Chicago's Auditorium Building: Opera or Anarchism

Joseph M. Siry


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0037-9808%28199806%2957%3A2%3C128%3ACABOOA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Z

The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians is currently published by Society of Architectural Historians.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/sah.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Chicago's Auditorium Building

Opera or Anarchism

JOSEPH M. SIRY, Weslyan University

Few buildings in the modern period have been as closely identified with a city's architectural culture as Adler and Sullivan's Auditorium Building in Chicago, designed and built from 1886 to 1890 (Figure 1). Regarded as a definitive monument for its place and period, it is a work that did much to launch Chicago's reputation as a major center for modern architecture. The Auditorium Building has always figured centrally in accounts of Adler and Sullivan's oeuvre because of its technical and aesthetic virtuosity, both as a construction and as a theater. This study attempts to situate the Auditorium Building within the social history of Chicago in the 1880s, when the city's theatrical and musical culture was part of a larger ongoing struggle between Chicago's leading capitalists and property owners and a local working-class political movement for socialistic anarchism.

As an ideologically calculated response to its historic moment, Chicago's Auditorium adapted traditions of theater architecture and urban monumentality as these had developed in both Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth century. The building's planning and design answered to its social purpose. Such analysis of this pivotal work provides a different perspective on the phenomenon of the Chicago School of architecture with which the Auditorium is linked in the modern movement's historiography. The case of the Auditorium points up the need to examine not only the protomodern construction and expression of Chicago's commercial buildings from 1880 to 1900 but also their patronage.

NEW YORK CITY'S METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE

As its patron and architects later commented, Chicago's Auditorium Theater was designed partly in opposition to New York's original Metropolitan Opera House of 1881-1883. Unlike the Auditorium, the Metropolitan was paid for by individual stockholders who purchased boxes in the projected theater for their private use. As the Met's architect, Josiah Cady, explained: "In this country, where the government is not 'paternal,' aid has been found in another quarter: the wealthy, fashionable classes, who, even if not caring especially for, nor appreciating deeply the music, find [the opera house] a peculiar and valuable social feature. Its boxes afford a rare opportunity for the display of beauty and toilet[te]s. They also give opportunity for the informal exchange of social courtesies, being opened to select callers through the evening; the long waits between the acts especially favoring such interchange." This method of financing "in no small degree determines the size and character of the house," where provision had to be made "for accommodating liberally and elegantly the boxholders who have built this house, guarantee it against loss, and receive their special accommodations as a return for the same."

Appointed after a competition in 1880, Cady designed the original Metropolitan Opera House for a site 200 feet wide from Thirty-ninth to Fortieth Streets and 260 feet long from its front on Broadway back to Seventh Avenue (Figure 2). For this site, as Edith Wharton recalled, New Yorkers wanted "a new Opera House which should compete in costliness and splendor with those of the great European capitals." The chairman of the Metropolitan's building committee wrote that "there is not a Theater or Opera House in the country that can be taken as a model for what we intend to have." Before he became the Metropolitan's architect, Cady, although an accomplished organist and musician, had never designed a theater nor seen an opera and had never traveled to Europe. His appointment prompted him to tour European opera houses in 1881 prior to executing his final plans.

In Cady's built plan for the Met, the auditorium housed a ring of equally sized boxes in the tradition of La Scala in Milan (1776–1778) and Edward M. Barry's Covent Garden in London (1856–1858). However, the Met's larger auditorium was a slightly modified version of their horseshoe-shaped plans. To ensure good sight lines from boxes near the stage, Cady shaped the boxes as a lyre in a plan that flared outward where it met the stage. Indeed he named his original competition project "Lyre," alluding to the musical instrument of Apollo, the god of music, whose image appeared in the mural over the proscenium. The auditorium's large overall area and its distended curvature enabled Cady to include a total of 122 boxes in three full tiers around the horseshoe and an additional half
tier of boxes beneath the lowest full tier. This half tier of baignoire (meaning bathtub-like) boxes was near the stage, where the lowering of the parquet permitted its insertion (Figure 3). As in La Scala, each box at the Met had an anteroom or salon for receiving visitors. The box itself seated at most six persons, yielding a total capacity of 732 persons in boxes. Stockholders purchased outright only the boxes on the two lower full tiers. Those on the lowest half tier and the upper full tier were rented, at first for $12,000 a season. When the Metropolitan opened, newspapers printed diagrams showing who owned each of the boxes. To ensure adequate ticket revenues, the entire auditorium was to seat 3,045, making it larger than major European theaters such as the Paris Opéra, which had 2,156 permanent seats.8

To avoid competition among patrons, the Met omitted visually prominent boxes close to the stage in the side walls of the proscenium, which were characteristic of earlier opera houses. To make all the boxes equally desirable, “sight lines were drawn from every part of the house in each tier [of boxes] to the sides and the rear of the stage, to ascertain how much of the view of the stage would be lost from that point, and the contour of the auditorium and the pitch of each tier [of boxes] were modified in conformity with the results of these studies to the arrangement actually adopted.”9 In optimizing sight lines from boxes, the Metropolitan converted its wealthiest patrons “into a republic of oligarchs with no precedence among themselves, nodding on equal terms all around Olympus.”10

In 1966, before its closing and demolition, accounts of the old Metropolitan praised its acoustics, especially for the voice. Yet in its first season (1883–1884), the theater was deemed too large to be an acoustically optimal space because its huge volume made it difficult to hear performers (especially those with less strong voices) in the uppermost galleries.11 In addition, although Cady’s office prepared 700 drawings to adjust sight lines, such studies did not perfect the quality of views from seats in the balcony and top gallery above the three tiers of boxes. In the topmost gallery, only a fourth of the seats had
a view of the stage, while in the theater overall, 700 seats had only partial views of the stage. At the close of the Met's first season, one editor concluded that "the problem of providing over three thousand good seats—that is to say, seats in which all the occupants can hear well and see well—in a theater of which three tiers are given up to less than seven hundred people [in boxes] is an insoluble problem. The Metropolitan Opera-house is probably the last attempt that will be made at its solution."  

The Met's concept of audience determined the volumetric form of the auditorium. When viewed from the stage, the house appeared as an encompassing wall of box tiers. On the parquet, the seating rose in a shallow curve up from the stage. The total volume of space was largely determined by the three tiers of boxes. Above these, the old Met had a gallery and an uppermost balcony around three sides. Above the upper balcony, the ceiling had a height of 80 feet over the stage. The high ceiling demanded a tall frontal opening or proscenium consistent with the overall proportions of the room. Thus Cady's proscenium was as tall as it was wide, or about 50 feet in.
both directions, crowned by an attic, as shown in Figure 4. As one contemporary wrote, the need for boxes in many tiers increased the theater’s height to create “an enormous unoccupied space within the auditorium.” As a result, “the voice becomes diluted, its quality changes, and as the singer forces his tones to make them reach his distant hearers, half the pleasure is lost.”

Demands of patronage had resulted in a functionally compromised hall.

The style chosen for the Metropolitan’s exterior conveyed its institutional program. The building cost almost $1.8 million, exclusive of the land. No opera house of its size, or pretension, had previously been built in the United States. In Cady’s view, the interiors of such a building were so complex and costly in construction, equipment, and ornament that “there is little money left with which to make it a noble work of art, or a monumental work.” Thus it would be best “if the architect acknowledges the situation frankly, and meets it in a simple manner . . . following some honored and appropriate style, especially adapted to the economy he must exercise.” For the exterior, Cady chose a round-arched style centered on

FIGURE 3: Metropolitan Opera House, original interior showing parquet rows, lowest half-tier (boîtiers) boxes, three full tiers of boxes, and balcony below gallery. From New York Daily Graphic (23 October 1883)
FIGURE 4: Metropolitan Opera House, view of original stage and proscenium, showing frieze with central mural of Apollo flanked by individual figural portraits of the muses and paintings of "The Ballet" and "The Chorus" by Francis Maynard to either side of the frieze above topmost gallery. From Century Magazine 28 (July 1884)

a portico of three bays as the main frontal entrance on Broadway (Figure 5). To the sides were corner blocks that rose to seven stories. Only the first two stories were internally part of the opera house, articulated as such by larger windows. The corner blocks’ ground floors contained shops, with ballrooms and restaurants above on the second floor. Their rents were to supplement income from the theater, whose operations alone were not expected to be profitable. Additional income was also expected from the corner blocks’ upper stories, which were initially identified as apartments for bachelors. The residential corner blocks were crowned by a bracketed cornice and balustrade, so that the round-arched exterior style was distinctly Italianate, considered appropriate for a theater initially intended for Italian opera. Since funds were insufficient to allow employment of costly stone and marble, Cady’s walls were of a pale yellow brick with ornamental terra-cotta trim of the same color.

Cady’s fronts for the Metropolitan signified the idea of opera as a legitimate entertainment. In New York, opera was popular, with audiences acclaiming leading musical artists imported from Europe to perform Italian works since the 1850s. Yet some regarded these operas as so emotional in tone as to border on the disreputable as a form of public amusement. This view became dominant with changing repertoires of the 1860s, when plots of new operas gave greater emphasis to personal mores. To certify the Met’s social acceptability, its sober fronts were meant to contrast with those of the Casino Theater of 1882 (Figure 6), standing opposite on the southeast corner of Thirty-ninth Street and Broadway. Designed by Francis H. Kimball and Thomas Wisedell, the Casino was Manhattan’s main center for light opera and burlesque. This theater’s exterior was highly eclectic and picturesque. Its round corner tower and bowed loggia curving out above the arched entrance on Thirty-ninth Street combined with Islamic motifs to evoke exotic fantasy that bespoke the productions within. The loggia signaled the presence of a roof garden—the first space of its kind in Manhattan—intended for informal musical performances. By contrast, the Metropolitan was deliberately restrained to convey its purpose of housing grand opera. Communicating an appropriate urban character was a central issue for the Chicago Auditorium’s design, yet its founders had a different theater in mind, one shaped by their city’s social and cultural situation.
CHICAGO’S GRAND OPERA FESTIVAL AND ANARCHIST DEMONSTRATIONS

The old Met’s completion quickly stirred Chicagoans to act. Dankmar Adler recalled: “The wish of Chicago to possess an Opera House larger and finer than the Metropolitan, a hall for great choral and orchestral concerts, a mammoth ball-room, a convention hall, an auditorium for mass meetings, etc., etc., all under the same roof and within the same walls, gave birth to the Auditorium proper.”21 As Adler implied, Chicago’s building was to be broader in its program and range of purposes than the Metropolitan’s. It was also intended to be a theater and a monument responding to local urban conditions as these were interpreted by the project’s chief patron, Ferdinand W. Peck (1848–1924). His vision was a frame of reference within which Adler and Sullivan created the Auditorium’s interiors and monumental exterior.

Peck was the youngest son of Mary Kent Peck and Philip F. W. Peck, who came to Chicago from Rhode Island in the 1830s and gradually acquired a series of centrally located properties whose values rose with the city’s growth. When their father died, Ferdinand and his brothers, who were also instrumental in building the Auditorium, took over management of the Peck properties. By 1890 these holdings constituted most of the fourth largest private fortune in Chicago, with the Peck wealth estimated at $10 million.22 Devoted to a series of civic causes, Ferdinand Peck was a major supporter and president of the first Chicago Athenaeum, an urban college and cultural center for working people, which in 1890 moved into a building close to the Auditorium.23 By all accounts, Peck showed an unusual degree of concern for workers’ lives. His fortune was based on the rental values of family-owned urban real estate, so he was not a socialist. However, unlike many wealthier Chicagoans, he was neither an industrialist nor a merchant who dealt directly with workers or their associations. This relative distance from confrontations between capital and labor may have fostered his more charitable outlook. He had “always been
outspoken in his defense of the rights of workingmen, and he heartily despises all forms of snobbish aristocracy.” Another observer wrote that Peck was “very sympathetic towards the man who could not afford to indulge his propensities in the direction of culture without pecuniary aid.” This concern shaped his vision of the Auditorium, which drew on a broadly informed knowledge of theaters.

