



# Aboard the **ORNAMENTAL EXPRESS**

There's a distinct pattern to **Bob Pratt's design work**

by Dennis Rodkin

**In a city, a profession and an era that prefer sleek, uncluttered profiles in their new architecture, Bob Pratt's fondness for ornamenting buildings with exuberant bursts of patterning makes him something of an iconoclast.**

Or you could say he's an iconocast, because precast concrete is the medium Pratt works in most often when designing decorative elements for his healthcare clients.

The head of his own 12-year-old Chicago firm, Pratt Design Studio, Bob Pratt, AIA, trims exteriors with ornamental bands and, sometimes, pilasters that hark back to the florid patterning of Louis Sullivan; but by using precast, he manages to keep it cost-effective and out of the budget-conscious crosshairs of construction managers. On interiors, where his patterning shows up in glass panels, carpeting and other details, the images Pratt uses contribute to a client's brand identity, but calmly, not to the point of overkill.

"It's subtle; it's not like people are going to be walking up to our building saying, 'Hey, there's a pattern of a sycamore leaf on this hospital building. That must mean these guys use the plane-tree model of healthcare, a patient-centered [approach to] care,'" says Gail Warner, the assistant to the president for strategic planning and special projects for Elmhurst Memorial Healthcare.

Pratt Design Studio and lead architect Albert Kahn Associates, of Detroit, are teamed on a new 866,000-square-foot, \$450 million main hospital for Elmhurst Memorial Healthcare (EMHC) under construction at York and Roosevelt roads. Pratt's Wright-inspired abstraction of a sycamore, or plane tree—a tribute to the tree under whose shade Hippocrates supposedly practiced medicine—will run in precast bands around the Prairie-style exterior, and show up in the interior water features, frosted glass panels and stained glass windows, and other details.

At EMHC, Pratt says, "They've embraced the idea of this ornamentation, so we've done a better job of taking the pattern further, integrating it into the building's interior and using it as a repeating theme, than we've been able to do before." On other projects, such as a 1997 structure for Advocate

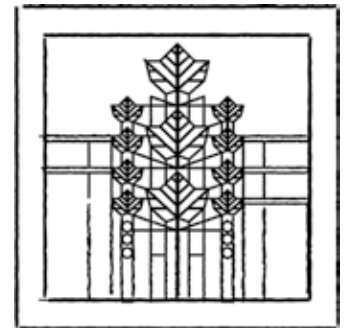
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Pratt devises a distinctive pattern of ornamentation for each project. On an expansion project at Advocate Condell Medical Center in Libertyville (top), form decorates function; buttresses that carry ductwork up the exterior, eliminating columns from the interior space, are trimmed with an upsweeping form and the patterned banding that wraps the structure. On a Condell bed floor addition (middle), a Sullivanesque pilaster expands on the vertical articulation of the buttresses (also seen in bottom image). The pattern in the banding combines a human figure with a pulse line.

All images courtesy of the firm



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Condell Medical Center in Libertyville; and two now under construction for St. Louis-based BJC Healthcare, the patterning hasn’t been quite so extensive, but it has been a distinct visual departure from the norm of plain-wrap, flat-front hospital structures.

“It’s something that tells people there’s warmth inside,” Warner says. “It combines the art and the science of architecture,” in much the same way a hospital combines the science of medicine with the craft of attentive patient care.

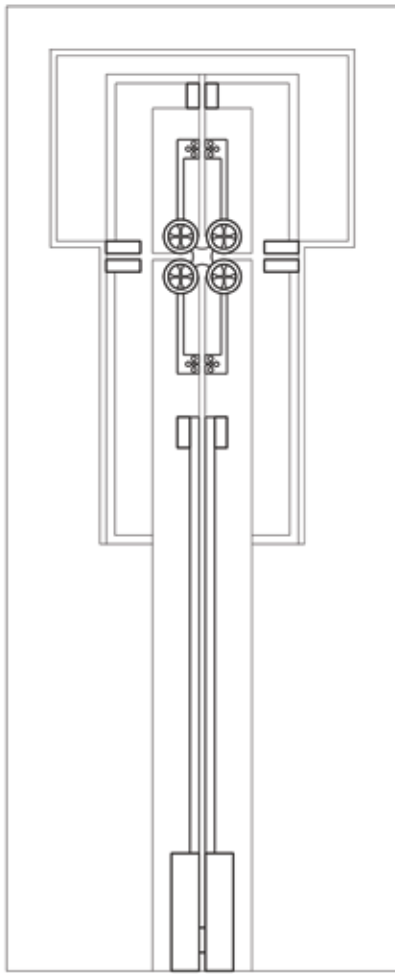
A lifelong fan of the sort of integrated design that Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan espoused, Pratt says his first architectural crush was on a house designed by Wright in his hometown, Peoria, and owned by friends of his parents. He attended Iowa State—with his predilection for ornament, he says, “I don’t think IIT and I would have worked out well,” given the school’s strong ties to modernism—and then spent the first dozen years of his career working for big firms in Dallas, Madison and Chicago, where he started at Perkins+Will in 1990 as a senior designer and later moved to VOA.

All along the way, “I worked for guys who were absolutely modernist,” he recalls, and “I was only marginally successful in introducing the ornamentation I liked. I would put stuff on, and other people would take it off.”

At the firms and among the clients, he says, “the tendency was modernist, and my tendency was not to be, and that was growing stronger all the time,” particularly after he dug into *A System of Architectural Ornament*, Sullivan’s book. “I really saw the power in his thoughts about harnessing the organic elements with the rectilinear elements, and the tension between those things,” Pratt says.

