

THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF CHICAGO

by Marlene Fanta Shyer

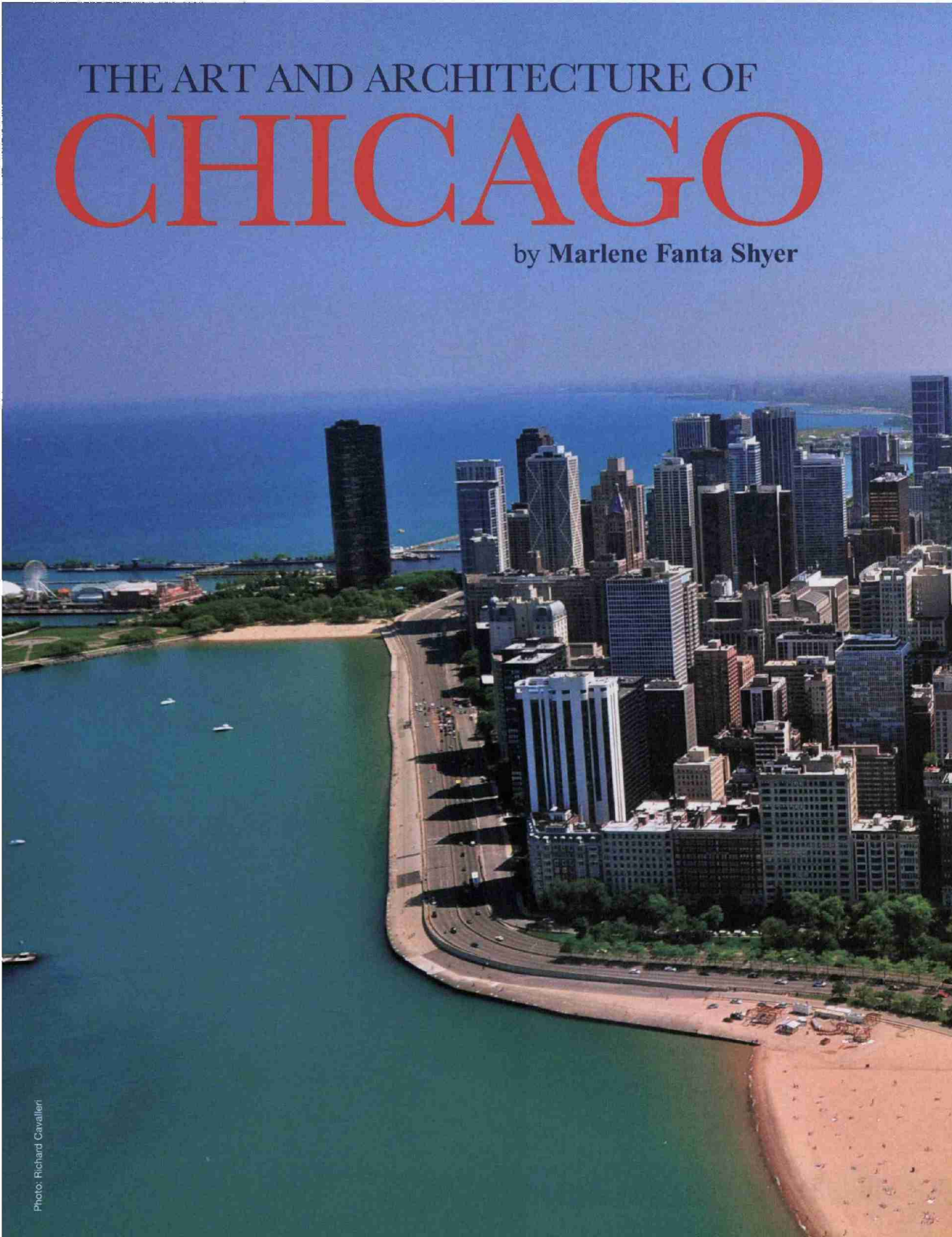
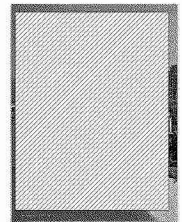


Photo: Richard Cavalleri





With its shimmering skyline, visionary theaters, and wall-to-wall art, Chicago has become the Midwest's gift to the 21st century. Architects, designers, and artists have made their mark on the city's restaurants, galleries, and even its commercial districts.

Formerly the Sears Tower, the view from the **Willis Tower Skydeck** (www.theskydeck.com) will now dazzle and challenge you; the panorama attracts 25,000 visitors a day. Here are glass-floored, glass-walled boxes that jut out safely from the building's steel walls. Called observation boxes, they dare you to step out 103 stories above solid ground and take a photo, get a better look, or perhaps propose marriage. Afraid of heights? Gaze from inside. Afraid of elevators? The Skydeck is 2,102 steps up.

