

Jay Wickersham

# LEARNING FROM BURNHAM: THE ORIGINS OF MODERN ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE



Left: Daniel Burnham. From John Graf, *Chicago's Parks*, 62  
Right: Louis Sullivan and Wife. Photo: Chicago Architectural Photographing Co.

Over the past 100 years, the practice of architecture has undergone some radical shifts. Individual practitioners have, for the most part, been supplanted by firms. What used to be an art and a craft has evolved into a government-regulated profession. Like all revolutions, the fundamental transformation of architectural practice has represented both improvements and losses. But for better or for worse, this revolution in practice has been as profound as the Modernist revolutions in the aesthetics of design and the technologies of building construction.

Viewed from the perspective of history, contemporary models of practice start to look remarkably new and unstable. In the United States, modern conceptions of practice, like Modernism itself, first took recognizable form just over 100 years ago and were adopted as orthodox only after World War II. I will focus on two key developments: the professionalization of architecture and the emergence of large architectural firms.<sup>1</sup>

In both cases, the last century shows a sharp break with the past. Mary Woods's *From Craft to Profession* depicts the primitive state of American practice at the end of the 19th century. Architecture was entirely unregulated until Illinois passed the first licensing law in 1897. The New York–based American Institute of Architects was a small clubby organization. Dominated by East Coast establishment figures, it represented fewer than 10% of architects nationwide, and it opposed government licensing of architects. The nine university programs in architecture founded before 1900 graduated only a handful of students; almost all practicing architects had been trained on the job. Most architects practiced by themselves or with one or two assistants; larger firms had just started to appear in New York, Boston, and Chicago.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the practice of architecture is fully regulated in every American state. University education, offered in 117 accredited schools, has become almost the sole gateway into the profession.<sup>3</sup> The AIA represents about 60% of the nation's approximately 100,000 licensed architects,<sup>4</sup> and it is headquartered in Washington to more effectively lobby the federal government. Equally important, the practice of architecture has shifted from the individual to the organization. Large firms with a staff of fifty or more employ 44% of the architectural workforce and receive over 50% of the total revenues for architectural services—a figure that has more than doubled since 1972.<sup>5</sup> Building designs that are published and praised as the creations of individual architects such as Frank Gehry, Norman Foster, or Zaha Hadid are actually produced by large limited liability firms, employing hundreds or thousands of trained and skilled employees, and collaborating with dozens of

other firms in disciplines ranging from structural engineering to acoustics to specification writing.<sup>6</sup>

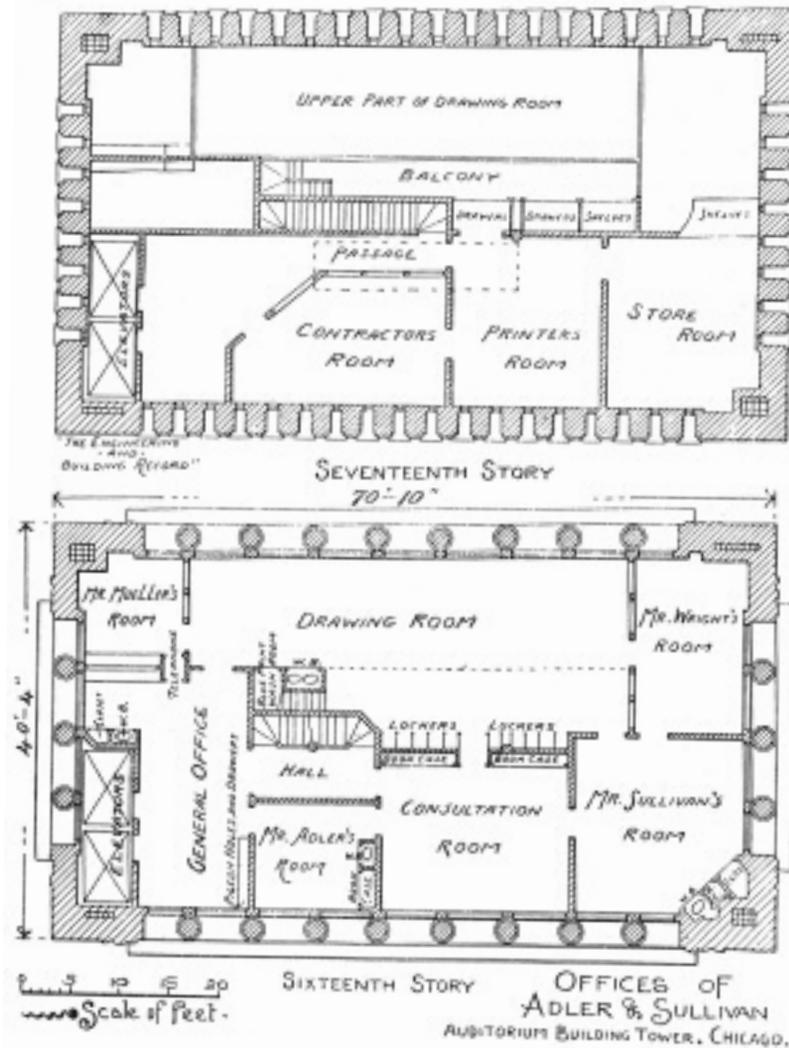
To see how these two developments in American practice came about, we must go back to Chicago in the 1880s and 1890s, where modern ideas of practice were born.

