

Column 1

Building miniatures is big business

Model maker put up

Big John in 10 days

By Edith Herman

RICHARD RUSH built the John Hancock Center in 10 days, but that was a hurlyburly order. It took Lucio Savoia almost five years to build St. Peter's Basilica.

Rush and Savoia are part of an elite group of craftsmen who construct precise, often costly, display models, creating everything from a miniature high-rise office building to a tiny cash register and not so tiny dinosaurs.

They are former architects, sculptors, industrial designers, childhood hobbyists turned professional, or just people who like to build things.

They're in the business to help people see what can't be visualized from a set of blueprints, a photograph, or a designer's sketch.

LONG BEFORE the construction crews arrived, Rush and his staff of 30 built the Hancock building—the 6-foot tall one that cost \$10,000 and now is on display in the 1,100-foot tall Hancock Center.

It was built so financial backers, the press, and the public could see what Chicago's newest landmark was going to look like.

Savoia, who has built everything from a Bombay theater to the Evergreen Shopping Plaza, said he created his model of St. Peter's "for my own satisfaction."

The Italian-born artist made the 8-foot model as a student at Rome University of Architecture more than 20 years ago. He spent three years "climbing around the dome and roof to take dimensions"—with Vatican approval—before finishing the model now on display at De Paul University's Lincoln Park campus.

MODELMAKERS CAN turn Northwestern University or the City of Chicago into Lilliputian communities of plastic, no bigger than a living room.

They create prehistoric forests for museums and well-groomed, miniature landfills for developers who use them to convince home owners that it's not so bad living next to a garbage dump.

Modelmakers like Mel Samonds and his son, Terry, construct dollhouse-like interiors of apartments or condominiums complete with furniture to make it easier for buyers or renters shopping for a home.

The Samonds, working in a studio behind their suburban Westchester home, can turn a 2,200-square-foot apartment into a 34-by-19-inch miniature and reduce a 76-inch sofa to 4 inches.

It takes them more than 100 hours to build one four-room apartment, down to the hand-painted pictures on the walls, and they charge developers about \$1,000 for each of those apartment floor-plans.

SOME MODELMAKERS build brass oil refineries that resemble erector sets so industrial engineers and designers can check plans before a refinery is built. "We've done everything from a Saudi Arabian pipeline to a titanium metals refinery," Terry Samonds says.

There are little models of big machines for salesmen to carry around—like the fully operative, tiny Victor cash register fashioned by George Waddell and Associates, south Loop modelmakers, for about \$300.

"You could hold it in the palm of your hand. It's sure easier than lugging around a 100-pound machine," says Mike Casale, a Waddell partner.

Those large boats displayed in the windows of travel agencies and steam-

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Building miniatures

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ship line offices can cost more than \$20,000 each, Daniel Dorcy says.

Dorcy, who calls himself a "thing-maker," used to build those steamships—now he just repairs them. Most are made in Europe now, he says.

AMONG THE models that have come from Dorcy's South Halsted Street studio were a barge and tow boat, made for a legal specialist in riverboat workman's compensation, who used them in court. Dorcy also produces pocket-size railroad cars, each costing from \$300 to \$800, which salesmen use to show prospective buyers.

Rush makes various museum models which can cost as much as \$200,000 for an intricate animated diorama. His studio is full of what he calls his "critters"—pigs, crocodiles, and a 34-foot tyrannosaurus rex ["a big critter"]—which are on their way to becoming part of museum exhibits thruout the world.

Smaller-scale models of everything from trees and rocks to moons and small prehistoric sharks are made with the help of experts. His museum models can take two or three years to complete—molded in clay, cast in fiber glass, then checked, changed, and approved.

Modelmakers are perfectionists out of necessity. Their models must be exact replicas or they serve no purpose—perfect down to furniture legs, window dimensions, and leaf size.

RUSH'S 10-DAY construction job on the Hancock building was unusual—such buildings usually require four to six weeks of work. Like contractors, architectural modelmakers work from blueprints, generally using Plexiglas, other special plastics, or metal.

Jim Punecky, head of the in-house studio at the Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill architectural firm, has no idea how much it cost to build a model of the Chicago 21 Plan two years ago. He estimates "tens of thousands" of dollars.

There are about a dozen scale model-making studios in the Chicago area, ranging from Rush's studio on North Clinton Street—the largest—to independ-

ents who work out of their homes.

Frances Holgate spent almost 30 years building Northwestern University in her Evanston home. Every time the university built a new building, she did, too.

AN INDEPENDENT with no formal training who decided making models was "kind of fun," she retired about five years ago and now is a partner in a small business which manufactures tiny "bricks, stones, and all those things I needed but could never find when I was making models."

Lou Thomas, a communications consultant for Illinois Bell Telephone Co., is constantly working on the Santa Fe Railroad—the one exhibited in the Museum of Science and Industry—in his Markham home.

The Santa Fe likes to keep its exhibit up to date and Thomas, a hobbyist turned part-time professional, may spend 200 hours on one passenger train.

Unlike other professionals, Thomas works from kits, but with the same air of perfection—altering kits, making his own parts at times, checking photos, and visiting railroad museums.

FEW MODELMAKERS expected to become modelmakers. Punecky studied journalism in college. About 25 years ago an architect saw some of his models hanging in a New Orleans bar and his model-making days started.

Mel Samonds is a former industrial manager. His son is a former school teacher.

Once their display days are over, models may remain in an architect's or designer's office, or, as Rush says, they can end up as "white elephants—no one knows what to do with them."

One modelmaker turned an apartment floor plan, built for an interior designer, into a \$3,000 dollhouse for his daughter.

The last time Daniel Dorcy saw one of his architectural models "it was lying in an alley, waiting for the trash collector."

Punecky claims it doesn't matter.

"The creativity is in building it," he said. "You put your whole self into it, you get emotionally involved and afterwards it's just over."