

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



# Continental Center

55 E. Jackson Blvd.

Preliminary Landmark recommendation approved by  
the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, July 7, 2011



CITY OF CHICAGO  
Rahm Emanuel, Mayor

Department of Housing and Economic Development  
Andrew J. Mooney, Commissioner

*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Housing and Economic Development, 33 N. LaSalle St., Room 1600, Chicago, IL 60602; (312-744-3200) phone; (312-744-9140) fax; web site, <http://www.cityofchicago.org/landmarks>.*

*This landmark designation report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the City Council's final landmark designation ordinance should be regarded as final.*

# **CONTINENTAL CENTER**

**55 E. JACKSON BLVD.**

**BUILT: 1961-62**

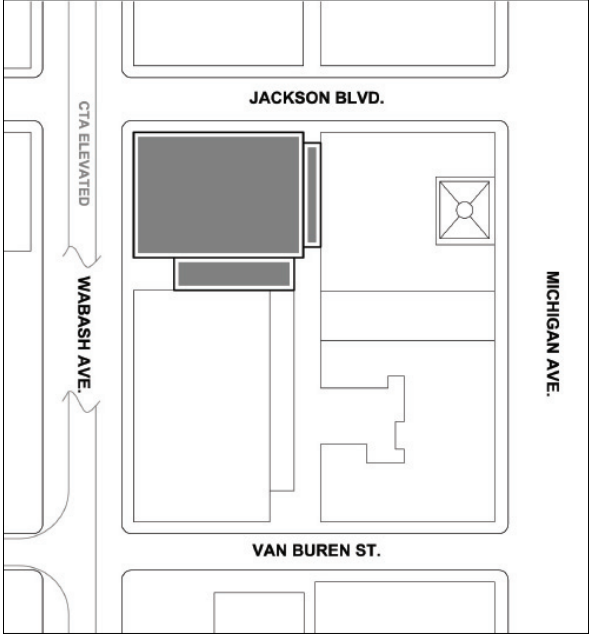
**ARCHITECT: C.F. MURPHY ASSOCIATES  
(JACQUES BROWNSON AND JAMES FERRIS,  
CO-DESIGNERS)**

The Continental Center is an early and exemplary example of an International Style skyscraper, influenced by the radically modernist steel-and-glass towers of famed architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his followers, including C.F. Murphy Associates, the architects for the building. The International Style skyscrapers of these architectural firms transformed skylines in Chicago and throughout the world from the 1950s through the 1970s. The 23-story building remains an impressive feat of engineering and is especially noteworthy for the clear expression of its structural skeleton and its flexible, column-free interiors. Other hallmarks of International Style skyscrapers include its rectangular, monolithic massing, cellular elevations in glass and steel, and recessed, glass-enclosed lobby surrounded by freestanding structural columns at the base of the building. At the time of its construction, the Continental Center's design was revolutionary within the context of the Loop's 19th and early 20th century streetscapes, and it was widely published in national magazines, journals, and books.

The Continental Center is an important building designed by C.F. Murphy Associates, one of the largest and most prolific modernist firms in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s. C.F. Murphy designed many of the city's most significant public buildings during the construction boom of this period. Its brawny Loop skyscrapers—many of which were designed in the International Style—were highly influential in terms of their architectural design and engineering. In addition to the Continental Center, the firm's significant works include terminals at O'Hare International Airport, Chicago's Central District Water Filtration Plant, the Daley Center, the second McCormick Place convention center, and the First National Bank of Chicago Building.



The Continental Center is located at 55 E. Jackson Boulevard in Chicago's Loop. With its sheer, gray-tinted glass walls, the building is a significant example of the International Style.



As one of the earliest office towers to rise in the Loop in the post-World War II period, the Continental Center was at the forefront of the era's building boom that transformed Chicago's skyline with a plethora of modernist office skyscrapers. The new urban landscape that resulted—featuring glass-and-steel and concrete-framed skyscrapers of unprecedented height and scale—demonstrated the vital role that architecture played in projecting an up-to-date image of modernity and prosperity for Chicago.

## **BUILDING HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION**

The Continental Center was built in 1961-62 as the new headquarters building for the Chicago-based Continental-National Insurance Group. The origins of this group of three primary insurance companies dates to 1897, when the Continental Casualty Company (originally called the Continental Assurance Company of North America) was founded to offer accident and health insurance coverage in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio. The new company's business was initially oriented largely to railroad workers. In 1911, Continental Casualty ventured into life insurance with the organization of the Continental Assurance Company. The two companies were referred to as the Continental Insurance Group and featured the same management. Both companies experienced steady growth in the ensuing decades, with assets increasing from \$20.4 million to \$53.3 million from 1927 to 1943, a period in which its premiums rose from \$14.6 million to \$31.7 million.

In 1943, the Continental Insurance Group purchased the 30-story Strauss Building at 310 S. Michigan Avenue for \$5.3 million to serve as its new headquarters. In 1945, Roy Tuchbreiter became President of the Continental Insurance Group, inaugurating a period of expansion and post-war prosperity for the company. Continental acquired the National Fire Insurance Company of Hartford in 1956, forming what became known as the Continental-National Insurance Group. In that year, the combined net premiums of the three companies—Continental Casualty, Continental Assurance, and National Fire Insurance—was close to \$415 million dollars. The move increased the company's status as an insurer while transforming it into one of the world's largest multiple line stock insurance organizations. The group offered life, accident, sickness, hospitalization, fire, and allied lines, casualty of all sorts, as well as fidelity and surety coverage.

During the late 1950s, the Continental-National Insurance Group consistently posted new all-time highs in terms of both volume and earnings. By 1959, Continental Casualty and Continental Assurance had grown to 2,500 employees and the insurance group occupied nearly 90 percent of the Strauss Building, leaving virtually no room for future expansion. As a result, in February 1960, Continental announced plans to erect a 20-story, \$5 million addition directly west of the group's existing building. It originally was to cover an "L" shaped site occupied by a parking lot with frontage on both Jackson Boulevard and Wabash Avenue, and would have wrapped around four adjacent buildings at the southeast corner of Jackson and Wabash, including the 11-story Cable Building on the corner and three smaller buildings to the south.

By September 1960, however, Continental had acquired these four remaining buildings and announced new plans by C.F. Murphy and Associates to erect a larger, 23-story glass-and-steel office building on the entire corner site. A.L. Jackson and Company was hired as the contractor. The new building was intended to connect to the company's existing headquarters on Michigan Avenue by enclosed bridges on all building levels above the ground floor. The combined buildings were called the Continental Center and together originally featured 1.2 million square feet of office space. In 1964, *Inland Architect* magazine noted that the new Continental Center was "elegant in its own right," without overpowering the old headquarters on Michigan Avenue.

