The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 cleared the slate for the grand architectural achievements of both yesterday and today. The fire occurred at a time of economic opportunity. Opportunists saw the fire as being a chance to create a metropolitan city of grandeur and style. The Great Plan of Chicago, by Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett became the grand scheme that all architecture was to abide to both then and now. The creators of the plan of Chicago wanted to create a city that would age and grow reminiscent of cities such as Paris and London. They wanted boulevards connecting parks to thread their way through the streets of Chicago. Chicago today still maintains the interweaving of nature and urban form. Mayor Daley has made a landscaping initiative which has added center aisles filled with colorful leaves and flowers that have beautified the streets throughout the entire city. Transportation and growth were also accounted for in the Plan of Chicago by centralizing commerce and initiating the 1 mile
grid system. The 1 mile grid system allowed for mobility and easy navigation for all the new immigrants that traveled to the city.

In the past, before internet or cell phones, the world stayed connected by hosting World Exhibitions that showcased each countries customs as well as advances in technology. The Columbian World Exhibition was planned to be the grandest exhibition of all time. The campus surrounds the Museum of Science and Industry became an expansive display of architecture created by Daniel Burnham and Olmstead. Remnants of the exhibition can be explored tonight at the Museum of Science and Industry grounds.

Chicago’s skyline today is graced with the strong steel and glass skyscrapers that border Lake Michigan. Chicago’s skyscrapers can be categorized into three different time periods. The first period built by the Chicago School Architects, searched for a language to define this emerging building type. With the advancements in elevator safety technology, buildings were able to soar to new heights. When built, the Monadnock Building was the tallest structure in the world. The 6th foot thick walls at the base still maintained a masonry style construction. It wasn’t until the Home Insurance Building by William Le Baron that the first skyscraper was born. This skyscraper was the first building to be fully supported by a steel frame and not masonry. The next achievements in skyscraper design were in terms of height. The Sears Tower and the John Hancock Buildings by Skidmore Owings and Merrill highlighted the structural achievements of Chicago architects and engineers. The John Hancock Building on North Michigan avenue with it’s signature X-frame bracing and the Sears Tower with it’s tubular steel structure were advancements that have paved the way for the newest batch of skyscrapers being built all around the world.
The two latest achievements in Chicago Architecture are Millennium Park and the Green Architecture movement. Both initiatives have been a collaborative effort city wide with the same goal of bringing an exciting and fresh addition to Chicago’s outdoor architectural museum. Sited at the north end of Grant Park, Millennium Park has become the new urban piazza of Chicago. The prized element of the site Millennium Park Band Shell by world renowned architect Frank Gehry. The curvilinear stainless steel signature shapes and exceptional sound system attracts some of the best world musicians to Chicago every year for free concerts.

The greatest achievement for Chicago’s future is Mayor Daley’s goal of making the city the greenest city in the world. Currently there are many projects being constructed that have great advancements in lowering energy usage and water usage as well as employing recyclable materials. The City Hall of Chicago also has a green roof to reduce the urban heat island effect. All of these advancements in green technology will make Chicago a healthy and clean place for generations to come.

Overall, Chicago is a great museum of architecture, both past and present. I urge everyone to take the weekend to walk the city and enjoy the visual masterpieces of the city.

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