

Chicago Union Station Power House

301 W. Taylor Street, Chicago



Chicago Union Station Power House on South Branch of the Chicago River with Roosevelt Road Bridge © Eric Allix Rogers

OVERVIEW

Chicago was once the railroad center of the nation linked to a network of substantial passenger and freight railroads, many crisscrossing the country through our city and often terminating at one of the great railway stations. These railroad structures, terminals, power plants, office buildings and stations at one time dotted downtown Chicago and its perimeter. Since the 1970s, many of these buildings have been lost to demolition. With those losses, our City's strong connection to the railroads, and its shared history, has been almost completely obliterated.

The iconic and austere Chicago Union Station Power House is truly a significant building, worthy of preservation, protections

Chicago Union Station Power House

Address: **301 W. Taylor Street**

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

Date: **1932**

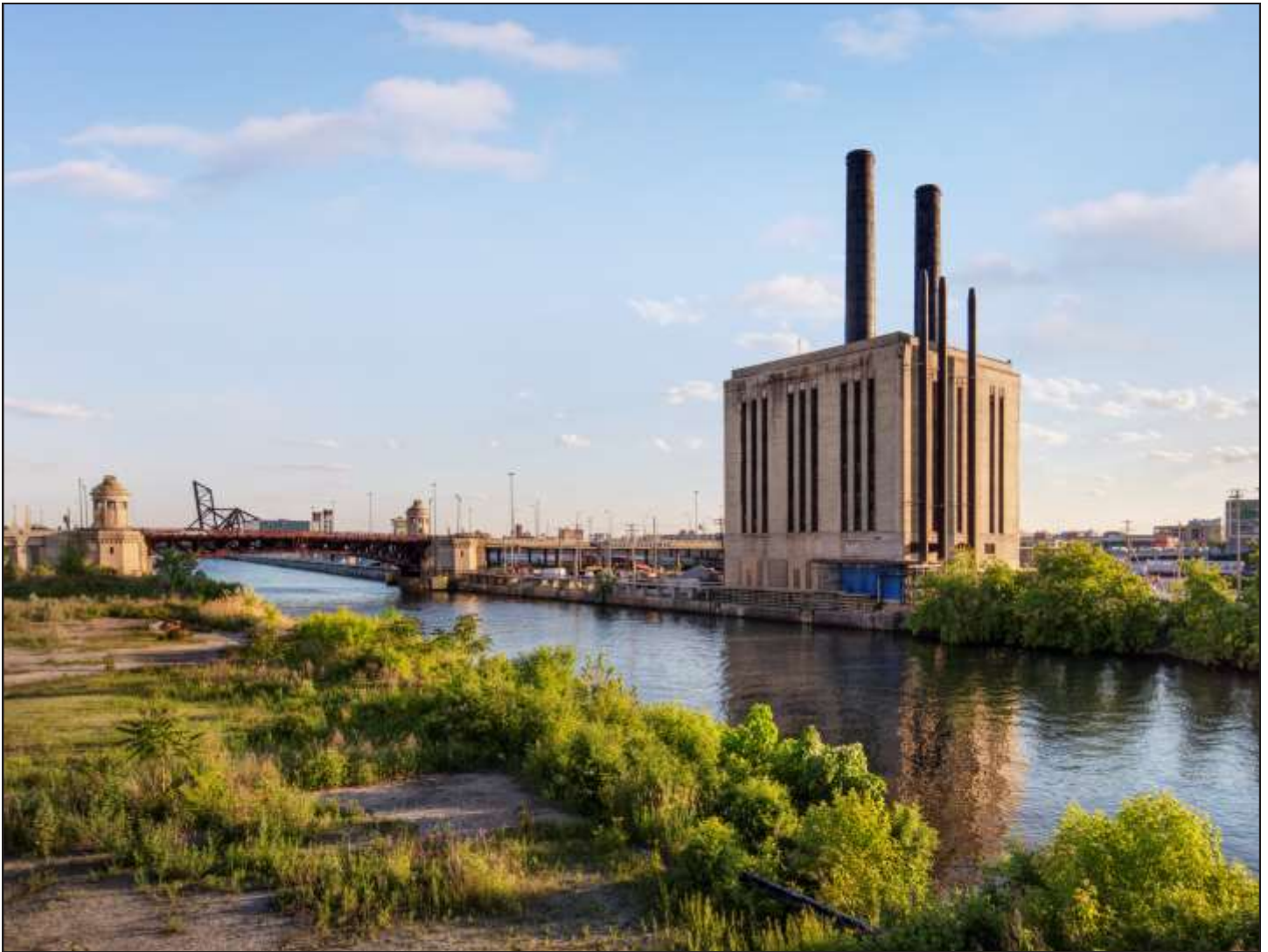
Style: **Art Moderne**

Neighborhood: **South Loop**

Chicago 7: Chicago Union Station Power House



View of South and East Elevations of the Chicago Union Station Power House on South Branch of the Chicago River © Serhii Chrucky



North and East Elevations with Roosevelt Road Bridge of Chicago Union Station Power House on South Branch of Chicago River © Darris Lee Harris

and reuse with its streamlined Art Moderne/Art Deco facades and smokestacks. The building exemplifies the story of Chicago's growth as a railroad and transportation center beginning in the pioneering days of the 1850s.