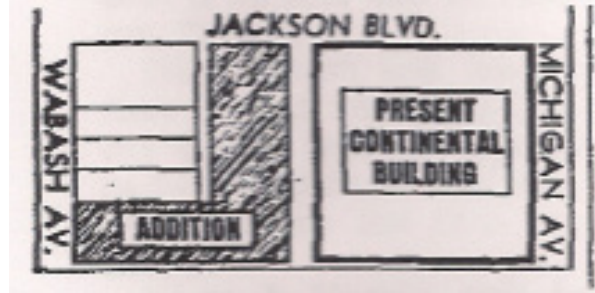
Demolition of the Cable Building and its three neighboring buildings began in September 1960, and construction proceeded at a rapid pace. In November 1961, the last steel beam of the new 23-story tower was hoisted into place during a "topping out" ceremony attended by Mayor Richard J. Daley, Chairman Roy Tuchbreiter of the Continental-National Insurance Group, and numerous civic and business leaders. The new building was completed in October 1962 at a cost of about \$18 million, and the official opening events held that month were attended by more than 1,000 civic and insurance industry leaders. Most employees of the Continental Casualty and Continental Assurance Companies moved to the new building upon its completion, joined by 400 employees of the western office of the National Fire Insurance Company, which moved from the Insurance Exchange Building at 175 W. Jackson. Continental subsequently rented the majority of the Strauss Building to outside tenants.

When the American Casualty Company joined the Continental-National Insurance Group in 1963, the company became known as the Continental-National American Group (CNA Group). The name of the group's building complex was then changed to the CNA Center. In 1967, the group was reorganized under a new holding company, CNA Financial Corporation. In 1972, a third building was added to the CNA Center: a 45-story glass-and-steel tower designed by James Ferris, who by then was working for Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. It was situated at the northeast corner of Wabash Avenue and Van Buren, just south of the company's 1962 tower. Both towers were painted red in order to provide a unified corporate identity. In 2003, the original C.F. Murphy-designed Continental Center was sold by the CNA Financial Corporation to Marc Realty and it has been known as the 55 E. Jackson Building since that time.

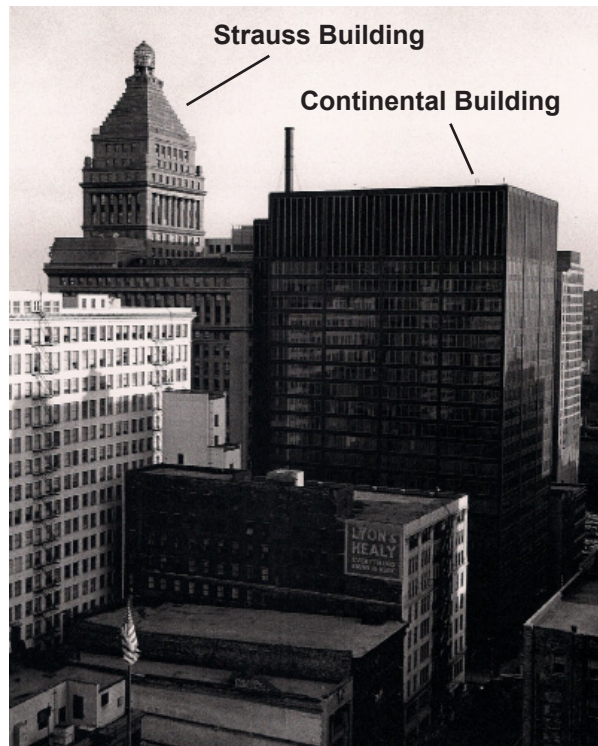
### *Building Description*

The Continental Center at 55 E. Jackson Boulevard is an outstanding example of an International Style skyscraper that was influenced by the architectural principles of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his followers, whose International Style skyscrapers transformed skylines in Chicago and throughout the world from the 1950s through the 1970s. The 23-story building exemplifies the International Style in its design. Its massing is straightforward and strongly geometric—a simple rectilinear box rising to a height of 333 feet above its site on the southeast corner of Jackson Boulevard and Wabash Avenue. The Continental Center is especially noted for its boldly-expressed metal frame, which is emphasized by its sweeping bays and powerful structural columns that are freestanding at the base of the building, forming a protected colonnade around the recessed, glass-





Explosive growth in the post-World War II era spurred the Continental-National Group to announce plans for an addition to their corporate headquarters in the Strauss Building at 310 S. Michigan Avenue. The original plan for an L-shaped footprint (above right) was changed to include the entire corner site of Jackson and Wabash following the acquisition of the Cable Building and three adjacent structures (above left). The resulting two-building complex featured approximately 1.2 million square feet of office space and stretched from Michigan Avenue to Wabash. The old and new buildings were connected on all levels above the ground floor by enclosed bridges that are extant but no longer in use as connectors (below right and left).







**The Continental Center is noteworthy for its boldly-expressed metal frame, which is emphasized by sweeping horizontal structural bays and visually powerful columns that are freestanding at the base of the building, forming a colonnade around the recessed, glass-enclosed ground floor. It was the largest all-welded building when completed in 1962, and its 42-foot building bays were considered exceptionally wide in its day. These photos were taken during construction or soon after completion.**





enclosed lobby and storefronts.

Steel and glass were typically the dominant materials used in International Style skyscrapers. At the Continental Center, steel is used for the structural frame and also as the material for the exterior curtain wall. The spandrel girders and the columns are sheathed in 3/8-inch-thick plates of continuously-welded carbon steel painted charcoal gray (originally painted black). During construction, fireproofing concrete was poured between the carbon plates and the structural frame, thereby eliminating the need for elaborate and costly formwork. The building's cellular east-west elevations are divided into three bays and the north-south elevations are divided into four bays. Each bay features eight floor-to-ceiling windows of gray-tinted glass.

To this day, the Continental Center remains an impressive feat of engineering, featuring huge spans of steel framing that display both visual power and simplicity. A mere 20 columns of high-strength A440 steel carry the building's weight 100 feet below street level to bedrock. Stretching between these columns are 42-foot spandrel girders, creating building bays that were considered exceptionally wide in its day. All of the Continental Center's connections are welded, rather than riveted, making it the largest all-welded building when completed in 1962. Carrying the floors are some of the heaviest steel beams ever used in a high-rise office structure until that time. They are deep enough (2 feet 3 inches) to accommodate regular openings for the building's air conditioning ducts and mechanical conduits, yet shallow enough to keep floor-to-floor depth to 12 feet, which allowed all floors above the ground level to connect with those in the older Strauss Building to the east. The enclosed bridges that stretch between the Continental Center and the Strauss Building on Michigan Avenue are extant, but the two buildings are no longer internally connected and the spaces are mainly used for tenant storage and mechanical systems.

The Continental Center is surrounded by a 20-foot-wide, granite-paved sidewalk. An alley to the east of the building and accessed from Jackson Boulevard leads to truck docks, while a driveway to the south of the building and accessible from Wabash Avenue provides vehicular access to an underground garage that accommodates approximately 170 cars. The Continental Center's glass-enclosed lobby is accessed by two revolving doors on the Jackson Boulevard elevation. The U-shaped lobby originally wrapped around three sides of the 42-by-84-foot service core. (It has since been subdivided with glass walls and other partitions into a smaller lobby plus retail/commercial space.) Slabs of tan granite matching the sidewalk pavement serve as flooring for the lobby and as cladding for the elevator banks which have unadorned nickel-plated doors.

