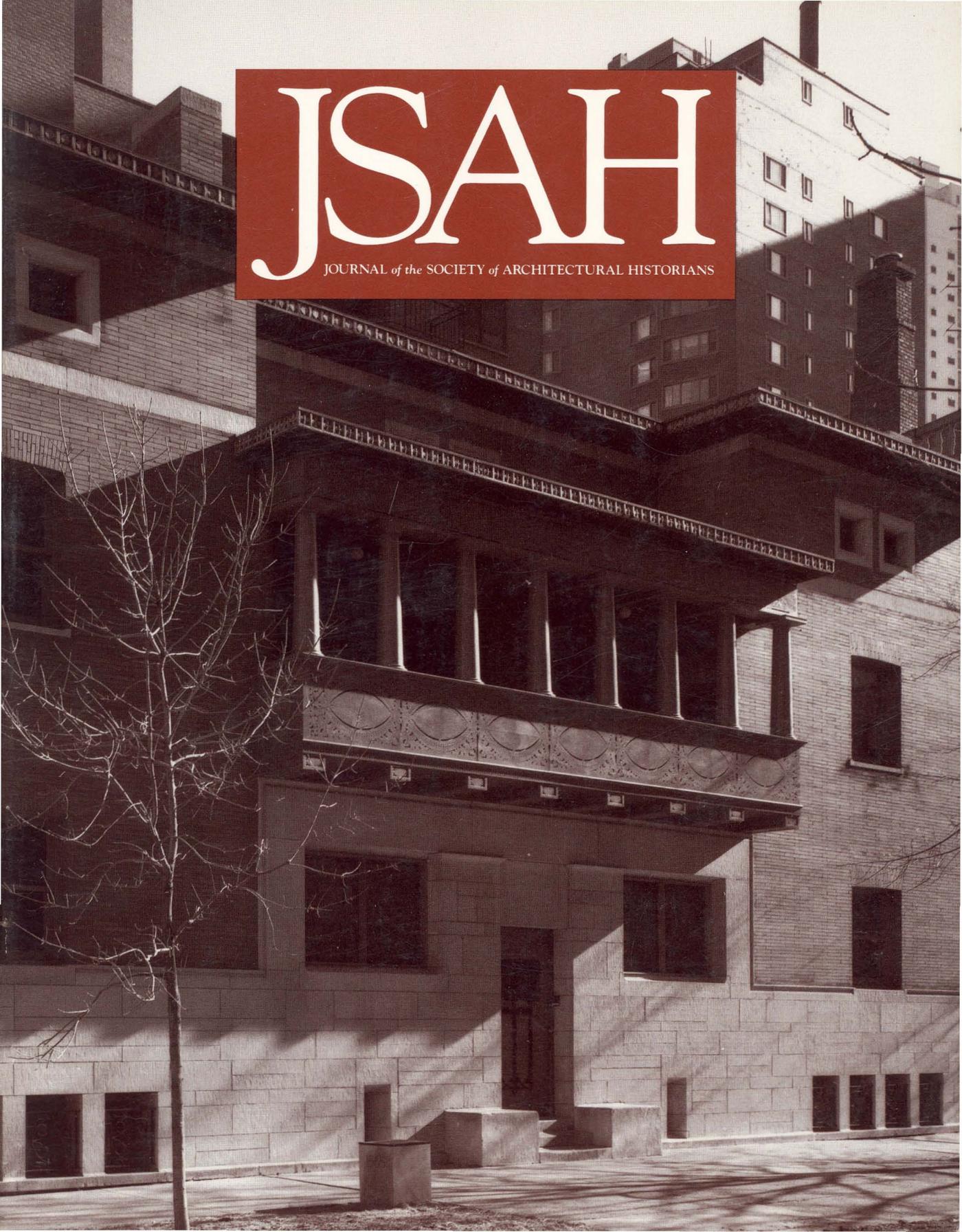


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The Charnley-Persky House

Architectural History and the Society

It has long been the dream of members of the Society of Architectural Historians to have a major work of American architecture as their headquarters. That day has come. In April of this year Seymour H. Persky gave the Society funds with which to purchase the James Charnley House at 1365 North Astor Street in Chicago. At their meeting in Seattle, the Board of Directors voted to rename the building the Charnley-Persky House in honor of this extraordinary benefaction. Mr. Persky's gift is one of outstanding generosity. He has given the SAH a landmark building of international importance and a model laboratory for architectural history, historic preservation, and urban history.

Most readers of *JSAH* are well aware of the significance of our new building. The Charnley House was designed in 1891 by the firm of Adler and Sullivan, where the commission was assigned to a rising junior member of the firm, Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright, indeed, later claimed that he alone was the designer of the Charnley House. But is that the case? Historians still dispute which architect had primary responsibility—our first puzzle—and weigh the importance of the building for the careers of these giants of American architectural history.

