

Circumstantial evidence

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

Every half century or so the *Christian Century* moves its offices. As our old Dearborn Street neighborhood seems to be “going condo,” we moved to Michigan Avenue last autumn. We’ve traded the historic Old Colony Building for the equally historic Monroe Building. I don’t keep desks in the places from which I’ve retired, but I do drop in on this office, and savor the occasions.

If you are like me, you might like to know a bit about the surroundings from which this magazine issues. I need to know what the *New Yorker* offices look(ed) like; to picture the studies of writers I admire; to imagine the pulpits of the Harry Emerson Fosdicks and William Sloane Coffins.

Deep in my consciousness and essential to my outlook is José de Ortega y Gasset’s motto, “I am I and my circumstances” (*circum-stantia*, that which stands around me). Thus I write this column from a study in Riverside, looking down on a Frederick Law Olmstead park, the library, the town hall, bicyclists and people pushing perambulators, as if ready to pose for a Norman Rockwell painting. That setting colors my outlook.

From the *Century* offices editors can look down across the avenue to the construction of the Millennium Park. They will be in paper-airplane gliding range of the new Frank Gehry-designed bandshell. Beyond it are Grant Park and Lake Michigan, as wondrous on days when it’s glassy as when storms toss the waves.

Friend and fellow church member Harold Stahnke, our landlord, took me on a tour of the building the other day, up to the studios and offices tucked under the peaked roof. We looked out of his own window and celebrated the pulse of the city, embodied in the pedestrians on Monroe Street between us and our more notable landmark “twin,” the University Club. That pulse should color our editing.

Both the Old Colony and the Monroe buildings were designed by Holabird & Roche. William Holabird recalled how in 1910 developer Shepherd Brooks had “sacrificed his own interests for the benefit of the community.” Brooks, as un-Trump like as one

could be, “would in no way injure the effect of the University Club opposite”; so he decided not to tower above it and “insisted upon a silhouette in keeping with that of the club-house.” The result is a 14-story gable-roofed building that, with the club, forms a kind of “gateway to the Loop” from the east. The design was described as “somewhat Gothic in style,” that “somewhat” being an apt qualifier. The lower floors are clad in polished granite, the upper in gray terra cotta. It’s a “standard office building, distinguished only by the vaulted entryway, which was sheathed in Rookwood tile.”

The gable is “enlivened with twisting colonnettes, leaded windows in arched openings, and quatrefoils.” These are so high above the street and visible from so very few office windows that I was astonished by the attention to detail that architects, clients and builders used to favor, even in hidden places. For a minute I was ready to forget my discipline and speak of such attention as belonging to “the good old days.”

At this magazine, however, it is the “good new days” that matter in this good new (1912) home. But do understand, please, if now and then we postmoderns allow ourselves some writing that has about it a semi-Gothic character, with verbal twisting collonettes permitted, thanks to our circum-stantia.