

Central Manufacturing District - Original East District

Western Avenue between 43rd and 45th, Ashland Avenue from 3600 to 3900, and Iron Street from 37th to 38th, Chicago



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, 3800 Block of South Ashland. © Serhii Chucky

OVERVIEW

Last year, Preservation Chicago announced the selection of the Central Manufacturing District's Pershing Road District as part of our 2020 Chicago 7 Most Endangered list. This year, the Central Manufacturing District's Original East District (CMD East) has been selected for inclusion. CMD East was the precursor to the Pershing Road District and served as a first chapter in the story of the development whose financial success ensured the construction of CMD Pershing Road just over a decade later.

Central Manufacturing District – Original East District

**Address: Western Ave. between 43rd and 45th St.,
Ashland from 3600 to 3900, Iron St. from 37th to 38th**

**Architect: Alfred S. Alschuler, Postle & Mahler, Samuel
Scott Joy and others**

Date: 1905 - c.1969

Style: Industrial Gothic / Prairie

Neighborhood: McKinley Park / Bridgeport



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, 3800 Block of South Ashland. © Serhii Chrucky

The Central Manufacturing District was the nation's first planned industrial park, a revolutionary design that gathered many of the city's manufacturing powers together in one localized region. This innovative concept, idea, and execution proved so successful that it further spurred on Chicago's industrial might and inspired imitations throughout the nation in the first half of the 20th century. Its significant historical background is further bolstered by the robust architectural heritage found throughout CMD East. Designed in a variation of styles that include Art Deco, Gothic Revival, Prairie School, Classical Revival, and Mid-Century Modern, Central Manufacturing District's Original East District is unlike any other architectural complex and grouping in Chicago.

CMD East is a crucial and irreplaceable artifact of industrial history and design both in Chicago and the United States. Unfortunately, without designation as a Chicago Landmark District, CMD East is threatened by a combination of demolition and neglect. While recent efforts to help protect the district have increased, those efforts are still insufficient. In an effort to acknowledge the importance of this site and the need for its continued preservation and maintenance, CMD East was listed in 2015 on the National Register of Historic Places with support from Preservation Chicago and our statewide preservation partner, Landmarks Illinois.

HISTORY

In 1902, Frederick H. Prince, an owner of the Chicago Junction Railway (CJR), and A.G. Leonard, president of the nearby Union Stock Yards Company, founded what would come to be known as the Central Manufacturing District



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, Standard Sanitary Mfg. Co. Doorway, 3716 S. Iron, Alfred Alschuler, 1924. © Max Chavez

(CMD). At once a solution to Chicago's unstoppable industrial expansion, as well as a savvy economic move on the part of these two industrial magnates. The CMD East was a radical experiment in city planning.

Before the establishment and construction of CMD East, this area of Chicago was known as the Cabbage Patch, so named for the acres of cabbage fields that dotted the area; to the south were the sprawling Union Stock Yards founded a half-century before the creation of CMD East. Much of the Stock Yards' success was thanks to the seamless integration of the Chicago Junction Railway's train lines (CJR) into their facilities. As this partnership between the CJR and the Union Stock Yards became increasingly lucrative, the CJR turned their attention to the nearby fields and the opportunities they presented.

Frederick Prince, as owner of the CJR, a consolidation of nine railways whose funding in part made the Union Stock Yards a possibility, felt that a redevelopment of these agricultural plots would both protect and increase his share of freight traffic. Such efforts would also create a new district that would attract companies fleeing the densification of downtown Chicago's industrial and commercial core. With the space provided by this adjacent farmland, Prince saw an opportunity to lure businesses looking for additional square footage and easier shipping made possible by front-door CJR rail lines. He also envisioned waterfront docks along a branch of the Chicago River known as Bubbly Creek that would grant companies direct access to water transportation. This creek and the dangerous working conditions of meatpacking in the Chicago Stockyards were soon made notorious by Upton Sinclair's muckraking exposé *The Jungle*.

