

Laramie State Bank of Chicago

5200 W. Chicago Avenue, Chicago



Laramie State Bank of Chicago © Eric Allix Rogers

OVERVIEW

The Laramie State Bank Building is an architectural gem located at 5200 W. Chicago Avenue in Chicago's Austin neighborhood. This exuberant Art Deco, three-story bank building is adorned with some of the most spectacular polychromed, terra cotta ornament in Chicago. The Laramie State Bank Building was designed by Architects Meyer & Cook and completed in 1929.

Despite being designated as a Chicago Landmark by the City of Chicago in 1995, the Laramie State Bank Building was foreclosed upon, has sat vacant for many years, and is suffering from considerable deferred maintenance. The building is frequently on the docket at Building Court. A portion of the roof collapsed in 2018. Emergency repairs are being considered to stabilize the building, but the fate of Laramie State Bank Building hangs in the balance.

The Laramie State Bank Building is an excellent example of the strong confidence and architectural exuberance of the "Roaring Twenties." Unlike the more typical limestone bank buildings of the period with their reserved and serious Neo-Classical design, the vibrant mustard, celery green and cream terra cotta bas-relief

**Laramie State Bank of Chicago
(a designated Chicago Landmark)**

Address: 5200 W. Chicago Avenue

Architect: Meyer & Cook

Date: 1929

Style: Art Deco

Neighborhood: Austin



Laramie State Bank of Chicago © Deborah Mercer



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sculpture of the Laramie State Bank Building is a vivid visual celebration of American desires for wealth and abundance. The building's ornamentation itself was used to both beautify the building and to communicate shared vision and aspirations to the bank's customers of industry and saving.

The ornament of the building's exterior includes many progressive-era motifs illustrating the creation of wealth through stylized heroic workers representing industry, agriculture and technology and reinforced through the images of beehives and squirrels collecting nuts. The fruits of this industry and saving are represented by plentiful coins interspersed along the soaring two-story columns. The concept of economic stability is reinforced by a sculptural scene installed over the front doors which illustrates a basket of plenty overflowing with fruits and flanked by a family embracing a child and an elderly couple at peace. Confidence and security is communicated through the owl of wisdom, and the American eagle astride the globe.

"While its arresting appearance alone distinguishes the Laramie State Bank from most other banks, it also represents a pinnacle in the technical and artistic achievement of the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company. Following the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, which gave the world the new decorative style of Art Deco, the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company hired a number of the prize-winning sculptors from the exposition and brought them to Chicago as modelers. It hired six of the prize-winning sculptors from that exposition, including a twin gold-medal winner Edouard Chassaing, to create new designs for

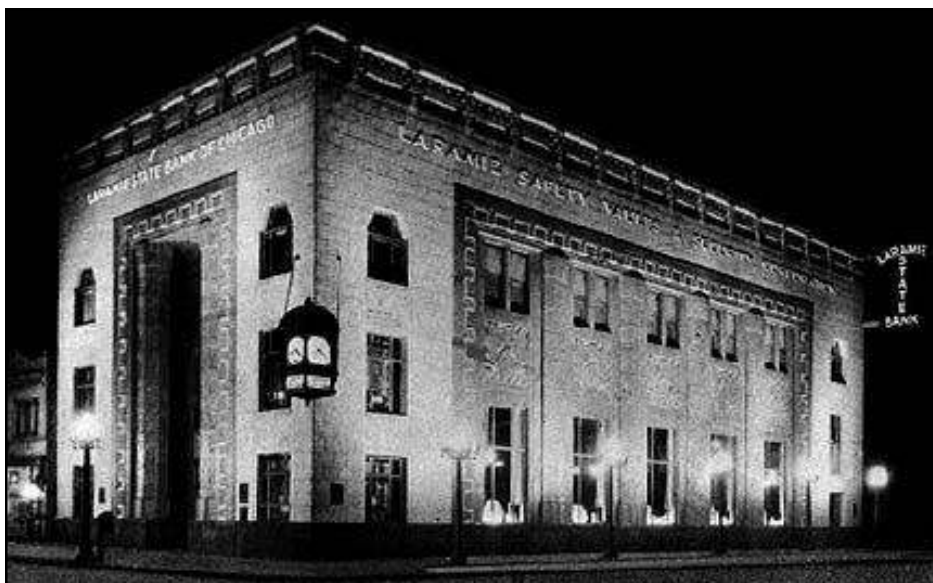
Chicago 7: Laramie State Bank of Chicago