For a teetotalers' dining experience, a pizza-and-salad dinner for two in a private alcove is available (no liquor license here yet) at \$100 per person, with the outside spectacle included. A \$23 breakfast is also available.

From an opposite perspective, the **First Lady Chicago River Cruise** (www.chicagorivercruise.com) asks you to look up. Ninety minutes on the riverboat features a lecturer with a mic who knows absolutely everything. He explains the differences between modern, art deco, and beaux arts architecture, giving a historical perspective and the backstory of Chicago's most iconic buildings. Glass-and-steel surface façades left and right reflect the sun, reach for the clouds, and are reminiscent of sci-fi movies.

The world's most famous architects have had a hand in creating the esthetics of this horizon, including Mies van der Rohe's austere **AMA Plaza** (www.amaplaza.com), Jeanne Gang's award-winning, futuristic **Aqua** (www.rentaqua.com), and Schipporeit and Heinrich's curvy **Lake Point Tower** (www.lakepointtower.org). That clever design was

created by fledgling architects in 1968, to provide both views and privacy from the structures' facing windows.

Hard to miss is the Burnham Brothers' **Carbide and Carbon Building** (www.hardrockhotelchicago.com), nicknamed the Champagne Building. It was built in 1929 of dark terracotta to resemble a Champagne bottle with its own gold-foil-like top. It does shine!

Nowadays, the busts of famous merchants line the riverfront esplanade of the Merchandise Mart, now just "**The Mart**," Chicago's famous mainstay. Once a distribution center for Marshall Field, its 25 stories and expanse of two city blocks reveal its current claim to fame as the world's premier design center. Head to the sixth and 14th floors to get high on cutting-edge furniture, tile, bathroom fixtures, and lighting, fit for the homes of potentates, and maybe yours. The marble-floored first floor is the place to pull up a chair and stop for a coffee or hibiscus apple cider at **Argo Tea** (www.themart.com).

Heading north from the Mart, get more of a designer-furniture fix in the **River North Designer District**. Along a generous stretch of North Franklin Street, you have great choices, including **Poliform**, that features international posh designers; **Luminaire**, with 21,000 square feet of glitzy lighting and furniture; **Minotti**, the "Made in Italy" brand with cutting-edge showrooms in every part of the world. Try not to miss **Orange Skin** (www.orangeskin.com). Founded by two local architects, the Chicago-only showroom features some unusual pieces like the chair that throws light, and sculptural items that use LED in original ways.

The **Hubbard Design Group** (www.hubbarddesigngroup.com), headed by African-American designer Christopher Hubbard, has its showroom here and is also Chicago only. Its Midwestern sensibility is preserved in its dedication to the finest of bespoke interiors, with specifications made to fit clients' needs. The Aranha console table is most impressive.