Chicago is a birthplace for architectural Modernism—both artistically, through the work of designers such as Louis Sullivan, John Wellborn Root, and Frank Lloyd Wright, and technologically, through the development of the skeleton frame and curtain wall. But Chicago is equally important to the development of modern practice and professionalism. Here we first find the combination of an outward-looking professional organization, governmental licensing based on education and examination, a standard legal form of owner-architect agreement, the opening of the profession to women, and large firms serving commercial clients on a national and international scale. The central figure in these developments was Daniel Burnham, the man vilified by Sullivan and Wright as the archenemy of progressive design. Yet Burnham should be recognized as the father of modern architectural practice.

### **The WAA model of practice and professionalism**

The Chicago concept of practice displays a confidence that artistic achievement, business acumen, and professionalism are not opposing values—each reinforces the others. Establishing this concept was the Western Association of Architects (WAA), founded in Chicago in 1884 as a rival to the New York–based AIA. During its five-year existence (the WAA merged with the AIA in 1889), the organization articulated a progressive program. Burnham was the first chair of the WAA's board of directors; Sullivan was the other director from Chicago.<sup>7</sup> Sullivan's partner, Dankmar Adler, chaired the important committee on legislation and served as WAA president in 1886; Burnham's partner, John Root, served as president in 1887.<sup>8</sup> After the merger, Burnham would win election as the AIA president in 1893.<sup>9</sup>

The proceedings of the second WAA convention, held in November 1885, deserve to be as well known as the CIAM charters, for they form a document with a comparable influence on how architecture is made today.<sup>10</sup> Adler, as chair of the committee on legislation, presented a proposed law regulating the practice of architecture. To receive a license from the state registration board, an architect would have to hold a college degree, have been trained for four years under another architect, and have passed the board's examination.<sup>11</sup> It would take more than a decade, but in 1897 a version of



Adler and Sullivan, *Auditorium Tower*, floor plan of the firm's office space, Chicago, Illinois, 1889. From Mary N. Woods, *Craft to Profession*, 117.

the WAA proposal was passed by the Illinois legislature as the world's first architectural licensing law.

Adler's committee also developed the first standard contract between architects and clients, including a clause protecting the architect's copyright in drawings.<sup>12</sup> This WAA document is the progenitor of today's standard AIA contract forms. And on the recommendation of Burnham and the board of directors, the convention unanimously voted to accept women architects as equal members—starting with Louise Blanchard Bethune from Buffalo, New York.<sup>13</sup>

One must view the WAA model of practice and professionalism in context. Chicago in the 1880s was a new phenomenon: one of the first fast-growing megacities, doubling in population every ten years. The real-estate market was wracked by boom and bust cycles. Government regulation of the building industry was lax or

nonexistent.<sup>14</sup> The competitive business environment stimulated the design innovations of Chicago architects. But it also meant the constant risk of fires and building collapses caused by shoddy construction, abetted by graft. Architects faced competition from builders who would offer clients cheap or free design services. In this world, financial success was the foundation of influence and power. Adler summarized the situation in a speech to his colleagues: "I believe in a business community like this, it is the body that appears to have the money that is respected.... If we wish to see the time when a person in order to practice as an architect must pass an examination, we must appear before legislative bodies, and before the public as men of standing, and we are not so considered unless we have demonstrated our ability to earn money."<sup>15</sup>

