

Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District

Peterson Avenue between Pulaski Road and Oakley Avenue



Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, Peterson Corporate Center, 3525 W. Peterson Ave. Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago

OVERVIEW

The Peterson Avenue has one of the finest neighborhood commercial collections of Midcentury Modern architecture in the City of Chicago. The Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District extends over approximately a two-mile distance that stretches from North Park to West Ridge. It consists mostly of low-rise structures that today house dentist and doctor offices, dry cleaners, schools, and even a fire station.

Peterson Avenue's Midcentury buildings were developed over the course of about three decades, with construction spanning from the late 1940s to 1970. Until the start of this period, Peterson

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Address: Peterson Avenue between Pulaski Road and Oakley Avenue and adjacent commercial streets

Architect: Various architects

Date: c.1950 to c.1970

Style: Midcentury Modern

Neighborhood: West Ridge



Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, 3535 W. Peterson and Peterson Corporate Center, 3525 W. Peterson . Photo Credit: Adam Natenshon

Avenue was largely undeveloped, consisting of service stations, billboards, the occasional 1920s storefront or apartment building, along with empty fields. However, that changed with the post-World War II construction boom that spurred a surge of development across Chicago's North and Northwest Sides. During and after this period, Peterson Avenue's sustained growth reflected a very sophisticated modernism and positioned the district as a gleaming, contemporary destination for Chicago's Northwest Side businesses.

While Peterson Avenue was not a formally planned development, many of the buildings lining the corridor were erected by a handful of developers and builders, many of whom also had their offices nearby. As they grew Peterson Avenue from miles of empty lots to one of the most sought-after neighborhood commercial districts in Chicago, the developers recruited a mix of architects, both well- and lesser-known, to further enhance the commercial offerings in the community. Some of the more recognizable names that designed structures on Peterson Avenue during this period are A. Epstein & Sons, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Perkins & Will, Paul Gerhardt, Jr., and Henry L. Newhouse II (son of prolific Chicago architect Henry L. Newhouse).

Today, Peterson Avenue's Midcentury Modernist buildings are threatened by a host of issues and threats stemming from neglect, unsympathetic alterations, abandonment, and demolition. Many significant designs have been razed, with one recent example being The Sapphire Building at 2800 W. Peterson Avenue, despite calls by Preservation Chicago to adaptively reuse the structure. The Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District is also not protected by Chicago Landmark status, nor are any of its structures listed in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey. As a result,

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Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, Huebner & Henneberg, 2440 W. Peterson Ave. Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago

Peterson Avenue's history relating to Chicago's commercial expansion on the Northwest Side in the middle of the 20th century and the significant architectural movement it represents, are in danger of potentially being lost.

HISTORY

Peterson Avenue has been a major North Side arterial street for 150 years. It was named after Swedish immigrant Pehr S. Peterson, whose greenhouse and plant nursery near Rosehill Cemetery supplied the city with new trees after the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. In addition, Peterson's plant nursery supplied nearly every tree planted for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The street was said to be laid out by Peterson himself to help transport trees from his nursery to sites across the city and as a result, greenhouses proliferated in the area around Peterson Avenue. For decades the street was largely undeveloped and used mostly as a means of transportation of goods to and from the city. This remained evident on Peterson Avenue up until the 1940s, when postwar Chicago, much like the rest of the United States, underwent an economic and real estate boom. That same economic boom helped to transform Peterson Avenue into one of the most desirable neighborhood commercial districts in the city.

Modernist architecture had already enjoyed a long history in Europe, the United States, and beyond by the time Peterson Avenue's development came to fruition. However, as the 1940s and 1950s arrived, Modernism started to drastically change American commercial districts and main streets. Existing storefronts were updated and new buildings were fitted with what are today common signifiers of Midcentury Modernism: angled storefronts, neon and aluminum signage, perforated screens, decorative canopies, and a mix of stone and terrazzo. As well, folded-plate, butterfly, and even A-frame rooflines were common sights in the era of Midcentury Modernism. This new contemporary style emphasized an American rebirth: modernity, sophistication, and the future promised by the Jet Age and rapidly emerging technologies.



Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, 3414 W. Peterson Avenue. Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago

The first signs of this new era for Peterson Avenue appeared in the late 1940s as a handful of new construction leaned heavily on Modernism as a building style. These structures are representative of their time and incorporate the pared-back and more modest trademarks of the Art Moderne and International Style movements that were so well-received throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Structures like 2522 W. Peterson (1948), designed by S.H. Morris, and 2655 W. Peterson (1949), designed by Henry L. Newhouse II, are some of Peterson Avenue's earliest Midcentury structures and represent the earliest days of the street's development.

Within a few years, Peterson Avenue's development increased considerably, largely driven by an influx of new residents as well as the 1951 completion of the nearby Edens Expressway. Developers Berkson & Sons oversaw much of this growth, even establishing an office in the aforementioned 2655 W. Peterson. During this first full post-war decade of the 1950s, Peterson Avenue's development and architecture began a transformation into more of a Midcentury vocabulary and design, with buildings resembling Miesian glass boxes and modern California-style post-and-beam homes.

Some of the district's most notable building designs from that decade are the street's most eye-catching. The 3333 Medical Building at 3333 W. Peterson (1956) was designed by A. Epstein & Sons, one of Chicago's most accomplished and prolific design firms. From the street, the building's beautiful stonework, gently sloped roofline, and clerestory windows still stun today, nearly 70 years after its completion. The ranch-style office structure at 3535 W. Peterson (1954) is arguably the most California-inspired building in this district. Notable for its side-gabled roofline which angles itself slightly below the front door, making for an intimately-scaled and shaded entrance. The modest office was designed by Morton Z. Levine for Harris Construction. Harris Construction was also one of many housing developers that set up shop on Peterson Avenue and, as a clever advertising device, as their office greatly resembled the ranch-style homes they built in Chicago's Northwest suburbs.

The 1960s saw development along Peterson Avenue advance at its most rapid pace, filling in almost all of the street's remaining empty parcels. This period is marked by a move towards more daring design elements and materials, experimenting further with new forms and challenging the vocabulary and recognized qualities of Modernism's straight lines and rigid massing. While the dining room and iconic hot dog signage at Wolfy's (1967) incorporated the angled roofline and shimmering neon of a roadside restaurant building, the Furst & Furst Building (c. 1963) at 2300 W. Peterson by A. Epstein & Sons intrigued passersby with an angled stone-clad sawtooth front

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Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, 3550 W. Peterson Avenue. Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago

wall and a cylindrical, all-glass foyer. Elsewhere, 3414 W. Peterson (c. 1967) plays with a decorative folded-plate roof that allows triangles of light into its interior hallway while 2440 W. Peterson (c. 1964) sports a softly undulating canopy that adds a sense of Space Age futurism to a modest glass and brick office complex.

Mid-rise office towers also came to Peterson Avenue in the 1960s. While many of them employed simple glass skins, developers Schurecht Inc. opted for something more distinct at 3525 W. Peterson which flaunts large, cantilevered floor plates that evoke a mix of Prairie School and Japanese elements. On the building's streetfront is a sunken garden over which visitors cross a suspended walkway to enter the building's lovely interior halls. The office tower at 2320 W. Peterson (1967) is another relic of this mid-rise period. Interestingly, the tower's original renderings indicate it was intended to be encased inside a giant honeycomb screen, further illustrating the fanciful and unique designs that were commonplace on Peterson Avenue during this time.

The pristine offices of Peterson Avenue were advertised heavily, positioned as valuable real estate in a prestigious new district. Chicago businesses took notice and opened additional offices along Peterson Avenue or relocated their operations altogether. Some of these names are recognizable today with companies like McDonald's, Dunkin Donuts, and Walgreens, all having a presence in the district at one time. Arthur Rubloff, arguably Chicago's most famous 20th century real estate figure and the man credited with helping to develop Chicago's Magnificent Mile and Carl Sandburg Village, recognized the potential of Peterson Avenue, establishing offices in The Sapphire Building (1966) at 2800 W. Peterson. Other major Chicago companies commissioned all-new campuses for their relocation to Peterson Avenue. Commerce Clearing House, Inc., a leading tax guide publisher founded in 1892, hired Skidmore, Owings and Merrill to build the largest development in the district at the corner of Peterson and Pulaski in 1956. The Modernist structure was unfortunately demolished in 2018 to make way for a People's Gas office complex with a smaller footprint and large parking lot.

