

Crowns

We're seeing cities from the top down. The peaks, in the past only glimpsed at a distance from the street, are now front and center on our screens. Our new view of the city is all tops, while the bottoms, the lobbies, and the entrances we know and love are lost deep in shadowed canyons.

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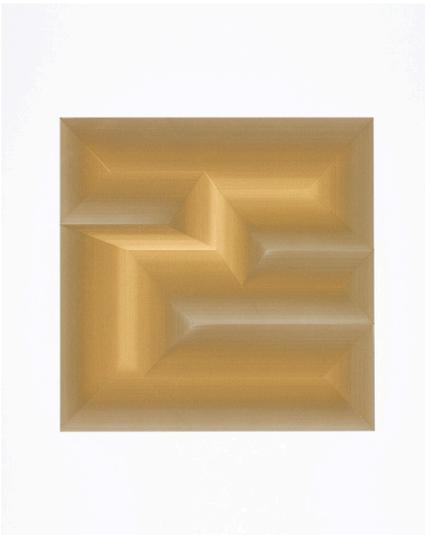
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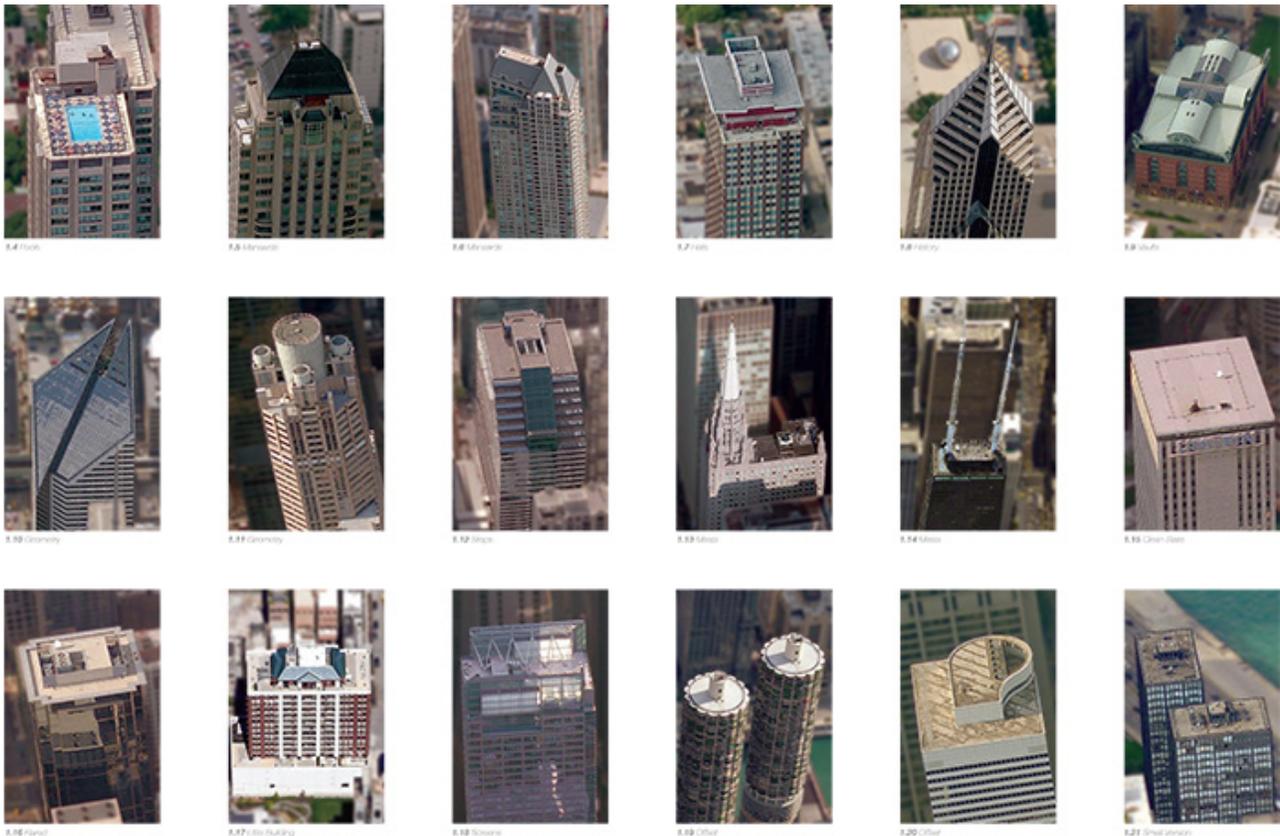
Beyond Chicago's issues of drainage, the lack of distinction in the horizontal and mostly flat landscape necessitated the invention and replication of the Midwestern plain into the layered city. The idea of ground, in Chicago, is an entirely artificial concept. There is no ground, but instead; grounds – 10 to be precise that are divided into 6 subterranean and 4 superterranean levels. From lowest to highest those levels begin with the deep tunnel, water tunnels, cable car tunnels, freight tunnels, the subway, the pedway and service levels, the river, the street, the el, and culminate with building tops. Each level, in a way, is built upon the contingencies of a form of functionalism, all, that is, except for the tops.