The beginnings of CMD East were supported by \$20 million worth of construction and infrastructure upgrades in 1902 on these former farmlands and ramshackle lumber yards. The district was overlaid upon the city's existing street grid, while its organization inside its borders was determined by a combination of factors including business functions and needs, traffic patterns, and shipping requirements.



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, Pfannmueller Engineering Co. © Max Chavez

Despite CMD East's industrial purpose, the visual beauty of the buildings, overall design quality, and detailing were also important factors, as still evident and witnessed today in the many structures located in this complex. Advertising materials created to entice local businesses to CMD East highlighted the overall appearance of the district. Handsomely paved roads, manicured parkways, and elegant lamp posts were featured prominently in this new industrial park, as were the architecture and overall characteristics of the warehouses themselves. CMD East boasted its own Architectural Department office on West 35th Street, which collaborated with business owners on the design of their new properties. The administrators also assembled a team of highly talented architects to bring this new industrial center to life, including Alfred S. Alschuler, Postle & Mahler, and Samuel Scott Joy. Many of these same architects would later be commissioned to design an addition to the CMD on West Pershing Road, along with smaller industrial developments modeled on the CMD.

The buildings of CMD East were constructed in a variety of sizes suiting each company's specific needs. Mostly consisting of pressed brick or concrete, these structures were then adorned with ornate details, often in terra cotta, unlike many typical industrial buildings of that time. These warehouses and offices embodied architectural trends of the 20th century and exhibited trademark features of the Art Deco, Late Gothic Revival, Prairie School, Mid-Century Modern and Classical Revival movements.

CMD East's attention to aesthetics aside, the district enjoyed great popularity thanks to the innovation and introduction of an all-inclusive offering of services—the first of its kind. Notable among these were unparalleled electric wiring, postal delivery, street cleaning, telegraphic connections, private water lines, preventative fire protections, private centralized banking, and even a social club. Amenities such as these were understandably appealing to smaller manufacturers who would have struggled to facilitate such a wide range of logistics on their own. As a result, this “package deal,” meant to aid manufacturing and factory operations, became one of the biggest motivating factors for businesses relocating to CMD East.

Hundreds of companies have called CMD East home over the past century. Household names like the William Wrigley Company, the Walgreen Company, Standard Sanitary, Spiegel (of catalog and mail order fame), and Westinghouse Electric all operated out of CMD East in its early days. However, as the years passed, CMD East lost little of its appeal and continued to attract a roster of big-name tenants including: Sears Roebuck, Goldblatt's, Procter & Gamble, Sylvania, the Glidden Company, the Oppenheimer Casing Company, Jewel Food Stores, and the



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, HP Smith Building © Max Chavez

Larkin Soap Company. The demolition of the Larkin Soap Company's building in 2021 was not the only lamentable architectural loss in that business's history. In 1950, the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Larkin Administration Building, which served as the centerpiece of their Buffalo headquarters, was controversially and regrettably demolished.

CMD East's expansion forged ahead unaffected by wartime economies or market downturns, continuing to expand and even thrive during the Great Depression and both World Wars. Its unrelenting success led to a proliferation of other industrial offshoots overseen by the Central Manufacturing District: the Pershing Road District; the Crawford Development along Pulaski Road between West Pershing Road and West 47th Street; the Kedzie Development which extends from West 47th to 49th Streets between South Kedzie and South Central Park Avenues; a smaller district from West 47th to 49th Streets between South California Avenue and South Rockwell Street; and the Calumet Industrial District, which ran along the Calumet River between East 103rd and 106th Streets.

