

ARTICLE ABOUT BENJAMIN MARSHALL

The article below is from the January 16, 2011 edition of the Chicago Tribune, and written by Blair Kamin.

His architecture is better known than he is: Enthusiasts rally to celebrate under-appreciated Benjamin Marshall, designer of landmark hotels and much of East Lake Shore Drive

He was dashing handsome and an A-list partier, hosting bold-face names like the Duke of Windsor at his lakefront mansion in the northern Chicago suburb of Wilmette.

He designed some of Chicago's best-known landmarks - - the Drake and Blackstone hotels; five of the eight buildings on exclusive East Lake Shore Drive (left, in the 1920s); the elegant residential high-rise at 1550 North State Parkway, and the South Shore Cultural Center, where Barack and Michelle Obama held their wedding reception.

Yet the Chicago architect, who shaped these highly visible structures, while much admired by a small circle of architecture buffs, is little known to the public.

Perhaps the time finally has come for the rediscovery of Benjamin Marshall.

A group of enthusiasts who call themselves The Benjamin Marshall Society is seizing upon an obscure centennial to put the late architect back in the spotlight.

Benjamin Marshall In 1911, Marshall, who doubled as a developer, began turning landfill east of Michigan

Avenue into what is now East Lake Shore Drive. The street's imposing row of limestone, terra cotta and brick buildings, which rise like a cliff above Oak Street Beach, is one of the postcard images of Chicago.

Among the street's former property owners: the late advice columnist Ann Landers and talk-show queen

Oprah Winfrey, who bought a 5,000-square-foot East Lake Shore Drive co-op in 2006, then sold it after realizing that her neighbors could look into her windows.

Blackstone Marshall "helped define Chicago," said the society's president, Jane Lepauw of Northbrook, who is joining Jennifer McGregor of Lake Forest to co-chair the group's March 4 gala at the Drake. The society's aim: Raise enough money to mount a Chicago exhibit of Marshall's works and catalogue his archives, which improbably reside at the University of Texas.

At first glance, Marshall seems an odd figure to celebrate. His high-living, Jay Gatsby ways are out of sync with the grim realities of today's economy. He was not an innovator, like Frank Lloyd Wright and

Louis Sullivan. Nor did he express anything comparable to Daniel Burnham's grand metropolitan vision of teeming parks and iconic public works, though he may have been inspired by it.

Marshall matters for this simple reason: He was very, very good at what he did. And what he did was to shape stage sets for the wealthy and powerful, borrowing freely from the styles of the past

Renaissance, Gothic, Tudor, Second Empire, you name it--to give his clients the rush of visual pleasure.

Ordinary people could also enjoy his buildings (left, the Blackstone hotel), though they could not afford to live there. Contrast that with Chicago's recent spate of the

eyesore condo towers and you have a distant figure who seems relevant.

Marshall “was the city’s best at endowing hotels with an exotic and luxurious ambience,” the historian

C.W. Westfall once wrote. His apartment buildings, with their suites of public rooms gazing out upon expanses of water and dramatic cityscapes, persuaded the rich to abandon mansions for “mansions in the sky.” Along with developer Potter Palmer and his castle-like mansion, Marshall helped shift the center of gravity for Chicago’s moneyed elite from the South Side’s Prairie Avenue to the North Side’s Gold Coast.

“Marshall does sort of set the standard,” said the University of Chicago historian Neil Harris. “They were the best hotels, the best apartment houses.”

Born in Chicago in 1874, Marshall lacked a formal architectural education but compensated with drive, imagination and social connections. He apprenticed for a Chicago architect, then set up his own shop after the century turned. One of his commissions, the Iroquois Theatre, was the site of a disastrous 1903 fire that caused the deaths of more than 600 people. Yet Marshall’s star continued to ascend.

His buildings include vast country estates, the first palatial multi-unit high-rise buildings, sumptuous hotels, many theaters, innovative commercial high-rise structures, and various other public projects.

A sample of his iconic and much loved buildings include The Drake Hotel, The Blackstone Hotel (recently completing a painstaking restoration), the Edgewater Beach Hotel, the South Shore Country Club, the

Cuneo Museum (formerly the estate of Samuel Insull and more recently John F. Cuneo, Sr), and most of the ultra-luxe residential buildings on East Lake Shore Drive.

Benjamin H. Marshall befriended powerful businessmen, society people, participants in all areas of theater (including best friends the Ziegfelds), and anyone with intelligence, style, and wit. He designed his own clothes (his first job was with a custom tailor) and enjoyed the best food, drink, and all his time had to offer.

He partnered with Charles Fox, who had studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of

Technology, designed theaters and other buildings across the nation, and shaped his suburban ShangriLa.

Built in 1921 -- not as a home but as a place to entertain lavishly, according to a 1948 Life magazine article—Marshall’s 32-room, pink stucco Wilmette mansion (left) was outfitted with rooms for exotic partying, including a tropical garden and Egyptian solarium. He sold the place in 1936 to department store executive Nathan Goldblatt. The mansion was razed in 1950 after the Goldblatt family offered it to

Wilmette and the village shortsightedly turned it down. All that remains today are its iron gates.

Marshall lived at the Drake hotel before he died in 1944.

His flamboyant life and fabulous buildings surely could be the subject of a book. But Lepauw and her husband Didier, the founder of the Marshall society, aren’t stopping there. “? It’s a movie!” exclaims Didier.

In the next breath, he and his wife nominate the actor and architecture buff Brad Pitt to play Marshall.

Perhaps first things should come first, like fixing the city landmark plaque for the East Lake Shore Drive historic district. Located across the street from the soaring apartment towers and the lordly Drake, it rests incongruously upon a base of cracked concrete. Surely East Lake Shore Drive and its foremost creator deserve a better tribute than that.

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SUNDAY MORNING POSTSCRIPT: I've heard from two readers this morning who are upset that this story didn't mention Marshall's Edgewater Beach Apartments--the "pink building" at 5555 N. Sheridan Road.

One of them, Mary E. Kennedy, writes: "I live at the Edgewater Beach Apartments...and was very disappointed that my building wasn't mentioned in your article today. My building was built in conjunction with the famous Edgewater Beach Hotel, which was one of Marshall's most famous and distinctive projects!

"The Edgewater Beach Hotel, built in the late 1920's, was THE place to go until it was torn down in the late 1960's. But now, the grand, pink apartment building, which is a co-op, AND listed on the National

Register of Historic Places, stands alone at Bryn Mawr and Lake Shore Drive. It's history outshines most Of Marshall's other projects, in my opinion!"

Thanks, Mary. I love the pink building, too.