Photo: fli photo

The Chicago River and Downtown Skyline

Cloud Gate Sculpture in Millenium Park

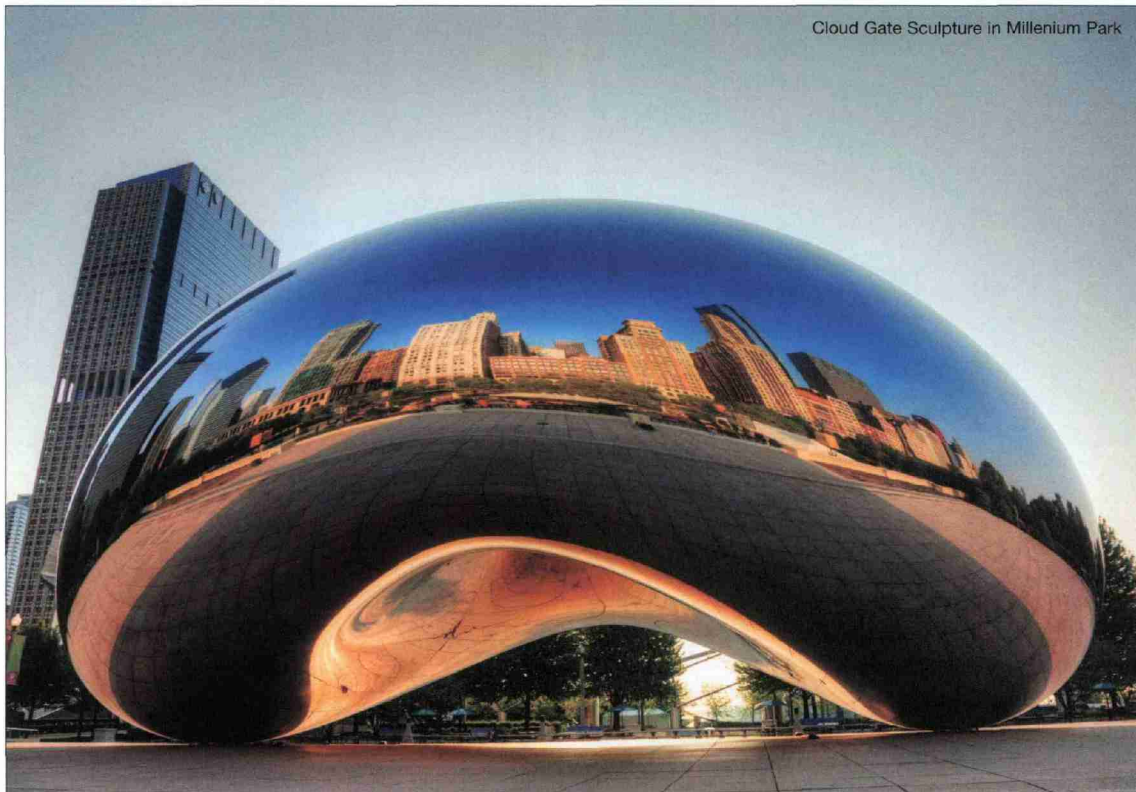


Photo: photoua

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Nearby, under the rumble of trains on the tracks above, are many fine art galleries. The **Gruen Gallery** (www.gruengalleries.com) is a good place to start, with four floors and 25,000 square feet mean there is diversity galore. Defining the art collection here is easy: Soup to nuts global contemporary and the price range is \$5,000 to \$20,000. The gallery is also an events space, so why not host your own wedding here? Talk to Lisa.

The **Echt Gallery** (www.echtgallery.com) focus is sculpture and the pieces here are all drama. Made of glass, beads, steel, clay, and what-have-you, expect the unexpected in this compact space.

The **Catherine Edelman Gallery** (www.edelmangallery.com) displays themed photography exhibits, and shares a space with the **Andrew Bae Gallery** (www.andrewbaegallery.com), which is devoted to the works of contemporary Asian artists, with an emphasis on Korean and Japanese works.

Also in this multilevel location, find the newest gallery, **Victor Armendariz** (www.galleryvictor.com) launched in 2017. The gallery exhibits "compelling contemporary art in a variety of media by both established and emerging artists."

California-native Armendariz says, "My husband and I were the first gay couple to be legally married in America!" They tied the knot in

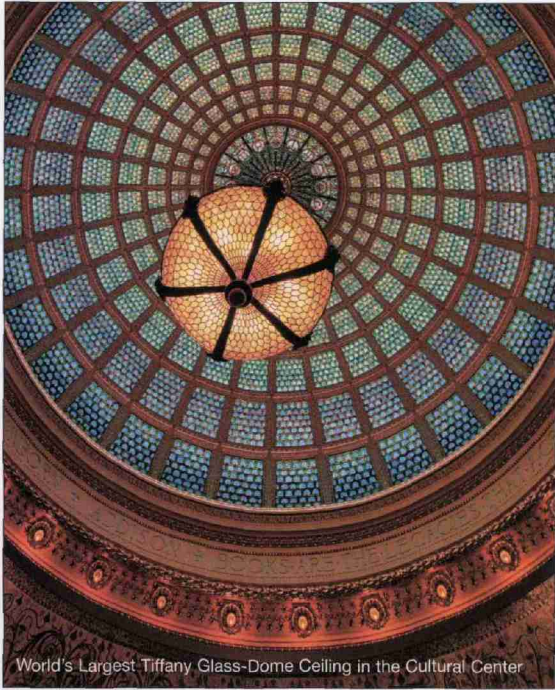
Provincetown in 2004. He's also proud to reveal that his gallery began with 25 artists and he now represents 40.

With 20 years of gallery experience, Armendariz is actually its sole owner, his lawyer husband works behind the scenes on contractual and other legal matters. They are both currently also involved in **Lambda Legal** (www.lambdalegal.org).

The wider world of painting and sculpture is represented at the **Art Institute of Chicago** (www.artic.edu), ranked one of the finest museums in the world, both for its architecture and "encyclopedic" range of art works. Aside from the celebrated works of French Impressionists, its imports are on exhibit from every region, many eras, and in all media. From a statue created in the 16th century B.C.E. to Yoko Ono's 2016 "Mended Petal" sculpture, you'll find it here, along with the museum's second floor masterpiece: Seurat's "A Sunday on La Grande Jatte."

The Modern Wing was designed by Renzo Piano (his gift to Chicago), and the third-floor museum restaurant is named for him. **Terzo Piano** (www.terzopianochicago.com) is bright white, with a futuristic vibe and an Italian-Asian sensibility.

