

CIRCULAR CITY

More than 50 years ago, Chicago architect Bertrand Goldberg designed a novel residential complex that redefined urban living. Laurence Lowe reports on a structure that continues to make its mark on the city

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PIT STOP



Left: Bertrand Goldberg's iconic structures seen from across the marina, which sits on the north bank of the Chicago River.
Right: Marina City up close. The parking garages run fully exposed from the plaza level to the 19th floor. The 20th floor contains a laundry room, and floors 21 through 60 contain private apartments (which were converted into condos in 1977).



The dream of Marina City was founded just over a half century ago on the north side of Chicago. Conceived as a city within a city – a novel idea at the time – the mixed residential-commercial complex consists of five structures, all staged on a river-facing raised platform, with a marina underneath. Its twin 90-story towers materialized in 1964 like a beckoning mirage: they were the tallest reinforced concrete buildings in the world and the first circular apartment buildings ever constructed, each one featuring a fully exposed parking ramp that runs between the plaza level and the 19th floor. Even before the West Tower was completed, *Time* magazine touted Marina City as “Chicago’s most amazing [structure] since the 1893 Ferris Wheel.”

Now widely known for resembling corncobs, Marina City’s twin residential towers endure as an architectural landmark, a must-snap subject of Instagramming tourists and a pop culture fixture. (Perhaps you saw their likeness wreathed in smoke and ash in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, or in last year’s pictures of the high-wire artist Nik Wallenda wearing a blindfold while crossing a tightrope from the West Tower to the East Tower.) But to fully inhabit the dream that was Marina City, you have to look past the towers – back to the visionary function that these iconic forms were built to serve.

The late architect Bertrand Goldberg, a native Chicagoan who apprenticed in the Berlin office of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, designed Marina City as a bulwark against suburban flight. “Marina City has been called revolutionary,” Goldberg once remarked, “but I do not believe along with Corbusier that things are revolutionized by making revolutions. The revolution lies in the solution of existing problems.” When construction on Marina City began in 1959, the idea of raising a family in Chicago (or any other major urban center) was no longer desirable. Owning a house and a car in a quiet, carefully manicured outlying community had become part and parcel of the American Dream. The suburbs promised backyards, better schools, and private garages. Some men drove to their offices in the city; others commuted by train, leaving the car at home with their wives to run errands and ferry the children around. Meanwhile, the influx of cars bedeviled urban planners, especially in Chicago, where the high water table makes underground excavation prohibitively expensive.