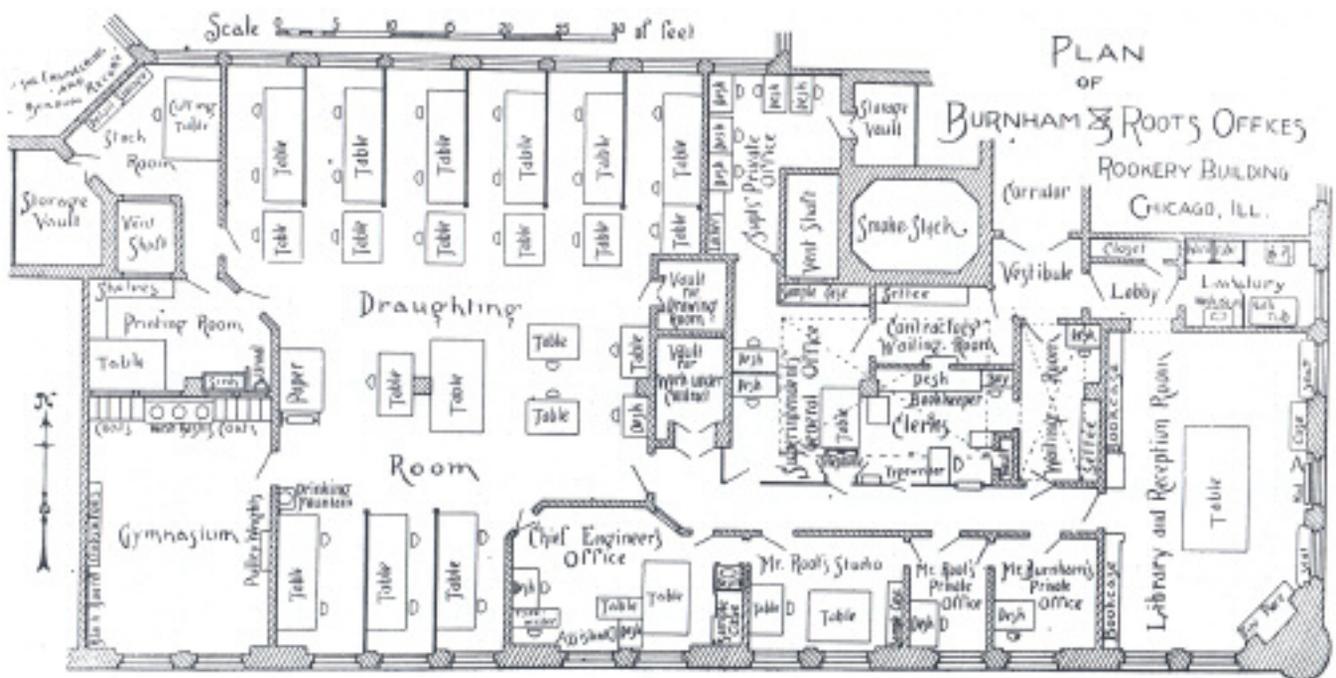
The WAA addressed these challenges with a shrewd mix of idealism and self-interest. Government licensing of architects would protect the public against shoddy design and construction. The WAA conventions showed a broad consensus that ethical standards should prevent architects from acting as builders, or taking payments from contractors and suppliers. The same ethical conception of architects as trusted, disinterested professionals would require them to act as fair and neutral arbiters in deciding job site disputes between owner and contractor, even if the decision might go against the architect's client.<sup>16</sup> Entrusting design to a regulated and ethical professional elite would raise aesthetic standards and accustom the public to demanding better design. The legislative committee report has a paternalistic tone: "We wish our fellow citizens to concede that we possess superior knowledge in our profession and to submit to our guidance in all matters relating to their building interests."<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, restricting architectural practice to a limited body of licensed professionals would strengthen their hand economically and support the push for a standard architectural fee schedule, to be set at 5% to 6% of the construction cost.<sup>18</sup> And by improving the business prospects of the profession, architects would gain the influence and power they were striving for.

### Burnham and large firm practice

Daniel Burnham's innovation in creating the first large national architectural firm was as important as his leadership of the WAA and the AIA. Other large firms emerged in late-19th-century America: McKim, Mead and White in New York may have been the first to have 100 employees.<sup>19</sup> But Burnham was unique in the range of his practice achievements. He recognized that firm management required complementary artistic, professional, and business skills, and he brought together a leadership team with the necessary mix of talents. At the staff level, Burnham applied mass-production principles of specialized labor and the sequencing of tasks, similar to those Henry Ford would develop for manufacturing. The European Modernists were fascinated with the implications of mass production and Fordism for building construction, but it was Burnham and his American contemporaries who understood the power of applying these principles to the design process.<sup>20</sup>

Burnham had little to show for himself in 1873 when he joined with Root, a recent engineering graduate of New York University, to found an architectural firm.<sup>21</sup> He had failed the entrance exams to Harvard and Yale; then he tried his hand, without success, at gold mining and politics. But once he partnered with Root, Burnham was



Burnham and Root, *Rookery Building*, floor plan of their top floor office space showing separate areas for management, administration, and drafting, Chicago, Illinois, 1888. From Mary N. Woods, *Craft to Profession*, 123.



driven by the vision that an architectural practice could become a large, successful business. Louis Sullivan grudgingly acknowledged that Burnham was the only Chicago architect to catch the significance of the movement toward “bigness, organization, delegation, and intense commercialism.”<sup>22</sup>

