

Chicago Vocational School (CVS)

2100 E. 87th Street, Chicago



Chicago Vocational School (CVS), 1941, John Christensen, 2100 E. 87th Street. Photo Credit: Lee Bey

OVERVIEW

Chicago Vocational School (today, Chicago Vocational Career Academy, or more commonly CVS, a Chicago public high school) is among the most notable examples of Art Deco/Art Moderne architecture in the city of Chicago. Outside of downtown skyscrapers, CVS is the largest building in this style in the city. Constructed between 1938 and 1941, Chicago Vocational High School was a result of generational demographic shifts and changes in urban educational philosophy. With federal financial support, it was intended as a South Side counterpart to the North Side's Albert G. Lane Technical College Preparatory High School completed in 1934.

Chicago Vocational School is a surviving early Public Works Administration-funded project in Chicago and was significant as a site of wartime training during

Chicago Vocational School (CVS) / Chicago Vocational Career Academy)

Address: 2100 E. 87th Street

Architect: John C. Christensen

Date: 1938-1941

Style: Art Deco/Art Moderne

Neighborhood: Avalon Park



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WWII. The school was once affectionately known as “The Pride of the South Side,” and a longtime institution in the Avalon Park neighborhood. Today its sheer size continues to impress, as the school’s four principal structures sit on a 22-acre parcel.

CVS is an active Chicago Public High School, with a renewed emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education and college preparedness. Enrollment, however, has dwindled. The school was originally designed to accommodate from 4,000 to 6,000 students, however as of 2023, the school had only approximately 800 enrollees. In 2022, CVS alumni operating under the banner of “Chicago Vocational H.S. Restoration Project” mounted a successful campaign to list the property on the National Register of Historic Places. That same group has made further appeals to designate Chicago Vocational School as a Chicago Landmark in the hopes that such a formal distinction could assist efforts to bolster both the school’s evolving curriculum and the physical campus itself.

HISTORY

At the turn of the twentieth century, Chicago’s public education supervisors increasingly recognized the promise of “technical” education. Like other progressive causes of the era, their aims were largely centered on the growing population of European immigrants arriving in the city after the 1920s. Many of these individuals originated from rural and agricultural regions of Europe, with little professional training or access to a classroom education. It was believed that vocational education would not only provide a pathway to steady employment and self-sufficiency for recent immigrants, but would also further the United States’ position as an industrial powerhouse in response to competition from Western Europe.

Chicago Vocational School is by no means Chicago’s first vocational school. Richard Crane Technical High School (1903), Lake High School (1905), and the original and subsequent Albert G. Lane Technical High School (1908 and

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1934) were among the earliest schools established in Chicago with the express purpose of providing technical education in the industrial arts and sciences. Others soon followed and by the 1920s, vocational education was a central feature of the Chicago Public School system.

Vocational education proved such a success that by the waning years of the Great Depression, demand for these programs was so great that additional schools on the South and West Sides of Chicago were built. Chicago Vocational School was funded in part by a series of grants from the Public Works Administration, the New Deal agency responsible for thousands of public works projects nationwide. Chicago Vocational School was surely the most ambitious of this later wave of public vocational schools. It remains the second largest public school in Chicago, behind Lane Tech on the North Side.

Construction on Chicago Vocational School began in 1938. Although the facility as it exists today was not fully completed until 1941, the year 1938 is carved in stone atop the school's primary entrance. The school's design consists of five interconnected buildings: the Main Administration Building sited along E. 87th Street; a Gymnasium and Auditorium which respectively flank the main building to the east and west; the Chappel Avenue Wing, sited north-south along Chappel Avenue and forming the western edge of the campus; the Anthony Avenue Wing, running northwest-southeast along Anthony Avenue, forming the eastern edge of campus; and a Dining Hall and Central Plant placed to the north of the Main Administration Building. A freestanding Vehicle Maintenance Garage and Aviation Hangar, both constructed in 1941, complete the campus.

The Main Administration Building, along with its Gym and Auditorium, is arguably the school's most striking and familiar view. Faced primarily in limestone and tan Pompeian brick, all principal elevations of the building feature vertical elements typical of Art Deco and New Deal-era federal architecture. A series of full-height fluted columns at the Gym and Auditorium's primary entrances, and near-full-height fluted pilasters, both framing and



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interrupting the three-story window bays that run throughout the principal facade form an Art Deco exterior.