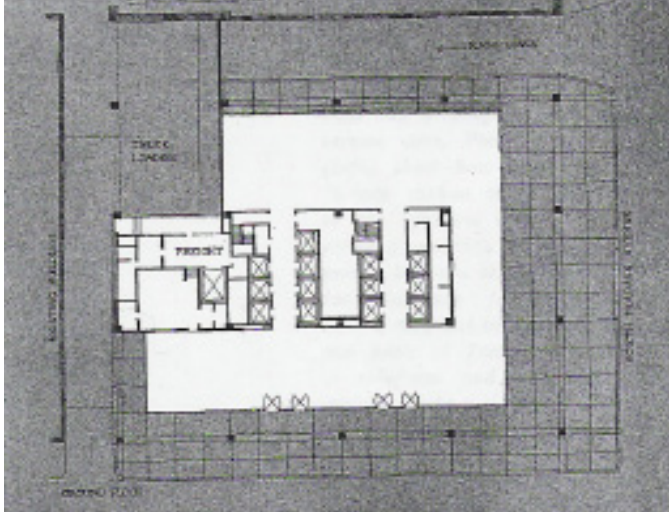
The Continental Center features exceptional interior flexibility, a hallmark of International Style skyscrapers. The functional character of this building is maintained by its open, column-free office floors. Wide, 42-foot bays yield 19,000 square feet of space on each floor, interrupted only by a compact, central service core. The column-free floor space was ideal for the large clerical pool area required by the Continental-National Insurance Group, and its versatility also allowed for future space needs. A 1963 critique of the building in *Progressive Architecture* noted that, "The uncompromisingly functional



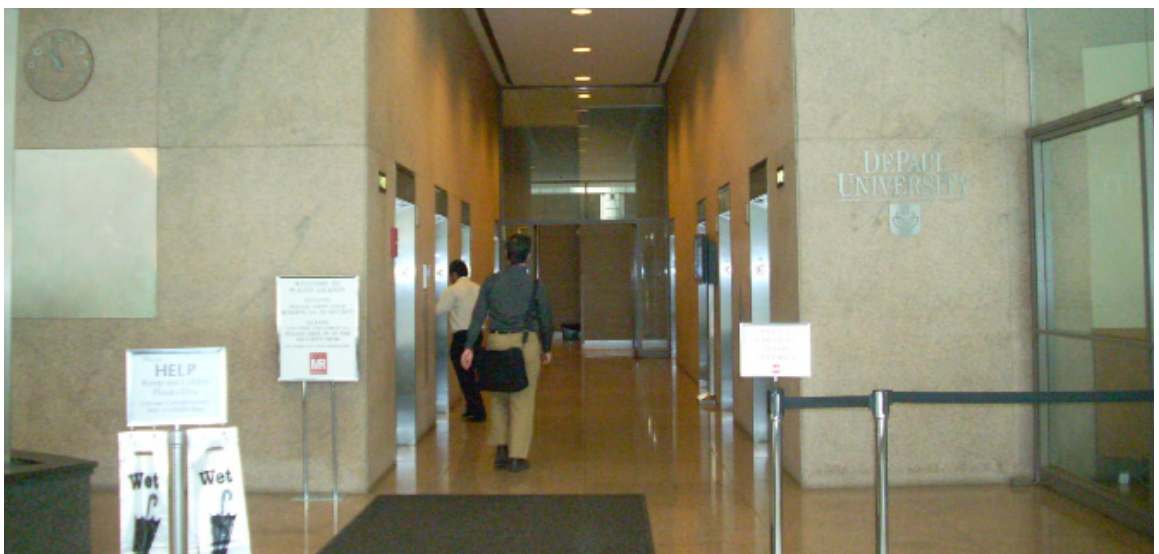
The Continental Center's massing is highly rational and geometric—a simple rectilinear box rising to a height of 333 feet above its site on the southeast corner of Jackson Boulevard and Wabash Avenue. Each building bay features eight floor-to-ceiling windows of gray-tinted glass. A driveway to the south of the building and accessible from Wabash provides access to an underground garage that accommodates approximately 170 cars.







The Continental Building's original U-shaped lobby wrapped around three sides of the 42-by-84-foot service core (left). Although now truncated, the existing building lobby visually flows through the building's glass skin onto the exterior plaza. Plaza, lobby floor, and elevator walls are all covered in the same granite material.





character of this structure, visible in its black-painted steel exterior, is maintained in its open, column-free office floors. The design closely follows the principles of the 19th-Century Chicago School.”

Upon its completion in 1962, the Continental Center received widespread acclaim in the architecture community and was published in national magazines and journals, such as *Architectural Forum* (May 1963), *Progressive Architecture* (September 1963), and *Inland Architect* (May 1964). In 1964, the Continental Center received an Honor Award from the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. In its critique, the awards jury cited the building as an outstanding example of the new Chicago school of architecture. The building has also been featured in a variety of books, including the *AIA Guide to Chicago*, *Chicago 1930-70: Building, Planning, and Urban Technology*, and *Chicago's Famous Buildings*.

In 1963, *Architectural Forum* magazine praised the Continental Center as “Chicago’s newest office skyscraper, and one of its finest yet,” while noting that it “carries on its city’s steel skyscraper traditions at a fine, big scale.” In his book, *Chicago 1930-70: Building, Planning and Urban Technology*, architectural historian Carl Condit has noted the building’s bold expression of its steel frame:

The Continental Building marked a decisive and apparently permanent break with the smooth curtain walls of the previous decade. The articulated walls of the Continental addition are so emphatically drawn from the central tradition of the Chicago school as to make it seem as though the long discontinuities between past and present had never existed...The massive steel frame of the Continental Center is expressed in the street elevations with a relentless assertiveness, so that there is no mistaking what lies behind.

## **C.F. MURPHY ASSOCIATES**

The Continental Center was designed by C.F. Murphy Associates (Jacques Brownson and James Ferris, co-designers). The firm was founded in 1959 by Charles F. Murphy, Sr. (1890-1985). Born in New Jersey and raised in Chicago, Murphy began his career in Daniel Burnham’s office in 1911. After Burnham’s death in 1912, Ernest R. Graham became head of the firm. Murphy became the administrative “right-hand man” to Graham both then and later in the firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. After Graham’s death in 1936, Murphy and two associates, Alfred P. Shaw and Sigurd Naess, formed the office of Shaw, Naess and Murphy. After Shaw withdrew from this firm in 1946, Naess and Murphy practiced together for twelve more years, designing the city’s first major skyscraper in the post-war era, the Prudential Building (1952-55), as well as the Chicago Sun-Times Building (1957; demolished).