By the middle of the 20th century, CMD East experienced considerable turnover with some buildings being razed to make way for new structures and companies. This era of demolition has resulted in the gradual dismantling of many of CMD East's most impressive buildings. Polish beer manufacturer White Eagle Brewing's Romanesque-style facilities have been lost, as well as the 192,000 square foot Samuel Scott Joy-designed John Magnus Building on 35th Street, which featured a lofty clock tower rivaling the one currently standing on West Pershing Road. Other impressive warehouses lost over the years include: the stately seven-story O.W. Richardson Company headquarters at West 37th Street and South Racine Avenue; the Starck Piano Company Building at the corner of West Pershing Road and South Ashland Avenue which also flaunted a tower with commanding views; and the Alschuler-designed John Lucas Company Building at the corner of West 37th and South Iron Streets.

By the latter quarter of the century, the Central Manufacturing District had sold off all of its holdings in the district. Still, building on the long-lasting success of CMD East allowed the Central Manufacturing District as a land-leasing organization to establish similar industrial parks from nearby Itasca, Illinois all the way to Phoenix, Arizona, although none were executed at the level of design or size exhibited in CMD East or its Pershing Road



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, CMD Bank Building © Max Chavez

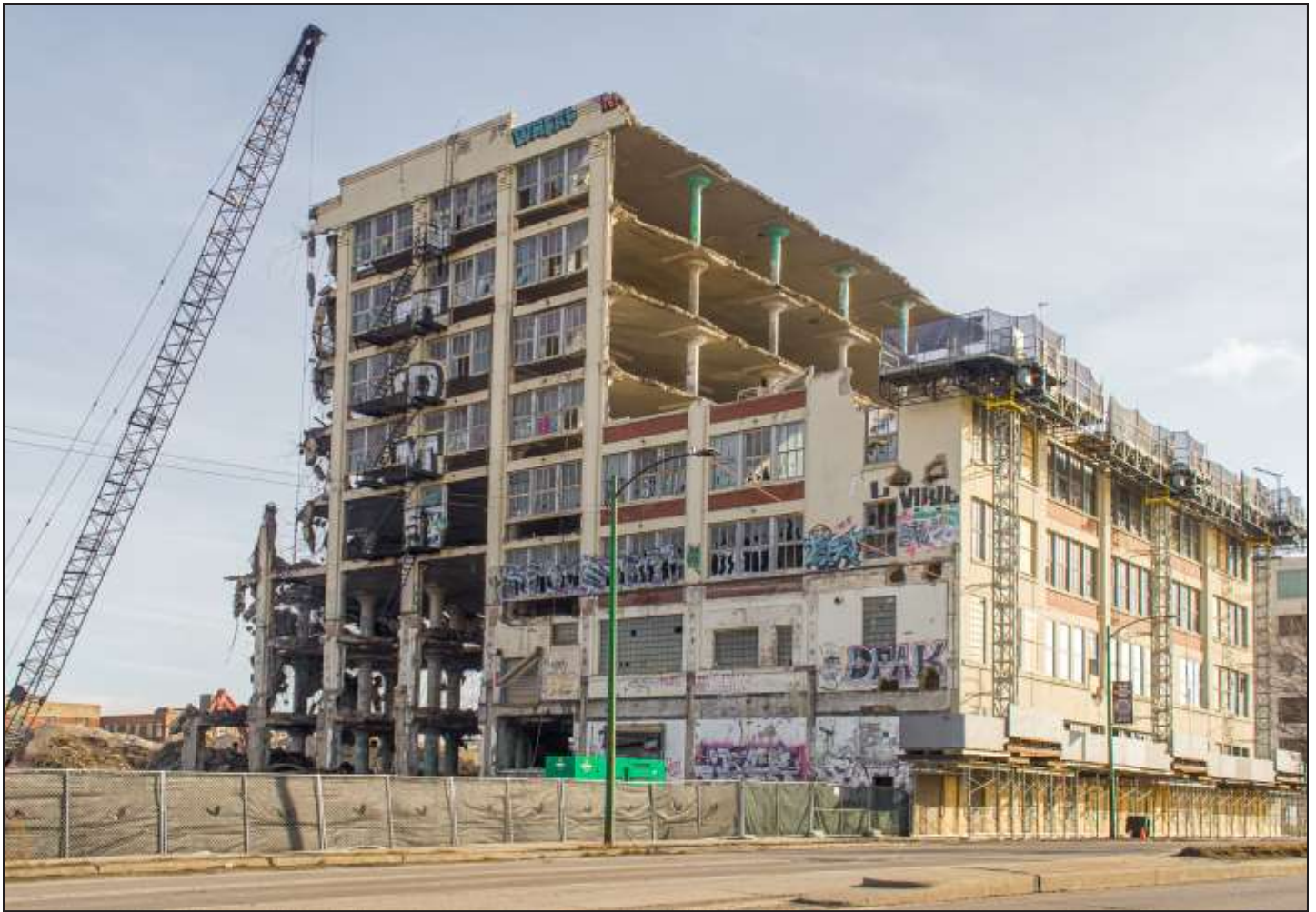
counterpart. The past few decades have seen the loss of many structures in this district by either purposeful demolition or accidental destruction, slowly chipping away at the cohesion found here during its halcyon days.

