

# Central Manufacturing District, Pershing Road

Pershing Road between Ashland and Western Avenues



*Central Manufacturing District, Pershing Road © Eric Allix Rogers*

## OVERVIEW

The Central Manufacturing District (CMD) was one of the earliest planned industrial complexes in the nation. It sought to maximize industrial manufacturing efficiencies within a district of large-scale, visually cohesive buildings. It became the national model for a dense concentration of industry within an urban environment supported by a strong labor force which resided in the nearby residential communities.

The initial grouping of buildings in the Central Manufacturing District are located in what is now called the Original East District, generally bordered by Ashland Avenue and Morgan Street. These buildings were constructed starting in 1902. With the success of the Original East District,

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Address: **Pershing Road from Ashland to Western**

Architect: **Samuel Scott Joy and Abraham Epstein**

Date: **1917 to c.1952**

Style: **Industrial Gothic / Prairie**

Neighborhood: **McKinley Park / New City**

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construction began to extend the CMD to the west along Pershing Road. This new area was ideal for a large expansion with large tracts of available and inexpensive land, access to rail lines, and proximity to a large, working-class population. Railroad spurs were built to connect the buildings with nearby railway tracks making the shipping and transportation of products, both within and beyond the CMD, more efficient. Both districts were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2015 and 2016 with the support of Preservation Chicago and our statewide preservation partner, Landmarks Illinois.

### HISTORY

The Central Manufacturing District was originally envisioned in response to economic and geographic pressures in the central business district and to enhance business opportunities along Chicago's flourishing network of national rail lines. The CMD may also have been a response to Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett's 1909 *Plan of Chicago* which envisioned the relocation of manufacturing and warehouse facilities beyond the central business district. This allowed for the expansion and beautification of the city center, and to locate industry and manufacturing closer to the labor force.

Frederick Henry Prince was president of the Chicago Junction Railway and the visionary behind the development of the CMD. His business partner was A.G. Leonard, president of the Union Stock Yards Company. By 1915, there were approximately 100 companies operating within its boundaries. The Original East District CMD was so successful that in 1917, Prince further expanded the development westward along Pershing Road, originally known as 39th Street, between Ashland and Western Avenues.

A prominent feature of the CMD, Pershing Road is the beautiful 11-story Clock Tower Building designed by Samuel Scott Joy, which housed the water tower that provided a centralized fire suppression system for the complex. The



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tower and clock are emblazoned with “Central Manufacturing District,” and the tower is surrounded by a series of tall, reinforced-concrete buildings sheathed in red brick, stone, terra cotta and a cementitious stucco. These industrial buildings share a unity of scale, volume, design and ornamental details. This became the model for planned industrial districts which increasingly gained popularity across the country.

In 1925 there were more than 40,000 people working in the CMD, and the complex provided a business incubator, a private bank, a post office, the CMD Club, a Wells-Fargo Express office, and a Western Union office. It was such a large and successful business operation that it supported its own police force, architectural department, telephone operations, and ground maintenance. During the Great Depression, the CMD management extended credit terms and worked with firms in the complex which enabled all but a single tenant company to survive the difficult economic period. It housed leading companies like Wrigley, Goodyear, Westinghouse and manufacturers of a wide range of goods. Just prior to the United States entering World War I, the US Army’s Commissary Department leased multiple buildings within the CMD to warehouse and distribute food, clothing, and equipment for the war effort.

The CMD, Pershing Road buildings are mostly constructed of reinforced concrete, sheathed with red brick, terra cotta and limestone, and are primarily designed in the Late Gothic Revival or “Industrial Gothic” style. However, a variety of architectural styles, details and influences are present within the CMD including Classical Revival, Prairie style, Chicago School, and even Midcentury Modern. Many of the buildings have articulated corner towers with decorative terra cotta ornament, further emphasizing the verticality and massive scale of the development.

The impressive streetwall along Pershing Road fronting McKinley Park is both breathtaking and massive in scale, as the buildings appear to march down Pershing Road for almost a half-mile. Many historic company names and logos are still visible today on the buildings exteriors. The CMD, Pershing Road represents an era in history when America’s industrial and manufacturing might was at its zenith.