The complementary skills of the two young architects—Burnham and Root were only twenty-six and twenty-three years old, respectively, when they got together—formed the basis of their success. Burnham was the public face of the firm; he found and held clients and dealt with contractors. Root, more introverted, preferred to stay in his office and draw.<sup>23</sup> He was a fine designer, surpassed only by Sullivan, and an innovative engineer; he developed the system of mat foundations that made possible the construction of high-rise office towers on the poor bearing soils of Chicago’s Loop.<sup>24</sup>

Yet it would be an unfair caricature to view Burnham & Root as the partnership of a businessman and an artist. Root valued Burnham for his planning ability, his sense of spatial sequence and organization. Burnham also was a fine critic, able to pinpoint the weakness in a design and push his partner to improve it.<sup>25</sup> Most important, Burnham understood that the key to successful large-scale practice was to rely on the skills of colleagues and assistants. “The only way to handle a big business is to *delegate, delegate, delegate!*” he once snapped at his partner, when he saw Root getting bogged down in routine work.<sup>26</sup>

Even before Henry Ford’s realization of the production line, Burnham had hit on the value of organizing a large service firm around similar principles. The firm broke down its operations into specialized tasks, carried out through a sequential process that moved production through different departments.<sup>27</sup> An 1890 floor plan of the firm’s offices, located on the top floor of its most

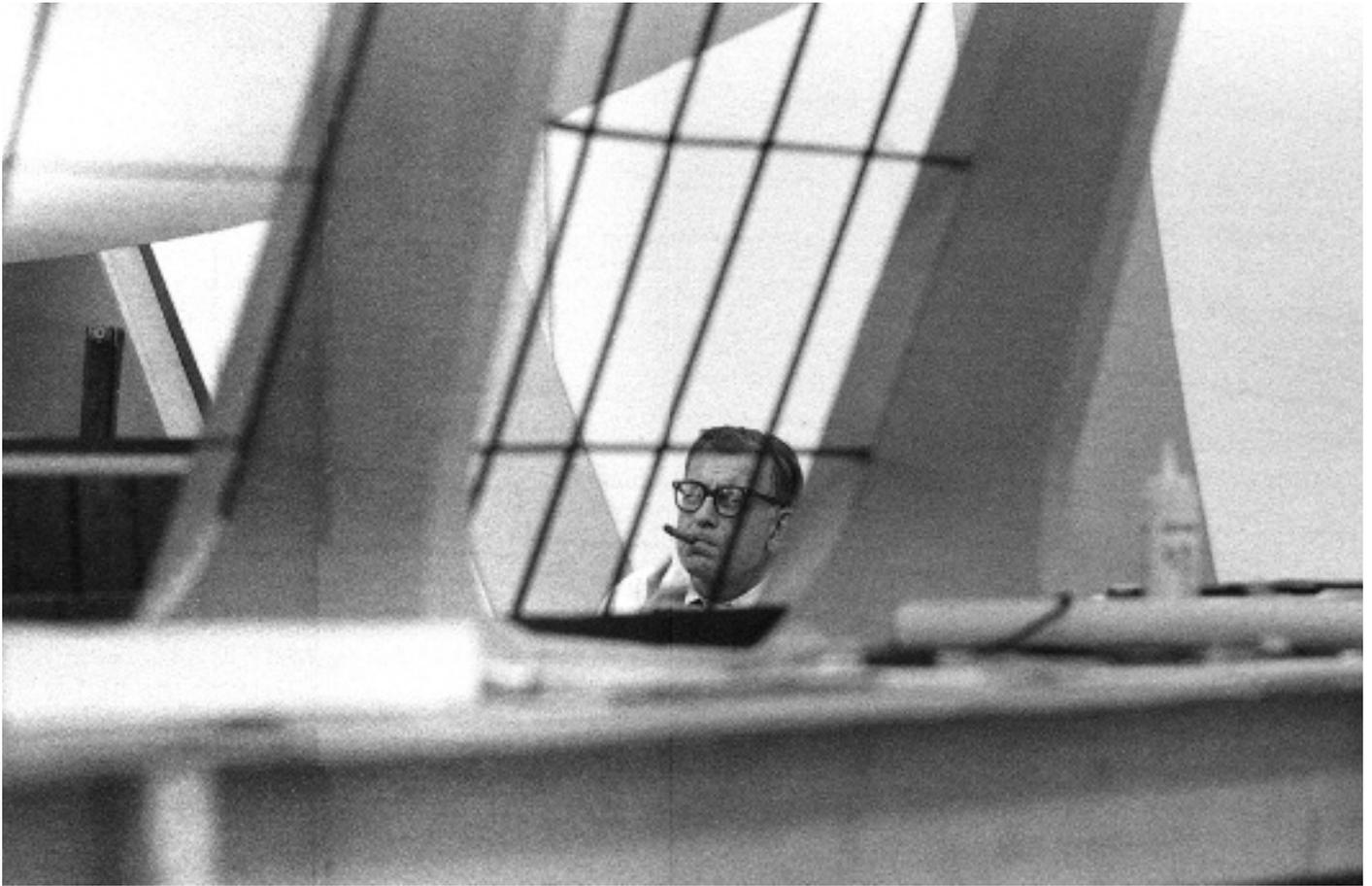
prominent building, the ten-story *Rookery*, shows separate areas for management, administration, drafting, engineering, and construction supervision. The firm’s early adoption of blueprinting allowed it to reduce its drafting staff from sixty in the late 1880s to twenty-four in 1893.<sup>28</sup> That reduction in labor costs must have helped the firm survive the severe depression of 1893. (There is no record of what happened to the laid-off drafters, who lacked college educations or family resources.)

