



# Design Kind of Town (Chicago Is)

More than just Crate & Barrel these days, the City by the Lake is a place where artful ideas for city living blow in the wind.



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As a kid growing up in “Chicagoland,” a region invented by local television advertisers to reach the hundreds of thousands of suburban residents who enveloped the city world-famous for its architecture, art meant Seurat’s *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* at the Art Institute. Public art meant the **2 CHICAGO PICASSO**, the deliberately rusty, 50-foot chimera in the plaza of the **RICHARD J. DALEY CENTER**. And good design meant iridescent blue goblets my Aunt Mary bought for Thanksgiving dinner at Crate & Barrel. Actually, not the original Crate & Barrel, housed in an adapted elevator factory on Wells Street, but one of its first Chicagoland outposts, the Old Orchard Shopping Center in Skokie, if I remember correctly.

Fast forward some 30-odd years. Crate & Barrel has spawned an industry by importing unusual furnishings for kitchen, bedroom, and bath. Their flagship now sits beside Cartier at the north end of The Magnificent Mile in a Meier-esque multi-level McMarket. Currently, there are 176 Crate & Barrel locations

around the US, as well as six little CB2s running around.

However wide their reach and continued appeal, Crate & Barrel is no longer the first—or last—word on the wind of innovative design blowing through Chicago today. I recently returned to the city of my formative years, Sandburg’s “Hog Butcher for the World (and) City of Big Shoulders,” and I found a city still full of abundant creativity, as well as a slate of young, upstart Crate & Barrels for the new millennium.

Of course much of the reason this one-time (tongue-in-cheek) “Second City” follows no one is its grip on world-class architects and no trip to Chicago is complete without an architecture tour. Starchitects Frank Gehry, Renzo Piano, Santiago Calatrava, among others, have always been eager to mix some of their DNA into the building bloodline that began with Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Mies van der Rohe. It’s too bad that Gehry’s arachno-architectural **1 PRITZKER PAVILION** in Millennium Park succeeds only half-way. It consumes you

“Chicago, in my humble opinion, is the best American city traditionally and just visually,” according to Frank Gehry. “It’s so exciting.”

just standing near it and I couldn’t help feeling that someone had given the artist Louise Bourgeois access to tons of steel, an army of welders, and then let her loose. Nearby, Gehry’s serpentine BP Bridge (complete with scales) is exquisite by comparison, showing what a little restraint can sometimes do.