As these losses persist at a concerning pace, attention has turned back to CMD East and the adjacent Pershing Road corridor. Some progress was made with the designation of both developments as historic districts on the National Register of Historic Places. While many of the buildings of CMD East face an uncertain future and remain undesignated, the Spiegel Administration Building on West 35th Street is now protected as a Designated Chicago Landmark and was honored by inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Meanwhile, some of CMD East's more visible structures have been creatively repurposed and saved. Most notable among these structures is the former Albert Pick & Company Building which was adaptively reused in 2001 as the Bridgeport Art Center, a collection of artist spaces and the home of the Chicago Maritime Museum. Today, CMD East houses a mix of tenants that range from breweries and storage companies to food producers and the largest prop warehouse in the Midwest.

THREAT

The greatest danger confronting the CMD East is that of rampant demolition unrestricted by any historic protections. Nowhere is this clearer than along the district's western boundary of South Ashland Avenue, where impressive hubs of industry have been replaced by multiple vacant parcels. A 32-acre lot at the corner of South Ashland Avenue and West 35th Street, owned by real estate investment company Avgeris and Associates, has been the site of some of the most widespread demolition in CMD East. These losses include the Wrigley Company's historic factory and the Larkin Company Building, which housed both the Larkin Soap Company and Jewel Food Stores during its long history.

The demolition of the Wrigley Company's factory was the final act in a series of missteps that could have been easily prevented by a Chicago Landmark designation. In 2002, the City of Chicago agreed to provide the Wrigley Company \$16 million worth of incentives to remain in Chicago, build additional facilities on Goose Island, and keep



Larkin Building demolition in 2021, Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, © Max Chavez

their historic factory open. However, the city never secured a written promise from Wrigley. Once Wrigley was acquired by Mars Inc. in 2005, it was announced that the factory would be sold. Its demolition began in 2013, a year after being purchased by Avgeris & Associates, with the company claiming that the razing was “safety related.” In the absence of any historic protections, the demolition moved ahead with no ordinances in place to delay it.

Portions of this lot are now the site of a close-to-completion distribution center with Amazon as the proposed new tenant, a decision likely to be met with heavy local disapproval. Other South Side communities have protested the opening of Amazon distribution centers in their neighborhoods for fear that an increase in truck traffic will cause heavy pollution that would impact the health of local residents. Concerns of environmental racism would be greatly justified as this part of Chicago has experienced several environmental justice issues impacting adjacent communities. These recent controversies include, but are not limited to, the noxious fumes emitted by the nearby MAT Asphalt plant as well as the April 2020 demolition of a Crawford Power Plant smokestack that resulted in a toxic dust cloud blanketing an entire Little Village neighborhood.

Since 2003, Avgeris and Associates has also owned a large lot at the corner of South Ashland and West Pershing Road containing two large historic industrial structures—the most notable of the two being the former home of Continental Can Company, a structure boasting Gothic Revival terra cotta and a six-story tower. There is concern that without protections, these buildings, instead of being wisely reused, will soon meet a similar fate as the Wrigley and Larkin Company buildings.