In 1891, two years before the depression hit, Burnham had to weather Root’s sudden death from pneumonia just as the partners were starting to plan the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Burnham then showed that he understood the need for colleagues with complementary skills. His key hire was Ernest Graham, who had acted as the construction supervisor for the fair. Like his boss, Graham had no education beyond high school, but he was smart, aggressive, and extremely capable at dealing with everyone from clients to office staff to contractors. He soon became Burnham’s junior partner. In 1900, when Graham was offered another job and threatened to leave, Burnham increased his profit share in the firm, now named D.H. Burnham and Company, from 10% to 30% (later raised to 40% in 1905).<sup>29</sup>

Burnham and Graham together guided the firm to an unprecedented size and profitability. By 1912 the staff numbered 180<sup>30</sup>; D.H. Burnham and Company had surpassed McKim, Mead and White as the world’s largest architectural firm. The firm was also extraordinarily profitable; in that year the partners received a total of \$1.5 million in profits, the equivalent of \$30 million today.<sup>31</sup> (For sake of comparison, an experienced draftsman in this era would have been paid an annual salary of between \$1,250 and \$3,000.)<sup>32</sup>

The Burnham firm pursued a successful strategy of turning down residential and civic jobs and focusing on large projects that were functionally and technologically demanding: office towers, department stores, and railroad stations. By the early 1890s, its expertise in high-rise office towers had won commissions as far east as Buffalo and Cleveland and as far west as San Francisco. The 1902 completion of the *Marshall Field and Company Building* in Chicago, with its spectacular thirteen-story atrium, established the firm as a national expert: Commissions followed for the Wanamaker’s store in Philadelphia, Gimbels in New York, Filene’s in Boston, and Selfridges in London. The commission for *Union Station* in Pittsburgh led to railroad stations in Chicago and Washington.<sup>33</sup>

As the practice grew, the firm expanded geographically. When Graham secured the commission for the



Opposite: Gordon Bunshaft. Courtesy, Yale University Library  
Above: Eero Saarinen, ca. 1958. Photo: Richard Knight. Courtesy, Stout Publishing. © The Estate of Richard Knight

headquarters of the George A. Fuller construction company—the 285-foot-tall *Flatiron Building*, which was for ten years the world’s tallest building—he set up a New York branch office.<sup>34</sup> Around 1901 Burnham set up a short-lived office in San Francisco.<sup>35</sup>

But despite these innovations in firm management, there was one unsolved problem: Burnham was never able to find another designer who was Root’s equal. Burnham’s initial solution was to hire Charles Atwood, his principal design assistant for the fair. Atwood was a superb designer, responsible for the 1895 *Reliance Building*, the most delicate curtain wall building of its era. But Atwood was an alcoholic and an opium addict, and within two years Burnham had to let him go.<sup>36</sup>

In 1895, when it had become clear that Atwood was unreliable, Burnham approached the most talented designer around, Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright had recently been fired by Louis Sullivan: He was struggling to develop his own practice by designing modest suburban houses. Burnham’s offer was extraordinary: He would pay Wright his full tuition and living expenses to study for four years

at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, followed by two years in Rome.

Wright, as he later told the story in his autobiography, was strongly tempted. “I saw myself influential, prosperous, safe; saw myself a competent leader of the majority rule. That much faith I had in it all. There would be no doubt about that, with Daniel H. Burnham’s power behind me, if I qualified—and there was no doubt in my mind but that I could qualify.” But he said no.<sup>37</sup>

The offer to Wright shows Burnham’s ability to spot and pay lavishly for talent. It also shows that he was not threatened by the prospect of hiring the most original and headstrong designer of his era. Given Wright’s independent temperament, and the bitterness of his recent break with Sullivan, the story could hardly have turned out otherwise. Nevertheless, Wright’s refusal to take the design helm of D.H. Burnham and Company is one of the great “might-have-beens” of American architecture. What would have been gained and lost had Wright’s innovative genius been employed in the design of skyscrapers, train stations, and city plans, instead of private houses?