As the Auditorium was being completed in June 1888, Peck noted that “the thing had been in my mind a long time.” How long is unknown, although Peck was said to have traveled repeatedly to Europe, where he cultivated his lifelong enthusiasm for Italian grand opera. He was not the only wealthy Chicagoan to acquire culture from European travel. For example, Philo T. Otis, one of the key supporters of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and author of its history, noted the operas he had attended in an account of his European journey of 1873–1874. For Otis, as for many of his American contemporaries, the productions of the Royal Italian Opera Company at London’s Covent Garden were a prime link to European operatic culture. By the 1870s this was the home of the premier vocalist of the period, Adelina Patti, who also sang in New York and at the Auditorium’s opening.

Peck’s emphasis on democratic access to high culture in music and theater, especially opera, may have been based in part on familiarity with comparable European efforts that predated Chicago’s Auditorium. In France the revolution of 1789 had initiated a prolific development of popular theater in Paris, where numerous new buildings for public commercial theater were built before the Restoration. By 1847 the growth of Parisian popular theater had led to the creation of the Opéra National, whose repertoire, staging, seating, and pricing were intended to attract workers. A democratic ideal also informed Charles Garnier’s building for the Paris Opéra of 1861–1875, wherein the architect carefully orchestrated the spatial system of arrival and circulation to accommodate a range of ticketholders. A comparable goal informed the design of Parisian municipal theaters built under the Second Empire for popular audiences, where auditoriums were encased by rented shops and apartments. These included Gabriel Davioud’s Théâtre du Châtelet and the Théâtre Lyrique (the latter built for a reincarnated Opéra National) sited on the Place du Châtelet, commissioned in 1859 and inaugurated in 1862. Early in the Third Republic, Davioud designed the large Trocadéro Theater (1876–1878) as a popular concert hall where opera could also be staged. Built for the Paris International Exposition of 1878, the Trocadéro recalled the program and scale of the Royal Albert Hall (1867–1871) in South Kensington, London. This hall had a vast metal dome that recalled the scale of the Crystal Palace built for the Great Exhibition of 1851. When rebuilt at Sydenham in 1854, the Crystal Palace had also housed large-scale popular concerts.

As Roula Geraniotis has shown, perhaps the most direct architectural and ideological precedent for Chicago’s Auditorium was one of the most innovative new European opera houses, Richard Wagner’s Festspielhaus in Bayreuth. Its architects, Otto Bruckwald and Carl Runkwitz, worked with the theater’s technical director, Carl Brandt, to design a setting specifically for Wagner’s musical dramas. The project grew from the composer’s earlier collaboration with architect Gottfried Semper to design a comparable theater in Munich, which was never built. At Bayreuth, Wagner selected the site and specified the Festspielhaus’s plan. Built from 1872 to 1876, this famed hall featured an amphitheater-like sweep of seating designed to give spectators a broad view of the stage (Figure 7). The theater seated about 1,500, including the rear boxes and a rear gallery above. Bayreuth had neither a main foyer nor aisles running to the stage between seating groups. Instead, the audience entered through five doors on the right and five on the left. Each of these led to a certain number of seating rows entered from the sides, leaving an unbroken curvature of seating in front of the stage. As with Semper’s projects for Munich, the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth explicitly recalled the amphitheater-like shape of ancient Greek theaters. On one level, the architecture’s Classical allusion was consistent with Wagner’s ideal of musical drama rooted not in Italian court opera but in ancient Greek theater. On another
level, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus’s deemphasis of boxes in loges or tiers fulfilled Wagner’s aim to provide a more democratic and unified experience for the audience. In this goal, he was carrying forward Semper’s earlier intentions for his Court Opera House at Dresden (1837–1841). Similar democratic impulses had underlain the amphitheater-like main floor of Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s Royal Theater, or Schauspielhaus at Berlin (1818–1824), although both there and at Dresden, loges of boxes still predominated around the theater interior.33

The opening of Wagner’s Festspielhaus in August 1876 was an international event described in detail in New York newspapers. At least one project for the Metropolitan Opera House incorporated ideas from Bayreuth’s design, and, after its first season in 1883–1884, the Met adopted a program of German opera modeled closely on Bayreuth’s, hiring Wagner’s protégé to conduct performances in New York.34 However, the Met’s directors did not choose to build a theater whose form imitated Wagner’s at Bayreuth. Instead, by modeling the Met on Covent Garden and La Scala, Manhattan patrons chose the earlier tradition of court opera houses to which Bayreuth’s Festspielhaus had been opposed.

Peck was familiar with the major opera houses of Europe, many of which he visited with Adler during the late summer of 1888. Their itinerary included Bayreuth, among other German theaters. Louis Sullivan greatly admired Wagner, and many Americans traveled to see performances at Bayreuth. Yet Sullivan also presumably knew the Paris Opéra from his period of study at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1874–1875. Its exterior had been visible from 1867, near the rue de la Paix, where he recalled his pleasure in strolling and window shopping. The Paris Opéra’s opening as a theater on 5 January 1875 was a major national event, occurring before Sullivan sailed back to the United States in May. He later acquired Charles Garnier’s folio monograph on the building and similar publications on the opera houses of Vienna and Frankfurt.35 As Peck stated in 1888, “We’ve had the plans of all the leading opera houses and theaters of Europe in our architects’ offices from the beginning of the [Auditorium] enterprise.”36 He was ideologically opposed to the concept of an opera house primarily for the privileged classes, with its space dominated by private boxes. On 7 December 1889, two days before its theater opened, he wrote to the Auditorium’s 180 stockholders, who constituted the city’s capitalist elite, stating that the great opera houses of Europe, those of Paris, Vienna, Frankfurt, Dresden, Berlin, and Milan, “are all smaller in capacity, exclusive boxes occupying much of the space. They are built rather for the few than for the masses—the titled and the wealthy rather than for the people—lacking the broad democratic policy of providing for all which prevails in the arrangement of your Auditorium, thereby lessening the gulf between the classes.”37

This last phrase was rooted in Chicago’s deeply troubled social history of the years 1883–1886. A recession starting in 1883, with its sudden layoffs and wage reductions in many trades, had been the stimulus for a series of local labor actions, beginning with a city-wide bricklayers’ strike in the summer of that year. The focus of the strike was Chicago’s new Board of Trade Building then under construction at La Salle and Jackson Streets, the cornerstone of which had been laid in December 1882. Designed by William Boyington, the Board of Trade Building was then Chicago’s most massive commercial monument, with the city’s tallest tower (Figure 8). The building housed a legendary trading floor for grain and other commodities, while the leaders of its board controlled Chicago’s railway systems and manufacturing plants. This structure “was by all odds the most important project then under way, and the strike was looked upon as a challenge to the industrial and financial might of the city.”38

Although the bricklayers’ strike was unsuccessful, it did help to initiate a rapidly growing labor movement in the city. The most politically radical and visible arm of this movement was the International Working People’s Association (IWPA), whose leaders included Albert Parsons, publisher of Chicago’s main English-language socialist newspaper, The Alarm. Parsons and his allies advanced a utopian ideal of anarchism as an alternative postcapitalist society based on freedom, brotherhood, and equality. As a part of the international anarchist movement, the IWPA opposed not only oppression of working people by propertied classes but also ideas of authority, privilege, and hierarchy in culture as in politics. An important part of the IWPA’s program in Chicago was the nurturing of a working-class counterculture that would provide a prerevolutionary model of the future utopia they envisioned. Toward this end, the IWPA organized orchestras, choral groups, theater clubs, concerts, dances, lectures, and plays as politically motivated alternatives to their bourgeois counterparts. For

![Figure 7: Otto Bruckwald and Carl Runkwitz, with Carl Brandt, Festspielhaus, Bayreuth, 1872–1876, showing scene from Richard Wagner, Das Rheingold, at theater's opening night, 13 August 1876. Drawing by L. Bechstein](image-url)
indoor events, workers rented local auditoriums, especially Turner Hall on the North Side and Vorwärts Turner Hall on the West Side, both located outside the central city, where middle-class theater buildings and music halls predominated. In workers’ halls, an ongoing series of musical and theatrical fêtes focused on revolutionary rhetoric and anarchistic speeches. The events were consciously intended as socialistic rituals, offering politicized working people a collective identity not found in bourgeois theater and music.  

The IWPA’s cultural program was not only an alternative to capitalistic entertainment but also to the nonpolitical and much decried amusements and leisure activities prevalent among workers throughout Chicago. These were detailed in the writings of religiously inspired middle- and upper-class social reformers, such as George Wharton James’s *Chicago’s Dark Places* (1891). There were politically conservative trade unions with their own programs of socially conventional entertainment. Yet James and others described a widespread poverty and demoralization represented by saloons, brothels, and general public immorality throughout the city’s peripheral districts where most workers lived. These areas housed many smaller theaters and music halls that were closely tied to alcohol and prostitution. James painted a bleak picture of the lewd entertainments staged at these theaters as evidence of an alarming degree of social degradation.

Capitalists like Peck and anarchists like Parsons both sought to provide alternatives to cheap, nonpoliticized, and depraved amusements for Chicago’s workers. Both also valued the symbolic dimension of control over highly visible public space in the city. Their alternative visions were apparent in two events that took place in late April 1885. The first, organized by Peck, was the Chicago Grand Opera Festival, inspired partly by the new Metropolitan Opera Company’s performances in Chicago in January 1884. The Met’s manager, Henry Abbey, had brought a large orchestra and chorus. To support his touring productions, he had charged what were widely regarded as “unreasonable and extortionate” prices “which in Europe no one would have the temerity to demand,” for “in older countries the lover of music, however poor in this world’s goods, may hear great singers at a trifling expense.”

One editor asked why Chicago should not “have constantly within the easy reach of all classes of its citizens these ennobling divers[is]es? Music halls and art galleries, accessible to the poorest, promote peace and good order, elevate the general social tone and abound in all exalting influences.”

In this context, Peck was a leader in incorporating the Chicago Grand Opera Festival Association in April 1884. A key ally was a local composer, Silas G. Pratt, editor of a booklet that described the association’s aims. Presumably alluding to the Metropolitan’s opening in October 1883, Pratt wrote: “Those who have observed operatic events for the last decade in America, have noted the gradual withdrawal of Grand Italian Opera from the enjoyment and patronage of the masses, and its limitation as a luxury to the favored few of wealth and fashion.” Peck’s association was organized “primarily to remedy this evil, and provide Grand Opera *for the people* at popular prices, within the reach of all, and, at the same time, to raise the performances to a higher standard of excellence.”

The only building in Chicago able to provide seating for an audience large enough to allow the festival to cover its costs was the Inter-state Industrial Exposition Building in Lake Park, on Michigan Avenue at Adams Street. Constructed in 1873, this building had repeatedly been identified with the city’s capitalistic elite as a site for commercial expositions, music festivals, and national political conventions. However, the hall’s enormous interior dissipated the sound of vocal artists. Such poor acoustics inhibited its ability to fulfill the social goals of music festivals, whose large choruses were intended to provide a spiritually uplifting experience for audiences.

For the Opera Festival of 1885, Peck hired Adler and Sullivan to refit the Exposition Building’s north end. Adler built new interior walls to lessen the room’s volume, so that “the entire opera hall will be inclosed, and also the stage.” He also built a massive sounding board extending upward from the stage’s arched proscenium and outward 80 feet into...
the auditorium (Figure 9). Fan-shaped seating focused on the stage. Adler’s sounding board ensured that the least strong voices of singers would carry to the rear of the house, so that, as Peck asserted, “the seats most remote from the stage are in as good hearing as those near the stage.” Sullivan designed ornamental art for the sounding board in \textit{papier-mâché} as extensions of the elaborate theatrical scenes on the stage, thus making “the auditorium itself an attractive feature of the festival.”