After Naess’s retirement in 1958, C.F. Murphy Associates was formed and quickly became one of the largest and most prolific firms in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s, comparable only to Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill in terms of their high-

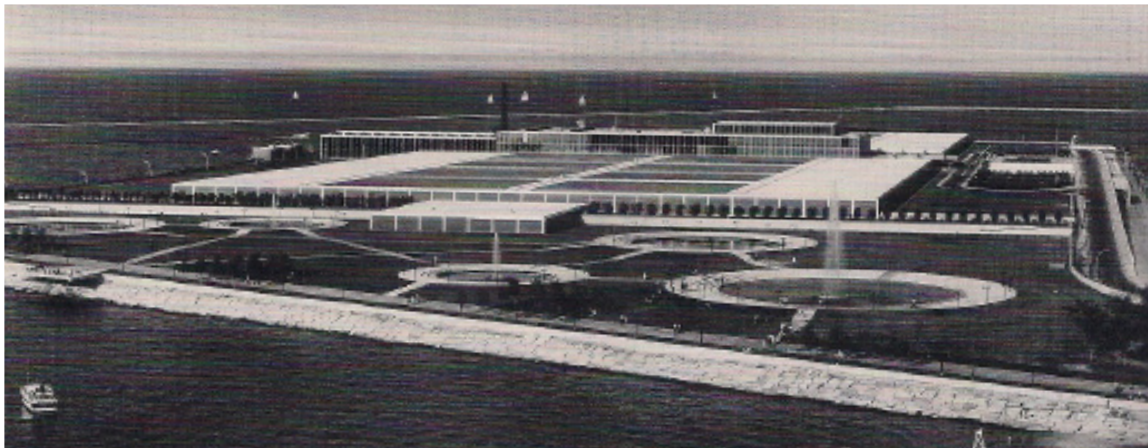
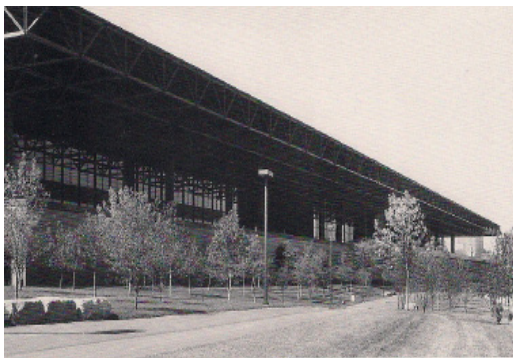
profile modernist projects. C.F. Murphy designed, or was associated with, the City's most significant public commissions during the building boom of this period, and its brawny office towers helped to redefine the Loop in the post-war era. In forming the design teams for its important commissions, the firm drew on former Illinois Institute of Technology students of famed architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, including Jacques Brownson and James Ferris. Such talented architects were attracted to the firm due to the virtual free reign they were provided over the commissions they supervised. This freedom resulted in a number of influential and award-winning buildings noteworthy for their architectural design and engineering.

C.F. Murphy's large-scale public commissions included terminals at O'Hare International Airport (opened 1963), Chicago's Central District Water Filtration Plant (opened 1964), the Daley Center (originally the Chicago Civic Center, 1963-65), and the second McCormick Place convention center (1967-71). The firm also served as associate architects with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for the massive Federal Center complex (1959-64) in the Loop. Many of the firm's works were designed in the International Style as developed by Mies van der Rohe, with rectangular frames expressed in steel and glass. However, others showcased the versatility of its designers, such as the granite-clad First National Bank of Chicago Building (1964-69) with its gracefully tapering elevations, and the Blue Cross-Blue Shield Building (1968), with its Brutalist reinforced-concrete design. Other important Chicago works by C.F. Murphy include an eleven-building expansion of DePaul University's Lincoln Park campus (early 1960s), the Mercy Hospital complex on the Near South Side (mid-1960s), Malcolm X College (1971), and the Cook County Juvenile Center (1973).

**Jacques Brownson (1923-2012)** earned his B.S. and M.S. at the Illinois Institute of Technology in 1948 and 1954, respectively, studying under Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. For his master's thesis he designed and built his own home in Geneva, Illinois—a house of glass that received much favorable national attention. Brownson worked for various Chicago architects, including A. James Speyer in 1947 and Frazier & Raftery from 1950-53, before he and Bruno Conterato, another student of Mies, opened their own office in 1955. Brownson, like his mentor Mies, was both a builder and an educator. He taught architecture at IIT from 1948 to 1959, when he joined C. F. Murphy Associates as chief designer. Besides the Continental Center, Brownson's noteworthy designs include the Daley Center (a designated Chicago Landmark).

In 1966 he left C.F. Murphy to serve as chairman of the Department of Architecture at the University of Michigan. Brownson returned to Chicago briefly in 1968 to serve as the Managing Architect for the Public Building Commission of Chicago. In 1972 he moved to Colorado to plan the Auraria Higher Education Center in Denver, taking his cue from Mies's plan for the IIT campus. He served as Director of Colorado's State Buildings Division from 1976 to 1986.

**James Ferris (1925-2002)** studied architecture at IIT, receiving a B.S. in 1949 and a M.S. in 1951. After graduating, he worked for Philip Johnson in New Canaan, Connecticut, and the Austin Company in New York City before traveling to Italy in 1954



**C.F. Murphy Associates, the architectural firm that designed the Continental Center, was one of the largest and most prolific modernist firms in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to the Continental Center, the firm's significant works include (clockwise from top left): terminals at O'Hare International Airport, the Blue Cross-Blue Shield Building, Chicago's Central District Water Filtration Plant, and the second McCormick Place convention center.**



with Myron Goldsmith to study under noted structural engineer Pier Luigi Nervi. In 1955, Ferris returned to the United States to work for Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in their San Francisco office and subsequently transferred to the firm's Chicago office in 1957. He left in 1960 to work for C.F. Murphy, where he was associated with several large projects, including the Continental Center, a restoration and addition to the Northern Trust Building, and as a member of the team that designed the First National Bank of Chicago Building.

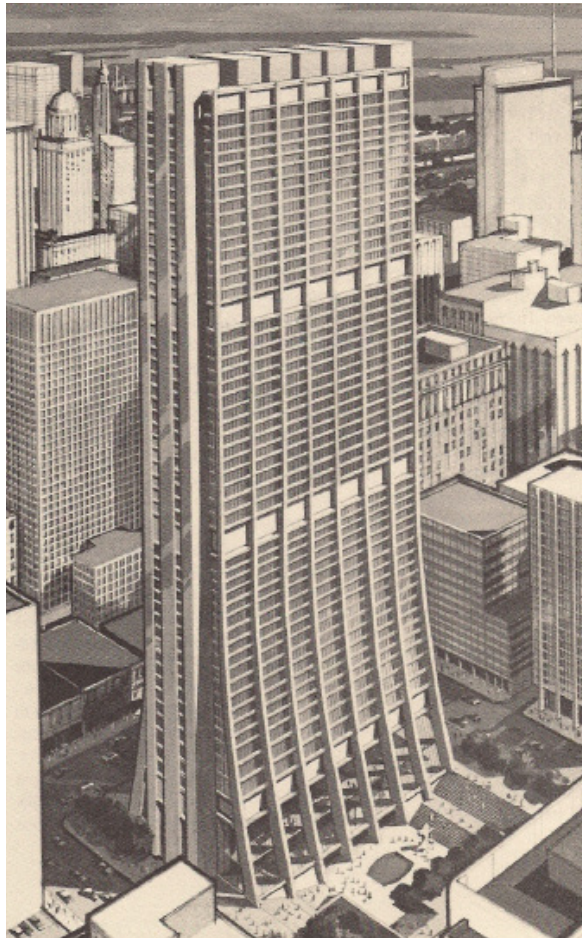
Ferris left Murphy in the late 1960s to work for Bertrand Goldberg. In 1969, he was hired by Graham, Anderson, Probst and White to serve as head designer for CNA's 45-story south tower. This building received a distinguished building award from the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1974. Ferris established an independent practice in 1973, and during the mid-1970s he served as a visiting professor at IIT. He was elected to the College of Fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1976.