Multiple CMD East properties are searching for new lessees. While some advertised structures, like the C.S. Davis & Company warehouse on 37th Street, are flexible warehouse or industrial spaces that face fewer threats of interior damage, others are more vulnerable to irreversible changes by new tenants. The currently-for-lease



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, Goulds Manufacturing / Imperial Campbell Branch © Serhii Chrucky

Central Manufacturing District Bank building on West 35th Street is of particular concern as its historic interior remains in fair condition. Retention of this significant space—the social and financial heart of the CMD and arguably the most ornate interior in the entire district —by both its current owner and its next tenant is of the utmost importance to the integrity of CMD East.

Vacancies and neglect also endanger CMD East's historic fabric. The Pullman Couch Company Building at 3757 South Ashland Avenue was heavily damaged in a massive 2013 fire that smoldered for days despite the below freezing winter temperatures and required the emergency demolition of the elegant warehouse. While the blaze's cause is unknown, the building's abandonment surely led to and accelerated its eventual demolition. We fear that other vacant buildings within CMD East could meet the same fate if left deserted.

The lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic loom large over CMD East's future as Chicago enters a second year with the virus. While Chicagoans continue to work from home in considerable numbers, demand for commercial real estate has dropped and vacancy has risen. Our post-pandemic world is expected to offer greater flexibility in allowing people to work remotely. Will this squeeze be felt all over the city? If so, CMD East may be threatened by this diminishing need for commercial real estate. It will be necessary to diversify how CMD East's vast square footage is employed to ensure its continued viability far into the future.

It must be noted that much of the CMD is zoned for industrial uses, which complicates the ability to convert long underutilized buildings into residential or other non-industrial uses. For example, a residential affordable housing proposal in the Pershing Road District was denied funding by the City of Chicago due to its proximity to the aforementioned MAT Asphalt Plant. This heavy industrial asphalt plant opened in 2018 to the surprise of many community members as almost no public process had occurred. This is an example of the difficulties presented by heavy industrial uses in close proximity to neighborhood reinvestments which do more to promote healthy and stable communities.



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, Transparent Package Company © Max Chavez

CMD East's historic infrastructure, such as its many railway tracks and brick-paved roads, has largely vanished over time as the district has evolved—but important fragments still remain. Their erasure poses a severe threat to Chicago's rich industrial heritage. These features are integral to telling the full story of this district and their thoughtful retention will continue to contribute historical, educational, and aesthetic value to CMD East.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The most pressing issue facing CMD East is demolition, a danger that can be effectively countered through designation as a Chicago Landmark District. Although CMD East is already listed under the National Register of Historic Places, this honor cannot prevent demolition and leaves it vulnerable to the wrecking ball—a reality clearly illustrated by the recent loss of the Larkin Company Building. Preservation Chicago wholeheartedly supports the protection of the area's remaining structures through the creation of a CMD East Historic Landmark District. The recent Landmarking of the Spiegel Administration Building is an encouraging sign that Landmark status can and should be extended to the remaining structures of the CMD's Original East District.

Furthermore, there are numerous buildings that exist within or on the periphery of the official CMD East boundaries outlined by the National Register of Historic Places that we at Preservation Chicago feel are worthy of inclusion in future advocacy efforts. Even if these structures do not fall within the official scope of CMD East's development, they contribute to the historical and architectural continuity of the district. We would be remiss to ignore these buildings as part of any future Landmark designations as they strengthen the district's cohesion and paint a fuller picture of CMD East and its environs. (List included below.)

