

Ditka's says
'No to Drugs'

Page 3

RIVER NORTH NEWS

All he needs
is love

Page 4

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Masters of Design

By Debra A. Schwartz —

Let's talk about stairways. They're really only glorified ladders, right? A way to get from one level to the next. Simple. Why, then, do architects make such a big deal out of the design of a staircase?

For the art. Your living room or office is their canvas, structural materials are their brushes. Form and function is their motto, from facade down to scratch. It gives them something to show for their efforts. A kind of tribute, not unlike a statue in the park.

The architects in River North are no exception. A few have definite opinions about the art of their work, others are non-committal. "Imagination makes architecture art," explained Marvin Ullman of Marvin Ullman Associates, whose firm designed the interior renovation of 400 N. State, then moved into one of the offices. Part of the art, Ullman said, is "to respond to an individual's needs; at the same time, open up and give insight to alternative situations."

Yet the portly Ullman, speaking as if he were saying the profession's pledge of allegiance, added, "Design criteria does inhibit creativity, in the sense that nothing is perfect. There's very seldom a circumstance that is ideal."

"It's not like somebody hired you to do a painting," said Bill McBride, whose storefront office he shares with Jack Kelley at the corner of Wells and Illinois gives the ultimate feel of openness. The architects have chosen crisp pale blue walls with a hint of yellow for warmth. Matching bookcases divide the areas into a conference room, discussion of plans space and workspace, while one side of the main hallway looks like a gallery wall in the Louvre, covered with preliminary drawings, sketches and plans.

"After collecting data, then you can start to create," explains McBride. "It's not just a visual, it's also the art of function, image, understanding the budget, and sociological and psychological perceptions of space (e.g., how the design might influence people working in the space or walking by, etc.)"

Kelley, his freckled, redheaded partner, added that "architecture is more of a multi-dimensional art. There's never lesser attention paid to one aspect than another. The art is to be able to handle all kinds of requirements."

According to Stanley Tigerman, "if art



Architect Stanley Tigerman

isn't present in architecture, it's not architecture; but just because it is present doesn't make it architecture. Art is a

constituent factor helping to design something reasonably undefinable." Tigerman, a River North-based architect

well known for several buildings around town and around the world, including the Anti-Cruelty Society at Grand and LaSalle and the Poly Tech Institute in Bangladesh, says one of his personal design criteria is "to attempt to discover an American architecture intrinsic in who we are as a people."

River North newcomer Pete Landon said that "in the last ten years, there's been a lot of architecture on paper (drawings, finished sketches), which has been something that sells in art galleries. It's something that people have gotten famous from, not because they're good architects."

He uses post-modern architect Michael Graves as an example. "For a long time, he did beautiful designs and drawings and became a star; but it didn't get the buildings built. Now that he's actually done the buildings, I think the architecture is less powerful."

The very tall Landon, who worked side by side with "humanist" architect Harry Weese, later gained influence from Ben Weese while at Weese-Hickey-Weese in River North before hanging out his own shingle two months ago. His primary style is a carpentry look, very simple in its elegance.

Landon's fundamental influence, however, comes from his grandfather, Ralph Stoetzel, an architect he describes as "eclectic and romantic. He was a happy guy who made me believe the ideal could happen — that you can have a social consciousness and still be an architect in this day and age." Landon also admires the work of prairie school architect Walter Burley Griffin along with the philosophical and honest approach to materials taught by Louis Kahn.

While architects differ amongst themselves about architecture as art, Linda Searl of Quinn and Searl Architects, the only architectural partnership in Chicago comprised of two women, shares Landon's artistic desire to season architecture with social consciousness. "We draw from people in the past who were craftsmen. We draw from architects that weren't known but are still concerned with the particular styles and details peculiar to a culture and period," Searl said.

The current wave in architecture is away from the bare bones of modernism toward designs utilizing "vernacular;"

Continued on page 11