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## ARCHITECTURE

# What's new in high-rise buildings: A skyscraper designed for seniors

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TRIBUNE CRITIC

With millions of Baby Boomers nearing their 65th birthday and yuppies turning into “ruppies” (retired urban people), it was only a matter of time before the world got something like The Clare at Water Tower, a stylish skyscraper in which to grow old.

But it took an architect with the skill and artistry of Ralph Johnson, a principal at the Chicago office of Perkins+Will, to ensure that this 54-story high-rise would nestle so deftly into the cityscape and provide a humane environment for its residents, some of whom get around with walkers and white canes.

The Clare, at 55 E. Pearson St., was developed, and is operated, by the Franciscan Sisters of Chicago Service Corp. This is the first skyscraper built by the Homewood-based company, whose stock-in-trade is the low-rise “continuing-care retirement community.” And it is the tallest building for Johnson, who already has graced downtown with two handsomely sculpted residential high-rises, the 39-story Skybridge at 1 North Halsted St. and the 15-story Contemporaine at 516 N. Wells St.

But The Clare is entirely different from those yuppie palaces. It is a stacked version of a suburban senior citizens home, combining individual apartments and common spaces such as workout rooms and dining areas. While most of its 334 apartments are for independent, able-bodied seniors, the rest offer assisted living and skilled nursing similar to hospital care.

Happily, Johnson and Robert Neper, a Perkins+Will senior associate, have



The Clare at Water Tower has a boldly curving facade facing the corner of Rush and Pearson Streets.

JOSE M. OSORIO/TRIBUNE PHOTO

avoided a sterile, institutional interior. They have also leapfrogged over the trap of the ugly, exposed-concrete tower plopped on a parking garage. Neither a stand-alone object nor a block-filling behemoth, their tower is

feliculously two-faced, curving suavely on one side and appearing sharply serrated on the other.

The graceful curve opens up the densely packed downtown campus of Loyola University Chicago, from

which the developers leased the property, and gives much-needed breathing room to the delicate, Gothic Chapel of St. James that sits kitty-corner across Rush Street.

In another good stroke, the architects designed a sharp-edged, nine-story “bustle” building that extends westward from the tower.

The bustle provides classrooms for Loyola on its lower floors and space for the tower’s parking garage above. Residents of The Clare can thus walk to classes (not to mention nearby restaurants, houses of worship and cultural attractions). Or Loyola students can use the tower’s chapel and other facilities. This builds an intergenerational mix right into the site.

On the skyline, The Clare is largely a success, though it lacks Skybridge’s prominent site alongside an expressway.

Johnson’s big move consists of a curving, cantilevered “eyebrow” that sweeps above a big recess hollowed out of the tower’s top. This treatment creates a distinct topside profile without repeating the cliché of a mansard-roofed summit, as in Lucien Lagrange’s adjoining Park Tower. It also gives the building a clear “front” that faces toward Lake Michigan.

True, Johnson cheats a little here, making the eyebrow resemble concrete even though it is really a steel frame clad in aluminum. The Clare’s sharply angled, west-facing side also can be faulted because it is more back than front, presenting a so-so, ribbon-windowed exterior to the west.

On the whole, though, Johnson’s handling of the tower is remarkably supple, enriched by the rhythms of three-part, Chicago-style windows; the human scale provided by vertical notches and horizontal recesses; and the elegance of curving concrete walls that appear as thin as bent cardboard.

The architects also have performed well inside, where they worked with the Dallas office of Perkins+Will, which was responsible for interior architecture, and Interior Design Associates of Nashville, which handled furnishings.

One of the most impressive features occurs at the building’s northeast corner, where you discover that the vertical slot cut into the curving exterior isn’t just for looks.

It opens the corridors of the independent living units to natural light and lake views, helping residents to orient themselves.

Equally good are high-ceilinged,

light-filled communal spaces, notably a hotel-like, three-story atrium that extends from the 17th to the 19th floors, and a 53rd floor gathering space with spectacular lake views.

The interior designers have outfitted these spaces in a traditional style that is at odds with The Clare’s clean-lined exterior, but their design stops short of over-the-top historicism.

Corridors outside the independent living units are outfitted with small wood shelves, a departure from many architects’ rigid, controlling ethos. Residents can personalize the shelves with their own decor.

Not enough residents have moved into The Clare yet for a critic to judge whether the skyscraper really works in building community. But the exterior is certainly a good citizen, and the interior appears to do all the basics rights. From around the world, developers and government officials involved with elderly housing already are flocking to the tower to observe.

In the city that invented the skyscraper, this high-rise for seniors is the latest new wrinkle in the art of building tall.

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