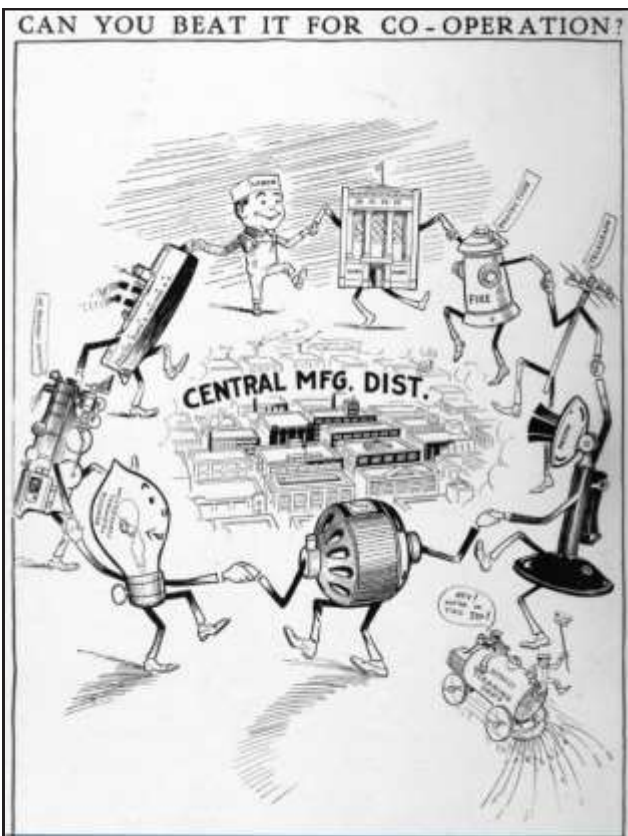
In keeping with the spirit of the Central Manufacturing District's mission to support smaller businesses and serve the Chicago area, we feel that CMD East offers opportunities to invest in the nearby McKinley Park and Bridgeport communities. Vacant structures could easily be adaptively reused as a myriad of uses including: housing, dining, commercial offices, art and performance studios, and educational spaces.



Central Manufacturing District © Max Chavez



Central Manufacturing District © Max Chavez



Central Mfg. Dist. Image Credit: CMD Magazine 1916-1917



Central Manufacturing District, Standard Sanitary © Max Chavez



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District, SA Maxwell Company © Max Chavez