In this setting, two weeks of grand opera were staged, including Italian, French, and German works. More than 8,000 people attended each performance, including Chicago’s wealthy citizens as well as those with modest incomes. Peck and the festival’s guarantors were “prominent citizens who are willing to assume any loss which may occur in order that the people may have opera at reasonable prices.” The lowest-priced ticket for a reserved seat in the main balcony cost one dollar for a single performance. During the Met’s opera tours before 1885, Chicagoans had “constantly complained that they have been kept away by the high prices, and that they could not afford to pay all the way from $3 to $6 for a seat.” For the Grand Opera Festival, “the action of the association and the public spirit of the guarantors have now made it possible for them to attend fourteen performances for $12 by buying season seats, and to obtain the best seats in the house for the season for a little over $2 a performance. If they fail to avail themselves of this extraordinary privilege they will have no right to complain in the future.” With such low-priced tickets for general admission, the festival attracted a total of 115,000 people, yielding receipts in excess of $170,000, which enabled the association to cover costs of the productions and to refit the hall. Local taste was educated, and the audience for grand opera broadened. At the end of the last performance, Peck, in response to repeated calls to the stage, came forward and declared that the festival “had shown what Chicago would and could do, and he hoped that people would look upon this as a stepping stone to a great permanent hall where similar enterprises would have a home. The continuation of this annual festival, with magnificent music, at prices within the reach of all, would have a tendency to diminish crime and Socialism in our city by educating the masses to higher things.”

Peck spoke those words on 18 April, just ten days before Parsons and others led the most dramatic socialist demonstration Chicago had yet seen. Since 1883, the IWPA had staged massive urban workers’ parades that wound their way through the streets. Lines of 3,000 to 4,000 workers marched to music, carrying and waving flags of socialist groups. These events reached a climax in response to the Board of Trade Building’s dedication on 28 April 1885, three days before the annual workers’ May Day parade. On the evening of 28 April, Parsons led a protest march to the Board of Trade to disrupt the inaugural banquet. Singing an anarchistic adaptation of the “Marseillaise,” the workers approached what they termed the “Board of Thieves” who had erected a “Temple of Usury.” When police lines blocked their approach at every street, the workers marched around the building, then rallied elsewhere, where leaders decried poverty amidst wealth.

Such demonstrations continued through the spring of 1886, when Parsons led a May Day parade down Michigan Avenue, past the future site of the Auditorium. The year be-
fore, he and others had led Sunday-afternoon labor meetings on the lakefront at the foot of Van Buren Street, almost directly east across Michigan Avenue from where the Auditorium was later built. In the spring of 1886 the workers’ cause focused on the eight-hour day, an idea supported by the American Federation of Labor, which declared that it should go into effect nationally on 1 May 1886. Strikes and other demonstrations followed in an effort to force employers to yield. It was in this context that the labor rally at the Haymarket, an urban square on Chicago’s near West Side, took place on the evening of Tuesday, 4 May 1886. As leaders addressed a crowd, police arrived and ordered the group to disperse. A few moments later, someone (never identified) hurled a bomb of dynamite toward the police. After the explosion and ensuing gunfire, seven officers and at least four civilians were fatally wounded, with scores more seriously injured.54

The shock of the violence at Haymarket devastated civic morale throughout Chicago, whose labor movement retreated in the face of a wave of reactionary rhetoric and legal action. Part of what made the anarchist movement so threatening to propertied Chicagoans was its foreign element. For example, the city’s oldest extant socialist newspaper was the German-language Chicagoer Arbeiter-zeitung, launched in 1876 and edited by two leading anarchists, August Spies and Michael Schwab, who were tried for the Haymarket bombing. As many of Chicago’s workers were of German origin, their native language was often used in the radical speeches and banners prominent at anarchist gatherings.55 Thus Haymarket represented an urban society divided not only along class lines but also between foreign and native-born. Newspapers other than those with socialist leanings, and most clergy, condemned the violence. More broadly they decried the depth of social division within the city. The Reverend David Swing, whose liberal ministry Peck supported, earlier saw the need for a symbolic counterweight to structures like the Board of Trade Building, noting, “There is perhaps only one city in the world having a population of half a million along whose streets no traveller or citizen can find a single structure built by local benevolence. Chicago has the honor of being that city.”56

The Origins and Planning of the Auditorium

Less than four weeks after Haymarket, Peck outlined his vision of a permanent Auditorium Building at the Commercial Club’s first meeting after the tragedy, which addressed the topic “The Late Civil Disorder: Its Causes and Lessons.”57 As a leading organization of businessmen, the Commercial Club had been founded in the fall of 1877, shortly after the railroad strikes of that summer.58 Peck detailed his proposal for the program, siting, and financing of a new civic structure, “a large public auditorium where conventions of all kinds, political and otherwise, mass-meetings, reunions of army organizations, and, of course, great musical occasions in the nature of festivals, operatic and otherwise, as well as other large gatherings, could be held.”59 No such facility then existed in the city, and public funds would not be available. There was sufficient local private capital to pay for construction, but to cover operating costs, the building had to have “sufficient area to produce adequate rentals out of improvements attached to and surrounding the auditorium.”60 The Auditorium Theater would be encased by a hotel, rentable shops, and offices.

Peck offered his vision not only within the context of Chicago’s response to Haymarket but also as part of an ongoing effort to improve the city’s cultural life. In the spring of 1880 the Commercial Club had devoted a meeting to “the fostering of art, literature and science” in Chicago. Another session was devoted to “the cultivation of art, literature, science, and comprehensive charities, and the establishment of art museums, public libraries, industrial schools and free hospitals” attendant to the commercial prosperity in great cities.61 In the early 1880s one of the club members, Nathaniel K. Fairbank, the primary supporter of the construction of the Central Music Hall in 1879, had initiated the idea of an opera house and public hall. Adler, who had designed the Central Music Hall as his first independent theater building, worked with Sullivan on studies for Fairbank’s opera-house project. As Sullivan later recalled, it did not progress to effective fund-raising because of its perceived elitist appeal.62 In proposing the Auditorium to the Commercial Club within weeks of Haymarket, Peck was offering a version of his friend Fairbank’s earlier idea, but broadening its civic purposes in response to the sense of urgency brought on by the recent violence. The political situation in the city lent support to Peck’s aim of recasting the opera house, a type of building long associated with urban elites, into a novel kind of structure aimed at the cultural inclusion of workers.

By May 1886 one of Peck’s allies had acquired an option on a set of contiguous properties that would become the core of the Auditorium Building’s site at the northwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Congress Street, then the southern limit of Chicago’s commercially developed center. In Peck’s view, this was “the only place available” for an auditorium “which will fulfill all the requirements,” meaning sufficient area for revenue-producing appendages and a central location providing access by streetcar from all parts of the city.63 To have sufficient funds for land rental and building construction, Peck organized the Chicago Grand Auditorium Association in July 1886 to provide a corporate framework for the issuing of stock in the enterprise. He led the effort by pledging $100,000, with $30,000 more from the Peck family. The next largest stockholder was Marshall Field ($30,000). Adler and Sullivan, who had been making studies for a permanent auditorium since 1882, also purchased shares in the amount of $25,000.64
By January 1887, when construction began, the Auditorium Association had increased its capital stock to $1.5 million. Peck sought to broaden the base of stockholders to include all classes.65 Citizens subscribed to the project without “any financial inducement being held out.”66 Peck wrote that the aim was “the benefit and elevation of the public, and to add to the glory of our city—the public spirit and liberality of citizens being necessary here to produce what governments build and support in other countries.” His purpose was “not to create a commercial enterprise.”67 For Peck, the paradigm of a state effort was the Paris Opéra, which he disliked. He did not refer to Parisian municipal theaters built, like the Auditorium, for popular audiences and encased by rented shops and apartments.68 Instead, he compared the Auditorium to European state opera houses. Even if the Auditorium were to be privately and locally funded, Peck believed that it would attain the status of a national monument like major European opera houses.69

Unlike the Metropolitan’s stockholders, purchasers of shares in the Auditorium did not acquire a box because, as Peck originally envisioned the theater, it would contain no boxes. The Met’s boxholders were the guarantors against the annual losses of the theater, which was never expected to be profitable. In the Auditorium, sizable hotel and office revenues were to be the theater’s guarantors against loss. Peck elected not to follow the Met’s operating plan for both financial and ideological reasons. In its first season of 1883–1884, the Met’s boxholders had agreed to guaranty the theater’s manager against a possible loss of $60,000. After the season of sixty-one performances, the Met amassed a loss of at least $250,000, due in part to initial high costs of scenery and costumes. Also, seats other than boxes were priced too high to fill the house. As Adler recalled, the Auditorium, with its larger theater and encasing spaces, was to be “self-sustaining, and not like the Metropolitan Opera House, a perpetual financial burden to its owners.”70

Peck had also consistently opposed boxes as a symbol of those differences in social class that had been so sharply drawn in Chicago, which the Auditorium was intended to lessen. Its lack of boxes “was [Peck’s] idea, for he has no belief in privileged classes, and regards the Metropolitan Opera House of New York, where the whole structure is sacrificed to the boxes, with infinite scorn and patriotic dislike. This was a repetition of effete European ideas, and if there was one thing he impressed upon the architects, it was that he wanted the Auditorium to represent the present and the future and not the corrupted past.”71 Although Peck initially preferred no boxes, their conventional place in Chicago theaters presumably led to the inclusion of forty boxes in the Auditorium Theater as finally built. However, these were set to the sides of the theater in two tiers above the parquet, and even the most frontal boxes were set well back from the proscenium. The boxes were also open to one another, unlike the Met’s, which were separated by partitions. The Auditorium’s lower boxes formed an arcade, while upper boxes had only posts between them (Figure 10).72 In all, the Auditorium’s boxes, which individual Chicagoans bid to possess for a season, accommodated about 200 people, or less than five percent of the theater’s total seating.73 As Sullivan said: “We are democratic in America and the masses demand the best seats. The boxes, you see, are on the sides and do not furnish the best possible view. In the imperial theaters the boxes are closed and take up all
the best part of the house. Those occupying boxes in America desire to be seen, probably, more than they desire to see.74

Sullivan’s position corresponded closely to that of Adler, whose views appeared in an essay on the theater probably written shortly before his death in 1900. Adler argued for a progressive view of architecture, meaning that older building types like theaters should adapt to modern social changes by avoiding nonfunctional historical conventions. He wrote that in 1800 just one kind of theater had been “common to the civilized world. The typical characteristics of its auditorium were: level or nearly level pit; high surrounding walls masked by many balconies and galleries; a ceiling raised high above these high walls by the interposition of an entablature or cove, or of both; within the ceiling a dome rising high enough to allow the main central chandelier to be hung above the line of vision of the greater part of the audience; and a proscenium fashioned and decorated according to the rules conventionally accepted for the proportions of a doorway in a palace of the period of the Renaissance. Almost the entire nineteenth century has lapsed, and theater design is still dominated by reverence for this historically transmitted type.”75 Adler advocated “non-historical theater design,” for “neither historical nor conventionally aesthetic considerations justify the use of forms and types which do not adapt to practical requirements.”76

In Chicago’s Auditorium, Adler sought to provide views and acoustics of similar quality for all patrons in a room whose 4,237 seats would make it among the world’s largest spaces of this type. Such a capacity, with a large number of inexpensive seats, was meant to ensure financial viability and democratic access. The theater was a rectangle, measuring 118 feet wide by 178 feet deep from the stage’s front to the foyer’s rear. The site permitted a main entrance only on the south side (Figure 11). The Auditorium’s different concept of audience shaped its interior appearance. The Metropolitan’s interior read from the stage as an encompassing wall of box tiers. The Auditorium’s multiple aisles and tunnel-like passageways leading into them from the rear foyers recalled vomitoria—a term Adler used—like vaulted entrances to Roman amphitheaters (Figure 10).77 In theater planning, he advocated a maximum number of narrow aisles (rather than fewer wide aisles) for facilitating egress in case of fire. A maximum number of aisles also resulted in a larger number of aisle seats, which were the most desirable. On the main floor and balcony, no seat was more than seven seats away from an aisle.78

Horizontally, the Auditorium’s deep rectangular plan enabled inclusion of a large number of seats in two sections of seating on the main floor: the parquet near the stage and the parquet circle farther back from the stage. The seating in both directions was set in “generous sweeping curves.”79 Adler did not specify these curvatures, but Figure 12 shows that they are segments of circles. He did not center seating rows at the stage’s front, and as a result, the rows did not reflect sound back to its source on the stage front, thus avoiding echoes there.80 In the theater, the central point of the circle from
which the arcs of the parquet rows are swung is at the stage’s rear center (Figure 12, a), while the central point of the circle from which the arcs of the parquet circle rows are swung is behind the first parquet row (Figure 12, b). At the parquet circle’s frontal sides, the curvature of the seating rows reverses, becoming convex rather than concave relative to the stage to ensure optimal views of the stage from these lateral seats (Figure 12, c). As Adler wrote, the main balcony (Figure 13) was elliptical in plan. Rows have a broad, shallow curve yielding superb views of the stage from the 1,429 seats on this high level.