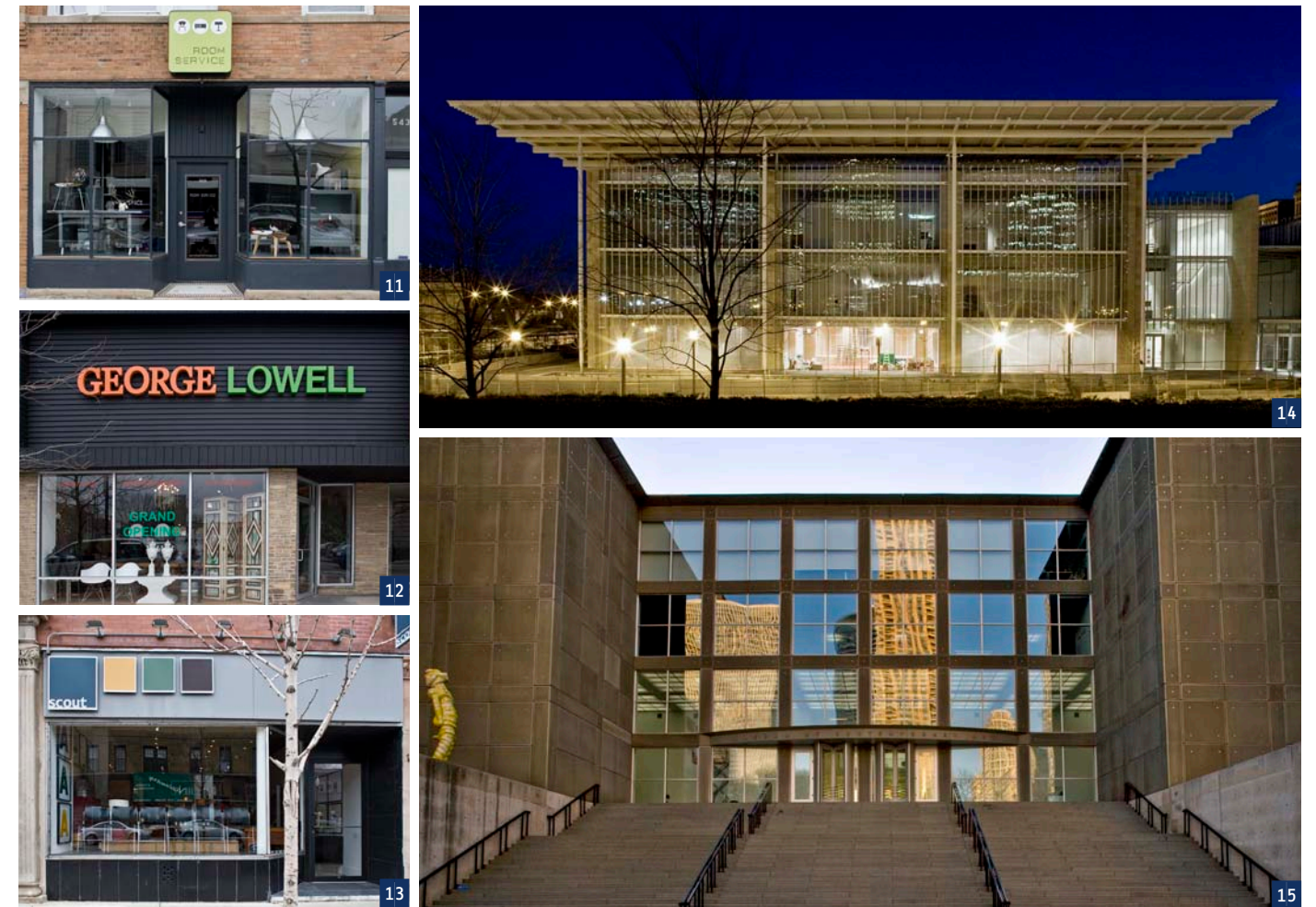
Whereas the inspiring icon during my childhood was the Chicago Picasso (still saluted for its cameo in *Ferris Buchler’s Day Off* and its somewhat sad duty of wearing the helmet of whatever professional Chicago sports team is even remotely close to a playoff), kids today marvel at “the Bean,” aka Anish Kapoor’s transcendent **3 CLOUD GATE** and the mesmerizing Crown Fountain by Jaume Plensa, also in Millennium Park.

Interestingly, the original maquette for Picasso’s untitled statue can be found in the newly-opened and surprisingly tight **14 MODERN WING AT THE ART INSTITUTE**. Apparently phoned in by Renzo Piano, the new wing comes off, at best, like a leftover floor from his *New York Times* building. At worst, it’s a mash-up

of all the clean, white Modern and/or Contemporary Museums found in Every Major City In the World. It pales in comparison to the 13-year-old, stately and still current **15 MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART** on East Chicago Avenue. Plus, MCA’s gift shop is rich in great design.

Just around the corner at 613 N. State Street, you’ll find **10 P.O.S.H.** and its wide selection of newly conceived old-fashioned home supplies: gardening tools, croquet mallets, tin buckets, washcloths, and country-kitchen-chic gadgets—all in stark contrast to the Alessi store next door, with their tableware and kitchen utensils disguised as designer Stefano Giovannoni’s and Rumiko Takeda’s Orientales characters.

To the west, in the shadow of the Merchandise Mart, you’ll find a clustering of the usual suspects: Roche Bobois, Ligne Rosset, Hästens, Kreiss, even a Bloomingdale’s Home + Furniture in the landmark Medinah Temple, an Islamic-revival building where the Shrine Circus used to perform.



