

Taft Hall at University of Illinois Chicago

826 S. Halsted Street, Chicago



Taft Hall at the University of Illinois Chicago, 1965, Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), 826 S. Halsted Street. Photo credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago

OVERVIEW

The campus of the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) was designed by acclaimed architect Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM). Executed in concrete and brick, the UIC campus is the largest collection of Brutalist architecture in the city of Chicago and is considered one of the crowning achievements of Netsch's long career.

Named after famous Chicago sculptor Lorado Taft, Taft Hall lies near the center of the UIC campus and is one of the “ripples” radiating outward from the “stone dropped in a pond of water”—a metaphor Netsch often employed to describe the campus' design.

Taft Hall is a simple but powerful three-story building notably defined by the fenestration of its upper two floors: rhythmic bands of pointed concrete grilles between which light passes into

Taft Hall at the University of Illinois Chicago

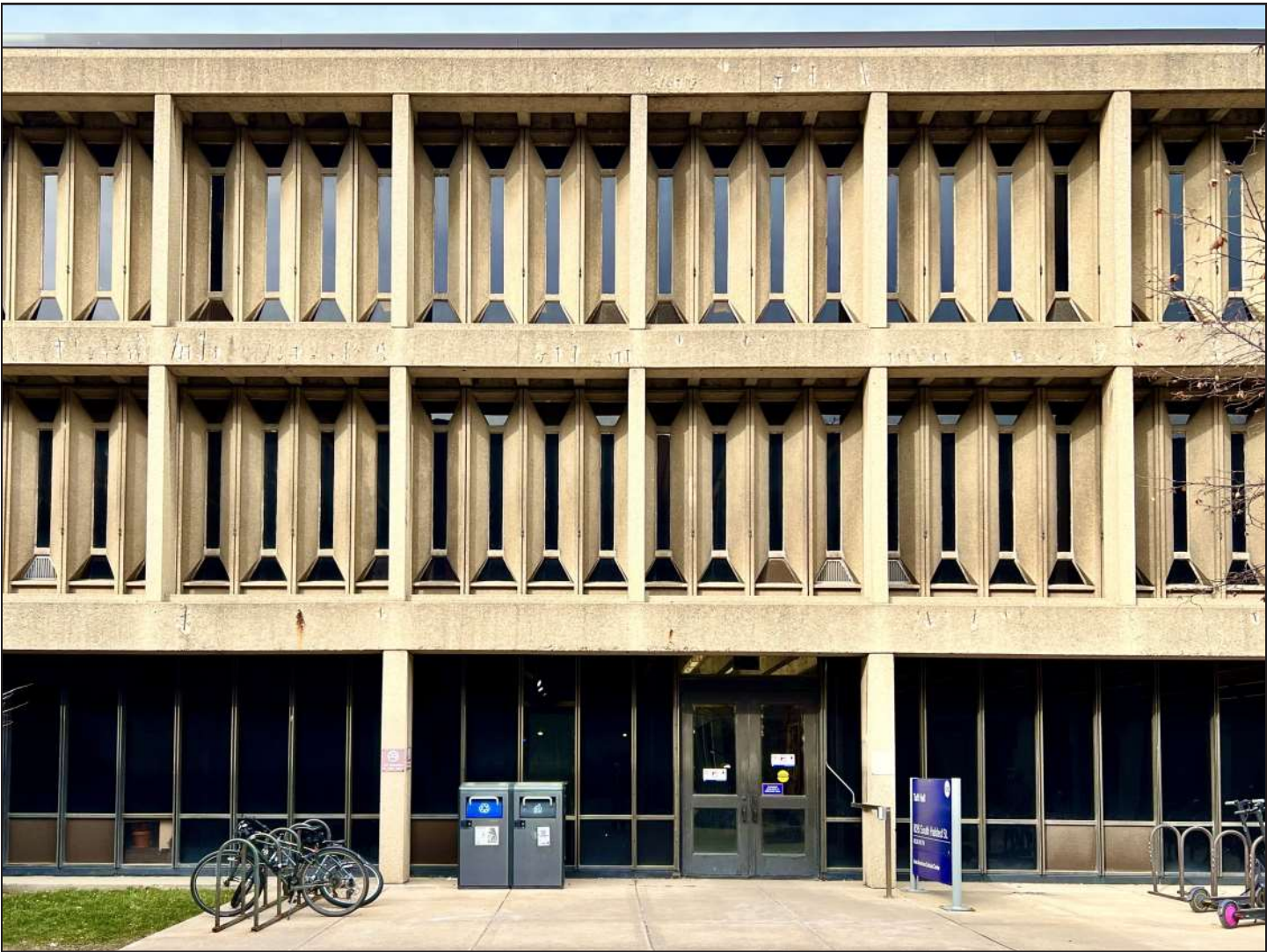
Address: **826 S. Halsted Street**

Architect: **Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM)**

Date: **1965**

Style: **Brutalist**

Neighborhood: **Near West Side**



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the hall's interior spaces. Taft Hall is one of three, nearly identical halls named in honor of Jane Addams, Daniel Burnham, and Lorado Taft. Each of these buildings are linked by second-floor enclosed bridges. As one-third of this cluster, Taft Hall is an essential building block of the UIC campus and is an integral part of Netsch's layout whose design was guided by his revolutionary "field theory" approach.

In October 2022, the University of Illinois announced plans to renovate the Taft Hall, including a complete demolition of its historic façade. While Taft Hall, along with the adjacent Addams and Burnham Halls, are undeniably in need of restoration, the removal and replacement of the structure's concrete cladding would be an unfortunate decision that would accelerate the erosion of Netsch's iconic campus design.

UIC's second similar cluster of three-story halls—Douglas, Grant, and Lincoln Halls—were renovated and reclad in non-distinct glass between 2009 and 2011. Stripped of their innovative historic architectural façades, these remodels provide a likely direction for Taft Hall's renovation. The architecture of this renovated grouping is at odds with Netsch's innovative architectural vision.

Preservation Chicago urges the University of Illinois Chicago to consider Taft Hall's place within the larger Brutalist campus and to achieve their goals of energy efficiency and modernization while also maintaining the building's relationship to its surrounding environment. We request UIC to recognize and appreciate their one-of-a-kind architectural heritage during Taft Hall's renovation, allowing Netsch's vision to remain for generations to come.



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HISTORY