As it turns out, tops are a good way to gauge the truest desires of a city. The building bottom has too many obligations to really get a feel for what an architect is thinking. The bottom needs to accommodate signage, entries and exits, a program, loading and unloading, setbacks, lighting, and visibility. Meanwhile, upstairs, the top just gets to look pretty. Sure you need to make allowances for mechanical rooms, elevator overruns, air handling, etc., but all of that is small ball compared to what's at stake downstairs. The bottom is a matrix of functions and requirements; the top simply needs to keep the rain out.

From the ground, Chicago towers are a beige and black history of realty speculation and skyscraper innovation. There are the usual characters of Sears, Federal Center, and Marina City alongside the evolution of the tall building from stone masonry to steel frame to bundled core to lateral brace. Things get done for logical economic reasons coupled with modernist design intent—the story of reasonable actors in a nice Midwestern city, with well-groomed lobbies, decked out in Miesian rationalism, and filled with dark-suited businessmen. All the while, high up above, it's rooftop gardens, formal extravagance, and bikini-clad socialites.

From the top, Chicago's not a modern city but a postmodern one. For all its Miesian posturing, there are more ornamented Mansard roofs than anything else; Parisian airs drift over the rigid Jeffersonian Grid. Perhaps the result of missing instructions or maybe a simple





oversight; Modernism offered a clear strategy for how to start towers on the ground but paid little attention to stopping them in the sky.

Some towers deny the top even exists, all evidence of anything resembling building services have been hidden beneath a roof slab that is as open as the floor plates that define the office spaces below.

The mechanical penthouses of 860–880 Lakeshore Drive are squatter twins of their parent buildings. A Miesian box perched, double-removed from the city and half-way to heaven, mechanical equipment sitting atop a tabula rasa, atop a Miesian skyscraper, atop another tabula rasa—Mies and Mies and Mies and Mies.

The mast, an invention not without technical merits (it makes sense to broadcast from the highest heights), also helps to smooth the otherwise abrupt transition from building to sky. Tapering from its base to its top and often multiplied or offset, these towers atop the towers produce a slow fade directing the eye back down toward the action.

In the presence of ever expanding mechanical equipment, the clean slate is pressured to evolve a method of concealment that maintains the integrity of modernist principals. While born out of the desire to remain true to certain compositional tendencies, it is the screen wall and hat brim that act as the threshold beyond which artifice and exuberance begin to take hold.

Signs (names withheld) too adorn mechanical spaces, a technique for hiding in plain sight. Has anyone ever noticed the hills behind the Hollywood?

Embracing signification, Chicago as second city is a copy onto itself. It collects other historical monuments: from an angular Chrysler to the gothic Tribune, using symbology to supplant the reticulated frame. Exuberance takes over restraint. The scale, all too awkward,



is indifferent to proportion. Only in our contemporary view of this 5th façade is the ideal vantage point revealed.