Burnham finally tried to fill the gap in 1900 when he hired Peirce Anderson, a graduate of Harvard and the École des Beaux-Arts, to head the firm's design department. Anderson was a more than competent designer, but the assessment by Thomas Hines, Burnham's biographer, still seems just. The firm's buildings were always well planned and well built, but after Root's death their architectural expression "ran the spectrum of relative excellence to meretricious excess."<sup>38</sup>

During his lifetime, Burnham delegated significant authority within the firm, and he gave a financial stake to its next generation of leaders, increasing the likelihood that it could survive his death. After Burnham's death in 1912, Graham and the other partners created a new firm, ultimately named Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, to continue the practice.<sup>39</sup> The successor firm continued to prosper through the early 1930s, with a staff of between 175 and 250.<sup>40</sup>

#### **The counterpoint: the dissolution of Adler & Sullivan**

The story of the Burnham firm shows the economic power of good management, but it also highlights how even the best-run firm can stagnate artistically when it is no longer led by innovative designers. As a counterpoint, the fate of Burnham's Chicago contemporaries, Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, shows what can happen when extraordinary design talent is undone by poor firm management.

In 1890, when Adler & Sullivan had just moved into new offices at the top of the seventeen-story *Auditorium Building*, the firm had a staff of perhaps twenty, less than half the size of Burnham & Root's. Yet the two firms were competing on equal footing for major commercial projects throughout the Midwest. The success of the *Auditorium*, the most ambitious mixed-use project in the country (it had a theater, hotel, shops, restaurants, and offices), had made its architects nationally known.<sup>41</sup>

Adler & Sullivan could rely on an even greater range and depth of talent than Burnham & Root. Sullivan was recognized as the finest architectural designer in Chicago. Adler was one of the city's leading engineers—his mastery of acoustics, heating, ventilation, and electrical lighting had won them the *Auditorium* job.<sup>42</sup> His chairmanship of the WAA's legislative committee showed his command of the business and legal issues affecting practice. Each partner could rely on a highly talented assistant. For Sullivan it was Wright, his chief designer, who had joined the firm in 1887. For Adler it was Paul Mueller, a structural engineer who would later collaborate with Wright for over twenty years.<sup>43</sup> Yet by 1895, Adler & Sullivan had dissolved. Neither partner was ever able to

practice with anything like the success they had enjoyed together.

Both Sullivan and Wright would later blame the decline of Sullivan's career on the shift in taste to Beaux-Arts classicism, associated with Burnham and the 1893 World's Fair. Others have pointed to Sullivan's alcoholism. But biographical evidence shows how Sullivan's proud, uncompromising temperament caused him to break with all of his colleagues. In so doing, he tragically destroyed his own practice and career.<sup>44</sup>

## **AFTER 1897, IT BECAME IMPOSSIBLE FOR INDIVIDUAL ARCHITECTS, EVEN ONES WITH SULLIVAN'S TALENTS, TO CARRY OUT A LARGE MODERN PROJECT WITHOUT SKILLED COLLABORATORS AND A FIRM TO SUPPORT THEM.**

Mueller was the first to leave, around 1891, for unknown reasons. In 1893 Sullivan quarreled with Wright over his assistant's supposed disloyalty in taking on his own house commissions. But these projects were an open secret. Wright's work for Adler & Sullivan had not suffered, and since the firm had stopped taking on residential projects, Wright was not competing with his employer. The better explanation is that Wright had paid off the \$5,000 loan Sullivan had given him to build his house in Oak Park, setting off fears in Sullivan that he was losing control over his brilliant young assistant. So he fired Wright, before Wright had the chance to leave him.<sup>45</sup>

The relationship between Sullivan and Adler was now strained, because Adler had taken Wright's side in the quarrel. In 1895, with the firm struggling in the prolonged depression, Adler broke up the partnership and left to take a well-paid position as chief engineer for a company that built grain elevators and other industrial structures.<sup>46</sup>

Adler soon realized that he had made a mistake and that he wanted to resume practicing architecture. But in the meantime, Sullivan had compounded the break. When drawings of the firm's last skyscraper, the *Guaranty Building* in Buffalo, were published, Sullivan took sole credit for the project as "Louis H. Sullivan, Architect."<sup>47</sup>

