

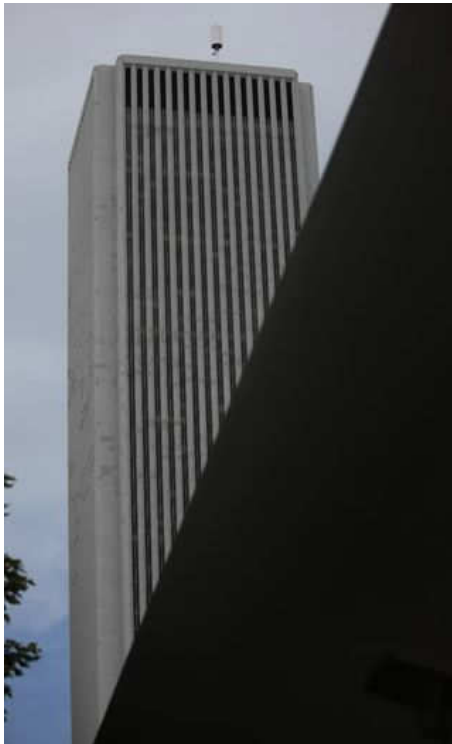


CITYSCAPES

A DAILY CHICAGO JOURNAL ABOUT THE BUILDINGS AND URBAN SPACES THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES
BY BLAIR KAMIN

August 21, 2009

The Aon Center dossier: assorted facts, along with brutal critiques



Lots of you are interested in the ugly new antenna atop the Aon Center--so many that I figure you may want to know more about the building itself.

Here goes:

Date of completion: 1973

Original name: The Standard Oil Building

Nickname: Big Stan (like "Big John," for the John Hancock Center)

Architect: Edward Durrell Stone

Associate architect: Perkins & Will

Distinctions: briefly Chicago's tallest building (before the former Sears Tower topped it in 1973-74); previously the world's tallest marble-clad structure (before its marble cladding began to buckle and was replaced from 1990 to 1992 with North Carolina granite); previously the world's tallest structure without major spires, antennas or finials on its roof (Shanghai's World Financial Center now claims that title); still the world's tallest building with a simple box shape, according to the Emporis building database

Critical pounding: It's the building architecture critics love to hate. Here are excerpts from Tribune architecture critic Paul Gapp's spot-on 1974 review:

"The Standard Oil Building is perhaps the worst thing that has happened to Chicago's skyline in the last 30 years.

"Look at it, this 80-story, 1,136-foot giant that has been inflicted upon us. From afar, it appears as a singularly fuzzy nonentity, despite its size. Move closer, and it begins taking on an oppressive quality. View it from a distance of a block or two, and you are visually suffocated by an unrelieved massiveness signifying nothing.

"Judged as anything more than a 2.7-million-square-foot container for people and filing cabinets...the Standard Oil Building is a disaster....the bulk of the 80-story building and its floor-area ratio (floor space compared with ground space) are considerably greater than anything originally envisioned by the city as acceptable.

"We will never know know what might have been built at 200 E. Randolph St., but all of us are going to have to live for a long, long time with the marble monster that stands there."

To bring things into the present, here's the 2004 edition of the "AIA Guide to Chicago" commenting on the skyscraper's granite cladding: "With a new skin that is matte rather than glossy, the building's banality is even more pronounced."

(Photo by Abel Uribe / Chicago Tribune)

Posted at 10:01:52 AM in Skyscrapers

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So, 36 years later, as a simple crisp form it certainly is much better than some of the recent and forthcoming stylized edifices that have been thrust upon our skyline like the Park Hyatt, Two Prudential, The Elysian, One Museum Place... I can go on. Yes it could have been better, but it has withstood the test of time which the above and others will not.

BK: Is it simpler than postmodern dreck? Yes. Does that make it good? No.

Posted by: P | August 21, 2009 at 10:20 AM

The similarities to the Twin Towers is striking. Same time frame, too. Same economic rationalizations.

I've actually come to like the building. I've been to a corner office on the 73rd floor, the views of the lake are insane.

BK: There are indeed similarities to the twin towers. At least we only have one of these banal boxes.

Posted by: Buzzcut | August 21, 2009 at 10:41 AM

BTW, the story of Standard/ Amoco and this building are pretty interesting, too. Standard had many buildings throughout the Loop (a big one on far South Michigan Ave.). They also had far flung operations in Tulsa. All were consolidated to Big Stan. But very shortly thereafter, they decided that, for all its attributes, the midwest was really not a good place for an oil company. In time, Standard (then called Amoco) pretty much moved all their operations out of the building, most going down to Houston.

Combine that with the story of the marble, and you have to wonder if the building is cursed.