Vertically, as Charles Gregersen showed, Adler adapted the ideas of John Scott Russell in order to calculate the steep rise in seating rows of the main floor (17 feet from front to rear). Adler had first used this method in the Central Music Hall of 1879, which was the auditorium where Ferdinand Peck regularly worshiped as a supporter of the hall’s main tenant, the Reverend David Swing’s Central Church.81 Ascending rows enabled observers to see and hear above the heads of others directly in front, as shown in the section (Figure 14).82 The resulting banked tiers of seating rise impressively from the stage up through the main floor, continuing into the balcony and galleries, the topmost of which has an extreme slope of forty-one degrees. From the uppermost row of this topmost gallery, one clearly hears an unamplified singing voice from the stage. As Adler said, “[T]he acoustic properties of the house are such as to permit the easy and distinct transmission
of articulated sound to its remotest parts.\textsuperscript{83} Tickets for this uppermost gallery were initially priced at one dollar, the same as the least expensive tickets for the Chicago Grand Opera Festival, whose theater was also to enable acoustical access for the least wealthy.\textsuperscript{84}

The Auditorium’s design contains a number of features that indicate Adler’s interest in ancient Roman and Greek theaters as functionally viable models for modern theaters. In referring to the Auditorium’s tunnel-like passageways as vomitoria, Adler implicitly recalled the prototype of the Roman Colosseum, the only ancient theater to which he referred in his writings.\textsuperscript{85} Known for its efficiency of circulation, the Colosseum was also elliptical in shape. Adler and Sullivan’s use of the ellipse in designing the balcony floor and ceiling arches of the Auditorium recalled a preference for this form for theaters by European architectural writers since the late eighteenth century. For example, Gottfried Semper, whose studies of theater design with Richard Wagner provided one basis for the latter’s Festspielhaus at Bayreuth, had also believed in the advantage of the ellipse for the projection of sound.\textsuperscript{86}

Adler’s essays on theater design echoed ideas propounded by the Roman architect Vitruvius. His analysis of the acoustically optimal design of theaters remained a standard reference before the matter received sustained scientific inquiry beginning in the late eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{87} Vitruvius endorsed the idea of raising tiers of seating to optimize acoustics. To avoid the problem of spectators blocking sound from those behind them, he advised that “it should be so contrived that a line drawn from the lowest to the highest seat will touch the top edges and angles of all the seats. Thus the voice will meet with no obstruction.”\textsuperscript{88} Citing Vitruvius’s writings on acoustics in his discussions of the topic, Adler described it as a phenomenon of concentric waves of sound that emanate from a source, just as the Roman architect had described the transmission of sound in ancient theaters, where seating rows were set in concentric rings around a stage. Like Vitruvius, Adler maintained that sound waves travel outward from a source until they are obstructed by an object. To enable sound to flow unobstructed, “ancient architects, following in the footsteps of nature, perfected the ascending rows of seats in theatres from their investigations of the ascending voice,” endeavoring “to make every voice uttered on the stage come with greater clearness and sweetness to the ears of the audience.”\textsuperscript{89} Thus, in adapting Scott Russell’s isacoustic curve, Adler reworked a
principle of design that he knew from Vitruvius's description of Classical theaters.

Adler’s contemporary, architect John A. Fox of Boston, had articulated the rationale for modern American adaptation of ancient Classical theater design. In a lecture of 1879 Fox noted that the term “theatre” was derived from the Greek word signifying “to see.” He cited James Fergusson, then perhaps the most widely read English architectural historian, who wrote that the Greeks “hit on the very best form in plan for the transmission of the greatest quantity of sound, with the greatest clearness, to the greatest possible number.”90 Fox proposed a modern adaptation of a Greek theater plan (Figure 15) that anticipates Adler’s Auditorium plan. In a modern theater, the need to see into the stage’s depth to a distance beyond the proscenium called for abandoning the extreme side seats in a Greek semicircular plan. The result was “the fan-shape; or more accurately, a portion of the sector of a circle, the centre for the radius of which shall be behind the proscenium, instead of in front of it as in the Greek form.” Just as Adler did, Fox argued for multiplying the points of egress to subdivide the audience for rapid exit in case of fire. During performances, the Greek idea of rising tiers of seats gave the opportunity “for every one in the hall to see almost everybody else [. . .]. There is no more valuable adjunct to noble architecture than this sea of interested and sympathetic faces, supplemented by the bloom of color in varied costumes.”91 This social effect anticipated descriptions of the Auditorium’s opening, when the full house became a metaphor for civic unity.92

Such an American adaptation of Greek theaters both resembles and differs in key ways from the adaptation of the ancient model at Bayreuth’s Festspielhaus, which was an extension of Semper’s ideas. Both buildings abandoned the primacy of the loges or tiers of boxes in favor of seating that was more equal, democratic, and unified. The dramatic upward rise of the seating at Bayreuth was also modeled on Scott Russell’s idea of ensuring acoustical and visual access to the stage.93 But, unlike Adler’s theaters, Bayreuth’s Festspielhaus had no main public foyer and no aisles running to the stage between seating groups, leaving an unbroken curvature of seating as a more direct evocation of an ancient Greek theater. Also, vertically, the Festspielhaus gallery was relatively small, whereas in Adler and Sullivan’s Auditorium Theater the main balcony and two galleries above accounted for well over half the seating.

Bayreuth’s Festspielhaus featured a triple proscenium, providing multiple rectangular frames for the stage.94 The Chicago Auditorium’s arched proscenium expanded out into a multi-arched ceiling that had no precedent in European or American opera houses. The Met’s acoustical difficulties were caused by its high proscenium and ceiling needed to accommodate tiered boxes. Adler believed that a proscenium higher than necessary for sight lines hampered an auditorium’s acoustics since the amount of unwanted reverberation is directly proportional to a room’s volume. He lowered the proscenium to reduce the room’s volume, thus conserving sound produced on stage and directing it outward to the audience, analogous to retaining density of sound projected through a trumpet or a speaking tube. This principle implied fan-shaped seating on raised levels, “but the effort to conserve the sound waves influences to a still greater extent the vertical dimensions of the auditorium. The proscenium must be low, not a foot higher than is necessary to permit full view of any possible grouping at the back of the stage from the last and highest seat in the house.”95

Adler complemented the low proscenium with “a gradual increase in height of ceiling from the proscenium outward.” He modulated the rising ceiling planes “into a profile which deflects the sound waves downward toward the rear of the lower portion of the house.”96 The Auditorium’s ceiling was
thus designed as four elliptically arched segments with a common center. These repeat the proscenium arch at progressively larger scales overhead (Figure 16). The four arches contain the sound emanating from the stage and reflect it back down into the theater quickly enough to prevent a discernible echo of direct sound from the stage.97

To further control the size of the opening around the stage, the Auditorium had an iron reducing curtain, covered with ornamental plaster, which could be raised or lowered. This reducing curtain framed the central heavy silk curtain. When lowered, the reducing curtain framed an opening 47 feet wide and 35 feet high for opera, drama, lectures, and concerts with no chorus (Figures 16, 17). Alternatively, to accommodate large choral performances, the reducing curtain was raised and the stage’s entire width of 75 feet was made spatially continuous with the rest of the auditorium. Adler wrote: “The success of the room is greatest when used as a hall for mass concerts. The chorus seems thus to blend with the audience, and the house is so open that one can see at a glance almost the entire audience and the whole chorus.”98 This effect was apparent on the Auditorium’s opening night, when the reducing curtain was raised to bring the whole stage into view from the house, including a chorus in banked seating on the stage (Figure 18).

Combined lectures and choral performances were a part of Peck’s social vision of the Auditorium. He proposed a series of Sunday-night lectures by eminent orators of the English-speaking world. These were “not to be the star performances of mere oratory, but real speeches upon important questions of the day—philanthropic, economic, educational, artistic, social.”99 The lectures were to be accompanied by great choral performances of 500 voices drawn from the Chicago public, with choral responses from the audience filling the house. Wealthy guarantors such as Peck would underwrite the cost of
such events to ensure that seats could be sold at nominal prices to intelligent workers “upon whom the existing inequalities of social conditions weigh most heavily.” Men would be “brought into a higher range of ideas and more stimulating and self-rewarding thought than that possible for them to pick up in assembly-rooms or in the little reading their daily fatigue permits them.”100 In 1889–1890 the Auditorium’s Recital Hall housed meetings of workers and capitalists aimed at resolving differences.101

SULLIVAN’S DESIGN FOR THE AUDITORIUM’S INTERIOR
As Peck and Adler saw the Auditorium Theater’s planning to be different from European state opera houses, so Sullivan viewed its interior as departing from such precedents. As one observer wrote, “Compared with the greatest European auditoriums [Chicago’s] will fall below many of them in costly ornamental display, but will excel any edifice in the world used for like purpose in seating capacity and utility.”102 Sullivan’s design was keyed to the theater’s electric lighting. The Met still had gaslights, whereas by 1889 almost all of Chicago’s theaters were lit electrically. The Auditorium Building had the world’s largest lighting plant, with 3,500 incandescent bulbs running along the ceiling arches and lines of bulbs along the fronts of the balcony and galleries. The lighting scheme eliminated the conventional chandelier in the center of a domed ceiling. The Met’s boxholders had asked that the gaslights remain raised during shows so that patrons in boxes would be visible, whereas the Auditorium’s arcs of electric lights enveloped the audience as a whole. In this period before urban power systems, only the most up-to-date commercial buildings had electricity, generated from their own power plants. Electric lighting was then a privilege associated with high capital, still rare in individual homes. The Auditorium brought this new utility to a mass audience.103

As Sullivan had done in his earlier remodeling of McVicker’s Theater in 1885, in the Auditorium Theater he created a scheme of color and ornament that was meant to complement the novel electric lighting. Under the flicker and glare of gaslights, the Met’s original interior had been yellow-white with gold relief.104 The Auditorium’s softer, more even electric light came from clear-glass, carbon-filament bulbs each radiating 25 watts. When dimmed to pinpoints of light, these resembled jewels. This new way of lighting would enable “the fullest appreciation of the most delicate tints and the most subtile [sic] gradations.”105 The bulbs formed a part of the decoration, their light springing from surrounding ornament. As in McVicker’s, Sullivan selected a dominant color of old ivory for the Auditorium. Subtly graded tones of this one color were applied in oil to unify the interior. No surface was red—the conventional color for theaters—so that the Auditorium looked “sumptuous and chaste,” its color conveying the ideal of a temple for high culture.106

Over the ivory-toned surfaces were areas of pure 23-carat gold leaf, which Peck valued for its permanence. Flat stenciled ornament of gold leaf (not extant) ran along the ceiling arch soffits. Along the vertical faces of these ceiling arches, Sullivan also designed scores of foliate motifs in cast plaster relief as settings for the projecting bulbs. As Adler wrote, “The use of richly-modulated plastic surface ornament is an important aid to successful color decoration. It gives a rare interest to even the simplest scheme of color distribution by the introduction of modulations of light and shade, by the constant variation of perspective effects, and by the brilliancy of the protuberant points and edges as they catch and reflect the light.”107

Although richly inventive in its motifs, the ornamental interior of Chicago’s Auditorium was simple and reserved in contrast with European houses, the archetype of which, from Chicago’s viewpoint, was Charles Garnier’s Paris Opéra. As one French visitor to the city wrote, Chicagoans considered...
the Auditorium Building to be their rival to Paris’s Opéra, even though on the Auditorium’s exterior “the decorative element, painting, and sculpture, so abundant, too abundant even in our [Opéra], is here totally lacking.”108 Peck contrasted the Auditorium with European opera houses, most of which had “grand approaches and splendid vestibules, embellished with costly frescoes and statuary which governments have paid for.”109 He reminded his stockholders that the Paris Opéra cost more than twice the amount for the Auditorium and took thirteen years to build, yet it contained a hall whose capacity was only half that of the Auditorium Theater.