A few months later Sullivan published his famous essay, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” in *Lippincott’s* magazine. Here Sullivan claimed that the artist-architect is solely responsible for a creation that transcends the “sinister building of the speculator-engineer-builder.”<sup>48</sup>

Adler read Sullivan’s words as slurs on his own abilities and his role in the firm’s achievements. The breach between the two men was permanent.<sup>49</sup> They continued to practice individually, with decreasing success on both sides, until Adler’s early death in 1900. Sullivan never found another collaborator. After winning two major projects in 1897, the *Bayard Building* in New York and the *Schlesinger & Mayer Store* in Chicago, largely on the basis of Adler & Sullivan’s track record, he never completed another large commission on his own. It had become impossible for individual architects, even ones with Sullivan’s talents, to carry out a large modern project without skilled collaborators and a firm to support them.

#### **The mid-century codification of practice and professionalism**

It took over fifty years, but by the time the post–World War II building boom began, the Chicago model of practice and professionalism had become codified nationally. Even after the AIA-WAA merger, architects in New York and Boston continued to view registration laws as improper government interference with their gentlemanly profession.<sup>50</sup> In 1919, by which date twenty states had adopted such laws, the AIA as an organization finally took a position in favor of regulation.<sup>51</sup> In 1951 the last two state laws were passed: Architecture become a fully regulated profession nationwide.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, the system of certificates issued by the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) allowed architects to practice across state lines.<sup>53</sup> This system effectively maintained the entire country as a single market, allowing large firms like Graham, Anderson, Probst and White to compete for projects nationwide.

The AIA was also taking a more active role in the codification of practice. In 1909 it issued its first ethical code. In 1911 it finally followed the WAA’s lead and issued a model form of the owner-architect agreement, along with a revised edition of its model Owner-Contractor Agreement (first issued in 1888). This initiated the AIA’s policy of revising and reissuing these documents on a periodic basis, which has continued to the present.<sup>54</sup> In 1920 the first edition of the *AIA’s Handbook of Architectural Practice* acknowledged the shift to firm practice:

The Architect must play the role of creative artist, sound constructor, professional adviser, business administrator, and fearless judge. Unless endowed with such varied talents as are rarely to be found in one man, he associates with himself others differently gifted. While architecture as a fine art is an individual effort, architecture as a profession is generally a cooperative undertaking....

[A]s the Architect’s work year by year grows more complex, it can be dealt with only by an efficient organization, consistently evolving in harmony with new methods of business management.

The idea that the Architect’s creative freedom will be hampered by such an organization is entirely erroneous. If he relieves himself of the burden of business detail, the designer will be the freer to exert his creative and artistic talents.<sup>55</sup>

## **IS A WELL-MANAGED PRACTICE A HALLMARK OF THE ARCHITECT’S PROFESSIONAL CALLING? OR IS IT A NECESSARY EVIL THAT MUST BE ACCOMMODATED SO THAT THE ARCHITECT CAN “EXERT HIS CREATIVE AND ARTISTIC TALENTS”?**

But is a well-managed practice a hallmark of the architect’s professional calling? Or is it a necessary evil that must be accommodated so that the architect can “exert his creative and artistic talents”? The *AIA Handbook* can’t decide. These contradictory attitudes toward practice still trouble architects today.

The postwar codification of practice supported Burnham’s model of large-firm practice, with its emphasis on collaborative firm management and staff-level delegation and specialization. The flow of graduates from newly accredited architecture schools (student enrollments increased fourfold between 1935 and 1947)<sup>56</sup> provided a skilled workforce. Licensing laws, AIA fee schedules, and NCARB certification protected architects from price competition while removing barriers to

nationwide practice. AIA contract forms and practice manuals standardized the treatment of business and legal affairs.

Chicago continued to be the center of this movement. In 1936, when Louis Skidmore and Nathaniel Owings founded the firm that would become Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), their ambitions were Burnhamesque: “[T]o gain respect of the client, SOM had to be powerful, had to have national coverage.... To work, we must have volume. An efficient set of master builders can eat up a lot of work. Volume meant power. We would try to change men’s minds.”<sup>57</sup>

Like the Burnham firm, SOM organized itself into departments, with work moving sequentially through specialists in design, production, and construction. Like the Burnham firm, SOM concentrated on large and complex projects, especially high-rise office towers, where large-firm efficiencies could have the greatest effect. Like the Burnham firm, SOM nationalized its practice, setting up full-service offices in New York, Portland, and San Francisco. By 1958 SOM had become the first architectural firm with over 1,000 employees. And like the Burnham firm, SOM successfully managed

the ownership transition beyond its founders, to a second, third, and today fourth generation of firm leaders and owners.<sup>58</sup>