The University of Illinois Chicago traces its history to the 1859 founding of the Chicago College of Pharmacy. The institution, which predated the Civil War, is the oldest arm of the University of Illinois system and was followed later by the establishment of the College of Physicians and Surgeons along with the Columbian College of Dentistry. These three colleges were consolidated in 1913 under the University of Illinois umbrella as the Colleges of Medicine, Dentistry and Pharmacy, eventually leading decades later to the establishment the University of Illinois at the Medical Center and the Illinois Medical District (IMD). In the postwar years, the University of Illinois created a second Chicago campus at Navy Pier that provided a two-year education to veterans on the G.I. Bill who could then transfer to Urbana-Champaign to complete their degrees.

By the 1950s, there remained a high demand for a public university in the city of Chicago, prompting the creation of a 1953 drive to establish one central University of Illinois campus within city limits. The city of Chicago, at the behest of then-Mayor Richard J. Daley, became involved with the land acquisition process and in 1961, a large parcel southwest of the intersection of South Halsted and West Harrison Streets was selected as the future home of



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the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle Campus (UICC). This decision immediately sparked a firestorm of controversy and protest by residents of the targeted area whose homes and businesses were now slated for demolition.

The area, home to longstanding immigrant communities including the Little Italy neighborhood, had already been designated an urban renewal area, making its razing by the city that much easier to undertake. Marches and sit-ins over the next two years, many of them led by local leader and longtime resident Florence Scala, demonstrated the community's resistance to the destruction of their neighborhood. The dispute eventually arrived at the Supreme Court in 1963, whereupon the community's appeal was declined and the neighborhood's demolition was allowed to move forward. In total, roughly 100 acres of land were cleared for the construction of Chicago Circle Campus.

As this controversy came to a conclusion, University of Illinois selected Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) to design this new campus with Walter Netsch as the project's lead. Born on the South Side in 1920, Netsch studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, graduating in 1943. Netsch served in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before eventually being hired by SOM in 1947. He first worked out of SOM's San Francisco office before returning to Chicago in 1951, where he became a partner at the firm.

Over the following decades, Netsch was responsible for a long list of acclaimed masterpieces of Modernism. In addition to the UIC campus, Netsch contributed to or designed: the Inland Steel Building (1954); Cadet Chapel at the U.S Air Force Academy (1962) in Colorado Springs, Colorado; Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago (1970); University Library at Northwestern University (1970); the Netsch House (1974) where he and his wife, Illinois state politician, Dawn Clark Netsch, lived until their respective deaths; and the Miami University Art



Taft Hall at the University of Illinois Chicago, 1965, Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), 826 S. Halsted Street. Photo credit: Jack Rocha

Museum (1979) in Oxford, Ohio. Netsch is now recognized as one of Chicago's most notable and important 20th century architects.