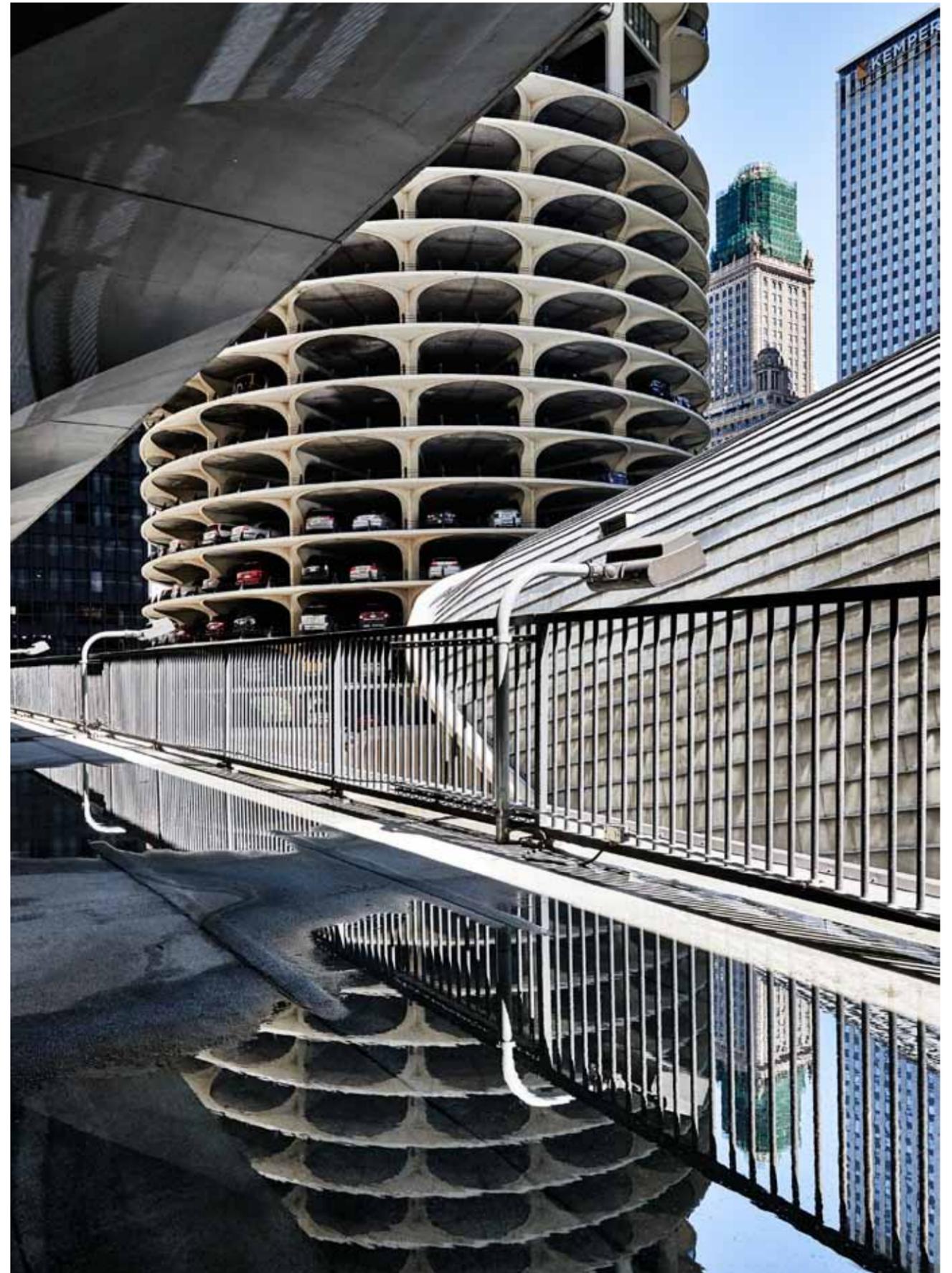
Marina City offered all the amenities of the post-war domestic ideal from the moment you stepped outside your door. It wasn’t just convenience that lured 2,500 applicants for 896 apartments – Marina City created an opportunity to be part of a bold new 24-hour community. It was refreshingly inclusive: in 1964 *Ebony* magazine profiled six of the residence’s original African American ten-

ants, including a 30-year-old real-estate agent who “had sought similar housing in [the Chicago suburb of] Evanston and was turned down because of his race.” Beyond the spectacular view from one’s private balcony, securing a coveted spot in Marina City came with access to the on-site office building, where residents were encouraged to work; to the saddle-shaped performing arts theater; to the namesake marina, which promoted a more active engagement with the long-ignored river; to a gourmet grocery store, a swanky cocktail lounge, a skating rink, a florist, a pharmacy, a swimming pool, a health club, a bowling alley, and – perhaps most crucial to the overall experience – a convenient place to park one’s car. No suburbanite whom Goldberg hoped to lure back to the city was about to give that up, so the architect designed a fully exposed parking ramp to showcase one of the most prestigious perks of Marina City living. The ramp was and remains valet run, with cars uniformly parked in 32 spaces along the circumference of each level (900 spaces in total). Their rears proudly face out at the city.

“Before Marina City, you didn’t ever get expression of the garage in city apartment buildings – it was more like New York, where garages are kind of tucked away,” says Christopher Groesbeck, a principal at the global architecture design firm VOA Associates, and an adjunct professor at the Mies-founded College of Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology. “When you’re across the river, you



Above: A peek at Marina City’s iconic parking ramps, whose circular forms differentiate the towers from others in the area. Below: The towers from street level. Right: Another view of the parking garages. To help residents, a crack team of valets (four during the day, two at night) back every car into one of 32 spaces along the circumference (roughly 900 in total).

