

The Perfect City

by BOB THALL

**Chicago** seems to me to be the perfect American city to photograph. The landscape shows only the hand of man, the chain of history and human decisions. Chicago is never meant to be finished; it is predicated on continual, sweeping change. The city is big, energetic, thoughtless, crass and proud of it.

*Continued in Centerfold*

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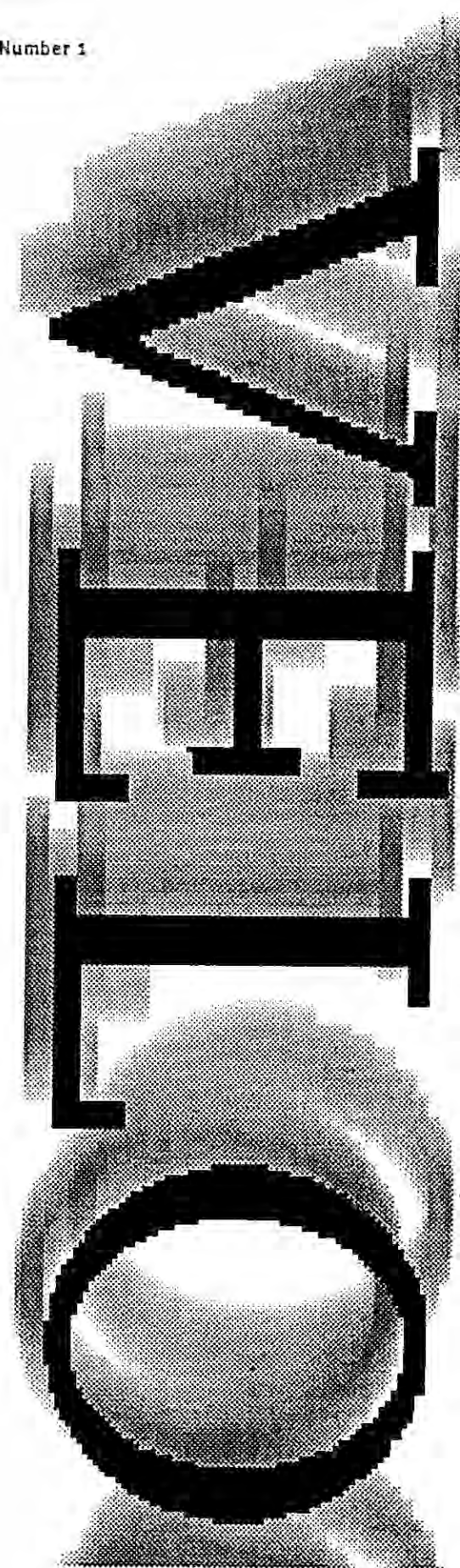
James Krohe Jr.

Lisa Krohn

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Instead of chaos, people in the Loop after the city's evacuation order got a glimpse of well-ordered Chicago might be there were no traffic jams or lots of cheerful cops on the streets, and public toilets on every block. The last in the form of portable toilets in the hundreds by construction workers apparently confused as to what the "flood" threatened the Loop. The "flood" was posted on darkened signs — "power out," "water out," "flood" — attested to still-fuzzy understanding of the event in the hours. One such sign specified the closing was due to the "city emergency," so visitors knew which emergency to

The fiasco at least in Chicago with the remarkable fact lying beneath its downtown. Some visionary reportedly once proposed converting the tunnels into parking garages. Jake Dumelle, chairman of the Illinois Tollway Authority Control Board, once proposed a system with giant fans circulating the Loop during summer months. The tunnels were to be cooled by Loop movie house air conditioning systems were perfected. In 1980, historian Carl Condit said that the freight tunnel system

would have then cost \$300 million to build; today, anyone who wanted to build an efficient system to sabotage the Loop would have to spend something like \$935 million. Planners and engineers everywhere should find it sobering to realize that such an astonishing system could be reduced so quickly to near-uselessness.

## Scanners

reviewed by Lisa Kravitz

What more can you sell the guy driving a Ferrari "loaded" with cellular phone, in-car navigator, lap-top complete with fax-modem, and portable printer? When the mobile phone merges with the palm-top computer/address book/appointment book/paperback/portable CD-player...and shrinks to a pocket-sized pen or a voice-controlled device, will you get what Donald Warfield of SkyTel called "the wirelessing of America" or just its virtualizing?

