



75<sub>years</sub>

THE HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

# Eulogy

*in Black and White*

by Joe Flanagan

RICHARD NICKEL'S LAST STAND ON THE FRONTIER OF URBAN RENEWAL

**The bulldozers started rolling shortly after World War II.** Victory brought the dawn of a limitless future, and America plunged headlong into the American century. Forward, upward, new—this was the currency of the time, pursued relentlessly and without looking back. By the 1960s, urban renewal had changed the face of the nation's cities. Wide swaths were demolished: entire blocks, entire neighborhoods, entire business districts, all razed to make way for the new. Nothing was spared. Nothing would ever be the same. The wholesale erasure of the past was, in part, inspired by the ideas of Swiss architect Le Corbusier. But it had very practical origins, too. Urban renewal was seen as a way to clear out the slums, get rid of “obsolete” buildings, make space for an exploding population, and accommodate the burgeoning car culture.

*Left: The Republic Building, an extraordinary example of Chicago School architecture designed by Holabird and Roche and built in the early 1900s. The structure—which became yet another casualty of the city's take-no-prisoners approach to redevelopment—was still standing when Richard Nickel turned up to take the images in this article, now in the archives of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Nickel depicts the building as both specimen and character, a signature technique of his photographic art.*

ALL PHOTOS RICHARD NICKEL/MPHABS EXCEPT AS NOTED



The destruction was particularly tragic in Chicago, a trove of American architectural genius. It is the crusade of a lone photographer, however, that lends such poignancy to the period. Richard Nickel scoured the streets of the city, often turning his lens on its treasures mere days before the wrecking ball swung. His story unfolds just as the preservation movement was coming into its own, reflecting a growing consciousness of the past in the wake of what was being destroyed. As in other aspects of life in the 1960s, the changes were momentous, the result a national soul-searching as to whether business-as-usual was indeed a good thing. Today, appropriately, a rich sampling of Nickel's art—including the visual poetry he saw in the now-destroyed Republic Building, pictured in this article—resides in the archives of the National Park Service Historic American Buildings Survey, which celebrates its 75th anniversary this year.

Just out of the Army in 1948, Richard Nickel was an amateur photographer attending the Chicago Institute of Design, founded by Hungarian expatriate László Moholy-Nagy, a former teacher from Germany's Bauhaus. Ideas forbidden under Hitler flourished, with the institute a place of note to art world luminaries of the time. Nickel enrolled under the GI Bill with modest hopes of becoming a commercial cameraman, but influenced by Moholy-Nagy's ideas and the institute's Bauhaus-inspired philosophy, he found himself on another pursuit altogether: perfecting himself as an artist.

Students were urged to abandon preconceived notions of beauty and start with a blank slate. Spontaneity was the objective; instinct the key. Before long, Nickel stood out for the freshness and power of his compositions. For a class assignment, he photographed the Jewelers' Building, a mercantile structure designed in 1881 by Louis

Nickel and his classmates, drawn to Sullivan's work, formed a small production company to photograph as many of his buildings as they could. The result, a 1954 student exhibit, was a eulogy to the priceless treasures becoming dust all around Chicago. Nickel wrote his graduate thesis on Sullivan's architecture, embarking on a quest to photograph obscure works in faraway Utah, Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, and New York. In 1956, Horizon Press commissioned a book based on the photos he and his classmates had taken.

### *The New City*

The changes transforming American cities grew, in part, from the ideas of Le Corbusier, whose philosophy of urban life guided much of the postwar rebuilding. He fervently believed that technology and engineering could vastly improve human existence, in cities designed as machines—functional, efficient, and clean. Nature was part of his vision as well—it is said that there was “an essential humanism” in his concepts—but that was hijacked by would-be imitators and municipal authorities working on tight budgets. Urban renewal in America was a backlash against what was seen as the old, cramped, dark cities of another time. “Obsolete” was a word that accompanied the bulldozers into one city after another. Real estate speculators, bred by the boom, fostered the destruction.