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the company. Laramie State Bank is a beneficiary of this investment in French craftsmanship.” (Chicago Landmark Designation Report, 1/4/95)

By the late 1920s, the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company was the largest terra cotta company in the United States. Despite having hundreds of buildings within its portfolio, Laramie State Bank Building was a stand-out. “Northwestern was very proud of the results. It presented the Laramie Bank as its premier model of Art Deco design in a special folio that it issued to potential clients in 1929.” (Chicago Landmark Designation Report, 1/4/95)



Laramie State Bank of Chicago © City of Chicago Landmark Designation Report



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HISTORY

In the 1920s, Austin was booming with a strong economic base focused on the commercial districts along Chicago Avenue and Madison Street. The population surged by approximately 75%, and much of the neighborhood's land was developed.

Carl A. Mueller, a local banker, purchased the property and by 1924 had built his first building around a smaller drug store at the corner. Business was strong, and on May 1, 1927, the Chicago Tribune announced plans for the construction of a larger and more ornate bank building fronting both Chicago and Laramie Avenue.

The monumental Laramie State Bank Building was opened with great fanfare in 1928. "An elaborate cornice, now removed, once crowned the building. Eye-catching during the day, the building was dazzling at night due to floodlighting." (Chicago Landmark Designation Report, 1/4/95)

Unfortunately, even the optimistic ornament could not prevent the strong impact of the stock market crash and ensuing Great Depression, and the bank closed its doors on August 16, 1930. Citizens National Bank, another neighborhood bank, took over the building in 1946 and operated at that location until 1991.

The property was purchased at auction in 1994 by longtime Austin residents. The building was designated as a Chicago Landmark in early 1995. The owners earnestly wanted to restore the building, but the significant costs associated with the terra cotta repair were prohibitive. Interim uses included a banquet facility, retail and restaurants.



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The building was foreclosed upon by Urban Partnership Bank in 2012. Due to high costs of repair, in an unusual move the bank later returned the building to the former owners.

THREATS

Preservation Chicago has appeared in multiple Building Court hearings in recent years, along with the Chicago Art Deco Society, Landmarks Illinois, Austin Coming Together and concerned members of the Austin community.

The Laramie State Bank Building is boarded up and suffering from deferred maintenance. According to a City of Chicago Department of Buildings inspection in July 2017, a number of issues were noted including water systems, elevators, doors, windows and historic exterior terra cotta. The deferred maintenance reached a critical stage in late 2018 when a portion of the roof collapsed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Laramie State Bank is a designated Chicago Landmark, an outstanding example of the Art Deco period, and a highly visible and important landmark in the Austin community. While the challenge to find the resources to restore the building is clear, this outstanding building is worth the effort. Preservation Chicago, Landmark Illinois and the City of Chicago, along with neighborhood preservation partners, have been working diligently to secure a patron that could stabilize the Laramie State Bank Building and restore this exuberant Landmark. We have a strong preference for a community or cultural use for the ground-floor banking hall that would ensure public access to this wonderful building.

The City of Chicago should use Adopt-a-Landmark funds to make needed repairs to the roof which would help stabilize the building. We encourage the Cook County Land Bank to become involved in the property to clear the title on the building and the adjacent parking lots which would allow for a reuse and excellent preservation outcome.

“It has great potential to become a West Side tourist attraction. Laramie State Bank is a gorgeous building on the outside. There’s nothing like this that is so strikingly, fully Art Deco. This is unique. This will make a perfect cultural and historical arts museum, something that children could come to and play their art and music.” said James Bowers, a long-time Austin resident and business owner. (Zhang, AustinTalks)



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