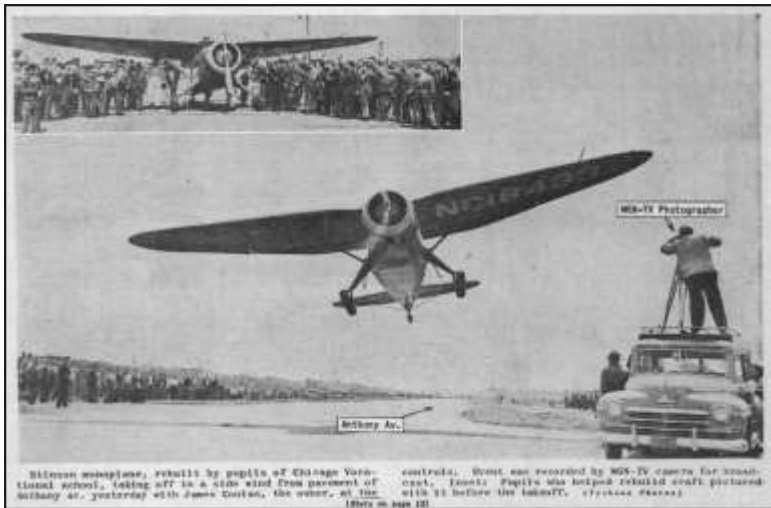
Rounded forms and beveled corners bring the structure more firmly into the Art Moderne. Along the 87th Street elevations are a series of notable bas-relief tablets, some serving as caps to the façade's pilasters, others inset within the entablature, each depicting various trades and industries which were to be the focus of education at CVS. These bas-relief insets are likewise typical aesthetic flourishes of the Public Works Administration and Works Progress Administration, often intended to lionize and celebrate the people and practices of everyday American life.

This design aesthetic is continued on the Auditorium's interior, via a series of unique carved wood panel murals depicting both iconic Chicago landmarks, such as the Chicago Board of Trade building, and industrial scenes similar to the bas-relief on the school's exterior. These particular murals were made possible by the Works Progress Administration Federal Arts Project, as were countless other such murals throughout Chicago. Most WPA murals, however, were completed in traditional oil and fresco paint. CVS's carved wood panels are undeniably rare. The artist is unfortunately unknown.

The two-story Chappel Avenue and Anthony Avenue Wings are more utilitarian in their design, but nonetheless help communicate the grandeur and imposing scale of the facility. A still extant, freestanding aircraft hangar, while slightly modified over the years, likewise speaks to Chicago Vocational School's varied history.

But for all the pomp and circumstance surrounding CVS's construction and eventual opening, it would be nearly six years before the curriculum commenced as intended. Owing to the United States' entry into World War II, CVS was

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Airplane hanger and Anthony Ave. airplane launch in 1948. Image credit: (clockwise from bottom left) 1969 CVS Yearbook "Technician", pg. 16; Chicago Daily Tribune, April 17, 1948, pg.40; 19650 CVS Yearbook "Technician", pg. 49, Historic photos, Michael Mims

handed over to the US Navy almost as soon as it was completed. From 1941 to 1945, the Navy wholly operated the campus, the only such arrangement at a Chicago school. The bulk of wartime training at CVS was devoted to aviation mechanics and repair, memorialized by the remaining aircraft hanger. The school was even temporarily renamed the Naval Training School for Mechanics, and had a symbiotic relationship of sorts with Navy Pier, Chicago's most regularly celebrated wartime training facility. Vehicles repaired and assembled at CVS would often be sent north to be used for practical training at Navy Pier.

Following the war, normal school activities began in earnest in 1946. Aviation mechanics remained a central component of CVS's curriculum and contributed to one of the school's most iconic moments. In April of 1948, students successfully reconstructed a 1930s era Stinson Reliant monoplane owned by local pilot James Coulas at CVS. At Coulas's request (and with permission from the city), Anthony Avenue was made a makeshift runway and Coulas took flight on his way to nearby Midway Airport. The moment was captured by the press and media.



Chicago Vocational School (CVS) Historic Exterior Photograph and Art Deco bas-relief sculpture. Photo credits: Michael Mims

Other primary areas of instruction included cabinet making, auto repair, sheet metal working, architectural drafting, printing, welding, and electrical work. These remained primary subjects at the school for the next thirty years. The postwar period also saw the introduction of male/female co-education and an increasingly diverse student body. Many programs were nonetheless still gender-coded. The majority of CVS female students pursued training in fields such as cosmology, millinery, dressmaking, secretarial work, cooking, and interior design. By 1964, the student body was approximately one-third female, and one-third African American, among the highest such numbers for any vocational school in Chicago. This was owed in no small part to the changing population of South Side Chicago. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Chicago hosted an influx of African American Southern families amid later waves of the Great Migration, people and families often in pursuit of both employment opportunities and freedom from the discriminatory practices of the Jim Crow South.