Completed over two phases between 1965 and 1968, the campus of the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) was designed by acclaimed architect Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. The campus as it exists today is the product of a long and complicated history that dates back as far as the 1850s, culminating in the 1960s construction of a brand-new complex near the corner of South Halsted and West Harrison Streets. Executed in concrete and brick, the UIC campus is the largest collection of Brutalist architecture anywhere in the city of Chicago and is considered one of the crowning achievements of Netsch's long career.

In designing the UIC campus, Netsch employed his trademark design process, a framework he termed "field theory." "We keep trying to find new ways to see things," Netsch said. "Our Field Theory is a process of looking at things differently." More of a behavioral science theory when Netsch's time at SOM began, field theory was adapted by Netsch into a method to plan new developments from the ground up. While field theory is a complicated and dense practice, it is best understood as the process of rotating geometric shapes, often at 45-degree angles, to inform a site's design, including walls, furniture, and fenestration. Often, field theory made use of a simple square as its basic building block. "The rotated square was the way we broke the box," Netsch once said of the approach.

The UIC campus is one of the largest manifestations of Netsch's field theory. While it was employed in the overall planning of the site, field theory also guided the design of the campus' individual buildings. In many cases at UIC, the implementation of field theory resulted in striking building elevations that resemble complicated fractals.



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Complex structures like the Science and Engineering South, Behavioral Sciences, and Arts and Architecture Buildings are some of the clearest examples of how field theory “broke the box” and forged a new path in architectural design.

Netsch often compared the campus to a “stone dropped in a pond of water,” an image conveyed best by aerial views of UIC in its earliest form. Netsch laid out the campus as a series of rings defined by their functions. At its center was The Circle Forum, a grand outdoor amphitheater located atop a series of interconnecting arcades that served as the campus’ central hub (now demolished). This amphitheater connected to the next ring of the campus: the Lecture Center, a collection of six buildings containing classrooms and other student spaces. On either side of this, constituting the next ring, lay two clusters of three connected buildings each— Douglas, Grant, and Lincoln Halls to the north and Addams, Burnham, and Taft Halls to the south. Beyond, other outlying halls and laboratories throughout the rest of the campus completed Netsch’s design and met the many needs of UIC’s faculty and student body.

The design of Taft Hall, as well as that of the other nearly identical halls that make up the two clusters near the campus’ center, consists of a concrete frame made up of horizontal bands supporting vertical piers. Recessed behind and between these piers on the second and third floors are angular concrete forms that together form a set of grilles, the building’s defining architectural feature. The negative spaces between these grilles are inset with glass, forming a rhythmic fenestration pattern that creates a powerful visual effect inside the hall’s upper-floor classrooms.

The window grille design is replicated repeatedly throughout the UIC campus. Low-rise structures like Stevenson and Jefferson Halls employ the frame and grilles seen on Taft Hall. UIC’s tallest towers, University Hall and the



Taft Hall at the University of Illinois Chicago, 1965, Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), 826 S. Halsted Street. Photo credit: Serhii Chrucky

Science and Engineering Offices, also feature the grille design prominently on their many floors. Early in the design process, Netsch crafted logos for many of the campus' buildings. For the clusters that include Taft Hall, Netsch created a striking image: the halls' bird's-eye silhouettes overlaid on the window grille design, a symbol of how integral this motif was to these halls and the campus overall.

The first phase of the campus' construction was completed in 1965 with a second phase completed three years later in 1968. In the decades since, portions of Netsch's campus design have been lost. Most notably, the elevated walkways that linked the campus' many buildings deteriorated greatly due to water damage and deferred maintenance. They would eventually become safety hazards and were demolished in the 1990s, along with the grand amphitheater located above the elevated walkways. As recently as the late 2000s, the northern cluster of halls—Douglas, Grant, and Lincoln Halls—underwent a large renovation that stripped these buildings of their concrete frame and grilles, replacing them with glass cladding. UIC states that throughout this renovation, “a special effort was made to keep the symbolic architecture of Walter Netsch visible while simultaneously updating the building to provide a bright and better learning environment for the students.” Per the university, “Netsch's style can still be seen in the vertical emphasis on the geometry of the building, incorporated by the long slim windows.”