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### THREAT

Many buildings comprising the Central Manufacturing District, Pershing Road are currently underutilized and are either undercapacity or vacant. In 2019, Aberdeen Development removed the entire masonry façade from the U.S. Cold Storage Company Building located at 2129 W. Pershing Road. Aberdeen insisted that a structural assessment was completed which indicated an imminent threat of brick falling from its façade. However, neither Aberdeen nor the City of Chicago have been able to produce a copy of this document. The building is orange-rated in the Chicago Historic Resource Survey (CHRS) and listed under the 2129 W. Pershing Road address. This status mandates a 90-day demolition delay and closer scrutiny by the Department of Planning and Development. However, building permits were submitted using a different address, 2055 W. Pershing Road. This alternate address was not recognized by the City of Chicago as an orange-rated building, so permit review and a 90-day demolition delay hold were missed.

Aberdeen Development owns a second building at 1950 W. Pershing, the only structure on the north side of Pershing Road within that district. The 1950 W. Pershing building previously served as a United States Post Office Station.

McKinley Park residents and community leaders were surprised in 2018 when MAT Asphalt established operations at 2055 W. Pershing Road. The community was not given advance notice that an asphalt plant would be built in the neighborhood. The IEPA issued a one-year construction permit for the operation of the facility located across from McKinley Park, behind the CMD buildings, and near the residential neighborhood. At times, the noxious odors and toxins emitted from the asphalt facility overwhelms the ability to enjoy recreation in McKinley Park. Neighbors for Environmental Justice, a diverse group of McKinley Park residents, organized to halt asphalt plant operations or at least minimize the pollutants and foul odors that overwhelm the area. It is feared that the asphalt plant will threaten development prospects for the remaining historic buildings in the CMD. McKinley Park is part of the

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Chicago Park Boulevard System Historic District and on the National Register of Historic Places. Unfortunately, none of these National Register designations protect the buildings from being neglected, demolished or adversely altered.

Hispanic Housing Development Corporation and Code Real Estate Partners have plans for an affordable housing development at 2159 W. Pershing Road. They also plan to lease the building at 2139 W. Pershing Road for commercial, residential and retail uses. While the development team has committed to preservation of the building and restoration of its original lobby, there are currently no protections in place to ensure that such plans are followed.

In January 2013, the Pullman Couch Factory in the Original East Central Manufacturing District suffered a massive fire in subzero temperatures that made it almost impossible to extinguish. The building smoldered for days before being demolished. Chicago Fire Department officials noted at that time that vacancy is a great danger to these buildings, and will remain a constant and serious threat until new uses are found for the structures. The recent demolition of the Wrigley Factory at 35th and Ashland, also in the Original East Central Manufacturing District, illustrates a particular danger: that the district will be disassembled piecemeal. It deserves protections and an overall plan for the reuse of the historic buildings.

Cushman & Wakefield's 2020 Industrial Outlook report forecasts continued growth in the market for 2020 and 2021. "Industrial has been the investors' darling in recent years, and there is no indication of this love affair coming to an end any time soon," the report noted. The square footage of industrial space will grow nationally, rents are expected to increase, and vacancy rates are expected to stay around 5%. With this demand for space in more densely populated areas, the buildings in and the community around the Central Manufacturing District are especially vulnerable for replacement with non-descript, industrial buildings or vacant lots.



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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

During recent community development meetings held by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, an overwhelming majority of neighbors expressed support for protecting the Central Manufacturing District, Pershing Road historic buildings. The community vision is for equitable growth that will continue to make New City/McKinley Park a great community and preserve the character of the residential core of the neighborhood.

While the National Register designation makes the buildings eligible for both federal and state historic tax credits, they offer no protection against demolition. A Chicago Landmark District designation is the only tool available in Chicago to offer protection against demolition and adverse and inappropriate alterations.

The CMD, Pershing Road is clearly eligible for designation as a Chicago Landmark District as it meets multiple criteria for Chicago Landmark Designation. The McKinley Park neighbors support the designation but political leadership is necessary to achieve this goal.

12th Ward Alderman George Cardenas has stated publicly and in private meetings that he supports a Chicago Landmark District designation for the CMD, Pershing Road complex of buildings. Preservation Chicago looks forward to working with him, his office, and city officials in the near future to support a Chicago Landmark District. If the area can be protected, it will offer better economic opportunities for future developers.

The Central Manufacturing District buildings and Clock Tower are a defining element of the McKinley Park/New City community. It is uncertain whether the local history and historic built environment will be honored and protected. The CMD, Pershing Road should be considered for a Chicago Landmark District designation before any more buildings are lost. Landmark designation would preserve this important component of Chicago's industrial history and provide more community control over the area's future development.

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