

Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building

2000 W. Pershing Road, Chicago



Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building, 1917, Samuel Scott Joy, 2000 W. Pershing Road. Photo credit: Serhii Chrucky / Esto

OVERVIEW

The Central Manufacturing District (CMD) Clock Tower Building, located at 2000 W. Pershing Road, is a prominent structure at the center of the CMD Pershing Road Development. The tall, slender, 11-story red-brick masonry and terracotta-clad structure, the tallest in the CMD development, is symmetrical on all elevations, with large windows punctuating the masonry of the tower and four elaborate clocks crowning its upper most floors. Designed by architect Samuel Scott Joy, who was also responsible for many of the other massive buildings in the CMD, the building functioned as a water tower while concealing a large water tank which provided a

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Address: **2000 W. Pershing Road**

Architects: **Samuel Scott Joy**

Date: **1917**

Neighborhood: **McKinley Park**

Style: **Late Gothic Revival/Industrial Gothic**



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centralized fire suppression system for the entire CMD complex. The water tank with its water suppression system, cleverly hidden within this large timepiece, continues to serve as a striking visual feature and landmark for both the CMD and the McKinley Park Community.

Preservation Chicago has previously listed the historic CMD as part of our Chicago 7 Most Endangered List, noting the deteriorating conditions and vacancy of several of these massive and beautifully crafted structures. The CMD Pershing Road Development was included on our 2014 and 2020 lists, and the CMD Original East District was included on our 2021 list. Both the historic CMD Original East District and the CMD Pershing Road Development are historic districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The Clock Tower Building is a contributing resource to the CMD Pershing Road Development. Due to its proximity and visual relationship with McKinley Park across West Pershing Road, is also a contributing resource to another National Register-listed historic district, the Chicago Park Boulevard System Historic District. Over the past decade, Preservation Chicago has suggested the clock tower and CMD complex be considered for Chicago Landmark Designation.

HISTORY: The Central Manufacturing District

Created in 1905 by Frederick Henry Prince, a New England financier known for his investments in stockyards, the 265-acre Central Manufacturing District was the first planned industrial district in the United States. Earlier, Prince had acquired a small switching railroad that connected the Chicago Union Stock Yards with major trunk

Chicago 7: Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building



Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building, 1917, Samuel Scott Joy, 2000 W. Pershing Road. Photo credit: Serhii Chrucky / Esto

lines, aiming to attract more shipping clients to his railway. At the time, many industrial businesses were being displaced from Chicago's downtown by increasingly dense commercial development. Recognizing the potential of the underutilized land on the city's Southwest Side, which was ideal for its large, inexpensive tracts of land, access to railroads, and proximity to a sizable working-class population, Prince saw a tremendous opportunity to gather these relocating businesses along the Chicago Junction Railway's tracks. He envisioned the CMD as a hub to streamline and expand industrial operations.

Before Prince's initiative and the establishment of the Chicago Junction Railway, the land was largely undeveloped, dotted with old cabbage patches and abandoned lumberyards, and only a handful of industrial operations. The first phase of Prince's plan produced the 185-acre "Original East District," located in what is now Bridgeport and extending roughly from 35th Street to Pershing Road and from Morgan Street to Ashland Avenue.

The CMD was originally conceived in response to both the economic and geographic pressures within Chicago's Central Business District and the opportunity to capitalize on the city's extensive network of national rail lines. By 1915, the first decade of the CMD was drawing to a close. During this period, the East District had grown to house around a hundred companies and had been transformed with new streets, landscaping, and buildings, all efficiently served by Chicago Junction Railway spurs. Building on the district's early success and responding to growing demand, Prince expanded the development westward along Pershing Road.

The Pershing Road Development began in 1917 with the construction of several industrial buildings. Among them, the striking 11-story Clock Tower Building, also known as the Water Tower, anchored the district as its central landmark. Over the following decades, it was surrounded by a series of tall, reinforced-concrete warehouses clad in red brick, stone, and terra cotta, gradually added as the development expanded through 1965.

The CMD represented an ambitious experiment in large-scale land development, capitalizing on new technologies in construction and power production. It became a national model for post-World War II industrial parks, featuring purpose-built manufacturing facilities organized around essential transportation infrastructure. Most buildings there range from one story, one-bay plans to multi-story, multi-bay industrial lofts. By 1931, the district spanned 900 acres and attracted hundreds of prominent tenants including Wrigley, Ford, Westinghouse, Rexall, Pullman, and hundreds of other manufacturing and industrial businesses. In the 1960s the CMD even expanded into the Union Stock Yards, transforming the historic meatpacking site for new industrial purposes.



'Niagara' on South Side: Water pours from ninth floor of the Central Manufacturing tower at Pershing and Damen. The "Niagara" resulted from a break in a fill pipe leading to the automatic sprinkler system. It took more than an hour to turn off the water valve because of extreme pressure. Eight floors were flooded." Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building, 1917, Samuel Scott Joy, 2000 W. Pershing Road. Photo credit: Don Casper, Chicago Sun-Times, January 26, 1963 / Preservation Chicago Photo Collection

Chicago 7: Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building



Pershing Road elevation of Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building, 1917, Samuel Scott Joy, 2000 W. Pershing Road. Photo credit: Eric Allix Rogers

HISTORY: The Clock Tower

Fire protection was a serious concern throughout the city but especially within this manufacturing district. Most, if not all, of the buildings were sprinklered, and the layout of the district provided safe distances between adjoining structures. The CMD also planned and built private water lines throughout the district, with special equipment to facilitate city fire engines' access to water in the event of a fire. An official from the Board of Fire Underwriters stated that the buildings comprising the CMD were "the best group of manufacturing buildings constructed from the fire insurance standpoint in the City of Chicago."