The Auditorium Theater eschewed the elaborate Classical and political iconography of the Paris Opéra as a key monument of the French Second Empire. Rather, Sullivan, with Peck’s approval, created a distinct symbolic program for the room that was to embody Sullivan’s ideal of architecture as nature. This program appears in Sullivan’s many ornamental motifs. One of these was the plasterwork relief framing the light bulbs on the ceiling arches. One observer likened these to sunflowers, signifying the theater’s locale as a prairie metropolis.110 On the main balcony, Sullivan also repeated interpretations of the milkweed pod, a plant native to the Chicago region, thereby creating a botanically specific reference to place rather than a variation on a historical style of ornament.111 As one contemporary wrote, “It is indubitable that there is within these walls an architecture and a decorative art that are truly American, and that owe nothing to any other country or any other time.”112

Allusions to nature recur throughout the Auditorium Theater. As initially completed, the room had stained glass skylights over the balcony for daytime illumination, unlike the Metropolitan and its main European models. One observer wrote that the light along the arches was “so even, so white and free from shadows, that it resembles a mild sunlight.”113 Evocation of nature became more literal in Sullivan’s scheme of ornament for the reducing curtain. These reliefs appear to have been inspired by representations of nature found in operatic stage sets of the period, as shown in a scene from Wagner’s Lohengrin on the Auditorium’s stage (Figure 17).114 In this view, dating from 1890, the canopy of trees forms a naturalistic arched frame that reiterates the proscenium’s elliptical arch above. At the rear is a distant expanse of landscape receding in perspective toward a painted backdrop showing horizon and sky. The foliage on stage continues the foliate plaster ornament in the reducing curtain framing the stage, linking representation of nature in operatic scenery to the theater’s permanent architecture.115

This theme continues in the mural paintings that frame the Auditorium’s interior, all of whose imagery was modeled from life by the artists. Having selected the themes for these murals to create a unified program, Sullivan wrote that they expressed growth and decadence as the two great rhythms of nature.116 Above the proscenium arch is a continuous processional mural of life-size figures on a gold background (Figure 19). They are not muses, symbolic of the inspiration for creating musical art, to be found over the prosceniums of the Met and other opera houses. Rather, they are groups of monks, young women, and others who express “the manifold influence of music on the human mind—the dance, the serenade, the dirge.”117

For Sullivan, these effects took their inspiration from the deeper rhythms of life and death that are cyclical in nature. This theme appeared in his prose poem “Inspiration,” which he first read to the Western Association of Architects in Chicago in November 1886, just before Adler and Sullivan were confirmed as the Auditorium’s architects.118 The idea is represented by the winged figure before a bright fire, at the mural’s south end (to the right as one faces the stage). This image, typifying youth and inspiration, signified the dawn of life or springtime, like an allegro tempo in music. The winged figure at the north end (at left), representing twilight and memory, reaches down to a low fire flickering to its end, like autumn, analogous to an adagio effect.119

At the proscenium mural’s central crown are three figures representing the past (south) and future (north). The central figure is not an ancient deity like the Apollo who presided over the Met’s proscenium but rather a personification of the present, enthroned below a phrase based on Sullivan’s poem “Inspiration”: “The utterance of life is a song, the symphony of nature.” As he declared in the poem, Sullivan’s ideal for the present was a spontaneous and vital art coming fresh from nature rather than from inherited styles. In this spirit, all forty-five figures were painted by a young American artist, Charles Holloway (1859–1941), “who made the sketches from living models posing for each separate figure” so that “everything is true to nature.”120 As one observer wrote, “Thousands of the spectators who enter the Auditorium will look admir-

FIGURE 19: Charles Holloway, drawing of mural over proscenium, Auditorium, 1889. From Chicago Daily Inter Ocean (11 December 1889)
ingly on that work of art, but few will stop to reason out the subject treated there.”121

The two murals toward the rear sides of the house continued the theme used over the proscenium. They were painted by the French-trained artist Albert Fleury (1848–1924). Originally educated as an architect, Fleury entered the École des Beaux-Arts after the Franco-Prussian War to study painting. His time there overlapped with that of Sullivan, and also of George L. Healy and Louis J. Millet, under whose guidance Fleury worked at the Auditorium. Fleury had come to the United States in 1888 to assist his former teacher, Émile Renouf, in making a large commissioned painting of the Brooklyn Bridge. At this time, both Renouf and Fleury received offers to assist in the Chicago Auditorium’s decoration, and Fleury accepted. Like Holloway’s mural, Fleury’s were subject to the approval of the Chicago Auditorium Association’s Executive Committee, headed by Peck.122 As an architect, Fleury not only specialized in murals but also enhanced the relation of such paintings to built interiors. His side murals for the Auditorium are large in scale and have the perspectival depth of landscape, giving the illusion of extending the interior space of the adjacent balconies. They recall the illusionistic natural expanse created by scenic backdrops for opera on the frontal stage. Fleury’s images of nature were originally illuminated by natural daylight from the art-glass skylights over the balcony. As in the proscenium’s mural, the south mural depicts spring (Figure 20), while the north shows an autumnal scene (Figure 21). From his youth, Fleury “was always a lover and a close student of nature, and besides he always followed the practice of painting his figures in the open air.”123 He sketched the north mural’s scene “from a Wisconsin dell,” like the wooded Wisconsin landscapes where Peck spent much time. The south mural depicts “a scene near Highland Park,” a suburb on Chicago’s North Shore, further emphasizing the Auditorium’s regional character.124

Each side mural shows a single creative figure or poet who is communing with the season as a source of inspiration. As Sullivan wrote, “[B]y their symbolism do these mural poems suggest the compensating phases of nature and of human life in all their varied manifestations. Naturally are suggested the light and the grave in music, the joyous and the tragic in drama.”125 Through these murals and their inscriptions, Sullivan linked his personal belief in nature’s emotive effects on the artist with the Auditorium as a theater wherein musical drama moved audiences. In “Inpiration,” Sullivan referred repeatedly to the sun’s daily course across the sky and its repetition through the seasons as a measure of nature’s cyclical rhythm of growth and decay. In his travels by railroad around the United States, he recalled having “visualized [the country’s] main rhythms as south to north, and north to south.”126 Fleury’s murals suggested such a meaning for the arches spanning the Auditorium’s ceiling between south (spring) and north (autumn), as if these elliptical forms represented the solar cycle of seasons and years in expanded repetition. Thus out of the ceiling’s arched functional form as a solution to optimal acoustics for a mass audience, Sullivan developed a program of ornament and images that gave the ceiling a cosmic symbolism different from the conventional shallow dome at the Metropolitan or many European theaters.

The Auditorium Building’s Exterior
Adler and Sullivan developed the exterior from their earliest-known design of September 1886 to after their working drawings of April 1887.127 From their first studies, they treated the building as a major civic monument in keeping with Peck’s
aims. If the Auditorium Theater’s interior space conveyed its social ideals, then the exterior communicated symbolic intentions through its architectural style. Adler and Sullivan’s contemporaries still thought in terms of a building’s style and historical associations as principal carriers of meaning. The Auditorium’s exterior style evolved in the course of its design and construction partly in response to social conditions and to Peck’s aims.

Viewed from a distance, with its cubic mass and tower (Figure 1), the Auditorium announced Chicago to travelers from the eastern United States coming to the city along the railroad lines running north into town at the lakefront. Early designs had featured walls of pressed brick and ornate terra-cotta above a granite base. In May 1887, in the course of a bricklayers’ strike, the Auditorium’s directors resolved that the upper walls above the three-story granite base be clad in an Indiana limestone. As the architect of four buildings under construction and of nine more for which plans were ready, Adler had much at stake in this strike. At that time, and in later essays, he described his professional role as the representative of his clients, the building owners. Like Peck, Adler politically was not a socialist, though he did sympathize with the plight of workingmen, writing that “there is much that is great and noble even in the trades unionism of our day.” But, during the protracted strike of 1887, Adler saw the bricklayers’ actions as causing workers to lose income. He noted that his clients waiting to build were “all agreed not to have a stroke of work done until this strike is ended by the giving in of the workmen. The [bricklayers’] union is what stands in the way of the erection of these buildings.” Because of its size, the Auditorium offered steady work for many over a long period, and progress on its construction continued, partly with workers who had left their union to return to work, and who were sometimes subjected to intimidation. Adler stated that some had returned to work because they had “become so destitute during the strike that they have sold their tools, and we have had to supply them.”

The strike of 1887 brought the issues of Haymarket into the building trades and into the history of the Auditorium, a structure that was intended to alleviate social tensions. Adler later did not recall that the change in the Auditorium’s design from brick to stone had been the result of the strike. Rather, he attributed the decision to “the deep impression made by Richardson’s ‘Marshall Field Building’ upon the Directory of the Auditorium Association,” combined with a “reaction from a course of indulgence in the creation of highly decorative effects on the part of its architects.” Why did Peck and his colleagues look to Henry Hobson Richardson’s monument as a model?

One answer is that it was then one of only two recently built local structures covering a comparable half-block site. Field’s store (Figure 22) and the Auditorium block showed the same ratio of frontal width to height of about 2.5 to 1. In symbolic terms, Sullivan and others saw Richardson’s building as largely a monument to its patron, Marshall Field. His conservative views were well known, and the completion of his building was
delayed by labor agitation until June 1887. Field had insisted that Richardson change his initial design for the upper walls from brick to a red sandstone, which was quarried near Field’s birthplace. After Peck, Marshall Field was the Auditorium’s largest stockholder. Although he declined to serve as a director, his brother and partner, Henry Field, also a major stockholder, took his place on the board, and the latter’s response to Richardson’s building was thus predictable.135

Adler admired this structure, noting, “How American is Richardson’s reproduction of the sombreness and dignity of the Palazzo Strozzi in the Marshall Field Building.”136 Scholars of Richardson’s work have also pointed out that his building for Field recalled the monumental form of ancient Roman aqueducts that Richardson had seen on his trip to Europe in 1882, photographs of which he acquired.137 One contemporary wrote: “It may be truthfully said in general of the styles used in Chicago . . . that the principal complex features came from the Romans.”138 For Edward Garczynski, author of the commemorative book on the Auditorium of 1890, its exterior recalled the forms of Roman construction. The tall arched bays compare to those of the Aqua Claudia (A.D. 38–52) near Rome (Figure 23). Such a style contrasted with the ornate Second Empire hotels of post-fire Chicago. As Garczynski wrote, between such structures and the Auditorium, “the progress has been a mighty leap forward . . . making this building the commencement of a new era. Here all is simplicity, stateliness, strength. There is in its granite pile a quality that strongly reminds the traveled spectator of those grand engineering constructions which the Romans raised in every part of their vast empire.” Peck presumably saw such monuments during his travels to Europe. Their influence on the Auditorium “was an inspiration” from Peck, to whom “it is most probable we must look for its Roman character.”139

The exterior style’s association with antiquity paralleled Adler’s interest in ancient theaters as one source for the Auditorium Theater’s interior spatial form. Garczynski’s perception of the building’s allusions to Rome aligned with Peck’s choice of the name “Auditorium” rather than the term “Grand Opera House.” In its ancient Latin usage, auditorium (as distinct from a ruler’s private palace, or palatium) referred to the space of the audience in a theater as a public hall for cultural and political gatherings, just as Chicago’s Auditorium would hold both opera and conventions.140 Within its walls, music and drama would be interpreted “not, as in the capitals of modern empires, to a favored few, but, as in the ancient republics, to the people of the city and Nation.”141

The Auditorium’s exterior form thus conjointed Roman monumentality with modern democratic ideology. So did the buildings of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, for which Peck chaired the local finance committee, and whose classical architecture he subsequently praised.142

