubric of "relaxed rationalism."

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Blair Kamin is the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic of the Chicago Tribune.

A steel frame structural bay fully enclosed in glass lends scale and identity to the exterior of the building, which fits on a narrow lot in the revitalized River North district of Chicago. Balconies slide out like trays from the structure and aluminum mullions frame the window wall.

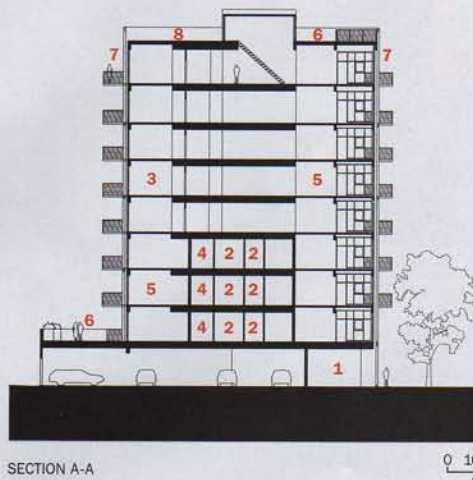
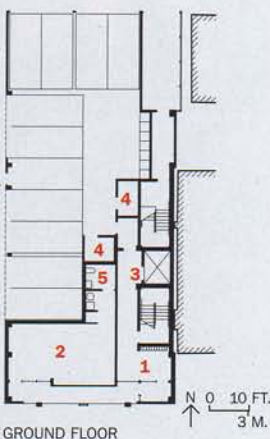




Steel-framed decks, enclosed with stainless-steel railings and louvers for privacy, serve as outdoor living rooms (left). Loftlike spaces with floor-to-ceiling windows are outfitted in sleek contemporary furnishings (below).



1. Lobby
2. Retail space
3. Elevator
4. Mechanical/electrical room
5. Bath
6. Bedroom
7. Walk-in closet
8. Living/kitchen/dining room
9. Terrace
10. Balcony
11. Mechanical area



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The main facades of the steel-framed building skillfully employ balanced asymmetry. A slablike end wall wrapped in standing-seam steel is matched on the other side by oversize, exquisitely detailed steel balconies. The composition gains added heft from the centrally located, wind-bracing exposed steel columns and diagonal tension rods, which are separate from the principal, weight-bearing structure. The end result satisfies the need for views, but with a robust urban presence and a sense of lightness and layering absent from more prosaic mid-rises.

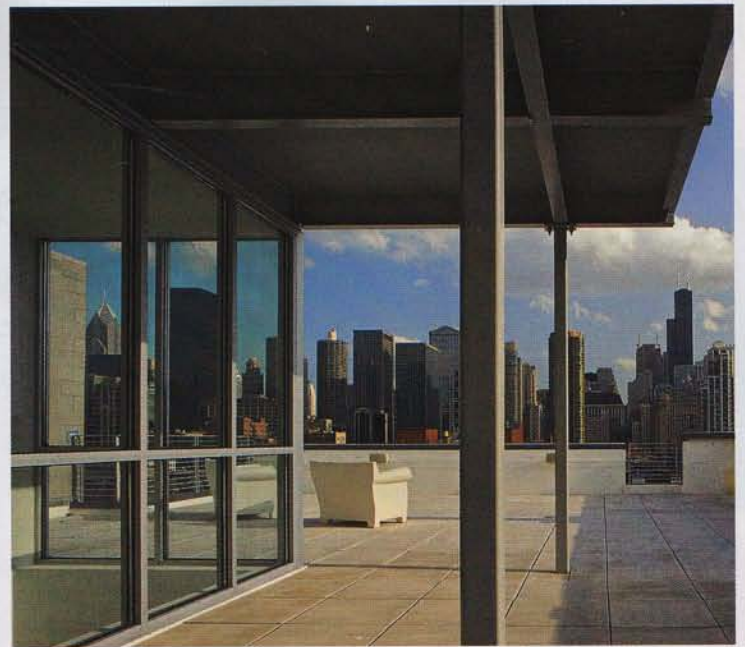
Miller configured the interior with equal deftness. To meet the program's economic demands, the building houses single-story flats, not multistory lofts. The light structure gives these units the feeling of urban tree houses. The 12 parking spaces, meanwhile, are accommodated solely at grade, not in a podium.

Commentary

While 156 West Superior uses an existing architectural language, it nonetheless plays with that language in creative ways, wisely tweaking a formal archetype rather than recklessly pursuing innovation for its own sake. Far from a slavish imitation of the Hancock Center, it is a light gem rather than a dark slugger—sinewy rather than muscular; street-engaging, not scale-shattering. This type does well by the city, though it is not faultless.

The expansion in the number of floors necessitated more at-grade parking, gobbling up space that was originally to be devoted to street-enlivening shops. In addition, the V-shaped steel tubes that complete the structural frame meet the ground somewhat awkwardly, partially blocking the pedestrian's path to the front door. But the scale, at least, is right for the street.

This mid-rise offers fresh evidence of the continued vitality of Chicago's legendary tradition of Modernism and serves as an example, at once architecturally striking and urbanistically sensitive, for other cities experiencing their own downtown development booms. ■



Ample deck space for entertaining is available on some floors (above). The open-plan interiors are airy, with abundant natural light flowing through commercial storefront windows (left). Kitchens feature contemporary Italian cabinets (below).