Could Sullivan deserve primary design credit for the building? Not generally known for his work as a domestic architect, Louis Sullivan nevertheless imprinted his ideas on the construction, massing, and ornament of the Charnley House design. Indeed, his experiments in tall office building and mausoleum design, specifically the Wainwright Building in St. Louis and the Ryerson and Getty tombs in Graceland Cemetery, Chicago, demonstrate the use of interlocking yet discrete masses in two very different building types that recall the Charnley commission.

But Wright's own projects in these same years bear remarkable similarities to the form of the building. In many ways, the Charnley House was a dress rehearsal for

the early phase of Wright's career as a domestic architect. The powerful centrality of the hearth, on axis with the front door, and the brilliance of the stairway design reveal elements of Wright's genius that appear in many later buildings. The house reflects, too, the regional consciousness that informed much of the domestic and other

architecture of the Chicago area and of the Midwest. At the same time, as Henry-Russell Hitchcock pointed out many years ago, the building also entered a national architectural discourse that came to a head in designs for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. The inset balcony at the second level of the Astor Street elevation is



Charnley-Persky House, Chicago, view of the stairwell. (Photo: Merrick, Hedrich-Blessing, Chicago)

a case in point. McKim, Mead, and White's Century Club building of 1891 incorporates the same motif but treats it in a vastly different manner. The ghost of Henry Hobson Richardson lurks here as well, through his designs for the Glessner House and the Marshall Field Wholesale Store in Chicago. The Richardsonian motif of the semicircular arch and the placement of the main stairway behind one of those ground-floor arches suggest that Richardson continued to influence the Chicago architectural scene.

The materials used in the Charnley House are also important, and a study of them tells us much about the building technology of the time. The Indiana limestone base, the tawny Roman brick of the upper stories, the wooden balcony and columns on the main elevation, the central skylight covering the middle third of the building, and even the Chicago common brick of the rear or east elevation of the building are characteristic of both Sullivan and Wright. On the interior, the beautifully carved mantelpieces in the drawing room and dining room recall the organic ornamentation employed by Louis Sullivan. The extraordinarily attenuated spindles of the staircase demonstrate oak stretched into screens of lines, making the stairwell itself an exercise in architectural sculpture.

All that beautiful woodwork is no surprise, of course, because the commission came from a family whose money had been made in the timber industry. James Charnley was a partner in the firm of Bradner, Charnley and Company and several successor firms. The Charnleys had built an earlier and larger house to the designs of Burnham and Root in the mid-1880s. Sullivan and the Charnley's were winter neigh-

bors in the coastal resort community of Ocean Springs, Mississippi, where Sullivan designed adjacent winter retreats for himself and the Charnleys in 1890.

Later users need consideration, too, in our model history laboratory. For example, two generations of the James Waller family, real estate developers with interests in buildings within this same block of North Astor Street as well as throughout Chicago, owned the house for the longest period of time, from 1918 to 1969. They made the most significant changes to the property, including extending the building to the south, expanding the kitchen, and adding bedrooms and sleeping porches. The renters who preceded the Wallers and the individuals and institutions that have followed them need to be studied too, to appreciate fully the evolution of this house and its environment.

The location of the Charnley-Persky House, at the corner of North Astor and Schiller streets, places the building in one of the most affluent neighborhoods of Chicago. The land on which the house stands was part of a larger parcel that Charnley purchased from Potter Palmer, whose mansion then stood on the eastern side of this block. Charnley subdivided his parcel and sold off lots to others, who built single-family residences and an apartment building. Thus, the mixed-scale pattern that is so apparent in this neighborhood today was established in the period of the house's construction. When the Astor Street Historic District was created in 1976 to prevent the construction of more tall apartment buildings, the single-family residential scale, admittedly established for a wealthy clientele, of most of Astor Street was preserved.

An extensive restoration of the building was completed in 1989 by the architect John Eiffler for the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill Foundation, which used the building as its headquarters from 1986 until 1994. Many important changes were undertaken in that restoration, most notably the removal of the wing that had been added to the south of the building in the 1920s. We are fortunate that most of the interior configuration has been maintained through the past century. But other projects remain for the SAH to consider. For example, paint research conducted at the time of the SOM restoration was not employed for the interior finish of the building.

How the SAH should preserve the Charnley-Persky House is now being discussed and debated and your thoughts and opinions are welcome. The board of directors passed a resolution at the meeting in Seattle clarifying that the building is to be used as our headquarters and not administered as a historic house museum. Nevertheless, as much as possible, we shall want to share this extraordinary house with all of you as architectural historians and enthusiasts for old buildings. How we accomplish these goals will be a balancing act to be choreographed in the months ahead. In any event, Seymour Persky has given the SAH a case study in architectural history with more questions than answers, or with many answers to some questions. Best of all, as the Society stretches to meet the challenges and opportunities our new headquarters poses, we will learn important lessons about the process and purpose of architectural history.

KEITH MORGAN

President, Society of Architectural Historians