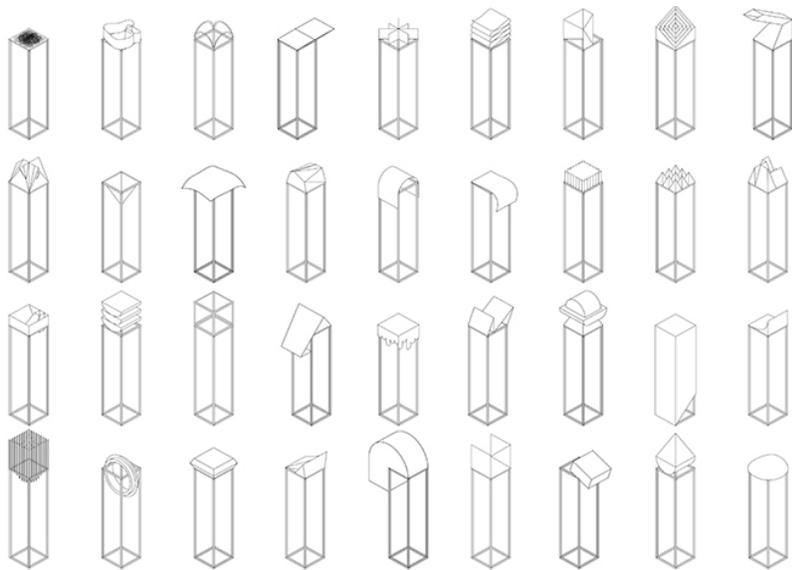
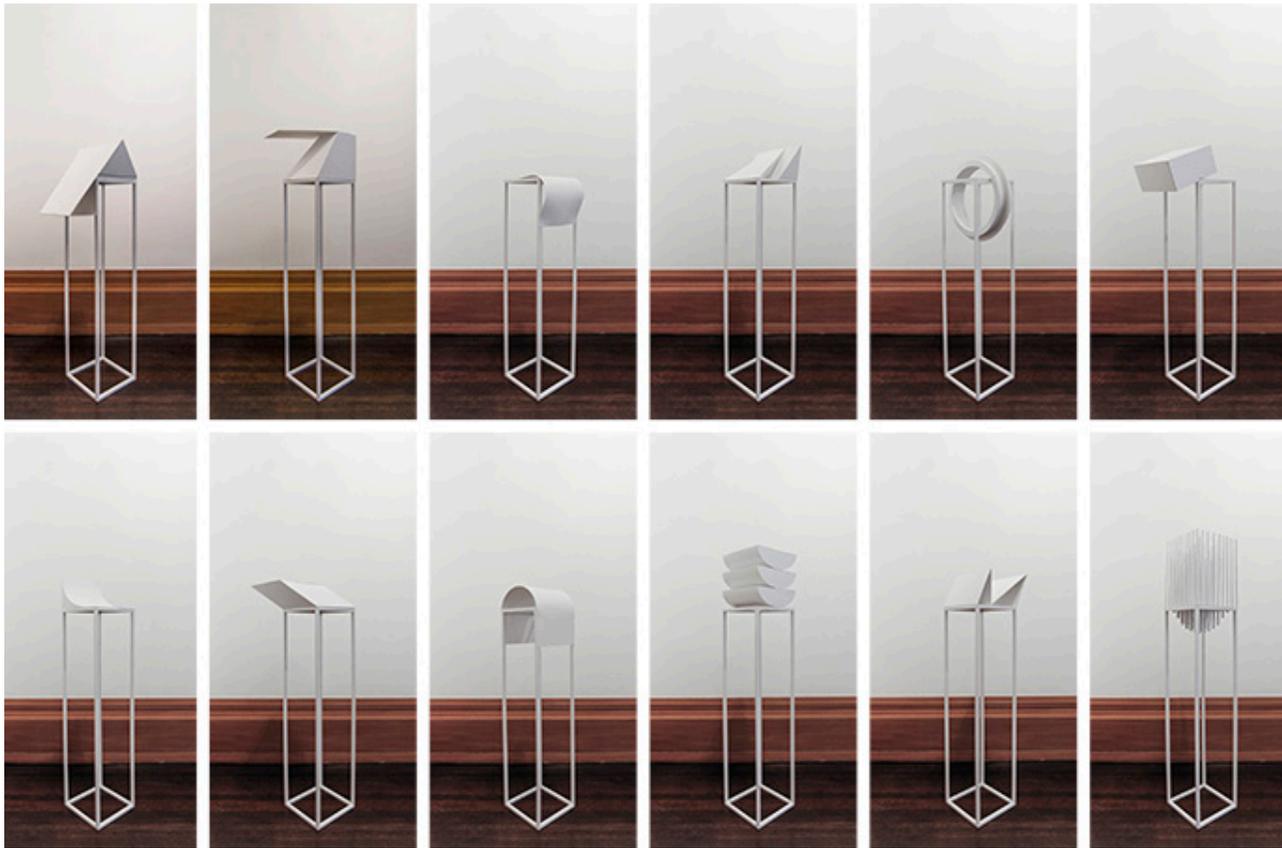
Or not so ideal - the prison yard that occupies the roof plane of Harry Weese's Metropolitan Correctional Center likely never expected to receive such attention. Certainly, neither did all of the swimming pools, of which there are a whole lot, a bit foolhardy considering the three-month summer, courtesy of a sizable population of brazen optimists who've sprinkled bits of Miami over snow-capped summits.

Penthouse cabins and towers built over monotonous office buildings, small idiosyncratic retreats and grand gestures located on a second Midwestern plain, speak to a loose band of rugged individualists shackled up over the business of land speculation below.

There are buildings with hats, strange geometric oddities at their apex, the last gasps of architectural intention escaping the straight jacket of economics and clients, a happening scene of architectural formalism. There is a curious incursion of towers with giant steps, all in the same area, that form a type of staircase, a nod to Sandburg's City of the Big Shoulders. There are even tiny buildings built on top of buildings as if a twister swept up a Barrington McMansion or Lake Forest country club and dropped it precariously, many miles removed from its typical context.

Viewed from the top down, Chicago is a city of oddballs and irrational dreamers, who, out of view of each other and the public, have created a fantasy world of form and program, which serve none of their masters below. Chicago's tops reveal an unexplored wilderness, a beach above the sidewalk, a place for naiveté and bliss.

The crown is the only element of the tower so closely identified with the iconography of the city in which it sits that has yet to receive any real critical attention. In the project 36



Crowns, is-office, explores alternative ideas for top creation. Each type of top elicits a corollary or alternative set of explorations that have the potential to engage our contemporary digital viewing methods of this 5th façade. From expanding the roof beyond the mansard to include the gambrel, gable, hip, shed, and other hybrids to exploring methods of increasing surface area to methods of doubling down onto the tower and other offshoots and strategies between; new crowns are primed to develop alternative notions of envelope and objecthood. In this new world of crowns, up is down and top is bottom.