



The North Side (1990)

Photos by Karen Hirsch



Staircase at North Michigan and the Chicago River (1983)



Sailboat championships on Lake Michigan (2001)

View finder

Chicago's photo documentarian gets another moment in the spotlight

By Marcy Mason
Special to the Tribune

It was a picture of two men sitting on a park bench in Barcelona, Spain, that first drew attention to Chicago photographer Karen Hirsch's skill with a camera.

At 20, while studying Spanish literature abroad on a Fulbright grant Hirsch, who had no aspirations to become a photographer, snapped the black-and-white photo that, in 1977, would be selected from more than 11,000 entries to win first prize in the prestigious Chicago Daily News photo contest.

Inspired, Hirsch took more pictures. This time of her native city and state. Over time, her Chicago portfolio gained notoriety and her work filled the pages of coffee table books, calendars, magazines, newspapers, graphic arts journals and travel and tourism guides.

Hirsch photographed the city's architecture, lakefront, celebrations, sporting events, landmarks and people. No matter the season, no matter the event. Hirsch was there capturing it on film. For more than two decades, her photos have documented Chicago's most momentous occasions — the millennium, the 100th anniversaries of the Columbian Exposition and the

Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the renovation of State Street, the Chicago Marathon, Bulls championships and the Mackinac sailboat race.

Now, in celebration of Chicago's 166th birthday and National Women's Month, a 25-year-retrospective of Hirsch's work is on display at the Daley Civic Center lobby, 50 W. Washington St., through March.

"She has an enthusiasm for the city that communicates in her work," says Rose Furina, curator of programs and exhibitions at the Daley Center, who invited Hirsch to do the exhibit.

After winning the Daily News contest, Hirsch decided to pursue a career in photography. The problem was she didn't know anybody in the field. Then she learned that Bill Kurtis, then local TV anchorman, was going to be speaking at her synagogue. Hirsch knew that he dabbled in photography and decided to approach him.

"I was scared stiff," says Hirsch. "It was something pretty nervy for me to do."

But Kurtis was glad to help. "I had just had a photo layout in the Sun-Times Magazine, so I was able to hook her up," recalls Kurtis. "Very often, someone like

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Children playing on Estes Street in Rogers Park were the subject of one of Karen Hirsch's photos of Chicago.

Photo by Karen Hirsch

PHOTOS: Hirsch back in focus

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this has a passion. I could see the fire in her eyes."

But Hirsch's plans at the newspaper were foiled. "I was told that they wouldn't hire me because my work was too poetic," she says. Using her foreign language degree didn't seem to be an option either. "My idea of being an interpreter for the UN wasn't going to happen. The doors wouldn't open," says Hirsch.

Instead, she landed a job at an advertising agency and continued to do photography on the side. "It was something that I did for pleasure," she says.

The agency noticed Hirsch's flair for photography and asked her to take photos for their presentations. Hirsch started to notice something too. "When I had a camera in my

hand, I saw the world in a different way. I saw details that I didn't see otherwise," she says. "I saw relationships between shapes, colors and shadows."

Hirsch also distinguished herself through the acute sense of timing. "I've seen her photograph at a few of my shows and she's fast," photographer Victor Skrebneski says. "It's not 'Oh Mr. Skrebneski, could you turn your head this way and get closer to the lady next to you.' She just does it. Just shoots. That's why her photographs look so spontaneous. It's because they are."

By her own admission, Hirsch is curious. It's what fuels her to go after a photo. "You have to have a lot of patience to wait for the right moment," she says. "I'll see an environment that has a good design, but it needs something more to punctuate it. So I'll wait for the right person or the right object to be the punctuation mark in the photograph."

A striking example of this is a shot Hirsch took looking down a spiral staircase near the Michigan Avenue bridge. The photo's balance is achieved by a man holding an umbrella walking hurriedly on



Photo by Terry Jo Tasche

Hirsch says she hopes to show visitors to her current exhibit at the Daley Civic Center "some things about the city that they've never experienced."

the sidewalk above.

Hirsch also has been tapped by the city to preserve its memories. The International Millennium Celebration was one of them. "It was a very significant event and we wanted to make sure we captured the best images," says Dorothy Coyle, director of

the Chicago Office of Tourism. Among Hirsch's assignments, was photographing Mayor Richard M. Daley's gala dinner party where two guests were invited from every country in the world.

Prior to the dinner, Hirsch snapped a photo of the elegantly decorated room and table settings. The photo was chosen from more than 250,000 taken to be part of the Millennium Photo Project, a worldwide photo documentation of the turning of the millennium. Hirsch's photo was one of 500 images selected to be included in the coffee table book, "Dawn of the 21st Century," that culminated the project. When asked what she hopes to communicate with her exhibit, Hirsch says she wants to "show people some things about the city that they've never experienced such as sailboat racing. Not many people have been out there to see that or the marathon or the parades."

She hopes they'll see something in the architectural photos too. "People have told me that they've never seen Marina City with a golden tone," she says. "It only happens at one time of the year, the fall. If you miss it, it's gone."