

Cornell Store & Flats

1230-32 E. 75th Street, Chicago



Cornell Store & Flats, 1908, Walter Burley Griffin, 1230-32 E. 75th Street © Serhii Chrucky

OVERVIEW

This year, the Cornell Store & Flats has been selected once again as a Chicago 7 Most Endangered after first being listed in 2017. Designed by Walter Burley Griffin, a prolific designer of both buildings and landscapes, this exceptional building is an outlier in Griffin's career. Compared to his largely residential designs here in the United States and his city plans in Australia, the Cornell Store & Flats is the rare example of a combination commercial and residential Griffin-designed building.

The Cornell Store & Flats is located on once-bustling East 75th Street near its intersection with South Chicago Avenue. Considered by some architectural historians to be one of the most significant buildings in Chicago, this Prairie School structure has been beset by years of neglect. This has been further exacerbated by disinvestment in the neighborhood of Greater Grand Crossing, near the western border of the

Cornell Store & Flats

Address: **1230-32 E. 75th Street**

Architect: **Walter Burley Griffin**

Date: **1908**

Style: **Prairie Style**

Neighborhood: **Greater Grand Crossing**



Cornell Store & Flats, 1908, Walter Burley Griffin, 1230-32 E. 75th Street © Debbie Mercer

South Shore community. The building's future has been uncertain since the passing of its long-time owner. The risk of permanent loss increased after it entered demolition court in 2016. Preservation Chicago is of the opinion that with the right owner and development plan, a viable path for reuse exists for this irreplaceable structure.

In an additional effort to further spotlight the significance of the Cornell Store & Flats, our statewide preservation partner, Landmarks Illinois, listed it in 2016 as one of the "Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois." Still, the building remains vacant and deteriorates further with each passing year.

We are hopeful that the Cornell Store & Flats can still be preserved and repurposed, ensuring that this significant building by one of the country's most accomplished architects will continue to serve its community long into the future.

HISTORY

Completed in 1908, the Cornell Store & Flats was created as an investment property by the estate of Paul Cornell. A New York-born lawyer who moved to Chicago as a young man, Cornell bought 300 acres of land bounded by what would eventually become 51st and 55th Streets in 1853. The sizable parcel was named Hyde Park and Cornell developed it rapidly, advertising it to well-off Chicagoans as a luxury lakeside retreat. By the time of his death in 1904, Cornell was able to witness the tremendous growth and annexation of Hyde Park Township to the City of Chicago in 1889, the establishment of the University of Chicago in 1890, and the success of the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

Cornell's family sought to maintain his legacy of development after his death. They decided to erect an unparalleled modern building on Greater Grand Crossing's 75th Street corridor that would provide his estate with rental income from residential and retail spaces. To design this investment property, Cornell's estate hired architect Walter Burley Griffin for the commission.

Chicago 7: Cornell Store & Flats



Cornell Store & Flats historic image, north facade, 1230-32 E. 75th Street © The Western Architect, September 1912



Cornell Store & Flats historic image, south facade, 1230-32 E. 75th Street © The Western Architect, September 1912



Cornell Store & Flats, north facade, 1908, Walter Burley Griffin, 1230-32 E. 75th Street © Eric Allix Rogers

At that time, Griffin, in his early 30s, was enjoying a very successful career. After graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1899, Griffin worked for two years under Prairie School practitioners Dwight H. Perkins, Robert C. Spencer, Jr., and Henry Webster Tomlinson. Soon after in 1901, Griffin began a five-year career as a draftsman in Frank Lloyd Wright's Oak Park studio. However, even before employment in these offices, Griffin had shown interest as a student in non-Western architecture, especially Japanese and pre-Columbian styles. This mix of influences can be observed in several of Griffin's designs and, to some extent, in the overall massing of the Cornell Store & Flats.

The building is an exemplar of the Prairie School of architecture and displays multiple trademarks of the style. Drawing on the boundless expanse of the Midwestern landscape, the Prairie School often implemented low-hipped or flat rooflines, an emphasis on horizontality, natural construction materials, and little to no ornamentation. In this regard, the Cornell Store & Flats adheres faithfully.