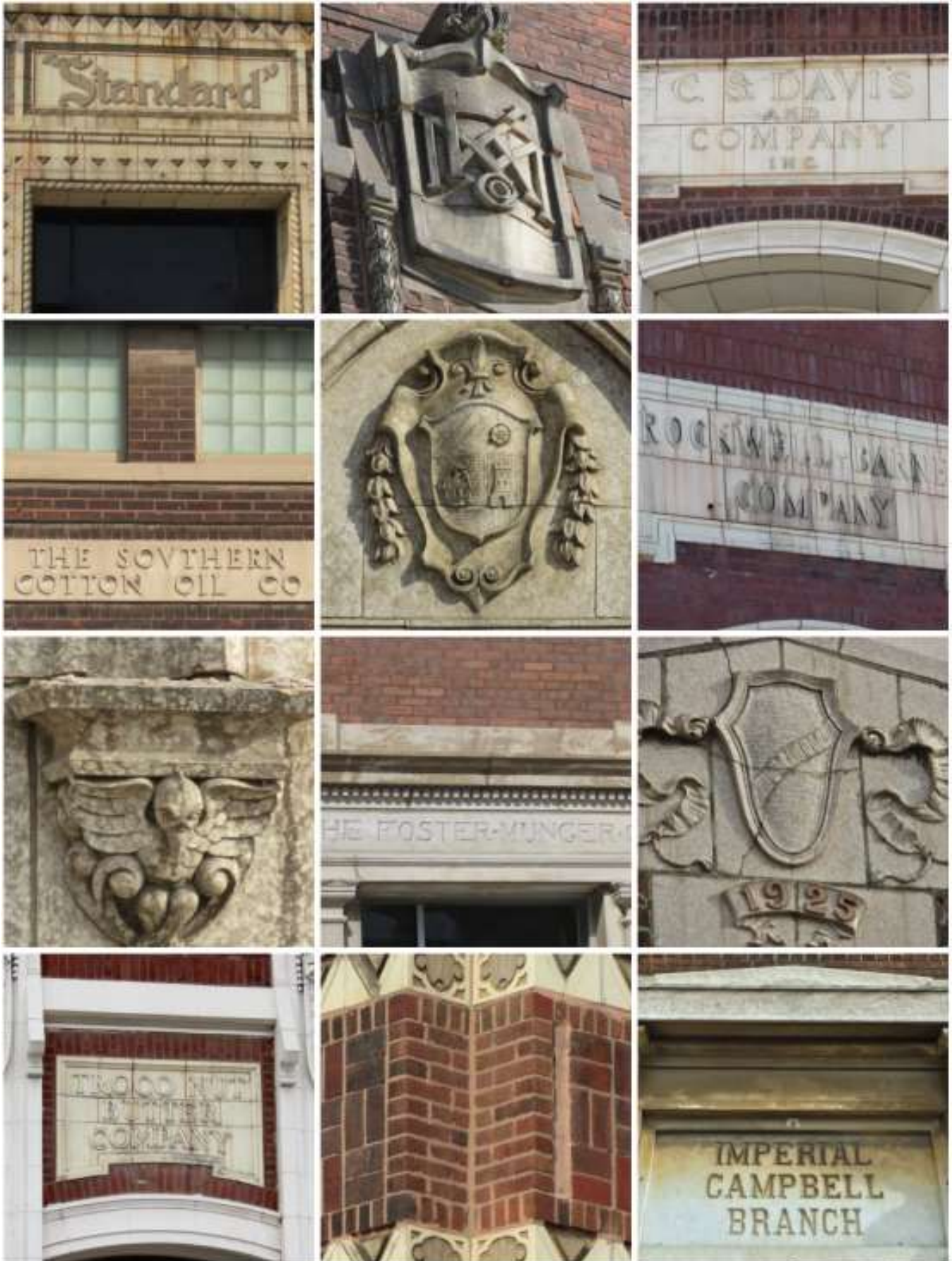
To further support adaptive reuse developments, the City of Chicago should adjust policy to deny demolition permits until future plans have been approved, permitted, and financing secured. Since the Chicago Historic Resources Survey overlooks countless historic buildings, policies like these could serve to discourage unnecessary demolition and reduce the loss of our historic built environment. Demolition as a first option leaves our city scarred by vacant lots which accelerate disinvestment and blight. Instead, requiring clearly defined proposals for what a developer or owner plans to do with a historic property is imperative for the retention of these irreplaceable structures, both in CMD East and throughout Chicago.

We also encourage architecturally sensitive design for the new infill development necessary to densify CMD East and eliminate many of the vacant lots in the area. Replacement developments such as the proposed Amazon distribution center or the adjacent ComEd training center address the problem of vacant parcels but detract from the overall visual and historic fabric of CMD East. Through thoughtful design and community-sensitive uses, it is possible to create additional space for local communities that captures the spirit of this revolutionary district. Reuse developments of industrial areas have been shown time and again to be popular destinations for local businesses and communities, both worldwide and here in Chicago. We are confident the same is possible at CMD East.

Additional contributing properties

1200 – 1232 W. 36th Pl. (1951)
926-930 W. 38th Place (1924)
3718 S. Ashland (1925)
3742 S. Ashland (1914)
3752 S. Ashland (1911)
3804 S. Ashland (1909)
3808 S. Ashland (1909)
3810 S. Ashland (1912)

3333 S. Iron (1953)
3545 S. Morgan (1925)
1120 W. Pershing (1945/6)
3800-3802 S. Racine (c. 1969)
Racine Avenue Pumping Station (1939)
3801 W. Sangamon (c. late 1950s)
1038 W. 35th St—Spiegel Administration Building*,
a Designated Chicago Landmark



Central Manufacturing District - Original East District Ornament and Entrances © Deborah Mercer