By the late 1950s, Chicago's treasures—notably its Adler and Sullivan buildings—were fast disappearing. Nickel stored salvaged decorative pieces in his parents' home, where he moved after a failed marriage. He hung around the frontier of urban renewal, haunting lonely blocks and blasted out streets, often, in his words, “the only person at the wrecking site when a Sullivan building was being

## **RICHARD NICKEL SCoured THE STREETS OF THE CITY, OFTEN**

*TURNING HIS LENS ON ITS TREASURES MERE DAYS BEFORE THE WRECKING BALL SWUNG. HIS STORY UNFOLDS JUST AS THE PRESERVATION MOVEMENT WAS COMING INTO ITS OWN, REFLECTING A GROWING CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE PAST IN THE WAKE OF WHAT WAS BEING DESTROYED. AS IN OTHER ASPECTS OF LIFE IN THE '60S, THE CHANGES WERE MOMENTOUS, THE RESULT A NATIONAL SOUL-SEARCHING AS TO WHETHER BUSINESS-AS-USUAL WAS INDEED A GOOD THING.*

Sullivan. It was the start of a lifelong obsession with the famed architect, who was a mentor to Frank Lloyd Wright.

Sullivan, who with his business partner Dankmar Adler created some of the nation's first high-rises, was renowned for his use of organic ornamentation. His buildings boasted a lavishness not seen in later variants of the form, richly decorated with masonry, cast iron, and terra cotta. The ornament seemed at odds with a phrase attributed to him—“form follows function”—yet it had a civilizing effect on the building's scale, acknowledging the modern city while embracing another era, staid and expressive at the same time. Imposing and all business, they digressed from function in ways playful and somber, with images of griffins, angels, human faces, and plants on textured block facades. It was as if a romantic had been asked to design a city. Other Chicago School architects took the cue, as in the Republic Building shown here.

demolished.” When a salvage item was too heavy, he sometimes convinced the wreckers to help him load it into his car. Richard Cahan and Michael Williams write in their book, *Richard Nickel's Chicago: Photographs of a Lost City*, “While others in Chicago celebrated the

*Right: The Republic in 1960, the year it was torn down to make way for a steel and glass skyscraper designed by architectural firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. For Nickel, it wasn't just architecture that was being lost but a sense of identity and place. To underscore the loss, he went out of his way to show city life teeming around his subjects.*







NICKEL STORED

building boom that promised to revitalize the aging city, Nickel soldiered on in the trenches of preservation and memory.”

The small masterpieces in the neighborhoods went first, followed by the downtown landmarks. Says Ward Miller, executive director of the Richard Nickel Committee and Archive, “People resigned themselves to the fact that there was a certain life to a house and [just] threw up their hands . . . when it came to downtown, it was different.” There was a push against the superstructures that would redefine the landscape. “There was excitement that the city was getting these new landmarks by the likes of Mies van der Rohe and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill,” he says, “but also acknowledgement of the terrible cost.”

### *Taking a Stand*

Before the 1950s were over, Nickel was a battered veteran of his own preservation movement. He watched beautiful buildings knocked down one after the other. Word got out that several early skyscrapers were to be torn down. “Now I am pulling out of it,” he wrote. “Buildings are coming down on all sides.” But when he heard they were going to demolish Adler and Sullivan’s Garrick Theater, the acclaimed 1892 opera house, Nickel stepped back into the fray.

By 1960, the Garrick’s grandeur had faded considerably. In *They All Fall Down: Richard Nickel’s Struggle to Save America’s Architecture*, author Richard Cahen writes, “Cheap rents attracted private detectives, phrenologists, and ne’er-do-well attorneys.” There had been successive bad remodels, the ground floor occupied by a Ham n’ Egger restaurant. But beneath all that Sullivan’s vision could still be seen.

The Garrick had the architect’s signature colonnaded arches and terra cotta on its outer face, which gave the effect, in Cahen’s words, of “a fluid, undulating skin.” The theater itself, which started in the waning days of opera and then became a prominent venue for vaudeville, was surrounded by offices.

Nickel began photographing inside and out. He came up with numerous ways in which the Garrick could work in a new capacity—as offices, studios, a hotel—anything. As the demolition neared, he wrote to architects all over the world, urging them to protest. He hunted down an old Sullivan associate and asked him to intervene.