But where SOM surpassed D.H. Burnham and Company was in its ability to foster and reward top design talent. The best designs of SOM’s second generation is generally recognized as equal to work done anywhere in the United States: *Lever House* by Gordon Bunshaft; the *Pepsi-Cola Building* by Natalie de Blois; the *Inland Steel* and *John Hancock* buildings by Bruce Graham; and the *Air Force Academy* by Walter Netsch. Their achievements were rewarded by a wide distribution of ownership; by 1958 SOM had fourteen partners, with no single individual owning a controlling share.<sup>59</sup>

Meanwhile, one of SOM’s competitors, Eero Saarinen and Associates, was showing it was possible for a boutique firm led by a charismatic designer to apply the tools of modern practice and prosper, avoiding the fate of Adler & Sullivan. The Saarinen firm pioneered many of the methods used by today’s international “starchitects.” Saarinen had an eye for talent; leading architects of the next generation, including Robert Venturi, Gunnar Birkerts, and Cesar Pelli, apprenticed in his office. But like



Charles and Ray Eames. Courtesy The Eames Office

Burnham and unlike Sullivan, Saarinen was able to maintain long-term relationships with irreplaceable assistants, notably his chief designer, Kevin Roche, and John Dinkeloo, who oversaw production and construction supervision.<sup>60</sup> The office pioneered the use of new design and presentation tools: large-scale models and photographic montages.<sup>61</sup> Saarinen's wife, Aline, a former *New York Times* art critic, was a masterful publicist. Perhaps most important of all, Saarinen rejected the megafirm model and kept his staff relatively small; it was not until 1960 that the firm had reached 100.<sup>62</sup> He did this by relying on talented collaborators like the Eames Office, and by outsourcing document production to large firms such as Smith, Hinchman & Grylls in Detroit. Perhaps the greatest evidence of the firm's strength was its ability to survive Saarinen's sudden death in 1961, at age fifty-one, and successfully transform itself into Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates. Post-Saarinen designs such as the *Ford Foundation* headquarters in New York City show the firm's continued design vitality.<sup>63</sup>

### **Lessons and challenges from the history of practice**

The post–World War II codification of practice, which made possible the success of firms such as SOM and Eero Saarinen and Associates, represents the high point of the Burnham/WAA model of practice and professionalism. Since the 1960s, this model has been under attack from outside the profession. Antitrust lawsuits barred the AIA's use of mandatory fee schedules and the provisions of the ethics code that had prevented architects from competing on the basis of price. Design review and environmental regulations have imposed new legal standards that constrain the architect's design autonomy. Construction managers, interior designers, environmental consultants, and other businesses continue to encroach on what was once the architect's protected professional turf.

But the challenges to the architectural profession are not all external. There are two unresolved internal contradictions at the heart of the Burnham/WAA model. The first is the contradiction between the ideal of the independent professional and the reality of large-firm practice. Our schools, professional organizations, licensing laws, and ethical codes all tell us that architects are trained experts, given a special status by society in order to exercise their professional judgment in a fair and dispassionate manner. The architect is governed by duties and loyalties both to the client and to the larger public good.

But the recent history of architectural practice and the statistics on current and future trends tell us that the architect of the future is increasingly likely to be the

salaried employee of a large firm.<sup>64</sup> Burnham's vision of a future dominated by "bigness, organization, delegation, and intense commercialism" has come true. Professional duties and loyalties are all very well; but in the boom and bust cycles of the construction industry, getting and keeping a job or a commission can easily come first. We have to ask, What types of firm practice can encourage architects and staff at all levels to exercise their best artistic, professional, and ethical judgments?

The second contradiction is the split between practice and design. So long as architects see practice as a set of activities distinct from design, they fail to realize the possibilities of either. Practice, as Dana Cuff has pointed out, is much more than just the business and legal management of a firm. How a firm is organized, the set of skills brought together in its leadership and its staff, the technologies it employs, whether it chooses to grow or stay small—this is the soil in which design can either flourish or wither.<sup>65</sup>

History offers a rich set of case studies on alternative models of design-based practice. One intriguing example is the Office of Charles and Ray Eames: a small firm headed by a husband-and-wife team who saw architecture as just one aspect of designing the total environment and the flow of information. Their practice model had a financial underpinning: The Eameses could rely on a continuing revenue stream from licensing their furniture designs to Herman Miller. They used this funding to subsidize experimentation and research in fields ranging from product design to filmmaking.<sup>66</sup>

The history of practice challenges us to consider whether we should teach all aspects of architecture—from design to history to practice—as collaborative ventures and not just as individual achievements. It offers perspectives on what it means to be a professional and how conceptions of professionalism have changed over time. It allows us to examine different models of firm practice that can foster the highest quality of design. There is still a great deal to learn, and think about, and argue over in Daniel Burnham's story. ♦