

10 QUESTIONS FOR ...

Mary Brush, research architect and climber of tall buildings

By William Hageman | Tribune staff reporter

We couldn't meet with research architect Mary Brush too early, we were told. "Her afternoons are better than mornings because she climbs buildings in the mornings," a representative said.

Brush is the director of preservation services for Klein and Hoffman, a Chicago structural and restoration engineering firm. An architect for more than 10 years, for the last seven she has been specializing in facades.

She was also the 2005 Richard Morris Hunt Fellowship winner, which sent her to France for six months, where she worked with restoration architects and studied their techniques. Back in Chicago and back on the ground, she talked about restoration and preservation. And Lincoln Logs.

1 What was the last building you climbed?

It's at 29 E. Madison. It's an office building designed by Daniel Burnham in, I believe, 1909. We're doing a critical exam, which is mandated by law in Chicago. Any building over eight stories has to be looked at by someone like me. If it's terra cotta, every four years. So I have to touch every outside wall. If it's not terra cotta, depending on the construction, it's every 8 to 12 years.

2 Sounds like your job keeps you in shape.

There is a certain amount of activity. On the swing stage (a horizontal platform and guard rail that has a motor on each end and which moves up and down the outside of buildings), I guess it requires a certain agility. And no fear of heights. ... It does help to be in shape when I have to access a building tower or steeple when a swing stage would not get me to the top, in which case I climb or rappel down the building on ropes, like a rock climber. ... It probably

does help that I kayak, row, sail, bike and swim, and I used to rock climb.

3 As a kid, did you play with Lincoln Logs?

I did have Lincoln Logs. I did have Legos. I did have Tonka trucks. Somehow it was more fun than Barbies.

4 Have you always been into architecture?

I always liked older buildings. After college I got a master's in historical preservation and later became an architect. I always knew I wanted to do both.

5 If someone wants to do restoration work on their home, do they need original plans?

Original plans are wonderful to have. But it's generally rare. It depends on whether the owner who had the building before them thought they were important enough to keep. Look in the



Tribune photo by Chris Walker

Mary Brush inspects the terra cotta exterior of the Monroe Building, 104 S. Michigan Ave., for cracks and other damage.

basement, by the furnace or boiler. We find a lot of the time that's where those old plans are stashed.

6 What else can they do?

They can research the style, but that won't necessarily help them. There are ways to find out the original colors. You can [do research on] the home to find the original form. But then they still have to decide how much they want to restore; it has to be balanced with

the family's needs today. Ideally, with the right architect, they can find the right balance.

7 If Uncle Ernie is coming in from out of town, what three buildings in Chicago would you show him?

The Chicago Cultural Center. The Rookery. And I think the Sofitel hotel [the new one on Chestnut]. It plays well with its site. And it works well as a hotel.

8 How about that Soldier Field?

Actually, I do think [the reconstruction of the stadium] is successful. Because of the rules of the game, the stadium had to stay within the existing structure and had to stay within the [landmark] regulations. I think it was successful under those rules. And if you're in Soldier Field, I think the columns are celebrated to a degree more than before. However, it did deserve to lose its protected status because the design has been altered.

9 What about other new construction? Will any of it be memorable in 50 years?

Some of the high-rises going up in Chicago now are much more interesting than in the past. Chicago is trying to reclaim its hold on architecture. And clients are trying to recapture that, which is a credit to the city. Architecture is our tradition, and it shouldn't be just older buildings.

10 What can you suggest for someone who wants to get a better appreciation of Chicago architecture?

Take a tour through the Chicago Architecture Foundation (architecture.org/tours.aspx). They're extraordinarily well done. The docents are extremely well-trained. That'd be the best way. It's something that Chicago has that most cities don't have. It's an invaluable resource for architecture.

bhageman@tribune.com

For more information on Brush's work, go to marybrush.com.