Chicago had formed a landmarks commission in 1957—and even passed a preservation ordinance—but they were largely ineffective. In

SALVAGED DECORATIVE PIECES IN HIS PARENTS’ HOME, WHERE

1959, the commission presented a plaque to the owners of the Garrick, designating it a “primary landmark.” This did nothing to alter plans to make it a parking lot. Nickel teamed with activist Thomas Stauffer to fight the demolition. It almost worked. Letters and telegrams poured in. Frank Lloyd Wright’s widow sent a message to Mayor Daley. Le Corbusier himself wrote, as did other renowned architects, artists, and scholars. Nickel and others picketed the theater. Says Jonathan Fine, executive director of Preservation Chicago, “It was the mood of the times. [People] had been battered by the interstate highway system and

*Left and below: Details of the Republic, whose demise mirrored in microcosm the fate of the city. During the urban renewal era, Chicago’s nascent preservation movement wrangled over one building after another, fighting against powerful developers and a craze for the new.*



*HE MOVED AFTER A FAILED MARRIAGE. HE HUNG AROUND THE FRONTIER OF URBAN RENEWAL, HAUNTING LONELY BLOCKS AND BLASTED OUT STREETS, OFTEN, IN HIS WORDS, “THE ONLY PERSON AT THE WRECKING SITE WHEN A SULLIVAN BUILDING WAS BEING DEMOLISHED.” WHEN A SALVAGE ITEM WAS TOO HEAVY, HE SOMETIMES CONVINCED THE WRECKERS TO HELP HIM LOAD IT INTO HIS CAR.*



Le Corbusier's nightmarish vision of what our cities were going to look like. By '60, '61, [they] had had enough." With the Garrick suddenly hot, Daley held a hearing in the city council chambers, with the developers denied a demolition permit while the city studied alternatives.

The developers sued. The building's fate hung in the balance for months, but in the end it was torn down, the wreckage laid out in a giant shed at Navy Pier, including "the plaster ornaments and pieces from the proscenium of the theater," says Miller. Since a commercial contractor was too expensive to do the salvage, Nickel was hired, the work funded largely by the American Institute of Architects, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the landmarks commission. By then he had attracted a following of kindred idealists. "It was just him and his band of architecture students, really," says Miller. "They worked in dangerous conditions, often with the wrecking ball just over their shoulder." In the end, he says, the salvaged pieces were shipped to institutions around the world.



## RICHARD CAHAN AND MICHAEL WILLIAMS WRITE IN THEIR

*Above: Shoppers at street level in one of the Republic's theatrical public spaces. Right: "With a white glazed terra-cotta façade that gleamed in the sunlight, and a sweeping bronze and marble arcade, [it] was a gem," writes Richard Cahan of the Republic in They All Fall Down: Richard Nickel's Struggle to Save America's Architecture.*

### *Surveying a Shattered Heritage*

Around this time, HABS came to Chicago, where a National Park Service report from the period noted "the sharply rising rate of destruction." Local architect Earl Reed, an old preservation hand who had an association with HABS, sponsored the work. To make measured drawings of what the report called "the complex Chicago skyscrapers," the teams used photogrammetry, an expensive technique at the time. Local institutions and private donors gave financial support to make it possible. The city provided an architectural historian, and the Illinois Institute of Technology made its dormitories available to HABS staff.

HABS, established in 1933 as a way to hire out-of-work architects under FDR's New Deal, set out to be "a complete resume of the builder's art," said founder Charles Peterson, a record of the nation's story told through the built environment. The effort achieved success throughout the decade, but World War II put a damper on it. In 1956, the National Park Service launched Mission 66—a campaign to rehabilitate park visitor centers, roads, and accommodations, with a number of historical sites to be added to the system. These sites needed to be documented, and HABS was revitalized to take on the job. The idea of a nationwide survey had not been abandoned; in fact, now there was new urgency. Superhighways were slicing through communities urban and rural, with suburbs steadily creeping outward from the city.

Reinvigorated, HABS took on increasingly diverse projects. The goal was to record 100 sites per year and photograph another thousand. The survey conducted research on preserving structures, too, becoming a proving ground for increased federal involvement in preservation. As in the '30s, HABS cast a wide lens on the built environment, including in its sweep "urban and rural, secular and profane, vernacular and high style," from log structures in Montana and cottages on Cape Cod to landmarks in the big cities.