## **THE CONTINENTAL CENTER AND POST-WAR REVITALIZATION OF CHICAGO'S LOOP**

The Continental Center serves as an important symbol of post-World War II efforts to rejuvenate Chicago's Loop following a quarter-century lull in skyscraper construction. Completed in 1962, it reflected the city's goals of encouraging private investment and revitalization in Chicago's historic core and helped spark a building boom in the 1960s and early 1970s that had a dramatic impact on the city's urban landscape. The radically modern architecture, including the Continental Center, that characterized post-war buildings in the Loop—glass-and-steel and concrete-framed modernist towers of unprecedented height and scale—demonstrated the vital role that skyscrapers played in projecting an image of affluence and prestige.

The 1960s boom was a long time in coming. The previous Chicago building boom of the 1920s was stopped short by the Great Depression of the 1930s, and new construction remained stagnant through the war years of the early 1940s. During this period, the traditional cycle of urban development—whereby buildings are replaced with ever larger towers that represent the highest and best use of their sites—was reversed. As foreclosures throughout the Loop multiplied, many owners of buildings operating at a loss resorted to demolishing them in favor of parking lots, garages, or one- to two-story speculative commercial buildings called "taxpayers." All of these uses were intended as temporary means to generate short-term income to cover property taxes on a site until the return of prosperity. Other Loop property owners performed minimal maintenance on existing buildings while slashing rents and offering generous concessions as a way to attract and retain tenants in a hyper-competitive rental market. These practices resulted in an office market that featured numerous run-down buildings, dozens of vacant lots, and a building stock that was increasingly considered obsolete.

After the end of World War II in 1945, pent-up demand for modern downtown office



The Continental Center's co-designers, Jacques Brownson (above left) and James Ferris (above right) were both students of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). Brownson's subsequent design for the Daley Center (top left) is similar to that of the Continental Center (top right) in its unusually wide structural bays. Ferris was also associated with large projects while at C.F. Murphy, including the First National Bank of Chicago Building (bottom).

space following the long hiatus in construction was enormous, but it took nearly a decade for the economy and the building industry to gear up for new large-scale projects. In assessing the urban landscape during this era, architectural historian Carl Condit noted: "...the wry comment among the real estate men as late as 1947 was that the Loop might as well be returned to the Indians." The Prudential Building (1952-55), located at the northeast corner of Michigan Avenue and Randolph Street, was the first office tower erected in Chicago's larger central business district since the completion of the Field Building in 1934. Condit described its significance:

The forty-one story steel-framed tower was designed by Naess and Murphy and served two valuable functions: it demonstrated the willingness of a major corporation to invest a large sum of money in its Chicago facilities, and it reminded the building and real estate interests that if any substantial demand for space appeared, there was nothing of prime quality available beyond 5,000 square feet.

Despite the importance of the Prudential Building in shaking the construction industry out of its doldrums, the Loop itself, like most central business districts throughout the nation, was in a state of decline in the 1950s. The post-war suburbs were booming at the expense of central cities, as regional shopping centers, corporate offices and industrial parks drew business and jobs away from the Loop. The city was losing population as well, with middle-class residents replaced by an increasingly poorer population. As the downtown First Ward produced over one-third of the city's tax base, it assumed an ever-greater tax burden as taxpayers were replaced by tax consumers.

In 1955, Mayor Richard J. Daley took office and immediately turned his attention to the Loop. He aimed to improve its visually-tawdry streetscapes with gleaming, glass-and-steel towers that would generate more taxes. Distinctive, cutting-edge architecture was increasingly associated with modernity and prosperity, and such buildings were therefore embraced by city officials as a means to rejuvenate their historic centers. In 1955, the Chicago Central Area Committee was created by the city's top leaders in business and industry for the sole purpose of promoting the revitalization of the downtown area. A new zoning ordinance passed in 1957 encouraged the construction of taller buildings and helped to facilitate the City's goal of increasing downtown density, as did its 1958 Central Area Plan.

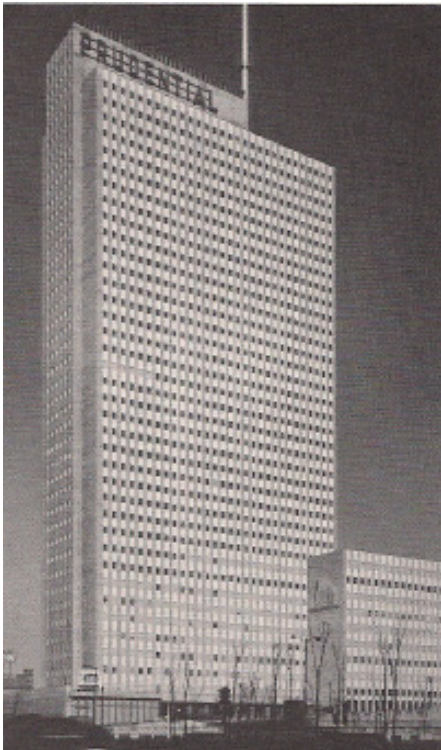
In 1958, Chicago's Central Business District witnessed the completion of its second major post-war corporate headquarters—and the first within the heart of the Loop itself—with the Inland Steel Building (a designated Chicago Landmark). Located at the northeast corner of Monroe and Dearborn, this striking building exemplifies the modernist corporate architecture of the Chicago firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. Featuring stainless-steel cladding, green-tinted floor-to-ceiling windows, clear-span construction and unobstructed spaces on each floor, Inland Steel's design appeared revolutionary within the context of the Loop's late 19th- and early 20th-century building stock.

