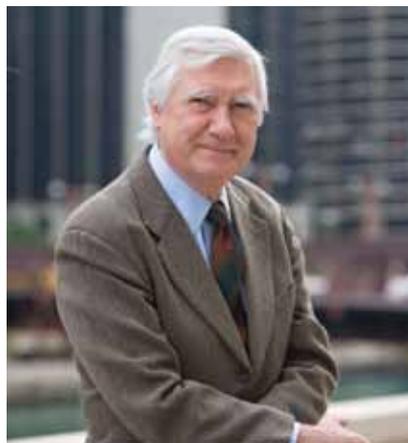


Updating the Past for Today

Lucien Lagrange, who incorporates Chicago's history into his residential designs, is now updating his own history as part of VOA's team

— Craig A. Shutt



Lucien LaGrange

Lucien Lagrange's retirement was a short one. The 71-year-old architect, well known for his work designing elegant, high-end residential projects, announced the closing of his eponymous Chicago firm in 2010. Only one year later, in August 2011, he joined VOA Associates Inc. as lead designer in the firm's luxury residential, hospitality and commercial mixed-use markets. The move brings a new chapter to a storied design career, which has focused on reinventing past architectural success for a new generation.

"I like taking problems that are puzzling for owners and even other architects and creating 'diabolically simple' solutions," he says. "When we can cut through the confusion with a plan that makes the owner say, 'Why, of course!' that's success. When it's a large-scale project where our solution represents both a major spatial statement and a remarkable business solution, the pleasure is even greater."

Lagrange decided to retire after turning 70 in 2010 and seeing few opportunities on the horizon for the commissions on which he has thrived.



Park Tower in Chicago, which combined hotel, condominium and retail functions, was the first high-profile project for Lagrange. The building is one of the tallest in the world to be clad with architectural precast concrete panels, containing 3,152 pieces.

"The market disappeared, and the work I was interested in doing did not look to be available any time soon," he explains. "I decided it was time to readjust my life and cut back the pressure. It can be pretty demanding to run an office with 50 or 60 people when you are the only principal."

VOA provides Lagrange with organizational support, which frees him

to focus on design. "It's a very good group of people, no big egos, very easy to work with," he says. "They are doing good work on a low profile, and it makes a good match for us." The opportunity arose when Lagrange ran into colleague Mike Toolis, VOA chairman/CEO, at a local community meeting. Conversations about possibilities became more serious talks, which led to Lagrange coming on board.

Respecting the Past

Lagrange is well known for his appreciation of Chicago's architectural history, especially Louis Sullivan's work and the period of 1900 to 1930, when construction of significant downtown buildings, especially along Michigan Avenue, flourished. He has been inspired by those stone edifices with their intricate detail, updating them to modern styles that represent twenty-first century functions and aesthetics.

"Being in Chicago, I have seen the great architecture that has been done here, and that leads me often to stone rather than steel and glass for my residential designs," he says. "Everyone admires those buildings along Lake Shore Drive and the Gold Coast from the 1920s, and there is good reason for that. It's a comfortable style. When you get there, you are home. That's what I've always been searching for."

Lagrange's affinity for masonry and stone designs comes naturally. The son of a mason, he grew up in Provence in France and studied architecture at McGill University in Montreal. In 1978, he moved to Chicago and joined Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, working on a variety of large-scale projects.

He opened his own firm in 1985 and established his name with the design of the 70-story Park Tower on Michigan Avenue in 2000. Other

key projects include the 26-story 840 Lake Shore Drive condominiums, the 48-story Pinnacle residential/retail building, the 61-story Elysian Hotel & Private Residences, the 35-story 10 East Delaware residential building, the 41-story Lincoln Park 2520 condominium, and the 40-story Ritz Carlton Residences.

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Creating Modern Styles

Deciding on the style for each project creates aesthetic and functional challenges, he notes, but the ultimate designs are driven by the building's need. But make no mistake: he is not designing "historic" buildings. "All are very modern designs, with historic appearances. They have large windows and use modern materials."

At the Ritz Carlton Residences, for instance, owners wanted balconies in each corner. "You don't do a classical building and put balconies in each corner, so we chose a concept that was inspired by an Art Deco style," he explains. "But no matter the look, all of the projects are designed for living. That is the ultimate purpose and their need."

Many of his projects have used precast concrete façades, a modern material that helps invoke the richness of history often incorporated into his projects. "Precast concrete allows us to bring the complexity of detail to these projects that would not be possible in stone," he explains. "It often is the best material to use. It provides a richness of color and texture and creates any detail we want. And it's not too expensive to work with."

The Park Tower project, Lagrange's first high-profile design, is one of the tallest projects in the world (844 feet) to feature architectural precast concrete panels. The goal was to blend the building with the nearby Water Tower, the landmark structure that was one of the few to survive the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. "We discussed the potential of precast concrete for this project in advance for some time and whether it would work," he says. "I visited the plant many times and studied the possibilities and capabilities."

Today, precast concrete's capa-

bilities have grown, he notes. "It's a wonderful material that has become more versatile. It used to be big, flat panels, but today, the level of detail that can be achieved has been increased. There is really nothing better for this type of project."

There are possibilities for more designs using precast concrete in Lagrange's future now that he has aligned himself with VOA. Having just returned from a trip to China to discuss potential projects, he has become involved with two rental-residential projects in Chicago, a suburban synagogue, and others.

Whatever projects are coming, they will invoke the richness of the past in a current vocabulary. "I have been pretty disappointed by the design work I see today that tries to produce modern images," he says. "Compared to the 1900 to 1930 period, today's work is very confusing. I don't really know what is happening with it. I much prefer to go back to the older times and move the designs forward."

That doesn't mean the new designs are old-fashioned, he stresses. "There is a lot to learn from past designers in Chicago especially, and there is a lot of value there. We should not lose that. We need to take the quality of the experience that is available to us and reinterpret it for the twenty-first century. I'm not sure that is happening to the best of its ability right now." ■



The Pinnacle residential tower in Chicago features architectural precast concrete panels in two finishes to complement the French limestone at the base and blend the building with the nearby Cathedral District.



Architectural precast concrete panels clad the upper floors of the Lincoln Park 2520 in Chicago, one of Lagrange's most recent high-profile projects. The panels were designed to complement the two-story decorated base, which was clad with granite and limestone.