In Chicago, 31 buildings were documented with drawings, large format photography, and written histories, among them landmarks that were to be preserved, and destroyed. HABS made several return trips, its work made possible by the passion of local preservationists, architects, and historic building aficionados. Also instrumental was Wilbert R. Hasbrouck, who headed the preservation commission of the Chicago chapter of the AIA. Nickel made uneasy alliances with this emerging preservation establishment, taking a hard line when

*BOOK, RICHARD NICKEL'S CHICAGO: PHOTOGRAPHS OF A LOST CITY, "WHILE OTHERS IN CHICAGO CELEBRATED THE BUILDING BOOM THAT PROMISED TO REVITALIZE THE AGING CITY, NICKEL SOLDIERED ON IN THE TRENCHES OF PRESERVATION AND MEMORY."*









economic and political realities left practically no room to bargain. Shy by nature, he agitated by writing letters to editors, politicians, and well-known architects.

As the '60s wore on, Nickel fought for one doomed building after another. The Cable. The Republic. The Hammond Library. The Blumenfeld House. The city often paid him to photograph them before their demise. He called the replacement buildings “gaudy and superficial”; the only things recommending them, he said, were the “air conditioning and automatic elevators.”

Nickel's pictures were part record, part homage, part indictment. Cahan likens his photography to a private tour. “He offers rewards to those who look carefully,” he writes. “A window washer hangs from the 8th floor of the Monadnock Building's façade, and an array of

### *A Death Mask of America*

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson convened the “Task Force on the Preservation of Natural Beauty.” Out of that came the message that the nation's legacy was in serious trouble. A special committee of the U.S. Conference of Mayors traveled to Europe to observe preservation practices, then delivered a report to the 89th Congress. Published by

*INDICTMENT. CAHAN LIKENS HIS PHOTOGRAPHY TO A PRIVATE TOUR. “HE OFFERS REWARDS TO THOSE WHO LOOK CAREFULLY,” HE WRITES: “A WINDOW WASHER HANGS FROM THE 8TH FLOOR OF THE MONADNOCK BUILDING'S FAÇADE, AND AN ARRAY OF TERRA COTTA EAGLES, GARGOYLES, GRIFFINS, AND FILIGREED PINNACLES SITS ATOP THE NORTH AMERICAN BUILDING.” DEVELOPERS CALLED THE STRUCTURES “DINOSAURS,” BUT IN NICKEL'S LENS THEY WERE DRAMA.*

Random House as *With Heritage So Rich*, it became a rallying cry for the preservation movement. Of all the buildings that HABS had surveyed, said the book, half had been either destroyed or mutilated. The HABS collections, it said, looked like a “death mask of America.” The federal government needed to take the reins, said the authors. Its agencies—many of which had fostered the destruction—needed to make preservation part of their missions. The report cited HABS as a ray of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape.

The next year saw the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act. Historic structures that would be affected by federal projects—or work that was federally funded—now had to be documented to standards issued by the Secretary of the Interior, which were based primarily on HABS standards. The Act required all states to complete an inventory of important sites, and the HABS approach became the model for the work.

In 1968, the Chicago city council approved the creation of the Commission on Historical and Architectural Landmarks, and with it the municipality's first binding preservation law. The same year, developers bought Adler and Sullivan's 1894 Stock Exchange on La Salle Street. The

## *NICKEL'S PICTURES WERE PART RECORD, PART HOMAGE, PART*



terra cotta eagles, gargoyles, griffins, and filigreed pinnacles sits atop the North American Building.” Developers called the structures “dinosaurs,” but in Nickel's lens they were drama. He once said he tried to remain calm while photographing his subjects—his early photographs are clearly more objective—but Cahan writes that “helplessness and anger” found their way into his later work.

*Previous pages: Original display cases—the structure boasted one of the first multi-level shopping centers—with the words “The Republic” on the back wall next to a clock frozen in time. Above and right: The interior of the building, a vacant and ghostly presence on the eve of its demise. The Republic was to be demolished to make way for an office tower for Home Federal Savings and Loan Association. Nickel tried to convince designers Skidmore, Owings and Merrill that the association could use the Republic as is. But there was no interest from the architectural firm, then making a name for itself with sleek new designs. Nickel wrote asking, “May I inquire what is so grand about a glass slab with aluminum strips running down the side?”*







## THE WRANGLING

WENT ON THROUGH THE LATE '60S AND INTO THE '70S, BUT THE STOCK EXCHANGE WAS DOOMED . . . IN APRIL 1972, NICKEL WENT IN ALONE, DISAPPEARING INTO THE NOW RUINED BUILDING. HIS WHEREABOUTS REMAINED A MYSTERY FOR EIGHT WEEKS, UNTIL WORKERS FOUND HIS BODY IN A PILE OF RUBBLE. WEAKENED BY THE DEMOLITION, THE FLOOR TO THE TRADING ROOM HAD COLLAPSED.

battles. "That's when the movement became more sophisticated," says Fine. "It started to mature in the '70s and '80s."