With the completion of the Inland Steel Building and plans for many other new projects





Following a quarter-century of stagnation due to depression and war, Chicago's Central Business District by the 1950s was characterized by numerous run-down buildings, parking lots (top right), and low-rise buildings called "taxpayers" (above). Skyscrapers such as the Prudential Building (below), built 1952-55, and the Inland Steel Building (bottom right), built 1954-58, symbolized the city's efforts in the post-World War II era to encourage private investment and revitalization in the city's aging historic core.



in the works—including one for a new modern Civic Center in the heart of the Loop across from the City Hall-County Building—the stage was set for a radical transformation of the Loop. The Continental Center, built in 1961-62, was at the forefront of a building boom that lasted from the early 1960s through the early 1970s. The novelty of erecting steel-and-glass skyscrapers at that time—a building type now ubiquitous among cities worldwide—was highlighted by a 1961 *Chicago Tribune* article on the construction of the Continental Center, which stated that: “An unusual aspect of the project is the use of structural steel to outline the building exterior, a new idea in skyscraper construction.”

Modernist towers such as the Continental Center allowed large companies to create new, polished corporate identities and quickly came to symbolize the United State’s vibrant and expanding capitalist economy in the post-war era. They also reflected the newfound faith of corporations in the future of the Loop, many of which were enticed to remain in the Loop or to return to the central city from outlying areas during this period.

The Continental Center is important as one of the Loop’s earliest corporate headquarters to be built in the post-war era. It preceded a plethora of new office towers built throughout Chicago’s Central Business District, some of which include the United States Gypsum Building at 101 S. Wacker Drive (1963); the Equitable Building at 401 North Michigan Avenue (1962-65); Mid-Continental Plaza at 55 W. Monroe Street (1969-72); the Blue Cross-Blue Shield Building at 55 W. Wacker Drive (1968); the IBM Building on the north bank of the Chicago River, between Wabash and State (1969); the John Hancock Center at 875 North Michigan Avenue (1965-70); and the Sears Tower at 233 South Wacker Drive (1968-74). In addition to the Continental Center, several other post-war office towers erected in Chicago’s Central Business District housed insurance companies, including the Prudential, Equitable, Blue Cross-Blue Shield, and Hartford Insurance Companies Buildings.

## **THE CONTINENTAL CENTER AND THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STYLE SKYSCRAPERS IN THE LOOP**

The Continental Center is an early example of an International Style skyscraper in Chicago, a modernist architectural style largely developed in the United States by Ludwig Mies van der Roher and his followers and characterized by modernist glass-and-steel towers. The term “International Style” entered the lexicon in 1932 with an exhibit organized at the Museum of Modern Art by two American architectural historians, Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson. The exhibit and its accompanying catalogue, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*, documented the work of European architects that included Le Corbusier in France, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe in Germany, and J.J.P. Oud in Holland during the 1920s. Hitchcock and Johnson demonstrated that these architects had developed a distinctive architectural style that both reflected 20th-century concerns with functionalism and responded to the social upheaval in Europe following World War I. The architects involved used innovative structural techniques and materials in ways that rejected the styles of the past.



Hallmarks of the International Style as seen mainly in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s included flat roofs and smooth wall surfaces, achieved through the use of materials such as concrete, steel and glass. The style was typically used for low-rise residential and commercial buildings and featured an overwhelmingly horizontal orientation.

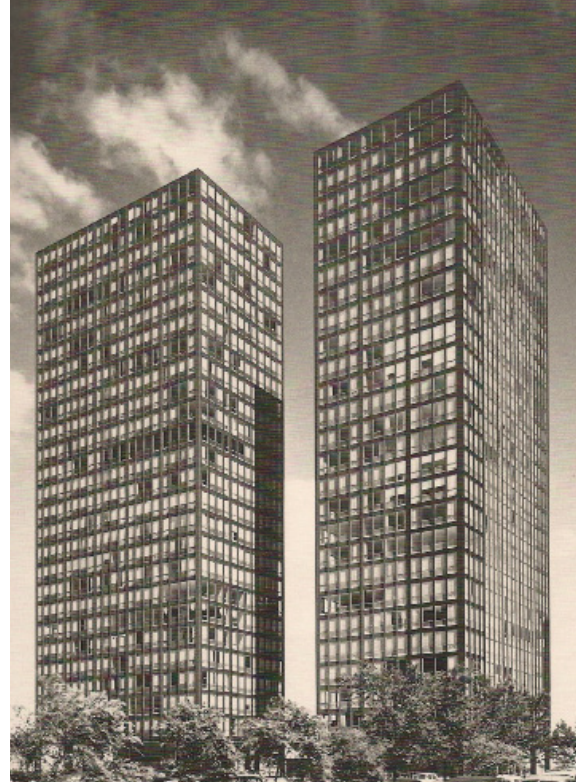
In the United States, however, the International Style became associated with tall steel-and-glass skyscrapers in the post-World War II era thanks largely to the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his followers. Mies, who had headed the Bauhaus (a German school that espoused modern design), came to Chicago from Germany in 1938 to head the School of Architecture at the Armour (now Illinois) Institute of Technology (IIT). Both as educator and as the head of his own architectural firm, Mies advocated rectilinear designs of metal and glass with spatially-flexible interiors. Although he designed a variety of building types, Mies became best-known in America for his International Style skyscrapers. Mies's followers, including such former students as Jacques Brownson and James Ferris of C. F. Murphy (the designers of the Continental Center), took Mies's distinctive modern style and helped make it the dominant style of corporate architecture in America during the 1950s through 1970s.

Mies's twin apartment buildings at 860-880 North Lake Shore Drive (1948-51, a designated Chicago Landmark) established the visual look of International Style skyscrapers. Rectangular massing, "cellular" elevations expressed in steel and glass, and recessed, glass-enclosed lobbies surrounded by freestanding structural columns characterized both 860-880 and other International Style skyscrapers, including the Continental Center. The flexibility of the International Style meant that it could be used for residential, institutional and commercial purposes, and variations on the style were widely built in cities worldwide, including Chicago, by both Mies himself and followers such as C. F. Murphy.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the skyline of Chicago's Loop was transformed with corporate headquarters designed in the International Style, which reestablished Chicago as the leading center of American commercial architecture during this period. Chicago's flourishing Miesian architectural culture of the period—labeled the "Second Chicago School of Architecture" by architectural historians such as Carl Condit—was dominated by architects who had studied under Mies at IIT or worked in his office and then spread his principles through subsequent work at large architectural firms that enjoyed national and international clienteles. The firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill was particularly noted for producing corporate office towers in the International Style. As America's largest architectural firm, SOM played the single, most powerful role in spreading the International Style as developed by Mies among high-profile corporate clients worldwide.

Next to SOM, C.F. Murphy Associates was one of the largest architecture-engineering firms in Chicago working in the International Style. Several of C.F. Murphy's Loop skyscrapers featured the articulation of their underlying steel frames in ways even more dramatic than towers designed by Mies himself. The Continental Center, along with the firm's later Daley Center, were both noted for the bold expression of their metal frames through sweeping bays and powerful exterior columns. These skyscrapers, along with





Mies van der Rohe's twin apartment towers at 860-880 North Lake Shore Drive, built 1948-51 (top right), is the first example of his prototypical International Style skyscrapers, a type that was easily adapted to corporate office towers. Chicago's skyline was transformed in the 1960s and early 1970s with International Style skyscrapers designed by prominent firms, including C.F. Murphy Associates, the architects of the Continental Center, that were influenced by the work of Mies. Examples include the Equitable Building (top left) by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, built 1962-65, and the Time-Life Building (left) by Harry Weese, built 1966-68.

high-profile designs for O’Hare International Airport and McCormick Place, pushed C.F. Murphy Associates to the forefront of the modernist Chicago firms working in the city in the post-war era.