As an architectural response to Chicago’s urban class strife in the era of Haymarket, the Auditorium’s exterior may be compared to other buildings that represented different institutional responses to labor unrest. One of the most prominent of these was a new armory for the First Regiment of the Illinois National Guard, a project first proposed in 1885. Organized in 1874, the First Regiment came to enroll about 600 local men who represented Chicago’s middle and upper classes. Among its members was one of Adler and Sullivan’s draftsmen. Having twice dispersed crowds without firing during the railroad strikes of 1877, the unit also confronted labor protests at several points around the city in November 1886. To radical leaders of Chicago’s workers, the First Regiment epitomized armed force in the service of capital.143 When the First Regiment sought to build anew, Marshall Field offered to lease it a site he owned on the northwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Sixteenth Street, not far from his own home. Field, who was closely identified with this regiment, agreed to lease the site to the unit for $4,000 per year (then only half its value) with no annual rent increase. Daniel Burnham and John Wellborn Root designed the First Regiment Armory in March 1889, and it opened in September 1891 (Figure 24).144

Burnham and Root’s First Regiment Armory was described as “perhaps the most massive structure in Chicago,”145 with its heavy stonework rising unbroken to a height of 35 feet on all four sides.146 The front had a wide sally port for troops marching abreast. Above the rusticated granite base were brick walls with arched openings and round corner bartizans. Atop all four walls ran a projecting machicolated cornice crowned with gun slits. The exterior left no doubt as to its purpose in the charged atmosphere of the time. Within there was a large drill hall that Adler and Sullivan redesigned in 1893 as a temporary theater known as the Trocadero Music Hall, named after the Parisian theater designed by Gabriel Davioud in 1876. Adler and Sullivan’s client was Dr. Florence Ziegfeld,
Peck was not a benefactor of this regiment. Its treasurer was Charles Hutchinson, who was also treasurer of the Chicago Auditorium Association. In 1885 the committee in charge of the regiment’s new armory had proposed to Peck that the armory and the Auditorium project be combined in the same structure. Auditorium directors were leaders of Chicago’s Citizens’ Association, founded in 1874 to fight corruption in municipal government, yet which supported the militia against labor agitation in 1877 and 1885. They also led the Chicago Citizens’ Law and Order League founded in 1877 just after the city’s railroad strikes in order to prevent the sale of alcohol to minors, as it was believed the strikers included a large number of half-drunk boys. In this context, both the First Regiment Armory and the Auditorium were facets of a broad range of elite responses to threats of social unrest.

The Auditorium was neither an armory nor a fortress, but it did have as its social aim the pacification of urban workers, not by means of armed control but rather by cultural suasion. As a capitalist monument, the Auditorium did present an image of indestructibility, as exemplified by its granite base near the citizen’s eye. Moreover, the tower, in addition to the slotlike windows within its stylized machicolated cornice, had windows within its arches below that Garczynski described as “square and deeply recessed, like embrasures in a fortification.” In its style, the Auditorium provided a model for Ferdinand Peck’s own house, which he commissioned William Le Baron Jenney and William A. Otis to design in 1887 (Figure 25). Educated at the École des Beaux-Arts, Otis translated chapters from Edouard Corroyer’s _L’Architecture Romane_ (Romanesque Architecture) immediately after its publication in 1888. This book traced the continuous development of medieval Romanesque from ancient Roman architecture, a link consistent with contemporaneous perception of the Auditorium. Located at 1826 South Michigan Avenue, within three blocks of the First Regiment Armory, the Peck house exhibited a rough-hewn stonework similar to that forming the Auditorium’s base. Its tower above a heavy lintel spanning the porch included a shadowed loggia below a foursquare crown, so that the house read in part as a miniature version of the Auditorium. When President Benjamin Harrison was entertained by Peck at this residence on the day of the Auditorium Theater’s opening, he remarked that the house was “the Auditorium, Jr.” Peck responded that “the same spirit prevailed in both buildings.” The house reminded all that the Auditorium was Peck’s project. Two buildings, by different architects, imaged one patron.

Interpretation of the Auditorium as a heavy lithic mass contrasts with its place in the conventional historiography of the Chicago School of architecture, which stressed local efforts to lighten or open up walls of the city’s commercial buildings from about 1880 to 1900. From this viewpoint, the Auditorium’s exterior was valued not for its solid piers of walling but rather its arched voids of windows. In this light, the Auditorium compares not with Burnham and Root’s Armory but with the building closest to Peck’s own attitude toward urban workers: the new quarters for Chicago’s Athenaeum (Figure 26), opened in May 1891. It stood on the same block as the...
Auditorium on the south side of Van Buren Street, adjacent to the original Art Institute of Chicago, built on the southwest corner of Van Buren and Michigan Avenue in 1887. Peck and other Auditorium patrons had also been founding supporters of the Art Institute. Its instructional program was partly intended to provide skills that would qualify students for employment with local businessmen whose philanthropy supported the college by heavily subsidizing costs of instruction. Thus both the Athenaeum and the Auditorium were cultural resources that provided workers with capitalist-structured alternatives to leftist political culture. It was to be a unifying, upbuilding urban institution, including the Reverend David Swing on its faculty. In December 1889 the Athenaeum’s head, the Reverend Edward I. Galvin, a Unitarian minister, congratulated Peck on creating in the new Auditorium “such a building for the public good in culture and wholesome recreation [as] must find universal endorsement.” He wrote: “[T]he next crowning glory of your life will be the completion and opening of the Athenaeum Building.”

As the Athenaeum’s president during the same years he was directing the Auditorium project’s realization, Peck had bought the Van Buren Street site for the Athenaeum and had overseen the expansion of its building from four to seven stories. As designed by Thomas Wing, the new structure had classrooms, a large lecture hall, recreational rooms, a library, and a gymnasium, all accessible to members for a nominal annual fee. Facing north, the Athenaeum’s street front had an abundance of windows with minimal piers and columns between, creating the image of a typical Chicago loft building of the period. The Athenaeum’s appearance was determined almost wholly not by stylistic considerations but by utilitarian needs to light interior spaces and limit costs of construction. The Roman associations of the nearby Auditorium’s exterior were lacking in this building also meant for the cultural uplift of workers, but one that did not have the Auditorium’s monumental scale, lakefront site, and representational purpose.

**Conclusion**

The Chicago Auditorium, whose design Adler and others ascribed to the wishes of its patrons, conveyed many messages simultaneously. On one level, it was a civic and cultural monument; on another, it projected the city’s power and enterprise; on yet a third, it stood for an elite’s will to direct Chicago’s social, economic, and political future. The outer architecture figuratively stood against socialism and anarchism, while the theater inside offered alternatives to politicized and nonpoliticized workers’ amusements. As Adler concluded more than two years after the building had opened, without doubt “Chicago has an Auditorium far better as an opera house or a concert hall or a ballroom than either the Metropolitan Opera House or the Music Hall [the Academy of Music] in New York.” Adler, like Peck and Sullivan, knew these theaters from eastern trips. Adler’s claim rested on his building’s innovative plan for audiences in terms of circulation, seating, sight lines, and lighting, as well as acoustics. Sullivan’s ornamental and symbolic program for the theater’s interior was comparably original, meant to contrast with the Met and European state opera houses, which he, Adler, and Peck had studied. They all rejected the predominance of boxes in these theaters. From the Auditorium’s stage, “the performers can neither sing to the boxes nor play to them, but must address themselves to the public” as “an immense mass of spectators without a break.”
Study of the Auditorium’s origins, planning, interiors, and exterior suggests how to continue to move beyond earlier modernist views of the Chicago School of architecture. The influential historians Sigfried Giedion and Carl Condit used the term to refer to the city’s commercial buildings of the 1880s and 1890s. They valued these structures for their technical innovations and their external expression of new metal-frame construction. The Auditorium’s story underscores the value of a historiographic approach that considers the ideology of patrons in the context of Chicago’s dynamic and difficult social history of the period. Such an analysis of the Auditorium’s development also shows that patrons were aware of competing works in Europe and in New York City, adapting some models, like the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, and rejecting others, like the Paris Opéra and the Metropolitan. As did architects elsewhere through the nineteenth century, Adler and Sullivan thought in terms of building types and their possible variations, in addition to pursuing a general ideal of appropriately functional modern form. This latter side of their thinking had attracted Giedion and Condit. Yet, as we have seen, Adler and Sullivan were not fully removed from historicism and the symbolic associations of older styles, for the Auditorium was not only part of the continuing development of an American Romanesque style but also a monument that conveyed allusions to ancient Rome.


4 Cady, "Essential Features of a Large Opera House," 47.


6 Egisto P. Fabbrini, Chairman, Committee on Building, Metropolitan Opera House Company, quoted in Mayer, Met, 15.

7 Mayer, Met, 19, noted Cady’s tour of Europe following the Metropolitan Board’s decision to build on 4 March 1881.


One description of Cady’s building concluded: "In the arrangement of the stairways and passages, the Metropolitan Opera-house bears considerable resemblance to Covent Garden" ("In the New Opera-House," New York Times [22 July 1883]: 9). Briggs, Yellow Brick Brewery, 9, noted that Covent Garden’s impresario, Ernest Gye, hoping to be named the Met’s manager, made plans of Covent Garden available to Cady. Cady also relied on a German-trained associate, Louis de Coppet Bergh (1856–1913), whose sister had studied music in Italy and provided pictures and details of European opera houses such as La Scala, see Milton Stasburg, "Romance in the Opera House," Opera 5 (10 March 1941): 4–9.


10 At the Metropolitan’s opening, "much disappointment was caused by the comparative failure of the acoustic properties of the auditorium...In the upper rows of the boxes and in the balcony only the high voices were distinctly heard. Nor were the facilities for seeing much better in some portions of the auditorium than the facilities for hearing" ("The New Opera-House," New York Times [23 October 1883]: 1). See also "Metropolitan Opera-House," The Nation 87 (25 October 1883): 848–849. After a first season, it was noted: "The Metropolitan Opera-house season has been financially a disastrous failure. Only consistently sold-out performances would have enabled a profit, but "the house is never full, and never can be, because there is such a large part of it in which no one can see or hear" ("Patti Will Go To London," New York Times [16 February 1884]: 5). Later praise for the Met’s acoustics was noted in Briggs, Yellow Brick Brewery, 15, and Eisler, Metropolitan Opera, x.


13 Cady, "Essential Features of a Large Opera House," 47.

14 Ibid.

15 James Roosevelt, first president of the Metropolitan Opera House Company, acknowledged: "We never expected that it would pay. None of us went into it with the idea that we would ever get our money back, but simply for the enjoyment to be derived from having a first-class opera-house. No opera-house in the world has ever paid as an investment, and none will ever pay" ("The Opera House Scheme," New York Times [14 March 1882]: 1). Van Rensselaer, "Metropolitan Opera-House," 76, noted that the corner masses on Broadway, being built in January 1884 after the theater opened in October 1883, were "to contain shops below, above large ball-rooms and restaurants, and above these again bachelors’ apartments." A special committee of the Metropolitan’s Board of Directors reported that “the advantage in finishing would be that the plans of the corners included the building of reception and supper rooms, which would enable the Directors to rent the house for balls" ("The Opera’s New Home," New York Times [24 May 1883]: 1).

16 Van Rensselaer, "Metropolitan Opera-House," 76.


18 On moral concerns in New York City about operas of Verdi and Offenbach in the 1860s and 1880s, see Dizikes, Opera in America, 171–173, 193–194.
Schuyler, “Metropolitan Opera-House,” 880, wrote that earlier local buildings made for opera, such as the New York Academy of Music (1852–1854), designed by Alexander Saeltzer on the northeast corner of Fourteenth Street and Irving Place, one block east of Union Square, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s first building of 1859–1861, designed by Leopold Eidlitz, on Madison Street, were similarly conservative in style. “It is quite certain that when these edifices were built, it would have been as difficult to obtain the money for an undischarged opera-house as twenty-five years later it has proved easy to obtain ten times as much.” On New York’s Academy of Music, see James V. Kavanagh, “Three American Opera Houses: The Boston Theatre, The New York Academy of Music, The Philadelphia American Academy of Music,” Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1967, 23–51, and Dizikes, Opera in America, 166–167.


