

Crawford Power Station

Between Pulaski and Hamlin, and 33rd Street and
the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal



Crawford Power Station © Eric Allix Rogers

OVERVIEW

The Crawford Power Station is fast approaching 100 years standing in the Little Village industrial corridor. After years of community organizing to eliminate the pollution it generated, the historic buildings stand as a testament to the community's victory as well as a bygone time when great architecture was the standard for industrial corridor development. Little Village is part of the South Lawndale community area.

What has been proposed for the 70-acre Crawford Station site is a massive 1 million square-foot diesel truck staging, cross-dock facility by developer Hilco Redevelopment Partners.

HISTORY

When the Crawford Station was built in 1926 by the Commonwealth Edison Company, it was considered an engineering wonder.

The Crawford Station was designed by architects Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, the successor firm to D. H. Burnham

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Address: **35th and Pulaski**

Architect: **Graham, Anderson, Probst and White**

Date: **1926**

Style: **Industrial Gothic**

Neighborhood: **Little Village / South Lawndale**

Chicago 7: Crawford Power Station



Historic Crawford Power Station outlined in yellow and extensive approximately 70 acre site outlined in red © Google Maps Aerials

& Company. The firm's commissions included many large scale and important buildings like Chicago's Union Station, Soldier Field, The Field Museum, the Merchandise Mart, Shedd Aquarium and Chicago's Main Post Office. The Crawford Station is orange-rated in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey, indicating its historic value and importance.

The Crawford Station employed innovative technology to conquer the previously difficult task of employing steam engine turbine technology to create the world's largest electrical generators. The massive electricity production allowed Chicago to grow and prosper at a magnitude not previously seen. The success of the Crawford Station was replicated around the world, but it all began in Chicago.

Engineering magazine in July 1925, noted that "probably no power station ever built has commanded greater interest during the period of its construction than has Crawford Avenue Station in Chicago." The magazine made numerous references to the world power conference in London, England and the interest in Chicago's new power plant.

The Crawford Station is composed of red-brick, stonework masonry, Modern Gothic forms and Renaissance Revival detailing to create an eclectic mix of historic styles, now termed Industrial Gothic. The stately main Turbine Hall, with its large towers, resembles the front façade of a church or religious structure. A mammoth three-story, arched window opening is divided with slender brick piers with a vast interior hall located behind.

For over a decade, a coalition of community activists fought to close the Crawford and Fisk coal-burning power plants that contributed significant air pollution and created negative health impacts for individuals living close to these facilities. Preservation Chicago attended meetings in support of the goal to retain the historic buildings and met repeatedly with 22nd Ward Alderman Ricardo Munoz to advocate for the buildings and the history it represents to the people of Little Village. Finally, in 2012, the plants were closed down and the active pollution stopped. Mayor Rahm Emanuel promised that any new development would be environmentally sustainable and that the community would be involved in development planning. According to a news release from the mayor's office, "When we closed down Chicago's last two coal plants, we committed to creating a cleaner, brighter and more sustainable future for Chicago's neighborhoods."



Crawford Power Station Turbine Hall Interior View © Library of Congress

“There have long been serious concerns about heavy trucks and diesel emissions near schools in Little Village. The fine particulate matter released by diesel trucks is linked to several threats to health including increased risk for cardiac and respiratory disease and cancer. For an organization that closed a coal plant, an increase in diesel emissions produced by trucks would reverse a major community victory on air quality.” (Bayne, Social Justice News, 8/28/17)

THREAT

A 90-Day Demolition Delay hold is required for all orange-rated buildings. The hold for the orange-rated Crawford Plant was shortened from 90 days to one day and Hilco Development received a permit to demolish the Crawford Station buildings. The approval process for Hilco’s planned development has moved rapidly with little to no engagement with local residents. Despite a City-funded Little Village industrial corridor modernization plan being developed now, there has been no movement by City leaders to delay the approval of this large development until the plan is finalized. While Hilco has plans to add green features, the plan at this current stage does not address all of the community’s needs and concerns for future development. The current plan does not adequately address environmental, traffic and historic preservation concerns. Hilco claims the historic buildings are structurally unsound, but it has produced no objective analysis to substantiate that claim.



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Community advocates contend that the massive truck staging facility will generate high levels of exhaust pollution, noise pollution and truck traffic in the neighborhood. The Little Village neighborhood consistently ranks highest in air pollution levels across the City of Chicago. Developing a high-polluting use on the Crawford site shows a significant lack of regard for the health and safety of people who live, work and attend school in the neighborhood.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago strongly encourages the adaptive reuse of the historic buildings into a redevelopment plan with new construction located elsewhere on the vast 70-acre site. The historic Graham, Anderson, Probst and White buildings, especially Turbine Hall, are an asset that should be recognized, valued and protected.

The Little Village community has been over-studied in the last few years and wildly underrepresented in redevelopment plans. The planned Hilco development is a prime example of that imbalance. Instead of approving a plan in the name of a free market that threatens the safety and quality of life of community residents and destroys important architectural history of Chicago, Hilco could be a responsible corporate neighbor working with the community to find a healthy balance between the company's profits and people's right to live in a healthy and safe neighborhood – one that retains its historic built environment.

It is possible and essential to redevelop this site in a way that minimizes harm to the community, honors the history and architecture and is still profitable for the developer. Little Village residents should not be required to sacri-

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fice their quality of life in exchange for Hilco maximizing its return on investment on the Crawford site.

In London, a once shuttered coal-fired plant built in 1947 was adaptively reused and is now the celebrated Tate Modern. This river-front art museum has become the third most visited attraction in the UK with 5.8 million visitors in 2016. That building faced repeated threats of demolition for nearly 20 years prior to its reuse in 2000. In Savannah, Georgia, the former Georgia Power Plant located on the Savannah River is being turned into a 670,000-square-foot, mixed-used development by Marriott.

Hilco recently acquired another significant property in the Pilsen community, the Fisk Generating Station at 1111 West Cermak. The company can practice profitable and sensitive redevelopment at Crawford to gear up for the same model at Fisk. Our city's history should not be erased in the name of one company's profits.

SPECIFIC

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago is not opposed to redevelopment for the site, but it strongly encourages the 1926 portion of the 70-acre campus be adaptively reused in any redevelopment plan. The historic structures could incorporate some of the existing equipment to tell a story of Chicago's place on the world stage in the history of electricity and the production process. This concept was employed at the former Sears Roebuck headquarters on Chicago's West Side where some of the old powerhouse equipment was integrated into the new high school, known as the Charles H. Shaw Technology and Learning Center operated by Noble Street Charter Schools.

Community residents, including those involved with the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, favor a reuse on the site that retains the historic buildings and offers potentially food-related growing and production operations within those structures. Hilco could then find a use on the site's vacant land that is respectful of the community's quality of life goals. Jobs can be created and profits can be turned without causing harm to the community and erasing our historic built environment.

The 1 million-square-foot facility proposed at Crawford would never be considered on Chicago's North or Northwest sides, and it should not be forced on the neighbors in Little Village/South Lawndale. Residents there have endured decades of disinvestment and environmental pollution with minimal investment of City resources toward protecting its built history.



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