Many factory buildings in the CMD often had their own integrated water towers, which typically contained a passenger elevator and a sprinkler tank to serve the building's own fire protection needs. These towers were functional yet designed to harmonize with the overall architectural style of the district. Expanding on this concept, the Clock Tower Building was constructed as an independent water supply for the district's fire protection network. Built in 1917 by Butler Street Foundry & Iron Company, a company that specialized in structural and architectural steel and iron work. While it performed this essential

utility function, architect Samuel Scott Joy designed it as an elegant landmark rather than a purely utilitarian structure. Measuring 50 feet wide and 38 feet deep, the tower features four clock faces, one on each facade, which are emblazoned with the "Central Manufacturing District" seal, the structure is an example of a "disguised" or "concealed" utility structure within an architectural language that is more "artistically designed."



Deferred maintenance and scaffolding visible at main entry to Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building, 1917, Samuel Scott Joy, 2000 W. Pershing Road. Photo credit: Cristen Brown

On December 1, 1926, *Water Works Engineering* magazine reported that “the architects have found a means for concealing the naked ugliness of the too prominent water tanks” and cited the CMD Pershing Road Development Clock Tower Building as a prime example:

“A stately tower of very good proportions not only serves as an office building but also contains two Horton elliptical bottom tanks mounted one above the other - the combined capacity is 250,000 gallons. The bottom of the lower tank is 118 feet above the ground and the bottom of the higher tank is twenty-four feet above this. The tower is supported on an eight post steel tower which extends down to just above the eighth floor.”

The fire-protective function of the tower was effectively wrapped in office spaces and concealed behind architectural expression. Betsy H. Bradley, author of *The Works: The Industrial Architecture of the United States* described the structure as “an empathetic synthesis of centralized power and fire protection.” The lower-level offices housed the industrial district’s architecture department and construction staff. For Bradley, the electrically illuminated clock faces “served as an ever visible reminder of the need for fire safety.”

The industrial buildings throughout the CMD Pershing Road Development share a unity of scale, volume, design and various detailed features, but the Clock Tower Building stands out as the tallest and most visible beacon of industrial development and heritage in the neighborhood.

Chicago 7: Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building



Bird's eye view of the Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building and McKinley Park, 1917, Samuel Scott Joy, 2000 W. Pershing Road. Photo credit: LoopNet

THREATS

Like many of the buildings throughout the CMD Pershing Road Development, the Clock Tower Building remains underutilized and vacant, and has stood in this state for decades. The building is in a significant state of deterioration and only the minimum necessary stabilization and safety measures are being undertaken. Increasing areas of containment netting have been installed throughout all four of the building's facades, and protective scaffolding surrounding the base of the building has been in place for over a decade to protect passers-by from the potential of deteriorated and loose masonry and terra cotta elements.

Without proper mothballing and stabilization measures put in place until a new preservation-sensitive owner comes along, the building is likely to continue deteriorating, ultimately increasing the threat of demolition by neglect. Other buildings throughout the larger CMD development in the Original East District have likewise been lost to the promise of new development. These include the Continental Can Company Building at 3815 S. Ashland Avenue (1920-2024), the Larkin Soap Company Building at 3617 S. Ashland Avenue (1912-2020), and the Wrigley Company Gun Manufacturing Buildings Complex at 3535 S. Ashland Avenue (1911-2007), which were previously listed on our Most Endangered list in 2020, 2021, and 2023.

Since the CMD Pershing Road Development was listed on our Chicago 7 Most Endangered List in 2020, the Clock Tower Building and three warehouses, including all adjoining land, were unsuccessfully listed for sale for \$12 million by property owner and manager Imperial Realty Company. According to the company's website, the "Clock Tower Industrial Center," which includes the Clock Tower Building, is still under their ownership and management as of early 2025. The real estate listing presented the property as a "multi-family redevelopment opportunity."



View of the Central Manufacturing District Clock Tower Building and other CMD warehouse buildings, 1917, Samuel Scott Joy, 2000 W. Pershing Road. Photo credit: LoopNet

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a contributing resource to a National Register-Listed Historic District, the CMD Clock Tower Building is a certified historic structure. A qualified rehabilitation or adaptive reuse project could utilize both State (IL) and Federal (F) Historic Tax Credits (HTCs) for project financing. Under the IL-HTC program, project sponsors can receive a state income tax credit equal to 25% of qualified expenses (capped at \$3 million). Under the F-HTC program, project sponsors can receive a federal income tax credit equal to 20% of qualified expenses (no cap). By stacking both HTC programs, owners can benefit from up to 45% of rehabilitation project costs returned in the form of tax credits.

As an orange-rated property in the *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*, the Clock Tower Building is also protected by the 90-Day Demolition Delay Ordinance adopted in 2003. However, Preservation Chicago recommends and continues to advocate for the designation of this significant building as either an individual City of Chicago Landmark or as part of a larger Landmark District. Formal landmarking would best safeguard the clock tower and adjacent district buildings from future demolition threats or insensitive alterations.

The CMD Clock Tower, and the entire CMD Pershing Road Development, is a defining element of the McKinley Park/New City community that meets multiple criteria for local landmark designation. Such a designation would incentivize preservation and investment in this important component of Chicago's industrial history and provide more community control over the building and the area's future rehabilitation and development. For years, the McKinley Park community has voiced its support for the preservation of the Clock Tower Building and the entire CMD Pershing Road Development, which are seen as neighborhood assets. A preservation-sensitive buyer committed to environmentally clean light industrial/assembly or mixed adaptive reuse can make that vision a reality.