Vocational education was initially framed as a “progressive” success story, seen as providing a pathway to economic success. During the decades after WWII, this narrative was flipped on its head, with vocational education seen as furthering inequality in the city. Moreover, many neighboring African American families resented the Navy’s occupation of CVS just as it was opening, sought an equitable and high-quality education for their children. That demand in part led to the 1942 creation of Dunbar Trade School (now Dunbar Vocational Career Academy High School), further north in Bronzeville.

The promise of vocational education dramatically changed even more impactfully amid later decades of white flight, capital disinvestment, and a rapidly deindustrializing economy. Many of the economic opportunities that minority groups in America had recently gained access to through technical education and federal protections such

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*Chicago Vocational School (CVS) Anthony Avenue Wing (Top). Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago
Chicago Vocational School (CVS) Airplane Hanger (Bottom). Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago*



*Chicago Vocational School (CVS) Anthony Avenue Wing Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago
Chicago Vocational School (CVS) Aerial Photograph Anthony Avenue Wing (parallel to Chicago Skyway). Photo Credit: Serhii Chrukly / Esto*

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Chicago Vocational School (CVS), 1941, John Christensen, 2100 E. 87th Street. Photo Credit: Kaufmann & Fabry Co., Chicago Vocational School (CVS) Historic Exterior Photograph, East 87th Street and South Anthony Avenue, Circa 1950, Folder 201, Sheet 11, Photographic Images of Change, University of Illinois at Chicago. Library. Special Collections Department

as the 1964 Civil Rights Act were now vanishing due to rapid technological advances which reduced the numbers of industrial jobs and by corporate relocations to the Southern US and Global South.

Despite a tangible need for skilled trade workers in the twenty-first century, CVS and its fellow technical schools have struggled to adapt to the realities of a post-industrial economy. By the late twentieth century, the very same liberal arts secondary education that was perceived as elitist and irrelevant to an emergent industrial workforce at the beginning of the century, was essentially a requirement of entry into the modern economy. Today, CVS still emphasizes technical training, but with a renewed focus on STEM education and more traditional college preparatory courses. Despite these updates to the curriculum, recent alumni mourn what they perceive as the decline of a once great Chicago Public School. Their passion and appreciation for their alma mater encouraged them to pursue both National Register listing and formal recognition as a Chicago Landmark, optimistic that the school can once again be a beacon of opportunity and lifelong preparedness.

THREAT

As noted, enrollment is a fraction of what it once was and the school is currently serving approximately a tenth of its intended capacity. Not surprisingly low-enrollment has resulted in deferred building maintenance throughout the school's multiple sections. The Anthony Avenue Wing was briefly targeted for demolition as a cost-saving measure, however, a lack of necessary funding for the demolition prevented that outcome. The Chicago Public School system as a whole is perennially challenged by emerging resource needs, teacher shortages, and budget shortfalls. At CVS, these issues are compounded by the ongoing and delicate maintenance needs of a massive 1930s era structure.



Chicago Vocational School (CVS), 1941, John Christensen, 2100 E. 87th Street. Photo Credit: Kaufmann & Fabry Co., Chicago Vocational School (CVS) Historic Exterior Photograph, East 87th Street and South Anthony Avenue, Circa 1950, Folder 201, Sheet 5, Photographic Images of Change, University of Illinois at Chicago. Library. Special Collections Department

The school remains open and there are no apparent plans to close and/or downsize the facility. However, CVS clearly needs an infusion of funds to address both deferred maintenance and, as alumni contend, modernization of the curriculum for a twenty-first century workforce.