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The new main building for EMHC is a monumental structure on a new site remote from the hospital’s longtime center-of-town location. The Prairie look, initiated by an earlier building on the campus, is enhanced by piers (seen in both the interior and exterior images), railings, windows and other patterned elements that use a plane tree icon that refers to Elmhurst’s care model.



The first project where he got to indulge his urge to ornament was for Advocate Condell Medical Center in Libertyville, a 1997 job that he started on when still working for VOA but then took over after going out on his own. Pratt devised a repeating image of two stylized human figures holding hands, with a through line that resembles a human pulse. The idea was to communicate ‘community healthcare’ visually. But he knew before he started that even though “the client had told me, ‘give us a beautiful building,’” any pricey excess would be value-engineered right out the window.

Talking to precast firms, he discovered that the cost of casting decorative bands would be tiny, about \$7,000 on a \$100 million project. “You just make one rubber mold,” Pratt says. “They’re pouring the panel anyway, and you just put the rubber [pattern mold] up. It’s the same pattern everywhere, so that’s key, that makes it really inexpensive.”

That discovery overturned what Pratt had heard countless times during his education and early career: that decorative flourishes like carved stone and terra cotta figures had largely disappeared from architecture because they had become prohibitively costly in the 20th century. In turn, it led Pratt to embrace even more the idea of using patterned ornamentation on his projects, in part to stage his own mini-revival of a centuries-old cultural love of architectural ornament. “Every culture in the world ornamented their buildings,” Pratt says. “The Aztecs, the Muslims, the Hindus, the Shinto Buddhists, Native Americans, you name it. Everywhere you look in history, there were these ornamented buildings, and it’s all very individual, very specific to their beliefs and their culture. Their buildings expressed who they were as a people.” But Pratt, echoing an argument made by Brent C. Brolin in his 2000 book, *Architectural Ornament: Banishment and Return*, believes that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Western architects’ use of ornament went around the bend. It lost its organic attachment to the culture and at the same time became excessive. “And then the modernists come along and say, ‘That’s enough of this stuff that doesn’t mean anything. It’s dishonest and doesn’t reflect who we are as a people.’ So it was all swept away.”

Developers and building owners, Pratt and Brolin both say, found that an unornamented building was less expensive to build and maintain, so that became the expectation. But, says Pratt, “If our speech had gotten tired with the ornament we were using before the turn of the [20th] century, we became mute with the advent of modernism. Our buildings didn’t say anything, they were blank. And this is why a building in Chicago looks similar to a building in Dubai or London or



For the exterior of BJC Healthcare’s Barnes-Jewish St. Peter’s Hospital in Missouri, Pratt created a highly geometrical decorative pilaster (drawing and image at left) that suggest the keys of St. Peter. Punctuating an otherwise modern facade, its retro attitude suggests the long history that the hospital brings to its newest facility. For another BJC project, in Alton (above), the motif draws on the town’s riverside location, with a river, bluffs and trees repeated in the banding.

New York. Because they're not saying anything about where they are or what purpose they serve."

That first pattern for Condell spoke, but more timidly than Pratt's later work—including a second project at Condell, where he used a more elaborate version of the original pattern. The job entailed tying three existing buildings together and placing a new umbrella structure atop all three. To button together the lower and upper pieces, Pratt created pilasters that are elongated, further abstracted versions of the original pattern. Here, he channeled his inner Louis: "I became more ambitious, and the design began to take on some Sullivanesque overtones," Pratt says.

Emboldened by that artistic success, Pratt launched into the 238,000-square-foot hospital tower for an academic medical center, which was completed last year. He combined images of the sword, symbolic of strength, with a shield to represent protection or care; the result is a handsome, compact icon that could be used in frosted glass, in sculptural column capitals, and in other details.

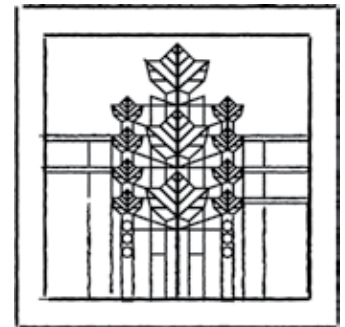
Before presenting it to the client, whose lead contact was a firmly avowed modernist, Pratt worked up a whole presentation on why the motif would work as a specific element in this particular building. Even though the system of ornamentation would represent less than \$20,000 of a \$70 million to \$80 million expenditure, he felt compelled to justify it. Turns out the presentation never happened; the lead contact embraced the idea of a sword-and-shield motif right away and became its staunch advocate.

"This has happened repeatedly," Pratt says. "When you show somebody this thing that is uniquely theirs, that will make [the building] speak about them, they struggle to keep it. It's what makes the project recognizable. It's not another brick and glass building; it's theirs."

EMHC's Warner notes that a personalized frill is nice, but only if it's affordable. "We like having this unique identifier for our building," she says, "but it's icing on the cake, if it broke the budget, we'd have to go without it."

Fortunately for the hospital—not to mention the countless future patients, caregivers and families who will enjoy the visuals at EMHC's future home—being expensive is not part of Bob Pratt's pattern. CA

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The BJC facility in Alton (above) demonstrates Pratt's idea that a building, particularly one that houses a healthcare provider, can communicate welcome with its detailing. "It's not one large, cold modernist form," he says. "As you approach it, you see the details better, get to know the place better and identify it." At right, a drawing of the plane tree motif used in the EMHC project.