22 “The Men of Millions,” Chicago Tribune (6 April 1890): 25. Chicago’s larger private fortunes were there listed as Marshall Field ($25 million), Philip D. Armour ($25 million), and George M. Pullman ($15 million). Potter Palmer and Mrs. Cyrus McCormick were also then reported to have fortunes of $10 million. Many Chicago properties of the Peck estate and their assessed values were listed in the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics, Ninth Biennial Report; Subject: Franchises and Taxation 1896 (Springfield, 1897). Biographical sources on Peck include C. Dean, The World’s Fair City and Her Entertaining Sons (Chicago, 1892), 36–74; The Biographical Dictionary and Portrait Gallery of Representative Men of Chicago. . . (Chicago and New York, 1892), 106–109; John J. Finn, Hand-book of Chicago Biography (Chicago, 1895), 283–284; Arna N. Waterman, Historical Review of Chicago and Cook County and Selected Biography, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1908), 926–930; “Ferdinand Peck, Widely Known Chicagoan, Dies,” Chicago Tribune (5 November 1924): 19; Paul T. Gilbert and Charles L. Bryson, Chicago and Its Makers (Chicago, 1929), 625; and Berger, They Built Chicago, 93–104. In 1897 Philip Peck moved with his family to a new home at Michigan Terrace, the most elite rowhouse block in the city. It stood on Michigan Avenue’s west side, from Van Buren to Congress Streets, where the Auditorium and its neighboring structures to the north rose in the 1880s. On Michigan Terrace, see Bluestone, Constructing Chicago, 75–78.

23 On Chicago’s Athenaeum, see Alfred T. Andreas, History of Chicago, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1884–1886), 3, 416–417; and Kathleen D. McCarthy, Noblese Oligie: Charity and Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849–1929 (Chicago, 1982), 82–84. Peck supported the Athenaeum from its origins after 1871 and served as its president for four years (1887–1891). He also secured the Athenaeum’s building at 56 East Van Buren Street in 1890 after the Auditorium’s block. See Nineteenth Annual Report of the Chicago Athenaeum 1889–190 (Chicago Historical Society); and Randall, Building Construction in Chicago, 160. Peck served for five years (1886–1890) on Chicago’s Board of Education and as its vice president. See Proceedings of the Board of Education of the City of Chicago, 1886–1890. He was also a trustee of the old and the new University of Chicago. In 1870 he had helped to found the Illinois Humane Society, and in 1886 he was a founder of Chicago’s Union League Club, which sought reform of city government. He also supported the Art Institute of Chicago and the Reverend David Swing’s Central Church of Chicago, which was the main tenant of Dankmar Adler’s Central Music Hall (1879). See Bluestone, Constructing Chicago, 99–101.

24 Waterman, Chicago and Cook County, 3, 930.

25 Gilbert and Bryson, Chicago and Its Makers, 625. See Dean, World’s Fair City, 71; and Sullivan, Autobiography of an Icon, 292, 293.


32 On Semper’s first Hoftheater at Dresden, see Mallgrave, Gottfried Semper, 117–129. On the seating arrangement in Schinkel’s Schauspielhaus at Berlin, see Barry Bergdoll, Karl Friedrich Schinkel: An Architecture for Prussia (New York, 1994), 60. On these buildings, and on August Sturmhoefel’s unbuilt project of 1888 for a Volksbühne, or People’s Theater, see Geraniotis, “German Design Influence on the Auditorium Theater,” 54–55, 58–62.


34 On American reports of Bayreuth’s opening, see Dizikes, Opera in America, 238–239. Among these reports were those by Leopold Damrosch, the Metropolitan Opera’s future conductor of German opera, who wrote: “To Day’s Musical Wonder,” New York Sun (13 August 1876): 2, and “The Twilight of the Gods,” ibid. (23 August 1876:2). See also the editorial “Wagner, the Art Revolutionist,” 154 _JSAA / 57:2, JUNE 1998_

Peck, quoted in "One of Our Wonders," Chicago Herald (16 September 1888): 17. He stated: "We intend to have the most complete stage in the world, with the best appliances. During my recent visit to Europe, I examined a number of stages with this end in view, and Mr. Adler, one of our architects, is there now . . . for the purposes of examining and getting detailed plans of the finest stages in Europe, especially those of Buda-peth, Frankfurt, Vienna, Dresden, Bayreuth [sic], and La Scala, at Milan." Adler's account of his trip appeared in his talk "Sage Mechanisms," in Inland Architect and News Record 13 (March 1889): 42–43. See also Joan W. Saltzstein, "The Autobiography and Letters of Dankmar Adler," Inland Architect 27 (September/October 1983): 20–24, and Geraniotis, "German Design Influence on the Auditorium Theater," 44–47.

Peck, Annual Report of the President to the Stockholders of the Chicago Auditorium Association, 7 December 1888 (Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives).


"Our Vampires," The Alarm (2 May 1885): 1, and "They Want Blood," Chicago Tribune (29 April 1885): 2. See also Schaack, Anarchy and Anarchists, 80–81, and Avrich, Haymarket Tragedy, 146–149.

Recent accounts of the riot and its aftermath include Avrich, Haymarket Tragedy, 181–239, and Carl Smith, Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief (Chicago, 1996), 101–176. Accounts from the period include "A Hellish Dead," Chicago Tribune (5 May 1886): 1–2. On workers' lakefront meetings held from May to November 1885, see Avrich, Haymarket Tragedy, 109–110.


Ibid. As successful local examples of this building type, Peck cited Adler's Central Music Hall (1879), and the Chicago Opera House (1885), on the southwest corner of Clark and Washington Streets, designed by Cobb and Frost. Adler and Sullivan remodeled its theater in 1886. On this building, see Andreas, History of Chicago, 5, 668–69, and Rand, McNally & Co., Bird's-Eye Views and Guide to Chicago 141, repr. in Randell, Building Construction in Chicago.

Glessner, Commercial Club, 20.

Garczynski, Auditorium, 20, recalled how, prior to the Peck proposal, “one of Chicago's most noble and most honored citizens, who, realizing this want of the city, had from 1882 to 1885, with the prompting and assistance of Theodore Thomas, made many brave but ineffectual efforts to convince a number of her wealthy citizens and her supposed leaders in culture and refinement to join him in giving Chicago a great Public Hall and Opera House.” He added: “The comprehensive studies of [Adler and Sullivan] made from 1882 to 1885 in connection with certain efforts in a similar direction under the auspices of Mr. Fairbank and Mr. [Theodore] Thomas, had enabled them to show that adaptation to a multiplicity of uses could be attained in the construction and equipment of an Auditorium without imperiling its utility or its beauty.” Theodore Thomas was the nationally known orchestra leader who played at Chicago's May Music Festivals of 1882 and 1884.

Sullivan, “Development of Construction,” repr. in Twombly, ed., Sullivan: Public Papers, 215, recalled that in about 1885, “there was a movement started by N. K. Fairbank for the building of a great opera house in this city, and we [Adler and Sullivan] made some sketches, but somehow the thing did not pull through. It lagged along. No one took a special interest in it, that is, interest enough to put up the money.” In Autobiography of an Idea (p. 292), Sullivan later wrote that prior to 1885: “For several years there had been talk to the effect that Chicago needed a grand opera house; but the several schemes advanced were too aristocratic and exclusive to meet with general approval.” Variations on Sullivan's account appear in local reports of the early 1880s, such as “Wanted—An Opera House,” Chicago Tribune (21 January 1883): 4.


Original stockholders and their amounts were listed in Records of the Chicago Auditorium Association, Originally Chicago Grand Auditorium Association, December 11, 1886 to November 7, 1906, 2 (Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives). This was a limited liability corporation created for publicly beneficial purposes under the laws of the State of Illinois. While not legally a nonprofit corporation, the Auditorium Association paid its stockholders a dividend only once, in 1895, the year of the Columbian Exposition, as noted in Records, 228.

Waterman, Chicago and Cook County, 3, 924. As the Auditorium neared completion, Peck wrote to its stockholders that “it is desired and expected that other citizens not now identified with the project will unite with us, thus continuing the policy originally adopted of distributing the ownership widely among our people” (Peck, Annual Report of the President to the Stockholders of the Chicago Auditorium Association, 1 December 1888. Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives).


Peck, Annual Report of the President to the Stockholders of the Chicago Auditorium Association, 12 December 1891. Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives.

On these buildings, see n. 30.

Peck stated that “it is the wish of the projectors that the Auditorium shall eventually come to be the great art center of America” (“The Pride of Chicago,” Chicago Daily News [Morning Edition, 9 December 1889]). Similar themes recurred in speeches at the theater's opening. See “Dedicated to Music and the People,” Chicago Tribune (10 December 1889): 1–2. The Auditorium's national significance stemmed partly from its intended use for national political conventions, which began with the Republican Convention there in June 1888. Later President Benjamin Harrison and Vice President Levi P. Morton, nominated at that convention, joined several state governors and Canadian officials at the theater's dedication. Peck wrote that the “Auditorium will be in a sense nationalized by the presence of distinguished men of the country” (Peck, Annual Report of the President to the Stockholders of the Chicago Auditorium Association, 7 December 1889. Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives).

Adler, “Chicago Auditorium,” 415. Krebbiel, Chapters of Opera, 91, cited a claim by John B. Schoeffel, a partner of Henry Abbey, the impresario who managed the Metropolitan in its first season (1883–1884), that Abbey had lost $600,000. See Briggs, Yellow Brick Broadway, 22, 28–29; Mayer, Met, 43–47; and Eder, Metropolitan Opera, 50–53. Garczynski, Auditorium, 20, noted that, in contrast to Cincinnati, whose capacious Music Hall had succeeded from its opening in 1878, “New York, with a far greater population, and with infinitely superior wealth, had built the Academy of Music, and still more recently the Metropolitan Opera House, with no better financial result than the obligation of the owners of these temples of the Muses to pay annual assessments for the maintenance of these structures.”

Garczynski, Auditorium, 122.

Adler, “Chicago Auditorium,” 423, wrote: “The boxes, forty in number, are arranged in two tiers upon each side of the parquette. The lower tier forms an arcade of semi-circular arches with rather light treatment and but little effect of inclosure, while the upper boxes are entirely open. In fact, there is nothing at all of the boxlike and stuffy effect produced by the conventional treatment of the open box.” The lower boxes' arches framed their occupants on view, yet interfered with views outward.

The Auditorium's boxes were sold for a season. See “An Opera Box for $2,100,” Chicago Tribune (23 November 1889): 1. The Met's first patrons paid $17,000 to own a box permanently.


Ibid., 23.

Adler, “Chicago Auditorium,” 423, wrote: “This unusually great size of the main floor has also made practicable the arrangement of six entrances, similar to the ‘vomitoria’ of the Roman amphitheatre, by which the lower half of the parquette seats are reached without rendering it necessary to climb to the upper level of the main floor.” Schuyler, “Glimpses of Western Architecture: Chicago (1891),” in American Architecture and Other Writings, ed. William Jordy and Ralph Coe, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 1, 260, saw the Auditorium’s entrances as vomitoria. He wrote (p. 258): “A place of popular entertainment, constructed upon a scale and with a massiveness to which we can scarcely find a parallel since Roman days, would present one of the worthiest and most interesting problems a modern architect could have if he were left to solve it unhampered.”

Adler advocated a larger number of narrower aisles in “Paramount Requirements for a Large Opera House,” 46, and “Theater Building for American Cities; Second Paper,” 815.


Gregersen, Dankmar Adler, 10, notes that the idea of seating rows not having curves centered on the source of sound followed from the theaters of Adler’s early employer, the architect Ozia S. Kinney, who died in 1869.


Dean, World’s Fair City, 71, wrote of Peck: “Although holding no decided views regarding religious belief, he may be seen with his family at Central Music Hall near every Sunday, listening to the logical and symmetrical discourses of Prof. David Swing.” Among the many publications of this minister’s words, a comprehensive collection from the period of the Auditorium is David Swing, Sermons (Chicago, 1884).


