

The guidebooks on Chicago give the Architecture Foundation tours a high rating. The tours range from summer boat trips on the river to see the buildings from another level to a special one for serious students of the Frank Lloyd Wright work in the town.

The wind was still too cold to do the river tour on our trip. We took the three-hour bus ride around downtown and out to the University of Chicago on a quiet Sunday morning. Traffic being lighter, the bus moved slowly by the facades of buildings going back as far as 1880 past skyscrapers built in the 1950s.

Leaving downtown to drive toward the University, the guide gave the history of the fill from the rubble from the huge fire of 1873 moving the shores of Lake Michigan three blocks away from the old shoreline. She pointed to the site of the World's Fair in the 1890s. Jostled around on the bus, I am not positive, but think we passed by a building from a later World's Fair.

Once at the University, we went through the Robie House that Frank Lloyd Wright designed in 1909. An in-house guide led the tour. Doors and windows stand in colored leaded glass – beautiful art pieces, yet passageways and closures. I don't remember the day being a bright one, yet the natural lighting of the rooms seemed open and balanced. The house is under serious restoration back to the original outlay before several different owners made changes.

At the end of the tour, in space that was once the three-car garage of Mr. Robie, the bicycle and motorcycle manufacturer, was a gift shop. The guide stood outdoors waiting. She had ordered us not to stall in the gift store. As the group passed through the shop with only minutes to snatch items from the shelves, deep-set misery reflected in ladies' faces in the glass doors leaving the shop. I expected, and expect, a grievance to be filed against the Foundation for unusual cruelty under the Rights of Shoppers Act.

Across the street from the Robie House on the University of Chicago campus, a Japanese architect designed a modern white building matching the lines of Mr. Wright's creation. Spotted in the right place by the Foundation's guide, we were able to see in the front of the building, five or 10 times larger than the house, the soft, rounded curves matching the master's vision.

Part of the theme of the tour proved how precious land space is in the city. For instance, Chicago was once a huge railroad center, and as the rail traffic reduced to one train per day, the abandoned yards were developed for other uses.

More dramatic, as the University of Chicago campus became over-developed, an architect designed a soundproof student center under the overhead tracks of Metro Electric on a previously worthless strip of land. We walked under the wonder just as the rails vibrated from the cars passing overhead, shooting sparks from abrasion of steel against

steel, without so much as interrupting students studying or holding class.

My fascination with a soundproof building under the tracks was already on test at our hotel. The Metro tracks ran within two blocks of the hotel every 20 minutes from daybreak to around midnight, meaning the thundering sound from the aftermath, transmitted over hearing aids, equaled the finale of a John Philip Sousa march on hi-fidelity.

The architect tour ended a block from the 850-room Congress Plaza Hotel. We'd called the hotel for reservations. In fact, made a deal, until we discovered the maids had been on strike for four and a half years, creating the question of who was going to change the sheets on 850 beds and hang fresh towels in the bathrooms.

But being in the neighborhood, I wanted to cover the strike, cross the picket lines, and (mainly) use the hotel's restroom. In the back of my mind, I saw hotheads shouting and waving signs in the air and throwing bricks like the oldtime political cartoonists' versions of strikers. Instead, a dozen or so guys and girls lounged on canvas chairs against stone ledges around a bed of white tulips, talking on cell phones or listening to Walkmans, with big placards lying face-down on the sidewalk or dallying between their legs.

Sure was a disappointment. After wandering through the lobby and studying the restaurant menu, I made a guess that a few nights in that mammoth hotel would put a guest on the side of the strikers.

In the morning paper I'd read that the very epitome of peace and tranquility, the Dalai Lama of Tibet, was spending the weekend touring Chicago. Taking one last glance at the strikers languishing as if fevered by spring, I hoped his holiness had an opportunity to see how peaceful our protesters can be.