

THE CASE OF THE PRENTICE WOMEN'S HOSPITAL BUILDING, 1969–1975

The Prentice Women's Hospital building, designed by Chicagoan Bertrand Goldberg, was an interesting case about how to control the presence of centrality using two different methods of composition. On the bottom part of the building, a rectangular five-story glass-box, which shelters the administrative part of the program and medical offices, uses uneven modules in order to create an axis of access. On top, a nine-story concrete quatrefoil tower, which was planned to be the maternity center, uses an axial disposition in order to create a core and to distribute equally the repetitive patient areas. Although aesthetically different, both of the parts base their compositions on principles of centrality (figures 1 and 2).

The volume on the bottom, a rectangular glass-box, had a post-and-beam structure following a regular, equally spaced module. Originally, Goldberg used a composition based on five rectangular modules. Such uneven compartmentalization had created a centralized module, the third of which emphasized the symmetrical composition of the glass-box. Moreover, the third module created an entrance and an axis toward the central core of the quatrefoil tower. Further developments of the design, however, changed this uneven composition to six modules, moving the access of the building to one of its peripheral segments.

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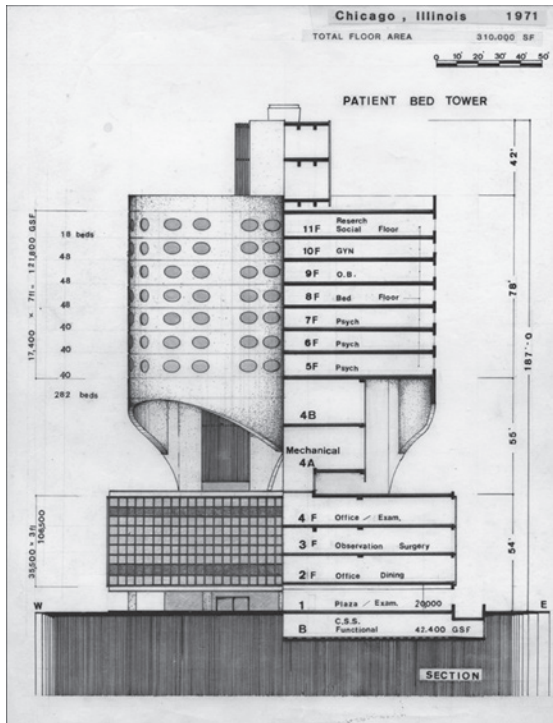


Figure 1: Prentice Women's Hospital Building, Section.
 (Source: Bertrand Goldberg Archive, Ryerson & Burnham Libraries, the Art Institute of Chicago.)

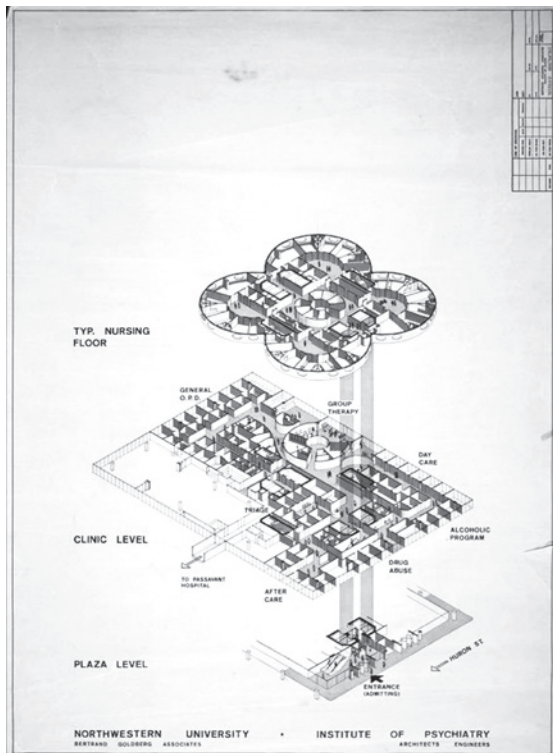


Figure 2: Prentice Women's Hospital Building, Axonometric.
 (Source: Bertrand Goldberg Archive, Ryerson & Burnham Libraries, the Art Institute of Chicago.)

The elimination of the center has its roots in the avantgarde uprisings of modern masters, which repudiated the concept of symmetrical equilibrium due to the consequent emptiness in the periphery of the composition. The common solution was the use of an abstract grid, which creates spaces of equal value and moves the hierarchy of the program to the margins of the design. In the First Chicago School, for example, Louis H. Sullivan, William Le Baron Jenney, and others manifested, of course, the abstract grid on the steel frame, but also forced moments of centrality using arches on the facades. However, after the Second World War, the symmetrical disposition of a building was considered adequate for most purposes. Considered by the postwar architectural magazines as a distinctly American phenomenon, centrality and the symmetrical composition again became the pretext for a condition of monumentality. In this case, there is the example of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, considered the main reference of the Second Chicago School, who articulated centrality and the abstract grid through the use of uneven compositional modules.

The volume on the top, a quatrefoil tower, has a concrete shell cantilevered off a central core, which distributes the building's weight through four interlocking arches. Goldberg used an axial composition in order to create four symmetrical lobes. Nursing stations were located in the central core, and patient wards, the repetitive part of the program, were in the four ledges. In this case, the composition had even modules, but the centrality was guaranteed by the structural core. Similar to a pinwheel configuration, each lobe rotates from a centralized point.

In conclusion, the Prentice Women's Hospital is the juxtaposing combination of a rectangular glass box and a quatrefoil tower that have in common the search for centralized moments. When Carl Condit argued that the "New Chicago School" in the 1960s represented "a renewal of the principles of the old school in ways that are appropriate to contemporary urban needs and that reflect the technical progress of the past half century," he understood that one of these renewals was a return to questions of centrality within the steel frame.¹ Unfortunately, the Prentice Women's Hospital was demolished in 2014, but Goldberg's use of uneven modules and axial dispositions toward the centralization of the building remain as a valid contribution to the history of architecture in Chicago.

Bibliography

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Note

1. Note: I learned from Dan C. Baciu that Condit wrote about the "New Chicago School" in a press article that featured Goldberg's Marina City with a large photograph. Condit, "The Rise of the New Chicago," 34. Mancoff, *Carl W. Condit's Publications—A Chronological Bibliography, 1946-1988*, 258-265.