

Filmmaker deftly captures Sullivan's story



Segue • SIUE

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Southern Illinois University Edwardsville recently hosted, “Louis Sullivan Architectural Ornaments at SIUE Conference: Bring the Past to Live in the 21st Century” and a film screening of “Louis Sullivan: The Struggle for American Architecture” as part of its Arts & Issues series.

Sullivan’s architectural ornament collection, salvaged by photographer Richard Nickel, was sold to SIUE in 1965 and ever since has been known as the largest collection of physical ornaments from the world-renowned designer’s constructions.

On this week’s episode of Segue on WSIE 88.7 FM, SIUE’s premier radio show that outlines the ideas and issues within the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, speaks to documentary filmmaker Mark Richard Smith about the screening of his film, his research about Sullivan and Sullivan’s profound effect on American architecture.

Known as the “father of the skyscraper” and creator of the iconic phrase “form follows function,” Louis Sullivan’s influential designs paved the way for famous architects like Frank Lloyd Wright in the late 19th century heading into the 20th century.

Smith came upon Sullivan by a sheer sense of fate. While studying for his graduate degree in history at Loyola University in Chicago, he took a stroll down Michigan Ave. and a book on display inside a store caught his eye.

The book’s cover featured a whole block of buildings in Chicago that had been demolished, minus one. Incredibly moved by the image, he marched inside the store and bought the book, “Richard Nickel’s Chicago,” right then and there.

“As someone who loves history and old architecture, it was almost like seeing a photograph of death,” Smith says.

“I immediately went into the bookstore and bought it. Through that book, I was introduced to the work of Louis Sullivan, and it was almost like I caught a disease.”

Smith had a quite successful run in the career of graphic design before stepping out of the business to pursue other dreams.

“I had always been a visual storyteller, albeit in a corporate way with my graphic design background,” he says.

“I always dreamed of working in film, and I finally decided to dive in.”

With no experience in filmmaking and documentation, Smith began making pilgrimages to existing Sullivan sites around the country and simply began filming.

“At the time, I did not know what story I wanted to tell, I just knew I wanted to go out and film these buildings. It took me around the entire country.”

Along with Sullivan’s partner, Dankmar Adler, the duo designed some of the most celebrated marvels, such as the Auditorium Building (1889) in Chicago, Guaranty Building (1894) in Buffalo, N.Y., the Wainwright Building (1890) and the Charlotte Dixon Wainwright Tomb (1892) in Bellefontaine Cemetery in St. Louis.

On his own, Sullivan took on 256 other commissions and projects, including the James Chamley House (1891) and the façade of the Krause Music Store (1922) in Chicago.

In the later part of his career, he designed a series of small banks and commercial buildings in states across the Midwest including Minnesota, Iowa, Ohio, Indiana and Michigan.

“Throughout his career, it was often Sullivan against the world, and yet he was creating beautiful architecture in the midst of these burgeoning cities,” he says. “In a way, he was at war with the very society that he was working so hard to change.”

In his film, Smith allowed Sullivan’s work to speak for itself and responds to it not only as a filmmaker, but as a designer and historian.

“There are plenty of people who write about Sullivan’s work from a theoretical standpoint, but something unique that I bring to the conversation is how exactly his work fits into our cultural history.”

In a time where American society was so intent on creating an identity itself, a flux of creative work came out of the industrial revolution and the fresh transition from rural life to urban prosperity.

“American society was very self-conscious,” he says. “As a rural society without traditions of art, literature and a young system of government, we had to find our own way. This artistic attempt to find out who the United States was and what we represented as people was explained through Sullivan’s buildings.”

Enter Richard Nickel.

After serving in the Korean War, he got divorced from his wife and moved back in with his parents. Simply looking for his way in life, he began studying photography at the Design Institute in Chicago in the 1950s.

At the same time, Sullivan’s architectural features on homes, factories and businesses on the south side of Chicago began to be torn down during a process of “urban renewal.”

As soon as he found out about Sullivan’s work, Nickel began working diligently to preserve and document Sullivan’s buildings.

“From Nickel’s perspective, there was a light that was being extinguished. He was going to do anything he could to save it,” Smith says.

“He would find Sullivan’s architectural features and strap them to the hood of his car and place them in his parents’ driveway.”

Through a self-proclaimed “series of coincidences,” Nickel sold a collection containing dozens of Sullivan’s architectural ornaments to SIUE for around \$25,000 in 1965.

Since then, it has been a permanent exhibit in the Lovejoy Library and has given a greater knowledge of the past and current efforts to preserve Sullivan’s and others’ cultural artifacts and buildings.

Tune in to WSIE 88.7 FM at 9 a.m. this Sunday to hear the entire thought-provoking conversation between Dean Budzban and Smith.