The Union Station Power House, known originally as the Union Station Boiler Plant, is part of a network of buildings, systems, and rail tracks constructed in the 1920s and 1930s by the architectural firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White for the Chicago Union Station Company – CUSCo. Their work also included Chicago's Union Station, its Great Hall and grand Waiting Room, along with the separate and expansive Beaux-Arts Concourse Building, which was senselessly demolished in 1969. The Chicago Union Station Power House has been out of service since 2011 and is currently mothballed. A plan is being advanced by Amtrak for demolition and replacement with a storage shed which should be located on nearby vacant railroad property. The Union Station Power House was also a Preservation Chicago 2017 Chicago 7 Most Endangered.

HISTORY

Chicago's central role in the national rail network was unparalleled by any other city in the nation, with the highest amount of passenger and freight traffic. This allowed for early industries to flourish, ranging from coal and raw products for manufacturing, to agriculture including wheat, corn, grains, and meat packing. Chicago's robust rail system also affected the city's residential population. As industrial business expanded in Chicago, its population also expanded as laborers and their families came to the city to work and live. Its location at the hub of the national railroad network established Chicago as the capital of the Midwest.

Chicago 7: Chicago Union Station Power House



Chicago's Demolished Legacy Passenger Train Stations with the exception of Chicago Union Station Headhouse. Clockwise from bottom left: Chicago & North Western Station, Grand Central Station, Chicago Union Station Headhouse & Concourse, Illinois Central Station, Center: LaSalle Street Station.

- 1) Chicago and North Western (C&NW) Railway Station. J.W. Taylor., photographer. Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file # 16348.
- 2) Grand Central Station. (B&O Railroad) Richard Nickel, photographer. Richard Nickel Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file # 201006_120213-027.
- 3) Chicago Union Station. Chicago Architectural Photographing Co., photographer. Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file # 60313.
- 4) Illinois Central (IC) Railroad Station. Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file # 68326.
- 5) LaSalle Street Station. Chicago Architectural Sketch Club Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, The Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file # casc.1903_40.



Aerial view of Chicago Union Station Power House with surrounding rail yards and architecture tour boat in foreground © Eric Allix Rogers

Today, most of Chicago's grand legacy train stations have been demolished, including:

1. The Chicago & North Western Railway Terminal by architects Frost & Grainger, completed in 1911, with the largest Guastavino tile arch vault ceiling in the world. The grand station, with its columned Waiting Room, was considered for Chicago Landmark designation but denied under the Mayor Jane Byrne administration and demolished in 1987. It was a great tragedy which could have been avoided.
2. The LaSalle Street Station from 1903 also designed by architects Frost & Grainger with an immense three-story arched entryway and a thirteen-story office tower above was senselessly razed in 1981.
3. The Illinois Central Station by architect Bradford L. Gilbert in 1893 was demolished in 1972. This was the gateway railway station for the Great Migration of African-Americans from the South to Chicago and beyond.
4. Grand Central Station was designed by architect Solon S. Beman with its massive soaring tower and adjoining hotel. The station operated from 1890 until its demolition in 1969.
5. The immense Pennsylvania Railroad Freight Terminal, once the largest in the country, was designed by architect William Lightfoot Price in 1915-1918 in the Secessionist style. Its large clock tower was highly visible at its 323 W. Polk Street location until its demolition in 1974.
6. Chicago's Union Station's Concourse Building was the formal classical grand entrance to vast Union Station complex designed by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White and opened in 1925. The Concourse Building's soaring interior volume was comparable in scale to the Great Hall/Waiting Room. It was demolished and replaced with two commercial buildings in 1969.
7. The original Illinois Central Depot, also known as the Great Central Depot was designed by Otto Matz in 1856 for the Illinois Central (I.C.) and Chicago & Alton Railroads. It was located at South Water Street and Michigan Avenue—below current grade. Upon the completion of the I.C. passenger terminal in 1893 at Roosevelt Road and Michigan Avenue, the station was used as a freight terminal until its demolition for the Illinois Center complex.