The building features imposing and monumental facades on both its north and south elevations. The building's ground floor south-facing storefront, which fronts East 75th Street, originally boasted a glass display window that projected outward from the body of the structure. This feature has since been replaced with a brick wall containing glass block windows. From the clerestory of the first floor to the roofline, five massive brick piers extend upward, creating the structural bays of the building's facade. On the second floor, slender masonry piers separate pairs of narrow, deeply inset windows. The vertical piers are further defined by both continuous and noncontinuous bands of limestone lintels and sills which frame the recessed windows and emphasize the building's horizontal massing. Reaching the top of this facade, the larger brick piers terminate at a thick horizontal limestone slab. Due to the deep recessed reveal, this stone slab appears to float above the facade at the roofline, further emphasizing the horizontal design qualities of the building.

The north façade, which originally faced towards a narrow right-of-way and residential street, is equally impressive.



Cornell Store & Flats, 1908, Walter Burley Griffin, 1230-32 E. 75th Street. Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

Employing a similar articulation to the 75th Street facade, the massive vertical Roman brick piers extend from the base of the building upward to another floating limestone slab platform. Griffin adds visual interest by way of a staircase hidden behind a wall of Roman brick that leads up to an arched entrance. This opening once guided residents into an open-air courtyard on the second floor which featured a glass block floor through which natural light flooded the retail space below. Four apartment units encircle and open onto the courtyard, creating a communal space for tenants while also maximizing sunlight and fresh air circulation. This courtyard offered a secluded outdoor space in the midst of a busy commercial and industrial environment.

After the construction of Cornell Store & Flats, Griffin rarely returned to commercial designs, especially those with residential spaces attached. In 1912, Griffin won an international competition in which he was selected to design the layout of the new capital city of Canberra, Australia. Later, Griffin and his wife, Marion Mahony Griffin—an accomplished architect in her own right and a former employee of Wright as well—would go on to complete numerous designs in India where Griffin would eventually pass away in 1937 at the age of 60. Still, elements of the Cornell Store & Flats appear in some of Griffin's later work, most notably at the Langi Flats in Melbourne. The Cornell Store & Flats even bears more than a passing resemblance to Wright's City National Bank building in Mason City, Iowa, which was completed roughly a year and a half after Griffin's building was completed. This further suggests that the Cornell Store & Flats' architectural significance is one of truly great importance.

In recent decades, the building has deteriorated rapidly due to neglect and exposure to the elements. While much of the exterior masonry is in good condition, the same cannot be said of the Cornell Store & Flats' interiors. The structural integrity of the ceilings and floorboards is greatly compromised with sagging and buckling evident throughout. However, recent visits to the building indicate that other later modifications can be successfully reversed, including changes to the storefront windows fronting East 75th Street and those made to the upper courtyard.

THREAT

Due to deferred maintenance and disinvestment in the neighborhoods of Greater Grand Crossing and South Shore, the Cornell Store & Flats remains in as precarious a position as it did when it was first listed as a 2017



Cornell Store & Flats, 1908, Walter Burley Griffin, 1230-32 E. 75th Street © Eric Allix Rogers

Preservation Chicago 7 Most Endangered. As each winter passes, additional decay erodes the building. Of additional concern is the fact that the site is largely unsecured: unlocked front gates allow access to a rear entrance where the absence of a door allows unrestricted entry. This leaves the Cornell Store & Flats vulnerable to occurrences of vandalism or destruction. The building has been in demolition court once already—a second time may further jeopardize the future of the Cornell Store & Flats.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago enthusiastically supports the designation of the Cornell Store & Flats as a Designated Chicago Landmark. Numerous Griffin-designed buildings have already been landmarked including multiple houses in the Walter Burley Griffin Place District within the Beverly community. Landmarking the Cornell Store & Flats would be another logical testament to Griffin's place in Chicago's architectural legacy.

It is additionally crucial to the survival of the Cornell Store & Flats that its current owners, South Shore Management LLC, make progress towards renovation or transfer the property to an owner with clear plans for restoration.

Returning the site to a residential and retail mixed-use purpose, for example, would serve the local neighborhood and honor the legacy of the Cornell Store & Flats' original design. As an additional incentive, because the site is adjacent to the 75th Street/Grand Crossing Metra station, a transit-oriented development here could secure additional state or federal funding. The building should also be explored for potential as a transit hub and train station for both the Metra Electric and South Shore train lines, and perhaps a bus line, serving both Chicago and nearby suburbs.

Preservation Chicago is confident that there are multiple opportunities for a redevelopment project that will ensure the retention and reuse of the Cornell Store & Flats while also investing in the communities of Greater Grand Crossing and South Shore.