The success of Peterson Avenue's Midcentury Modern design was not just confined to Peterson Avenue, but also extended to adjacent commercial corridors along California and Lincoln Avenues. Congregation Mishne Ugnovo Synagogue (1954) at 6045 N. California, designed by firm Greenberg & Finfer, is one of the many fine examples of



Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, 5940 N. Lincoln Avenue. Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago

Modernism in the vicinity: a pair of handsome brick and glass structures linked by a low vestibule and streetfront canopy. Lincoln Avenue between Peterson and California also boasts a robust array of Midcentury Modern architecture, in addition to the many examples found on Peterson. Other notable examples include: the former Villa Motel (c. 1957) at 5952 N. Lincoln, which has retained its slight butterfly roofline and sawtooth windows; the concave glass facade of 5850 N. Lincoln (c. 1961) which showcases a two-story foyer and a vibrant polychromatic mosaic of a construction scene. Also included in this grouping is Mather High School (1959) at 5835 N. Lincoln, designed by Loeb, Schlossman and Bennett. Mather is one of a dozen new Chicago schools constructed to accommodate the youth of the postwar baby boom era.

THREAT

The Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District is today threatened by a number of issues, all of which are eroding the architectural character of this historic streetscape. Peterson Avenue is suffering from a number of vacancies which leaves these significant buildings neglected and vulnerable to vandalism or weather damage. Two of Peterson Avenue's most architecturally significant buildings, 2300 (1963) and 2606 W. Peterson (1958), both appear to be currently vacant. These two structures exhibit considerable signs of damage that will likely continue to



Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, 3455 W. Peterson Avenue. Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago



Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, 2722 W. Peterson Avenue. Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago

increase, until action is taken by the current or new owners to mitigate this decay. Prolonged vacancies also leave Peterson Avenue's buildings at risk of prolonged exposure to poor weather conditions, where a lack of heating and maintenance results in burst pipes and water damage. This is evident by a recent occurrence in which water was seen leaking from multiple floors of the vacant building at 2320 W. Peterson (1967).

Heavy alterations have also continued to shape the appearance of the Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, drastically remodeling the buildings from their original architectural design intent and chipping away at the district's cohesion. One of the most prominent examples of this erosion is The Office Center at 2534-2544 W. Peterson (c. 1956), a remarkable fusion of Miesian Modernism with the elegance of the Hollywood Regency style complete with a towering obelisk. The building once offered luxury office space inside of a polished stone and glass facade. Today, the building is nearly unrecognizable, with much of its original materials removed or replaced. Likewise, the courtyard office building at 3300 W. Peterson (1960) has lost its original sawtooth canopy which was the structure's most prominent feature. Throughout the district, the loss of original facade material, alterations to rooflines, as well as the loss of light fixtures, signage, and landscaping, along with their replacement with contemporary, unsympathetic substitutions, lessens the visual power of the Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District.

Demolition has also been an ever-present danger to the Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District. Many of the district's most impressive designs have been lost over time, some as recently as last year. The demolition of the Newhouse-designed Sapphire Building (1966) at the corner of Peterson and California Avenues, has been the most high-profile demolition in recent years. The Perkins & Will-designed Peterson Bank at 3232 W. Peterson is possibly the biggest loss, as it was a beautiful brick structure that exemplified the evolving look of Modernism at the start of the 1970s. The building was demolished in the 2000s and today the land is a parking lot. The dual demolitions in 2019 of 2900 W. Peterson (1949), designed by Henry L. Newhouse, and 2906-10 W. Peterson (1956) eliminated one of the district's few fully intact Midcentury streetwalls, replacing them with one-story offices of similar or lesser square footage. As buildings in the Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District continue to remain unattended, partially vacant, and unrecognizable, demolition will become an even more pressing threat in the future.



Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, The Sapphire Building / Business House, 1960, Henry L. Newhouse II, 2800 W. Peterson Avenue. Demolished May 2022. Photo Credit: Google Maps

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago enthusiastically endorses the creation of a Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern Landmark District. By establishing an all-encompassing district that honors and protects these significant structures, we can prevent unchecked demolition from further harming and erasing the district's continuity and cohesion. A Chicago Landmark designation could also ignite widespread interest in the district, helping to revitalize and find new tenants for these endangered or abandoned structures. Furthermore, Landmark status could allow for property owners to apply for Adopt-A-Landmark funds which would aid in the necessary restoration and maintenance of these structures, many of which are 60 to 70 years old.

In some instances, a Chicago Landmark designation should be potentially considered for building interiors in the district. Offices like the Holistan Building (c. 1964) at 2545 W. Peterson, the Cardamil Building (1960) at 2600 W. Peterson, and the Furst & Furst Building (c. 1963) at 2300 W. Peterson all feature intact lobbies, with floating staircases, terrazzo floors, and interior courtyards that are representative of the elegant amenities used to entice businesses to Peterson Avenue from across Chicago. These semi-public and accessible spaces symbolize Peterson Avenue's Midcentury allure and should be strongly considered in any future landmarking efforts. Preservation Chicago also believes that the Midcentury Modern structures found along California Avenue from Peterson to Glenlake as well as Lincoln Avenue between Peterson and California are very much an integral part of the district. These areas demonstrate how widespread Modernism came to be in the area's development during the 1950s and 1960s.

Cities across the United States are celebrating their Midcentury architectural heritage through the creation of landmark districts. The Miami area boasts two separate Midcentury Modern historic districts: the Morris Lapidus/Mid-20th Century Historic District in Miami Beach and the MiMo Biscayne Historic District in Miami. Both districts honor the impact that Midcentury Modernism had on their respective areas' development, acknowledging them as important historic resources meant to be celebrated and understood. Elsewhere, areas like Las Vegas's Beverly Green Historic District and New Jersey's Wildwood Shores Resort Historic District, along with dozens of landmarked buildings in Palm Springs, are all testaments to the long-lasting legacy of Midcentury Modern architecture in America. The Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District is an essential part of this legacy and deserves to be recognized with the same enthusiasm seen in other American cities.

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Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, 3333 W. Peterson Avenue. Photo Credit: Epstein Architects

However, a pervasive unawareness of Midcentury Modernism's status as a historic architectural movement continues to threaten the existence of buildings from this era. Midcentury Modernism's effect on the built environment stretched from the vistas of the Hollywood Hills to small town American main streets cannot be overstated. Yet, there remains a belief that it is too recent and lacks the ornate signifiers of other more easily recognizable and popular historical styles.