Posted by: Buzzcut | August 21, 2009 at 10:45 AM

Having been a neighbor of this building for many years about the best I can say about it is (a) it could have been worse --ala an even more "oppressive" Mies black block--, and (b) it's there.

Posted by: Ken | August 21, 2009 at 11:10 AM

I always thought the building added a nice touch to the Chicago skyline, with marble and now granite among all the iron and steel. I've never really heard anyone say they didn't like the building or that they thought it was ugly.

Posted by: John D | August 21, 2009 at 11:25 AM

I've never heard it called Big Stan (nor have I heard the Hancock called Big John). However, the AON building certainly has it's place on our skyline.

What do critics know, anyway? :-)

Posted by: Marcus Twain | August 21, 2009 at 11:52 AM

Well one thing I like better about about the Granite version as opposed to original Marble, is now after heavy rains, the building turns gray until it dries out. And the granite won't fall on your head.

Posted by: Cary Granite | August 21, 2009 at 12:09 PM

Personally, I have always LOVED the building! However, I may be biased. My father used to work there, and it was always fun to visit him and ride the double-decker elevators.

I think the ugliest building in our skyline is the Willis Tower.

We all have our own likes and dislikes.

Posted by: Kevin | August 21, 2009 at 12:29 PM

That tin can on top makes it even more fuglier.

Posted by: meseret hailu | August 21, 2009 at 12:56 PM

I worked in the Prudential building, and the outdoor elevated plaza on the west side of Aon is the best spot for brown bag lunches. As for the 80-story building - meh.

Posted by: Robert | August 21, 2009 at 01:09 PM

I agree with most of the commenters here - the Standard Oil Building is not terrible at all. The only thing terrible about it, really, is its dated, ugly plaza and lobby. Otherwise, I tend to find it rather stately and pleasant to look at. The verticality of its recurring lines is aesthetically pleasing (moreso than the original WTC, in my opinion) and the proportion of it horizontally is intriguing. It really strikes me whenever I'm walking on Randolph how skinny the building actually is.

Is it a stunning architectural achievement? No. It doesn't even stand up well to Prudential 1 and 2 right next door. But it's not a disaster by any means. It's certainly better than the postmodern DeStefano dreck on the river, or the various Jahn atrocities littered throughout the city.

Posted by: Matthew Welfen | August 21, 2009 at 01:12 PM

One comment mentioned the view from a corner office on the 73rd floor. I used to work on that floor (no corner office for me) and the views are spectacular. There are no true corner offices, though, and that's a feature, not a bug. If you look at the photo, you see that the corners are set in. No one has windows on two sides. This provides eight quasi-corner offices per floor, and it improves the character of the occupants by helping them resist corner office syndrome.

BK: Are the views spectacular when you are not close to the windows? Like the old World Trade Center, this building has closely-spaced perimeter columns. At the WTC, that created the bizarre situation for tenants of being lifted into the sky and then having views shut off, or compromised, by the forest of columns.

Posted by: PST | August 21, 2009 at 03:08 PM

It was, after all, Stone's version of the International Style and, like the authentic Miesian buildings, it does not give active offense the way so many of the more recently risen buildings do. In other words: we can live with it until--in 2064--they tear it down for an expansion of Millenium Park.

BK: Great to have you on the program, Milt.

Posted by: Milton Rosenberg | August 21, 2009 at 03:21 PM

I always liked it. It passed my 5 second rule.

One stormy Autumn afternoon, black clouds all about, I was at the south end of Grant Park and that late low afternoon Sun popped out. That beautiful light bathed the white granite in its soft glow against those black clouds. It was outstanding! I will never forget that image. I really appreciated that building then.

Posted by: Matt | August 21, 2009 at 03:49 PM

I think its a fine looking building. Vertically strong, simple and without embellishment, it says business all the way. In a time when every building tries so hard to scream look at me, Aon Center cant help but be noticed without beating you over the head. The plaza needs updating, no doubt. I think its a great highlight in Chicago's skyline.

Posted by: Intrepid | August 21, 2009 at 07:23 PM

It looks like the antenna is set near the edge of the building and that is why it is visible from the street.

When one looks at the top view using the satellite view in Google Maps one sees that there is space for it to be located in the center of the building, however, they would have to build up structure there to support it. I'll bet if the antenna was located there it would not be visible from the street. Too bad the building managers continue to not care much about aesthetics.

Posted by: Robert | August 22, 2009 at 11:55 AM

Buzzcut: Here's another bit of trivia about the Old Standard Oil Building at 910 S. Michigan.

After Standard moved out, the state leased the entire building from the new owner.

They not only paid more for the lease than the new owner paid for the building, but the state wouldna't use the 19th floor, where Standard's top execs had their offices because they were so luxurious that no state employees were allowed to have offices that nice!

Posted by: Garry | August 23, 2009 at 12:03 AM

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