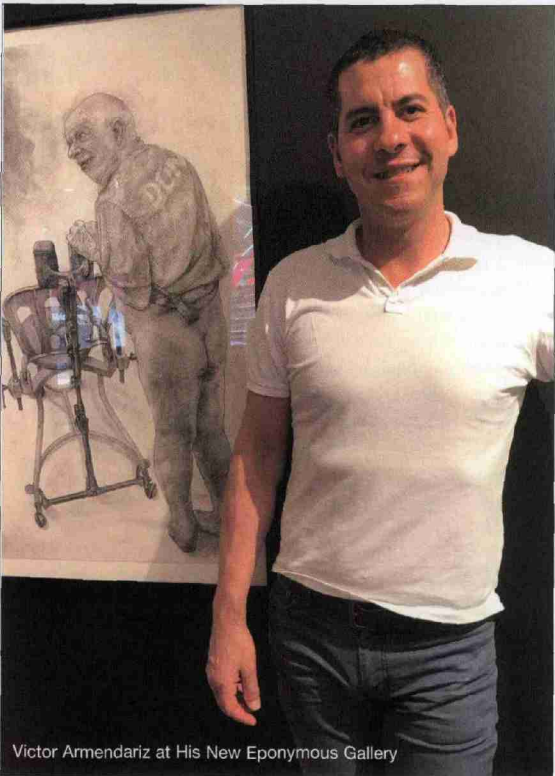
A stone's throw away is **Millennium Park**, reached through the



World's Largest Tiffany Glass-Dome Ceiling in the Cultural Center



Sushi Chair at Merchandise Mart Showroom of Fernando Campaigns



Victor Armendariz at His New Eponymous Gallery

Nichols Bridgeway designed by Piano to access the park from the museum. The park's most popular attraction is sculptor Sir Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate," a gleaming transcendental work of art, whose elliptical dome mirrors the sky and the world around it. Walk through it and find your image as part of the attraction as well. Now find your way to Frank Gehry's outdoor concert venue and hope for some free music, or walk through the **Boeing Galleries**, home of modern and contemporary art, or just chill in the tree-lined Wrigley Square section of the park.

Next to the Millennium Park Welcome Center sits the non-profit **Harris Theater** (www.harristheaterchicago.org), dedicated to the performance of music and dance, it is one of 200 live performance spaces in the city.

The newest theater, opened in fall of 2017 at the Navy Pier, is the exciting **Yard** (www.chicagoshakes.com), named for William Shakespeare's Yard in London, the pit where rich and poor alike had access to great performances. This premier namesake faces Lake Michigan and the skyline beyond, and includes innovative high-tech architecture that helps build a "dynamic interaction" between the audience and the performers. An electronic wall of glass welcomes theatergoers, monitors sun and shade, bathing the outer corridors in varying degrees of light. Inside is a 180-seat black box theater and the stunning new Yard auditorium. This venue has a unique system that allows huge sections of seating to be added or removed, and 510 audience members (or less) to be seated in various configurations. Grandeur does not begin to describe this tiered space that performs not only plays by the Bard but also current imports, original plays, musicals, you name it.

Gay Executive Director Criss Henderson has been instrumental in bringing this project to fruition. He calls it a team effort (it was built in three weeks in Montréal) "a collaborative innovation" and "a different experience, one of a kind." Ticket prices range from \$12 to \$87.

Photos: Marlene Shyer

In keeping with the “optics” of surrounding yourself with beauty at dinner, the Japanese restaurant **Izakaya at Momotaro** (www.bokagr.com/izakaya.php) is suffused with a contemporary warm glow. Shared plates are popular here and the quieter downstairs includes a wall-embedded TV showing subtitled anime movies, in silence.

Spanking new is **Marisol** (www.marisolchicago.com), with its fresh, modern face, in the Museum of Contemporary Art. Sarah Rinkavage is one of the city’s brilliant new chefs who plans to change the menu frequently, depending on what’s available. Meat, yes, but also “vegetarian friendly,” it hopes to be a popular neighborhood restaurant.

With its three-sided bar and hyper-lively atmosphere, **Promontory Café** (www.promontorychicago.com), a casual place with a south-of-the-border flavor, is a spot to enjoy a bloody mary or the crowd-pleasing chilaquiles at lunch or weekend brunch. Outside seating allows Fido, or leave him home and stay for a music show after dinner.

Recently opened and chockablock with murals and surprises is **EMC2 Hotel** (www.hotelemc2.com). Its glamour fits the **Chicago** design motif and is also a techie’s pure delight. A valet’s tutorial helps you understand your room’s esoteric light system, its many outlets for electronic devices, and even the gold plated shower handle. Room service is the surprise when Chloe arrives with fresh towels or shampoo. She’s made a few mistakes, bringing tampons to a guy’s room, but what can one expect from a beautiful robot?

The City Beautiful has made its point: Art is where you find it, but in Chicago, no matter where you go, it finds you. ■



Glass Bead Sculpture at Echt Gallery

Photo: Mariene Shyer



City Skyline from Art Institute of Chicago

Photo: Felix Lipov