RECOMMENDATIONS

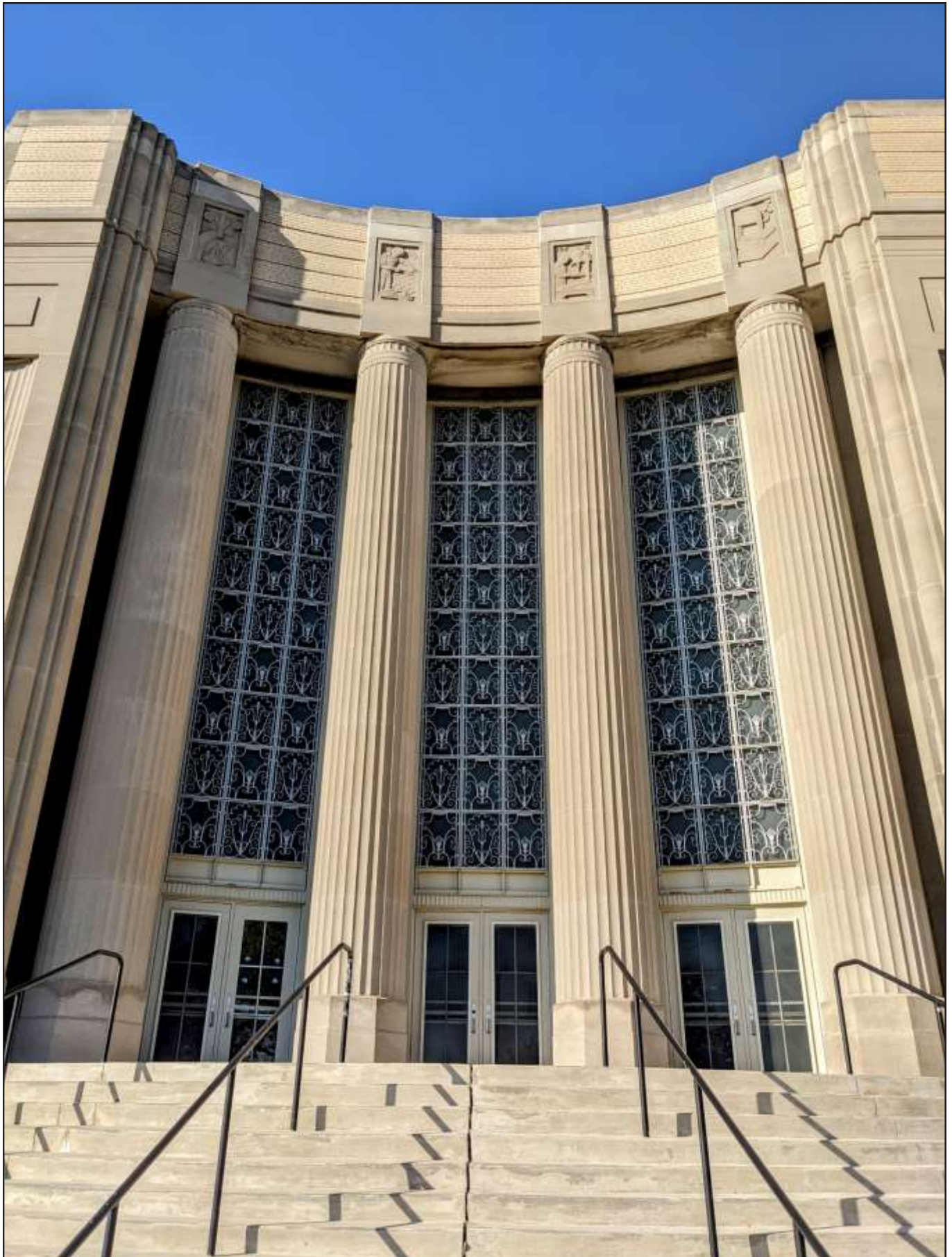
Chicago Landmarking is a start. It would potentially open the school to City of Chicago Adopt-a-Landmark funds and provide the school with a much-needed financial boost. The property is National Register listed, but as a municipally owned and operated public school, it is not a candidate for Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits more typically reserved for privately led, commercial projects. National Register listing makes the structure potentially eligible for grant support via the National Park Service and/or Illinois State Historic Preservation Office, though these funds are typically modest in scope and would only cover small, discrete projects. Regrettably, there is no modern-day equivalent of the Public Works Administration. Ultimately, the school needs a bold investment of public dollars, either local, state, or federal, to be made whole again.

In the sad—and avoidable—event that the school ever closes, it will at least be well situated for private reuse, and a number of creative approaches could be pursued to utilize its unique array of interior spaces. A recent example of creative reuse is Philadelphia’s Edward W. Bok Technical High School, another immense Public Works Administration-funded public vocational school closed amid much controversy in 2013. The building has since been successfully converted into a combination of events space, food and service providers, office suites, artist studios and retail, with an emphasis on local craftsman and makers. Projects like this offer just one possible template for CVS, should it be closed. Reactivating the trade school at CVS would prepare the next generation of Chicago’s skilled tradespersons and engineers.

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*CVS Historic Interior Lobby. Image credit: UIC Chicago Collections; Ethyl News Cover, June 1943. Image credit: Ethyl News
Chicago Vocational School (CVS), 1941, John Christensen, 2100 E. 87th Street. Photo Credit: Max Chavez / Preservation Chicago*



Chicago Vocational School (CVS), 1941, John Christensen, 2100 E. 87th Street. Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers