

## Meeting Walter

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It isn't easy to forget a first meeting with Walter Netsch.

I met Walter about 1980, just after my arrival in Chicago. John Zukowsky, also newly arrived in the city to oversee the architectural collections at the Art Institute of Chicago, asked if I would be willing to serve as guest curator for an exhibition he wanted to do on the work of three Chicago "maverick" architects — Harry Weese, Bertrand Goldberg, and Walter Netsch.

I was thrilled to get this opportunity. All three were still active in 1980, and they were already legendary figures. It seemed to me, a young historian just starting a career, that meeting them would be a chance to catch a glimpse of an era that already seemed to belong to some distant past. Each of them had played a key role in architecture in the decades after World War II, in which the torch had been passed from an earlier generation of modernist architectural pioneers — men like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright — to a younger generation.

By 1980 Weese, Goldberg, and Netsch had created a considerable body of work in which the principles of modernism were extended, enriched, and adapted for use in America. However, all were considered mavericks because they had highly individual approaches to design that didn't fit easily into the aesthetic of minimal geometric forms that was introduced to Chicago by Mies and considered the gold standard by many architects in the city.

In the case of Walter Netsch, I knew that he had recently retired from Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, an enormously successful firm that, during the postwar decades while Walter had worked there, had quickly expanded to become Chicago's largest. I knew that his extremely prolific career had included such major works as the master plan and buildings at the United States Air Force Academy, the Joseph Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago, a master plan and numerous buildings at Northwestern University, and the master plan and most of the buildings at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle (soon to become University of Illinois at Chicago), where I was teaching. From the minimal modernism and glassy walls of the earlier buildings, Walter's work — like that of a great many architects of his generation — had moved toward a heavier, more complex approach,

often involving intricate rotated geometries in a system that he called, with a half-ironic nod to Albert Einstein, “Field Theory.”

By 1980 I also knew that there had been a strong reaction to modernist architecture and to the work of people like Walter. This was the high-water mark of the “postmodern” response to architectural modernism. According to many postmodernists, modernism had led architecture into a cul-de-sac. The minimal glass boxes of Mies, so admired just a few years previously, were called boring, energy inefficient, and insensitive to local context. Walter’s later buildings were routinely described as too massive, gray, and brutal. Many people also considered the rotated geometries too complicated and disorienting.

And so it was one morning that I arrived at the door of the Netsch house on Hudson Street in Old Town. It was a building I had seen from the outside many times before. At first glance it was relatively unassuming. Although it clearly looked different from the neighboring houses, its massing, materials, and landscaping made it seem to fit in. The largely blank walls gave little sense of what might be inside, and I was very curious.

I rang the bell. Walter opened the door. From the front door I could look diagonally upward and see that the majority of the house was a great volume of space brilliantly lit from a few windows. Visible on the walls were several large pieces of art, most notably a huge Lichtenstein painting. From invisible speakers came the sound of some insistent modern music. Walter took me upstairs and showed me drawings of his latest project. The large dining table was strewn with dozens of sheets of yellow tracing paper, each one covered with geometric patterns, the “fields” of rotated squares that formed intricate matrices, out of which Walter would designate and trace buildings or rooms or pieces of furniture. Then I turned on the tape recorder and he started talking about his career.

As it turned out, the exhibition at the Art Institute never happened. But I was hooked. That first visit began a process that continued for many years, where I would visit Walter at home, hear about his latest projects, and then sit down to record what he could remember about his career. What he could remember always astonished me. Although the names sometimes didn’t come easily, he could almost always answer any question I had about why he had chosen a particular material or designed a specific detail, even for projects that he had completed decades earlier. He conveyed vividly the sense of architecture as a mission: the creation of buildings that would make their occupants more comfortable, productive, and happy.

One thing that never changed was Walter’s oversize personality. There is something about Walter that commands attention. It isn’t his booming voice, although that is certainly memorable. His presence is deeply felt even when he isn’t speaking. It isn’t his physical size. He is a tall man but not overwhelming in stature. Even in recent years, when Walter has been confined to a wheelchair and suffering from many infirmities, his presence is huge. He seems to fill whatever room he is in.

It seems that what commands attention is, instead, an attitude, the way everything he says or does — even the way he simply sits in a chair — seems to express an absolute conviction that he is part of something larger than himself. That something isn’t religion or politics. It is modern architecture. Walter was raised in the true modernist faith, and he has never



fig. 1 Walter Netsch with Robert Brueggemann, 2006

wavered in his belief. Design — good modern design — can solve human problems. To be an architect designing good modern buildings is one of the highest callings in the world.

This belief sustained him through all kinds of adversity, and it comes across almost instantly to anyone at all attuned to this way of looking at the world. For many years, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, his unyielding faith in the power of rational modernist problem solving and his impatience with the ironic, detached play of imagery that marked the postmodern reaction to modernism made him seem like something of an anachronism, a vestige of a long-vanished world. But even in those years his presence was impressive.

Today, as modernism is again resurgent in schools of architecture and his buildings start to reach the age when they are ready for designation as historic landmarks, Walter Netsch provides a connection back to the heady years of the last century, when modernism and America emerged from World War II ready to take on the world.