Adler, “Paramount Requirements of a Large Opera House,” 46.
Ticket prices for the Auditorium’s inaugural season of 1889 were noted in Minutes of Executive Committee of the Chicago Auditorium Association, 3 May 1887 to 11 December 1907, 146 (Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives).

On prices for the festival, see n. 50 above.

Adler, "The Theater," 22.


In addition to Patte, European treatises on architectural acoustics predating Scott Russell’s studies included George Saunders, A Treatise on Theatres (London, 1790); J. G. Rhode, Théorie des Verbreitung des Schalles für Baukünstler (Berlin, 1800); Ernst F. Chladni, Traité d’Acoustique (Paris, 1809); and Carl F. Langhans, Über Theater oder Bemerkungen über Katakoustics (Berlin, 1810). See also On the Principles of Sound and their Applications to the New House of Parliament (London, 1840). Scott Russell read two papers on acoustics of theaters before the Royal Institute of British Architects in February and March 1847, summarized in Builder (1847), 82 and 118, and in Building News (26 November, 3 and 10 December 1858). American variations on such studies predating Adler’s mature career included Jabez B. Upham, Acoustic Architecture (New Haven, 1853), and Alexander Saelter, A Treatise on Acoustics (New York, 1872).


Ibid., 139. Matthew Hurtle, "The Context of Tradition in the Chicago Auditorium," seminar paper, Wesleyan University, May 1892, noted that Vitruvius (Ten Books on Architecture, book 5, chap. 3, 138–139) wrote that sound "moves in an endless number of circular rounds, like the innumerable increasing circular waves which appear when a stone is thrown into smooth water;" and that Adler ("Theater Building for American Cities: First Paper," 722) wrote: "The sound waves, produced in the open air, travel very much as do the ripples in a pool when a stone is thrown into it."


Fox, "American Dramatic Theatres. III," 36.

One observer of the Auditorium Theater’s opening wrote: "You could not feel the sense of immensity till you turned from the footlights and looked back under the white and gold-ribbed vault of the body of the Auditorium to the balconies, which flattered the eye and then bewildered it; for, first, there sloped back from the parquet a stretch like a flower garden; then came the curving balcony; black with thousands, as if more people were there than anywhere else; above it the straight line of the second balcony, with banks of sightseers; and last and highest of all the gallery, whose occupants looked like dots. Now came the triumph of architecture for, while you felt the largeness, you also felt the compactness of the whole. Despite the distance, you knew that these dots in the gallery were near you, and could hear every word or note uttered on the stage" ("Dedicated to Music and the People," Chicago Tribune [10 December 1889]: 1).

Izenour, Theatre Design, 568–569.

Mallgrave, Gottfried Semper, 260–262, noted Semper’s innovation of the double proscenium in his unbuilt project for Munich’s Festival Theater as the source for the triple proscenium enframing the stage at Bayreuth. It accommodated the orchestra’s placement in a deep pit, or ‘‘mystical abyss’’ between the audience and stage—an idea important to Wagner.


Ibid.

At first there was to be a fifth arched segment in the ceiling nearest the stage, but this was omitted to place the organ there. See Gregersen, "Chicago Auditorium: A History," 23.

Adler, "Chicago Auditorium," 432.


Ibid.

Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull-House (Chicago, 1900), 177–178.


"Opera and Drama," Indicator 6 (4 July 1885): 553. Sullivan, "Development of Construction, I," in Twombly, ed., Sullivan: Public Papers, 214–215, recalled that in the 1885 renovation of McVicker’s Theater, he had invented "the first decorative use of the electric lamp—placing the lamps in a decora-


Adler, "Theater-Building for American Cities; Second Paper," 817. Peck wrote: "The plan of decoration is consistent and elegant throughout the building, the Auditorium and main rooms of the hotel being finished mostly in gold and ivory tone of color. This has been costly, the quality of the gold leaf being exceptionally fine (23 carats), but it is permanent and grows more beautiful with age, and therefore is wise economy as well as effective in beauty" (Peck, Annual Report of the President to the Stockholders of the Chicago Auditorium Association, 7 December 1889. Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives). Sullivan wrote: "A single idea or principle is taken as a basis of the color scheme, that is to say, use is made of but one color in each instance, and that color is associated with gold" ("Plastic and Color Decoration of the Auditorium," in Twombly, ed., Sullivan: Public Papers, 74).

Mme. Léon Grandin, Impressions d’une parisienne à Chicago (Paris, 1894), 117: "En outre, l’élément décoratif, peinture et sculpture, si abondant, trop abondant même en nôtre Académie de musique, fait ici complètement défaut."

Peck, Annual Report of the President to the Stockholders of the Chicago Auditorium Association, 7 December 1889. Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives. Peck noted that the French government had paid the equivalent of over $7 million for the Paris Opera House, plus $2 million for the ground, while Chicago’s Auditorium cost $3.1 million to build, plus a ground rent of $1 million for the lease period.

Garczynski, Auditorium, 128.

Johannes Gelert (1852-1923) sculpted these reliefs and those of Shakespeare and his design for the synagogue for Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv, Chicago. It has no historical style. It is the present. You have got to get away from schools of anything there is no progress, nothing gained, no advancement. Look at the Auditorium. What school does that represent? None” (“Church Spires Must Go,” Chicago Tribune [30 November 1890]: 36).

113 Garnczynski, Auditorium, 114. In a later interview, Sullivan said of Adler's and his design for the synagogue for Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv, Chicago (1889-1890): “It is the nineteenth century school. . . . That is all I can say for it. It has no historical style. It is the present. We have got to get away from schools in architecture. As long as we adhere to schools of anything there is no progress; nothing gained, no advancement. Look at the Auditorium. What school does that represent? None” (“Church Spires Must Go,” Chicago Tribune [30 November 1890]: 36).

114 Sullivan, Auditorium, 128.

115 Sullivan, Autobiography of an Idea, 208-209, recalled that Lohengrin had an impact on his appreciation of Wagner, whose portrait, along with Haydn’s, appears in gold relief in the arch spandrels of the organ screen to the stage’s left. See “Auditorium Supplement,” Chicago Inter Ocean (11 December 1889). Johannes Gelter (1852-1923) sculpted these reliefs and those of Shakespeare and Demosthenes to the stage’s right.

116 The illusionistic backdrop for the Auditorium’s stage consisted of a continuous canvas roll on which were painted panoramas of the sky in different seasons and weather. The backdrop, 300 feet long and 75 feet high, was painted by the Kautsky Brothers of Vienna, whose system of hydraulic lifts was adapted for the Auditorium’s stage. See Adler, “Chicago Auditorium,” 428-429, and Garnczynski, Auditorium, 135-136. Sullivan’s designs of foliate ornament to frame naturalistic stage imagery recurred in his studies for the proscenium and curtain of the Pueblo Opera House (1888-1890). See Lloyd C. Engelbrecht, “Adler & Sullivan’s Pueblo Opera House: City Status for a New Town in the Rockies,” Art Bulletin 67 (June 1985): 297, 290.


118 Ibid., 76.


122 Ibid.

123 At their meeting of 28 August 1889, Peck and his colleagues resolved “that the architects and the decorative contractor [Healy and Millet] proceed with landscape paintings for the side arches in the Auditorium—the cost thereof not to exceed two thousand dollars ($2,000). It being fully understood that if not satisfactory they are to be taken down at the expense of Healy and Millet . . . the landscapes to be subject to modification in the original designs and subject to the approval of the Executive Committee” (Minutes of Executive Committee of Chicago Auditorium Association, 141. Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives). On 5 June, the Executive Committee had “voted to authorize Architect Sullivan to have figures placed over the proscenium arch of the Auditorium, the cost thereof not to exceed $2,000, and the design subject to the approval of this committee” (Ibid., 111). On Fleury, see Francis E. Towne, “Albert Fleury, Painter,” Brush and Pencil 12 (April-September 1903): 201-208. On Healy and Millet, see David Hanks, “Louis J. Millet,” Louis Sullivan, 205; Sullivan, Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings, ed. Isabella Athey (New York, 1947), 30, described the Field Store as a monument to Field, “to the strength and resource of individuality and force of character.” Field’s associate, Harry G. Selfridge, noted that the firm’s architecture “met the moral requirements of Mr. Field himself” as “a lasting monument to his character” (Harold I. Cleveland, “Fifty-Five Years in Business: The Life of Marshall Field—Chapter XI,” System 11 [May 1907]: 459).


127 On the Auditorium’s siting and urban visibility, see Garnczynski, Auditorium, 41-49.

128 At their meeting of 7 May 1887, the Auditorium’s directors, headed by Peck, voted to change the upper walls to limestone (Records, 71. Auditorium Collection, Roosevelt University Archives). Paul Mueller, “Testimony,” in Kaufmann, ed., “Wright’s ‘Lieber Meister’,” Nine Commentaries, 49, and Wright, Genius and the Mobocracy, 48, both recalled that Sullivan’s initial designs for the upper walls were in brick and an ornate terra-cotta, cladding structural iron columns.


131 Field’s Wholesale Store was 325 feet long east-west on Adams Street and its seven stories stood 130 feet high. The Auditorium’s front on Congress Street is 362 feet long east-west, while its ten-story block is about 144 feet high. Both thus had a ratio of frontal width to height of 2.5:1. John Van Osdel’s Farwell Wholesale Block (1886), on the west side of South Market Street from Monroe to Adams, was the other recent building of comparable size in central Chicago. See Rand, McNally & Co., Bird’s-Eye View and Guide to Chicago, 105-106, and Randall, Building Construction in Chicago, 112, 123.


135 Industrial Chicago, 1: The Building Interests, 25.

136 Garnczynski, Auditorium, 54.


140 On the unit’s local history and reputation, see Souvenir Album and Sketchbook of Chicago’s First Regiment (Chicago, 1890); Andreas, History of Chicago, 3, 586-587; and John J. Flinn, Chicago: The Marvelous City of the West, 2nd ed.
Jenney and Julian Ralph, "The First Regiment Armory in Chicago," 24 Jackson Street, opened in 1878. On this structure, see Autobiography Armory, see Gregersen, 'the Armory,' famous twentieth-century showman, see Flinn, Conrad, Chicago's architecture, see Garczynski, Auditorium, 505. On the Chicago Citizens' Law and Order League, see Frederic C. Jaher, Chicago Inter Ocean (3 May 1885): 6.


The Athenaeum's earlier building stood on the west side of Dearborn Street, just north of Adler and Sullivan's Borden Block on the northwest corner of Randolph. On the Art Institute's original patronage from its organization in 1879, see Andreas, History of Chicago, 3, 421, and Helen L. Horowitz, "The Art Institute of Chicago: The First Forty Years," Chicago History 8 (Spring 1979): 2–19.


Garczynski, Auditorium, 152.

Studies that revise views of the Chicago School by examining its architectural patronage include Bluestone, Constructing Chicago, and Berger, They Built Chicago.

Paul Bourget, Outre Mer (Paris, 1895), 1, 161–162, trans. in Schuyler, Critique of the Works of Adler & Sullivan, in American Architecture, 2, 380. Bourget in this context was discussing the exteriors of Chicago's tall commercial buildings. See Jordy, American Buildings and Their Architects, 4, 52–53. Schuyler wrote: "The type of an opera-house, which the [Chicago] auditorium essentially is, is so well settled and so universally accepted that the variations ordinarily attempted upon it, even by architects of original force, are comparatively slight. While the component parts of the accepted type are retained in this interior, they are transmuted into an entirely new result." The theater, in "extending and proclaiming a hospitality as nearly as may be equal and undistinguishing, illustrates, as plainly as the exterior of many-storied buildings, and in contrast with the 'royal' and 'imperial' opera houses, M. Bourget's conception of 'a new kind of art, an art of democracy' " (Schuyler, Critique of the Works of Adler & Sullivan, in American Architecture, 2, 384–385).

Illustration Credits
Figures 1, 10, 13, 16, 17, 20. Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago
Figures 5, 14. Library of Congress
Figure 6. Museum of the City of New York
Figure 7. Deutsches Theatermuseum, Munich
Figures 8, 9, 18, 22. Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society
Figure 23. Courtesy of Alinari-Scala/Art Resources International, New York City