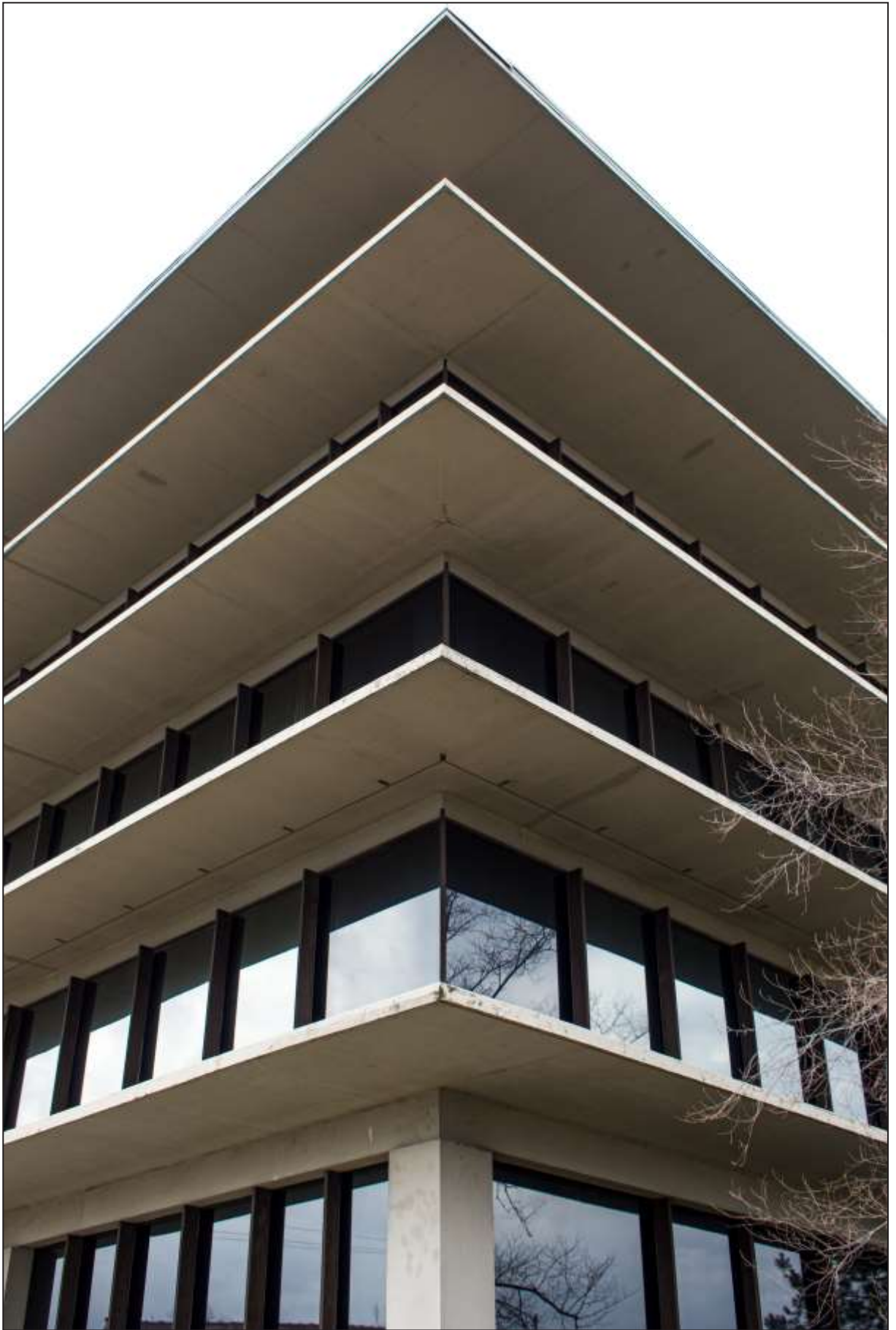
One way to address this issue in Chicago is to update the Chicago Historic Resources Survey (CHRS) used as a guide by the city to classify buildings by historic importance or significance. There are many issues with the Chicago Historic Resources Survey, one of the most significant being that at the time of its completion and publication in 1996, the survey only covered Chicago's built environment up to 1940. Today, 25 years later, the Chicago Historic Resources Survey has never been revised and publicly updated, suggesting that over 80 years of Chicago's architectural history is deemed potentially unprotected and potentially not of historic value or consideration. Such assumptions would also include every building in the Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District.

By updating the Chicago Historic Resources Survey, the City of Chicago can consider granting decades worth of Chicago buildings the ability to be potentially placed on a 90-Day Demolition Hold in response to a demolition request. This would also recognize and acknowledge that Chicago's architecture during the second half of the 20th century can be as important as well.

Chicago's accomplishments in Modernism, Postmodernism, New Formalism, and Brutalism are celebrated worldwide, yet in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey, these accomplishments remain unacknowledged. In an effort to update this survey, the guide by which historic buildings in Chicago are often judged, will permanently establish these significant sites and buildings. Peterson Avenue's wealth of Midcentury Modernism, are important and like many of the other buildings in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey, that they are also worthy of preservation.



Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, Huebner & Henneberg, 2606 W. Peterson Avenue. Photo Credit: Max Chavez



Peterson Avenue Midcentury Modern District, Peterson Corporate Center, 3525 W. Peterson Avenue. Photo Credit: Max Chavez