A host of landmarks did survive urban renewal, among them Frank Lloyd Wright's Robie House, Sullivan's Auditorium Building and Carson Pirie Scott Store, the Rookery, the Monadnock Building, and the Chicago Library. But the threat remains ever-present. "Neighborhoods are under siege again where they weren't for a long time," says Miller. "Small developers are picking houses out one by one, tearing them down and replacing them with cut and dried standard units." The city's 1968 preservation ordinance has, on occasion, been circumvented by creative interpretations and political considerations. Early this year, Preservation Chicago's endangered list included the ordinance itself. "It's the first time we've ever put an idea on the list," says Fine.

*Left: The Republic lords over the streets of Chicago, gazing down majestically from grand heights. These images and those of many other Chicago landmarks are housed today at the Library of Congress as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey collection. Right: A self-portrait, Nickel covered with grime from salvaging pieces of the buildings he loved.*

commission included the structure in its list of buildings designated for preservation, but the council voted it down. The developers, who had powerful connections, had invested millions in the property. It was the start of an emotional and protracted fight, in many ways mirroring the struggle to save the Garrick, except "this one everybody got," says Miller. The newly formed Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, a private group, led the campaign. Known today as Landmarks Illinois, it would go on to become one of the most prominent players in the local preservation scene. Lisa DiChiera, the group's director of advocacy, cites the battle over the Stock Exchange as the seminal moment in Chicago preservation. Nickel, who Cahan describes as "fed up and cynical" by this point, got involved once again.

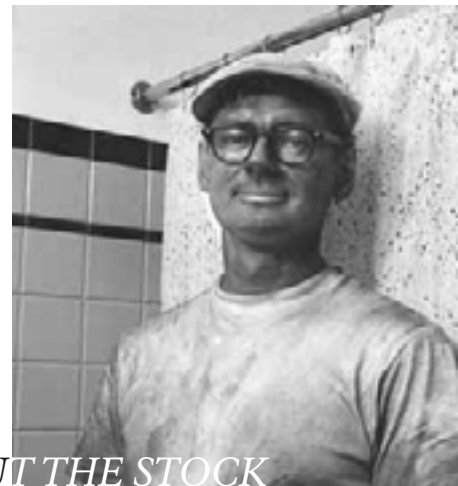
The wrangling went on through the late '60s and into the '70s, but the Stock Exchange was doomed. Nickel's friend John Vinci was hired to salvage the architectural ornament. Vinci hired Nickel, and they spent endless hours inside the Exchange taking photographs and removing decorative pieces, struggling to stay ahead of the wreckers. In April 1972, Nickel went in alone, disappearing into the now ruined building. His whereabouts remained a mystery for eight weeks, until workers found his body in a pile of rubble. Weakened by the demolition, the floor to the trading room had collapsed.

### *On the Bones of the Stock Exchange*

"The preservation movement in Chicago was built on the bones of the Stock Exchange," says Miller. The following years brought more big

But there have been successes, too. Since its inception, the city landmarks commission has designated over 300 properties, including 50 districts. For the past 10 years, it has hosted the Great Chicago Places and Spaces festival, a celebration of architecture with 250 free tours.

And the Historic American Buildings Survey, as it celebrates its 75th anniversary this year, remains arguably one of the most enlightened concepts in preservation. Its collection at the Library of Congress is part scholarly analysis and part family album, both tribute and technical archive. It is fitting that Richard Nickel's photographs can be found there, in the company of the American pantheon of buildings, where his work is neither lonely nor futile.



For more information, visit the HABS website at [www.nps.gov/history/hdp/habs/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/hdp/habs/index.htm), or email HABS chief Catherine Lavoie at [catherine\\_lavoie@nps.gov](mailto:catherine_lavoie@nps.gov). The HABS collection at the Library of Congress can be viewed at [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs\\_haer/](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/). Visit the Richard Nickel Archive and Committee website at [www.richardnickelcommittee.org](http://www.richardnickelcommittee.org).

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