## **CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION**

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sec. 2-120-690), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a final recommendation of landmark designation for an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art or other object within the City of Chicago if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for designation,” as well as possesses sufficient historic design integrity to convey its significance.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Continental Center be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

### ***Criterion 1: Value as an Example of City, State or National Heritage***

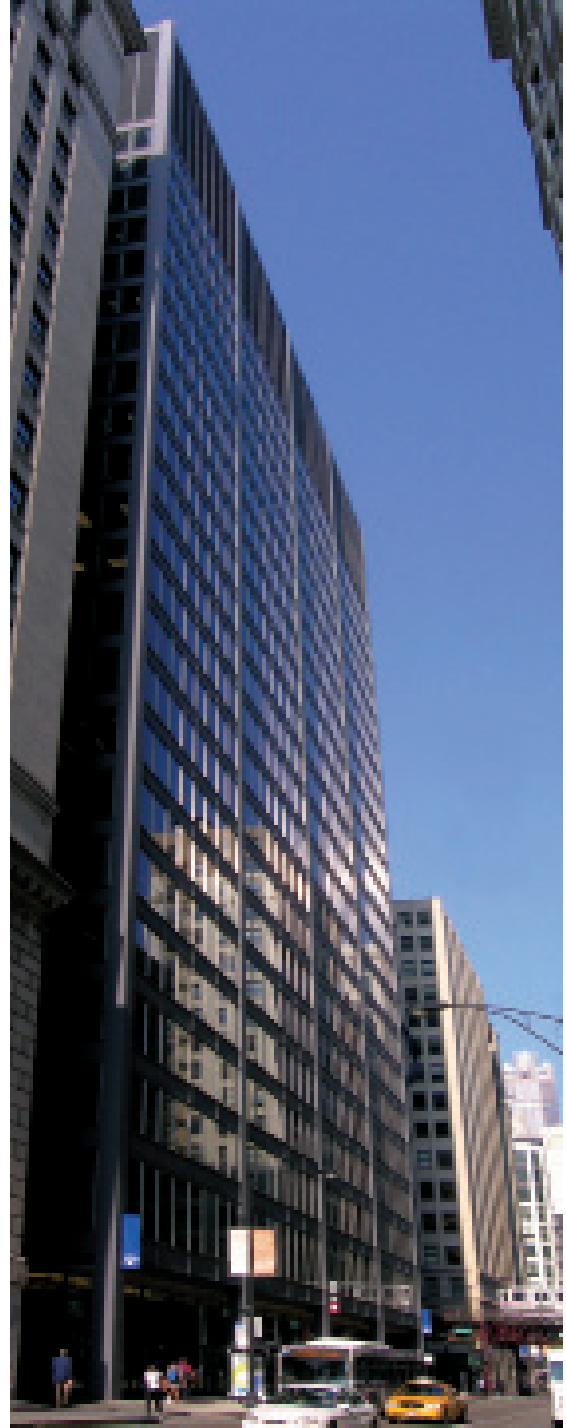
*Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

- Completed in 1962, the Continental Center exemplifies the modernization and redevelopment of Chicago’s Loop during the post-World War II era. As one of the earliest office towers to rise in the Loop since the 1930s, it was at the forefront of the building boom of the 1960s and early 1970s that transformed Chicago’s skyline with a plethora of corporate headquarters designed in the International Style as developed by famed architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and his followers.
- The Continental Center was one of the earliest skyscrapers to be constructed in the Loop in a modern architectural style, symbolizing the city’s efforts in the post-war era to encourage private investment and revitalization in its aging historic core. The new urban landscape that resulted—glass-and-steel and concrete-framed modernist skyscrapers of unprecedented height and scale—demonstrated the vital role that architecture played in projecting a new image of modernity and prosperity for Chicago, reestablishing it as the leading center of American commercial architecture during this period.

### ***Criterion 4: Exemplary Architecture***

*Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship.*

- The Continental Center is an innovative International Style skyscraper and is significant in the history of modern Chicago architecture. The building is noted for its boldly-expressed metal frame and spatial flexibility, both characteristics of the International Style as influenced by the steel-and-glass skyscrapers of Ludwig Mies



Upon its completion, the Continental Center was revolutionary within the context of the Loop's 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century building stock. The design of high-profile commissions such as this pushed C.F. Murphy Associates to the forefront of Chicago's modernist firms working in the post-World War II era.



van der Rohe and his followers.

- The Continental Center is an outstanding example of post-World War II innovative design and engineering. At the time of its construction, it had the largest all-welded structural skeleton ever erected and featured exceptionally wide 42-foot building bays, which were needed to accommodate column-free office space within. Carrying the floors were some of the heaviest steel beams ever used in a high-rise office tower until that time.
- The Continental Center exemplifies the architectural principles of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as disseminated by his followers and former students. Mies's enormous influence on global modern architecture resulted from both his teaching at Chicago's Illinois Institute of Technology, where he was director of the Department of Architecture, and from his Chicago buildings. The resulting International Style skyscrapers by both Mies and firms such as C.F. Murphy transformed skylines in Chicago and around the world in the 1960s and 1970s.

### ***Criterion 5: Work of Significant Architect or Designer***

*Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

- The Continental Center is one of the most significant buildings designed by C.F. Murphy Associates, one of the largest and most prolific modernist firms in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s. C.F. Murphy designed, or was associated with, many of the City's most significant public commissions during the building boom of this period, including terminals at O'Hare International Airport, Chicago's Central District Water Filtration Plant, the Daley Center, and the second McCormick Place convention center. In addition to the Daley Center, C.F. Murphy's skyscrapers—including the Continental Center and the First National Bank of Chicago Building—were highly influential and helped to redefine the Loop in the post-war era.

### ***Integrity Criterion***

*The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architecture or aesthetic value.*

The Continental Center remains an outstanding example of a glass-and-steel skyscraper designed in the International Style and has excellent exterior integrity. The steel curtain walls and original gray-tinted windows remain intact, as do the glass walls enclosing the lobby and the steel structural columns at the building's base. The granite used for the sidewalk paving is also original.

Changes to the exterior of the Continental Center are minor, and include the replacement of two of the original four revolving doors along Jackson Boulevard with new glass doors: one set of double-glass doors and one sliding glass door. Revolving doors have

also been added along the Wabash Avenue elevation. The slatting on the ceiling within the protected colonnade around the recessed, glass-enclosed lobby is non-original. The other change undertaken on the building's exterior is its paint color, which was originally black and is now charcoal gray.

