In this study, Jeffrey Plank examines the significance of a 1954 photographic exhibition of buildings of Louis Sullivan, arranged by abstract photographer and educator Aaron Siskind, at Chicago’s Institute of Design. Siskind’s exhibition, which Plank refers to as the Institute Sullivan Project, was drawn from a photographic survey of Sullivan’s architecture conducted by Siskind’s Institute of Design students. It featured 103 photographs by Siskind’s students and twenty-three by Siskind himself, and depicted thirty-five Sullivan buildings, several of which are no longer standing. Plank compares the photographs—all reproduced in this volume—to the published architectural history of Sullivan’s work, and contextualizes the project within the scope of the Institute of Design, Siskind’s photographs, and later attempts by Siskind and Richard Nickel to document every extant Adler & Sullivan building. Plank skillfully argues for the importance of this exhibition because it documented and photographically preserved buildings that were being destroyed in the name of urban renewal.

Although the Institute Sullivan Project was well received and reviewed by local and national press at the time, its works remained unpublished and largely unknown. Fortunately, upon graduation from the Institute, Richard Nickel, one of Siskind’s students in this project, dedicated his career to the continued documentation of Sullivan’s architecture.

The quality of the Institute Sullivan Project photographs was unrivaled by other Sullivan documentary projects, and the architectural details highlight Sullivan’s unique use of ornament. The high-quality, large reproductions of each photograph make them an asset for the study of Sullivan’s work. The book complements other recent texts, including the re-publication of John Szarkowski’s The Idea of Louis Sullivan (Boston, MA: Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown and Co, 1956/2000), a photographic monograph of Sullivan’s architecture that was unrelated to the Institute Sullivan Project, but published shortly after the completion of the exhibition, and Institute of Design-related texts such as Taken by Design: Photographs from the Institute of Design, 1937-1971 by David Travis and Elizabeth Siegel (Chicago, IL: Art Institute of Chicago, in association with the University of Chicago Press, 2002). Two books, by Richard Cahan, Richard Nickel’s Chicago: Photographs of a Lost City (Chicago, IL: Cityfiles Press, 2006) and They All Fall Down: Richard Nickel’s Struggle to Save America’s Architecture (Washington, D.C. : Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1994), focus on Richard Nickel’s career documenting Sullivan’s architecture, and Plank completes the story by addressing the earliest steps Nickel took toward creating his photographic legacy. I recommend this volume for libraries specializing in modern American architecture, modern photography, art pedagogy, or exhibition design.

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