Chicago Union Station Power House across the Chicago River © Darris Lee Harris

These grand monuments represented the influence of the railroad industry which played such a critical role in the growth of Chicago. It is simply tragic that these magnificent railroad buildings have been destroyed. Demolition has erased most of our railroad-related buildings and terminals. The Chicago Union Station Headhouse & Waiting Room/Great Hall still functions as a rail terminal and was recently restored. Dearborn Station/Polk Street Station remains standing and has been repurposed as a small office and retail center. Both buildings are designated Chicago Landmarks and protected against demolition.

In contrast to the more Beaux-Arts style Chicago Union Station complex, the Union Station Power House was designed and constructed in the Art Moderne/Art Deco style, reflecting the streamlined austerity of the time. The building, with its large volume and strong vertical massing, also exemplifies the industrial might associated with generating and supplying power to operate a system of railroad-related infrastructure and buildings.

The architects of the Union Station Power House were Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, a firm that descended from the legendary architectural firm of Daniel Burnham and John Wellborn Root and D.H. Burnham & Company. The firm designed many of Chicago's most iconic buildings and designated Landmarks, including the Wrigley Building, the Field Building/Bank of America Building, and the Merchandise Mart – once the largest building in the world. The firm also designed the old Chicago Post Office, once the world's largest; the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago; and Illinois Merchants Bank Building/Continental Illinois Bank/Wintrust Bank. The list also extends to the Straus Building, Pittsfield Building, John G. Shedd Aquarium, Chicago Civic Opera House, Insurance Exchange Building and many other notable structures both in Chicago and across the United States.



Looking northward at Chicago Union Station Power House with Chicago Loop in the distance © Eric Allix Rogers

The strong verticality of the Union Station Power House, from its linear groupings of parallel window bands to its tall chimneys, emphasizes the building's strength. Its massive cream-colored brick walls, horizontal stone banding and austere ornament create additional visual impact. Unique in form, the Union Station Power House a rare example of industrial power house design by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White.

THREAT

Amtrak is the successor railway system which condensed 20 passenger railroads across the nation into one semi-governmental or quasi-public corporation body under the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration. Amtrak was formed by the Congressional Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970 and began train service on May 1, 1971. Amtrak is officially recognized as the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, and the entity receives a combination of state and federal subsidies but is managed as a for-profit organization. Since

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Interior views of the Chicago Union Station Power House flooded with natural light from large bands of vertical windows © Darris Lee Harris

its founding, and since the consolidation of service occurred with these mergers, many of Chicago's railway-related buildings have succumbed to disuse and demolition.

Only recently, and through a long-term lease to a developer, has Amtrak invested in decades-long repairs to Chicago Union Station and its Great Hall, including the 1980 fire-damaged Fred Harvey restaurant space. We commend the recent restoration work to one of Chicago's most amazing interior spaces to Union Station and want to encourage the same type of commitment to the Union Station Power House.

Amtrak is the current owner of the Chicago Union Station Power House and has decided that this structure is no longer necessary for its operations. In order to demolish the building, they are required to conduct federally mandated Section 106 hearings as it has been determined that the building is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Regardless, these hearings alone cannot prevent the future demolition of the structure.

Demolition would be an expensive option, ranging in cost between \$9 million and \$13 million of taxpayer funds. Amtrak's alternative proposal for the site is to create a maintenance shed. Amtrak's plan for a maintenance shed on the site is problematic. Such a shed could certainly be built elsewhere in the vast rail yards which extend for miles in Chicago's South Loop. In addition to the heartbreaking loss of this iconic railroad historic building, new construction could cost millions of dollars. At a time when the Chicago Riverwalk is being expanded, locating a mundane maintenance shed along the banks of the Chicago River would be tragic.

Noting Chicago Union Station's recent switching failures and communication issues, and the National Public Radio investigation which reported on an wheelchair-bound passenger being charged a \$25,000 fare for a 136-mile ride to Bloomington, Illinois for the removal of seats and special accommodations to meet ADA requirements, it appears that Amtrak priorities are not aligned with Chicagoans' priorities.

Chicago 7: Chicago Union Station Power House



Aerial view looking south with the Chicago Union Station Power House and future site of tech development across Chicago River © Eric Allix Rogers



Rendering of the 78 with Chicago Union Station Power House © Rendering from Related Midwest with delineation by Preservation Chicago

Chicago 7: Chicago Union Station Power House

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago recognizes the limitations of the site due to the railroad tracks to the west and the South Branch of the Chicago River to the east. To minimize access issues, we are encouraging an adaptive reuse of the building as a data center, a chilling plant or another compatible use. The building is across the Chicago River from the planned “The 78” development technology hub which will include 13 million square feet of buildable space, 24,000 on-site jobs, and cost \$7 billion. The data center use would be an amenity for the residents and commercial enterprises relocating to Chicago’s South Loop. Another potential use could be a rail station serving the 78 and South Loop. The idea of a third-party use could stimulate long-range plans for addressing the riverfront along this stretch of the South Branch with its amazing views. In addition to the reuse of a potential Chicago Landmark, it could catalyze the creation of riverfront access, riverfront green space and perhaps even a future riverwalk.