Despite the alterations that have been made to the architecture of UIC, much of Netsch's original architecture remains. As is, the campus of UIC is still the largest and most cohesive collection of Brutalism—an endangered style facing an increased number of demolition threats—to be found anywhere in the city of Chicago.



Taft Hall at the University of Illinois Chicago, 1965, Walter Netsch of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), 826 S. Halsted Street. Photo credit: Serhii Chrucky

THREAT

In October 2022, the University of Illinois published a request for a Professional Services Consultant to “lead the design of the renovation of approximately 27,000 GSF of space on the first, second and third floors of Taft Hall,” a project that would also seek to “completely remove and replace the exterior wall cladding systems.” This renovation aims to also achieve “net-zero energy and water consumption” and provide “an energizing and more welcoming environment both within and outside the classrooms.” While no renderings or plans have yet been made public, Preservation Chicago is concerned that this project will irreversibly alter Taft Hall’s historic Brutalist design and set into motion similar renovations of Addams and Burnham Halls, as well as other campus structures.

The recladding of Douglas, Grant, and Lincoln Halls between 2009 and 2011 show how far-reaching the renovation of Taft Hall could be. Modernized with glass cladding, the renovated cluster bears no resemblance or relationship to Netsch’s campus. While UIC claims that this renovation still keeps “the symbolic architecture of Walter Netsch visible,” the choice of materials used directly contrasts with UIC’s concrete and brick. The power of the Netsch’s campus lies in its unity of materials and design. Later construction, such as the Student Residence and Commons buildings completed in the 1990s, are successful additions to the UIC campus because their massing and materials reference the cohesive master plan laid out by Netsch in the 1960s. While the need to update and renovate Taft Hall is understandable and even necessary, its modernization does not require the obliteration of its already existing construction materials.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago urges UIC to consider alternative approaches to the renovation of Taft Hall, ones that keep



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Netsch’s historic design intact while also attaining the energy, accessibility, and modernization goals set out in their request which we fully support. Insensitive piecemeal alterations carried out over long periods of time will result in the loss of UIC’s significant cohesive visual appearance. We ask UIC to consider their one-of-a-kind architectural heritage during Taft Hall’s renovation, ensuring Netsch’s vision remains for generations to come.

Preservation Chicago is sympathetic to UIC’s desire to modernize and update Taft Hall. Concrete spalling and water damage are seen throughout the building’s exterior elevation which we agree detract from an “energizing and more welcoming environment both within and outside the classrooms.” Furthermore, deferred maintenance in the building’s interior contributes to the clear need for updating. Disintegrating terrazzo, visible water damage, and broken lighting are visible in Taft Hall and show that work on the building is certainly required. However, we are confident that this can be achieved without the wholesale destruction of Netsch’s design. While the modernization of “HVAC, electrical, AV, and IT related infrastructure” is unavoidable in buildings with such heavy daily use, original durable materials like door hardware and terrazzo flooring can be restored to their original appearance.

Concrete, in particular, is one of the highest sources of embodied carbon with regards to construction materials. The removal and destruction—as opposed to the restoration and maintaining—of extant concrete on historic buildings like Taft Hall will only contribute detrimentally to the ongoing climate crisis. It is urgent that we find ways to wisely keep construction materials intact when and where preservation and conservation is possible. Both in the United States and internationally, the restoration of Brutalist architecture shows clearly that adaptive reuse is an attractive option to extend the life span of a building without destroying its historic character. Recent high-

profile renovations of Brutalist architecture, like Marcel Breuer's Pirelli Tire Building in New Haven, Connecticut (converted into a net-zero hotel) or Erno Goldfinger's Balfron Tower in London (adapted into sold-out luxury flats) demonstrate that the style has growing public appeal and that its preservation and reuse is more than feasible.

Brutalism—and Modernism as a whole—faces increased threats to its existence. As deferred maintenance contributes to the disintegration of Brutalist buildings that are at least fifty years old, we continue to see demolition as the prevailing answer to the question of Brutalism's future. As an architectural style, Brutalism is also considerably uncommon, having only enjoyed roughly two decades of prominence in the United States and being mostly restricted to public and civic spaces. The retention of Brutalist architecture is today one of the most pressing uses in the preservation of our built environment.

With Taft Hall, UIC has a powerful opportunity to show that they are a world-class university committed to forward-thinking policies by carrying out a climate-friendly restoration of Taft Hall and guaranteeing the preservation of one of Chicago's most significant sites of Brutalist architectural history.



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