The Art of Placemaking
We practice from the Fulton Market District, a historic neighborhood of walled buildings. Some are 8 feet thick, forming cold storage buildings with frost-covered interiors perfect for holding pallets of food. Most of the walls come in shades of red and brown brick, handlaid by masons who have crafted the many austere warehouses around here with simple details.

As architects, we are comfortable with walled buildings. After all, since 1987, we have restored and adapted hundreds of them in Chicago and other parts of the United States. We built our studio inside a vintage storehouse with a bowstring truss roof, renovating at a time when the market was dominated by food purveyors who rolled their meat carcasses down the street.

We have an affinity for these buildings, in part because of our influences like Allan Greenberg, one of the few Classical architects left in America, who showed us the human quality of buildings with walls, the beauty of their scale and proportion and how buildings can create order and a sense of place in cities.

Place is in our consciousness, reinforced by Tom Beeby, who taught the importance of architectural hierarchy and introduced us to the idea of center. In ancient times, a center was a place thought to be an axis to the sacred world, an oasis from the dangerous and inhospitable secular world. At first, centers were gathering places for storytelling and worship, eventually becoming sacred buildings and temples. The modern era of design and architecture brought about an erosion of center through industrialization and secularization. Gradually, architecture began to weaken as architects who misinterpreted the canons of Modernism began to produce cold anonymous buildings.

In the 1970s, a group of architects known as the Chicago Seven formed to rebel against the modernist dogma perpetuated primarily by followers of Mies van der Rohe. The seven included some of our mentors: Stanley Tigerman, Beeby, Stuart Cohen and Jim Nagle. They presented new ideas in their exhibitions, looking to the past for inspiration and often including historical references in their building designs. As students, we heard their comments on the lackadaisical state of architecture. Nagle would say: It wasn't Mies that got boring… it was the copiers that got boring.

Now the Digital Age has come to Fulton Market. Tech companies have arrived along with their young millennial workforce. They are exiles from downtown commercial offices outfitted with cubicles and boardrooms. Here, in the neighborhood, they have found a home in traditional handmade walled buildings with high ceilings and large industrial windows. Instead of subdivided corporate workspaces, they gather in open and collaborative environments to create new ideas for their commodity: the vast ubiquitous space of the Internet. We understand their exodus and arrival. As our professor Tigerman once said of Americans: We are all exiles…yearning for another, simpler time...we have a burning desire to find our identity and concretize our place on earth.

When a client refers to us as placemakers, we take note, unsure of being categorized or marginalized. Yet this comment and the timing of this 30-year monograph allow us to pause and reflect upon our experiences and the direction of our practice during the incredible transformation of our neighborhood. As always, we continue to relish the discovery of new ideas, we are thankful to practice in America with all its freedoms, and we are grateful to our inspiring clients and talented partners and associates who help us create the work.

*Raymond Hartshorne and James Plunkard*
Chicago’s history as the meatpacking capital of the world dates to 1883, when the city sent its first shipment of dressed beef to the East Coast. A decade earlier, businesses specializing in meatpacking and its related foods and services started to concentrate operations in the area now known as the Fulton Market District.

The wide-open prairie lands that served as livestock pasture for Midwest farmers combined with the development of Chicago’s rail network between 1852 and 1865 spurred the rapid growth of Chicago’s meatpacking industry. The burgeoning industry gained vast market share with the subsequent invention of refrigerated railcars, which safely transported Fulton Market’s homegrown products to distant locations.

Government conflicts here and abroad further fueled the industry’s expansion. During the Civil War, the U.S. government purchased loads of Chicago’s beef and pork to feed the Union troops. Across the Atlantic Ocean, European governments bought sizable shipments of canned meat, an industry innovation, to feed remote military and colonial outposts.

Fortunes were also made on these streets. Chicago-based industrialists Gustavus Swift, Nelson Morris and Philip Armour built warehouses on Fulton Market. The men were known as the “Big Three” and held considerable influence over the meatpacking industry as a whole.
HPA Projects in the Fulton Market Historic Boundary
HPA’s extensive design work in this landmark district includes loft conversions, adaptive reuse for office tenants and hospitality ventures, and renovation of the vintage storehouse that HPA calls home.
Today, the historic district is known for its loft manufacturing and warehouse buildings, the majority of which are still intact and date to the time period between 1880 and 1929. Common exterior elevations are now protected by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and include brick façades, large industrial-style windows and, often, elevated truck bays along the streetscape. Interiors can be reconstructed to suit a building’s new purpose.
Carefully planned redevelopment in the Fulton Market District has created a vibrant, thriving neighborhood that appeals to office tenants looking for authentic space; residents who seek an urban, mixed-use community; restaurant owners launching “the next big thing”; and hospitality ventures that seek structures with soul. Today, entrepreneurs, creative firms and high-tech titans work alongside the many meat- and food-related entities that continue to operate here.

Our work in Fulton Market’s rebirth has been a labor of love. When we chose to move our office here, we saw nothing but opportunity. Opportunity for the area—some historic structures were vacant and ripe for restoration—and opportunity for our firm. Our early years spent designing loft conversions in the neighborhood helped hone our expertise in the restoration and adaptive reuse of historic structures. With more than 30 projects under our belt in this neighborhood alone, our vision for creating places that matter out of buildings that were forgotten has proved its value.