The Union Station Power House could be reused and repurposed by Amtrak or a private developer for a data center, or a control center for Amtrak’s Midwestern and Chicago rail operations. At one point, Amtrak entertained selling the building and issued an RFQ that did not yield any final bids. Preservation Chicago continued to actively seek potential new users and recently identified a well-capitalized, highly experienced Chicago developer with excellent credentials for large projects who desires to reuse the building as a data center. Amtrak has refused to consider any purchase offers at this time and is pressing forward with the process toward demolition of a National Register-eligible building and a potential Chicago Landmark. Because of its eligibility for the National Register, demolition of the building using federal funding would trigger a Section 106 review and complicate matters.

Union Station Power House’s connection to Chicago’s incredible railroad and architectural history makes it a prime candidate for a Chicago Landmark designation. A Chicago Landmark designation for this unique building would ensure its preservation and reuse. A preservation outcome for this building would be a win-win for Chicago, Amtrak Rail Systems, taxpayers and future generations of Chicagoans.

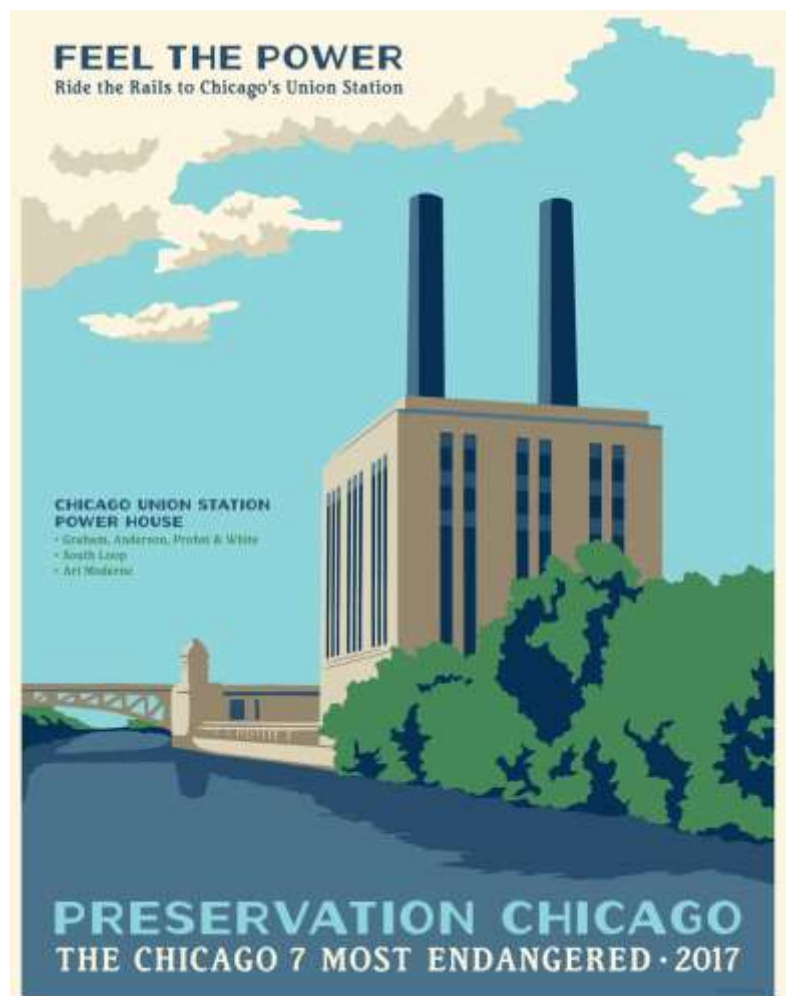
THE OPPORTUNITY: Available for adaptive reuse as a data center, chilling center or other use, the Union Station Power House by one of Chicago’s greatest architectural firms is in close proximity to central business district. Amtrak has plans to demolish the building at an estimated cost of \$9 to \$13 million and replace it with a maintenance shed or a parking lot as proposed in 2017.

Benefits:

- Solid masonry fireproof building
- Zoned: DS-5
- Height: 115’
- Footprint: 9,000 sf (95’x95’)
- Potential square footage: 100,000
- Central Location Close to Central Business District
- Close proximity to exchanges, tech & financial district
- Proximity to fiber optic trunk lines
- Adjacent to Chicago River for low-cost cooling option
- Adjacent to Com Ed electric substation

Potential Eligibility:

- 20% Federal Tax Credits
- Illinois Historic Tax Credits
- Adopt-a-Landmark Funds
- Class L Tax Designation
- Permit fee waivers



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