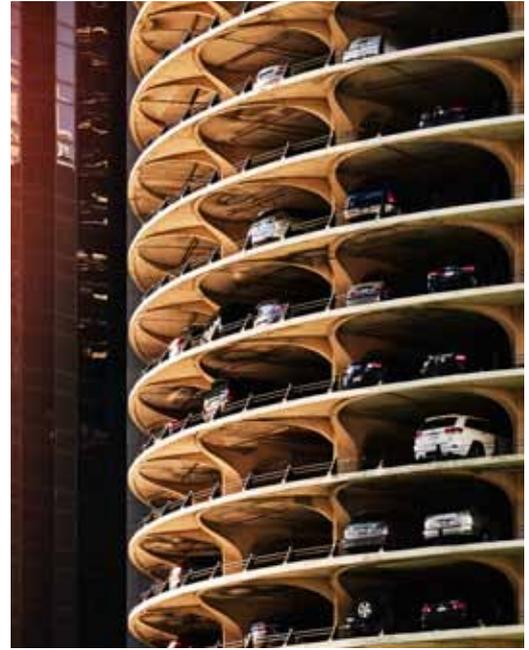


can see the cars. That's part of the modern movement altogether – to not deny the actual functions within the building and in some way make them part of the form. The parking garage contributes to Marina City's civic presence."

Groesbeck, who was born and raised in Chicago, still remembers Marina City's immediate impact. "It became an icon of Chicago," he says. "It had a very romantic image. It wasn't some wood-frame house out in the suburbs. It engaged the idea that urban living could be different – that it could be exciting and dynamic. It was something that everyone embraced."

After 50 years of gravity-defying one-upmanship, Marina City no longer occupies pride of place. The John Hancock Center, with its unparalleled observation deck, supplanted Marina City as the tallest building in Chicago; the Sears Tower (now the Willis Tower) supplanted the Hancock, becoming the tallest building in the world (now the second tallest in the United States); then the Trump International Hotel and Tower, a 98-story steel-and-glass

Right: Car rears face outward toward the city as dusk approaches in Chicago.



behemoth, moved in next door. While unobstructed views are now harder to come by, Marina City still stands apart, both inside and out, provoking the shock of the new. Nearly all the apartments are occupied, though they were converted into condos in 1977, and Marina City's commercial properties, including the two garages, were spun off under separate ownership. The office complex is now the luxury Hotel Chicago Downtown. The skating rink was demolished to make way for a Smith & Wollensky steak house. The theater is a House of Blues. After kicking off a nationwide urban residential renaissance, Marina City inevitably changed with the times.

In 1992, five years before he passed away, Goldberg reflected on Marina City's evolution. "Living is not just shelter," the architect said. "It is a quality of environment that enhances the ability of people to act on their own and develop whatever they are

Above: The towers among other Chicago buildings. Since Marina City was built, the city has been developed around it.

capable or desirous of developing. I did not try to dictate how they would develop various things." Goldberg was nonetheless "very pleased" to learn that some of the tenants had founded a newspaper. The now-defunct *Marina City News* published profiles of residents (including the chief photographer for the TV show *Wild Kingdom*), hyperlocal ads (Marina City Beauty Salon, a hypnotist who lived in the West Tower), and remembrances by the original tenants. ("We enjoyed being pioneers," wrote one, "and had a feeling of warmth and spirit of camaraderie with our neighbors much [like what] the early settlers of Chicago [must have experienced].")

And so it's a shame that Goldberg, who welcomed all such efforts at community building, never had the chance to meet Marina City's current resident historian, Steven Dahlman, who runs the indispensable website *Marina City Online* (to which this author is enormously indebted), and who has researched, written about, and photographed his adopted home nearly every day for the past 10 years. "When I first came to Chicago," Dahlman says, "I would always gravitate to this part of town. I would stand on the other side of the Chicago River, and I would look at Marina City, and just be mesmerized." When he walks around the complex today, Dahlman greets nearly every passerby with a warm handshake. In Dahlman, and in all his fellow tenants, the dream of Marina City lives on.

"I firmly believe that the concept of total environment creates a pleasurable experience for the occupants," Goldberg declared during the early days of construction. "St. Augustin said that beauty is that which gives pleasure. I do not know if that which gives pleasure is also beauty. But we are closer to our objective by creating the pleasurable total life." ☺