Set appropriately in the magnificently simulated Shangri-La known as the San Francisco Airport Hyatt, Mobile '92 gathered some 500 denizens of Planet Silicon for two days in July, to grapple with these and other consumer electronics riddles of the next millennium. This conference managed to cover every angle of the evolving secretary-in-the-pocket except, perhaps, its true purpose.

Speakers included hard- and software jocks, network gurus, electronic mailmen, marketers, papers, planners and scanners — and a full complement of consultants to all the above. I was awed by the demographics: 6.5 million Americans currently use cellular phones; 1 million use personal computers. By the year 2000, the industry anticipates 3 million PCs and 41 million Personal Digital Assistants in the bit stream, PDA's alone yielding the better part of two billion dollars. According to William Warwick, president of AT&T Micro-electronics, "the nations of the world will spend more on network interface in the next ten years than they have spent in the entire time since the invention of the telephone."

By what criteria, then, do we shape the next generation of information devices, with the whole traditional desk-top world in the balance? Will these techno-babes sport miniaturized traditional keyboards, as do current models on the market, or will the sexier 'pcentric' and voice-recognition methods prevail? There was some discussion of a wild card alternative to all these, though nobody seemed to have a clue what it might be.

And how small is too small? Tandy vice president Howard Elias explained that keys spaced any less than 19mm apart, on center, become a problem. Brian Dougherty, chairman and CEO of Geoworks, likened small displays to looking at a map through a straw. Battery life is also a pivotal issue, though the environmental shortcomings of alkalines didn't seem to be of much concern. Three new types of cell — Nickel Metal Hydride, Zinc-air and Lithium Ion (a rechargeable, suitable for powering smaller products) — may supersede the Nickel-Cadmium rechargeable now standard in most portable electronics.

While competition for market share is as fierce as ever, the industry is well aware that the seamless flow of information is a must, if their product is to be truly marketable. The realization that one's competitors are also partners lent a think-tank atmosphere to the proceedings: evidently, the only sure way to snag a piece of the action is to collaborate. Several joint ventures were announced, for example AT&T is working with Go, a Silicon Valley software company, and Apple has joined forces with Sharp to develop the much-vaunted pen-based Newton which (when they get it to work) will transform your handwriting into

type, file the information, look out for you! and, according to the Apple guys, will be the short of the Second Coming.

The information industry is at a juncture now similar to that of a decade ago, when Apple and IBM introduced prototypes of the PC. Everyone at Mobile '92 had a fortune in mind, but also a keen awareness of how easily companies crash and burn. Remember Amiga and Atari? AT&T announced their first videophone at the 1984 World's Fair, and lost a lot of money. This industry is all dressed up, but definitely not sure where to go.

With all these breakthroughs in communication and information technology, will the busy executive of the future still need to be so on the go? Or will the convergence of video-conferencing and terrorism finally conspire to slow the great progression, and its correlate, the nomadic office? Are we devising the ideal tool for a lifestyle we are technologically outgrowing?

For me, redemption lies in these gizmos becoming objects of desire — talismans to which we are deeply attached, loyal vessels, T.S. Eliot's "eternal footmen". Jerrold Kaplan, chairman of Go, speculated that "mobile devices will become more like personal accessories than they are now. You will choose your computer as you do your tie, shoes or glasses. The Radio Shack aesthetic just won't work out." Wouldn't it be grand if we could really make them be-long-ings?

Mobile '92 revealed a closed loop between management and their executive and technical expeditors; independent designers were conspicuous by their absence, on and off the podium. I waited in vain for the dialogue to include issues beyond cost, dimensions, computing power, speed and battery life. What about the mythical past and future of this genre of object? What is its essence? In what way does it extend its user beyond mere convenience? In the absence of a passionate vision about human interaction in the age of broadband communication, all this brainstorming somehow seemed only to portend increased efficiency and reduced bulk — but design-wise, business as usual.

The greatest irony is that all this faith in the technocratic future is laced with the nomenclature of war. Expressions like killer application, deploy, strategic, penetrate, target, kick ass, and blow (you name it) out of the water were popular. Concern about how the other ninety-nine per cent lives was not.

I am very much in favor of increasing our understanding of the world, and our abilities to communicate with each other. I am also glad to see the merging of what seem like parallel products into fewer, more sophisticated commodities. I will probably even own one of the mini-digitals before long. I find the possibility of office work without an office breathtaking — but does it then mean that the office is (nonsensitively) everywhere? Will Yeats must have been anticipating the Personal Digital Assistant at the end of his Second Coming, when he wondered "What rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

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