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A little further west, in an industrial area near the *Tribune* distribution center, and spoked by train tracks, the year-and-a-half-old **8 CASTE**, at 521 N. Halsted, stands alone. This riveting *Wunderkammer*, co-owned by Brad Rowley, features fine wood and metal work from Missoula, MT-artist Ty Best, who describes his cabinetry, candlesticks, light fixtures, and artwork as “future primitive.” Odd, exquisite objects such as freestanding African mahogany “stalagmites” and stained and torched busts with tree sap drizzled over their heads reflect an air of Poe in collaboration with Dubuffet. Best drives his latest work from Montana each season, so the installations are always changing and the shop’s wonders never cease.

The next crucial stop is a quick \$10 cab ride north to 3337 N. Halsted, **6 I.D.**, HQ of *LoftLife* expert, Steven Burgert. Cleverly combining “modern home” with “modern eyewear,” Burgert and his partner and house optician, Anthony Almaguer, look to a future in home décor that’s “more geometric, more bold, that pushes the edge of Modernism,” according to Burgert.

Beyond cutting-edge frames from Jean Lafont and Tom Ford and choice furnishings from BluDot, Spectrum, Bensen, and Arteforte, I.D. carries international designers “people can’t generally get in Chicago” (a strategy that once paid off for Crate & Barrel). Droog, Cubus, Iittala, Hella Jongerius, and free-trade Transglass vessels from Guatemala mingle with the work of local designers such as TIVI, who presents a fine collection of cuffs, rings, and purses made from ebony and metal.

Further uptown, along the 5000 block of North Clark, in the historic neighborhood of Andersonville, you’ll find what amounts to a thriving design district. From **12 GEORGE LOWELL** Arduser’s eponymous design destination at 5123 North Clark, which features modern, traditional, and one-of-a-kind furnishings from a one-of-a-kind interior designer, to the equally elegant but seriously unpretentious **11 ROOM SERVICE** at 5438, which serves up unusual collectibles, hand-picked vintage gems, and the random piece of organic sculpture.

A stroll along North Clark will lead you to more well-chosen

antiques and curated home accessories in spaces medium to small, raw to refined: **9 FOURSIDED** at 5061—appreciators of art, specializing in quality framing; **13 SCOUT** at 5221 with its Webelos-as-Creator aesthetic: a study in painted wood, brushed metals, and subtle details; and **5 WHITE ATTIC** at 5225—where the owner, Terry Ledford, selects each piece of vintage furniture to be restored and resold, and his smart, smiling staff will help you plan the perfect lamp at the store’s genius “Lamp Bar.”

Keep an eye out for Foursided’s other locations, especially their little sister much further south at 2958 North Clark, a letterpress card and gift store with the same Midwestern can-do-but-with-a-tongue-in-cheek sensibility, called Twosided.

For those looking to satisfy their green thumb, a stop into **7 SPROUT HOME** at 745 North Damen Avenue is essential. Like their Brooklyn store, Sprout specializes in bringing nature into your urban existence with the help of local and more widely known designers. Their selection of self-watering planters, in sleek metals or earth tones, is extensive. If you prefer, they have

watering cans in the most unexpected shapes, black terrazo tables, and just the right cactii combos, bamboo bunches, or succulent arrangements to display outdoors or in.

To satisfy your inner design child, that is, if you’re looking for a t-shirt that reads, “I have more toys than your kids,” then **4 ROTOFUGI DESIGNER TOY STORE & GALLERY** at 1953-55 West Chicago is for you. Toy-loving owners Kirby and Whitney Kerr invite you to lose yourself in their out-of-this-world gadgets, t-shirts, ephemera, and figurines. *Lots* of figurines, many designed by local artists and produced for the store by Chicago-based Squibbles Ink. Rotofugi’s logo, a mischievous Abe in an eye-patch, is hands down the best logo currently in the “Land of Lincoln.” Available on a variety of the store’s t-shirts, it makes—besides perhaps a photo-op with the latest Chicagoan to inhabit the White House—the *perfect* souvenir. Plus, it’s wearable proof that Chicago’s local design scene—a long, long way from crates and barrels—cuts its own edge.

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