The Continental Center's original U-shaped first-floor building lobby has been subdivided into a smaller rectangular lobby and adjacent retail space. The existing lobby retains its original granite flooring, granite-clad elevator walls and round, granite clock on its central wall. Changes to this lobby are minor and include a non-historic reception desk and "running-water" sculptural wall behind the desk. The lobby's elevator corridors remain intact with original nickel-metal doors. The building's first floor retains its historic sense of visual transparency from the exterior colonnade into the existing lobby.

Adjacent retail spaces subdivided from the original U-shaped lobby also largely retain this historic sense of visual transparency between the exterior colonnade and first-floor interiors. In addition, the retail spaces adjacent to the existing building lobby retain visual transparency between those spaces and the lobby through non-historic, floor-to-ceiling clear-glass partitions.

First-floor retail spaces have been further altered with tenant build-outs and furnishings in order to allow them to function in their new uses. The building's existing rear lobby has been altered with new commercial space and partitions as well. However, some elements of the original building lobby from which these spaces were subdivided remain, including, to varying degrees, original spatial volumes, ceiling heights and ceiling planes, and granite cladding elevator walls and floors.

## **SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art or other object is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its evaluation of the Continental Center, the Commission recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building; and
- The original first-floor building lobby of the building (see plan).

The significant features of the building's original first-floor building lobby include, but are not limited to, the overall historic spatial volume of the original lobby and historic decorative wall, floor, and ceiling materials, finishes and ornamentation, including, but not limited to, original granite wall covering and flooring.



**The Continental Center remains an outstanding example of a glass-and-steel skyscraper designed in the International Style and has excellent exterior integrity. The steel curtain walls and original gray-tinted windows remain intact, as do the glass walls enclosing the lobby and the steel structural columns at the building's base.**





The Continental Center's original U-shaped lobby, which wrapped around three sides of the elevator core and featured unobstructed space, has been truncated by clear glass partition walls along its east and west ends. These partition walls separate the extant central lobby space from commercial and retail spaces on either side.

For purposes of Commission permit review, the portions of the building's first-floor interior that were not part of the original first-floor building lobby are not considered part of the significant features. In addition, later additions to the original first-floor building lobby, including the current concierge desk and "water wall" in the building lobby, as well as build-outs and furnishings associated with current retail tenants, are not considered significant features for the purpose of this designation.

#### *Additional guidelines*

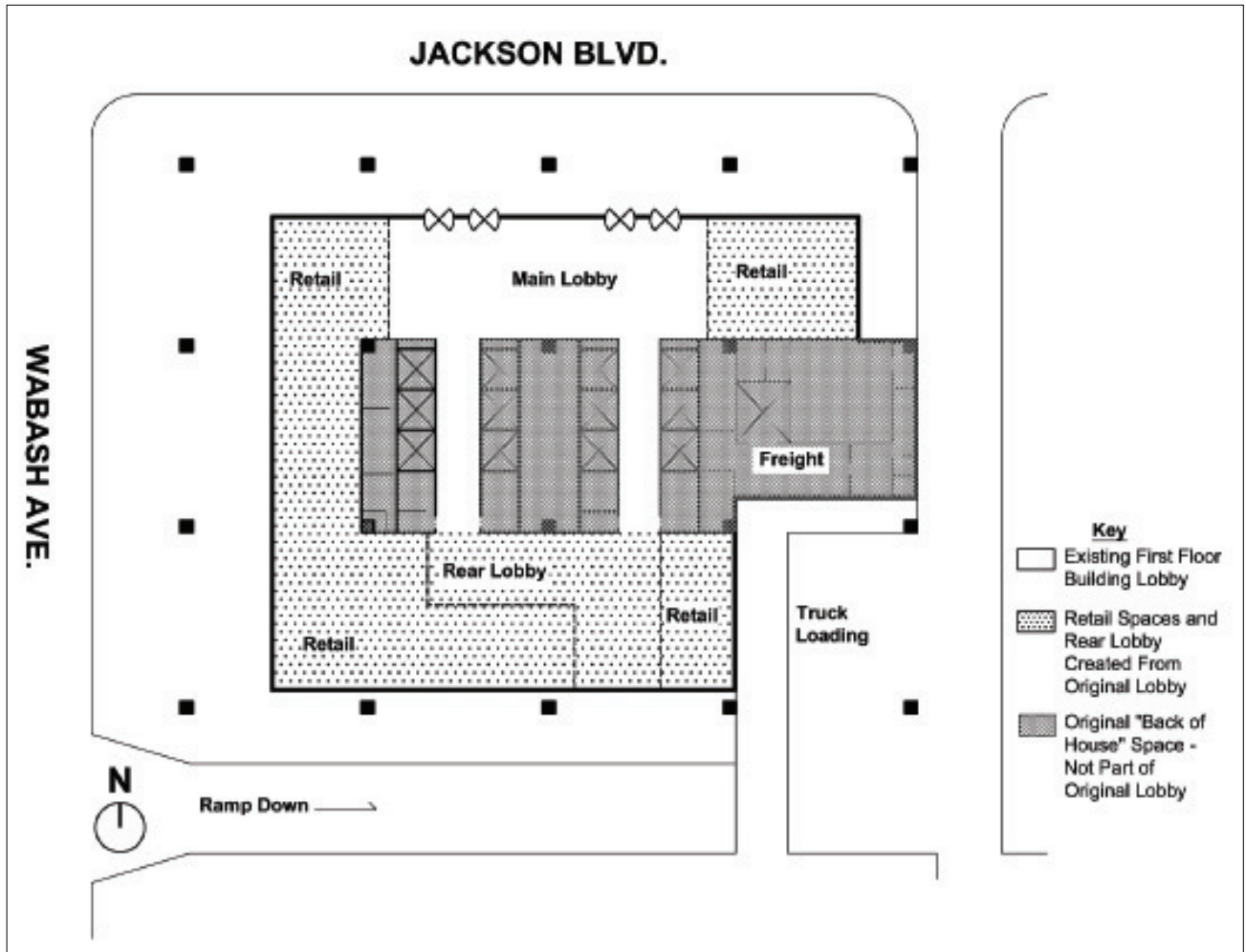
Visual transparency should be maintained between the current Jackson Blvd. building lobby and adjacent retail spaces, as well as visual transparency between the building's arcade and the building lobby and street-facing retail spaces.

In addition, best efforts should be made to maintain and enhance the historic spatial volume, historic ceiling plane and any remaining historic building materials and wall finishes, including but not necessarily limited to granite cladding and flooring, remaining in current retail spaces and the rear portion of the first-floor lobby.

To the extent the significant historical and architectural features of the building include interior spaces specifically identified in the designation ordinance, the Commission's review of work proposed for these interior spaces should ensure that the historic features and character of the building are preserved long-term while allowing reasonable change and flexibility to meet continuing and new needs, whether related to the continued current uses of the building or in accommodating future uses, and to the extent such consideration is not otherwise inconsistent with the intent of the Chicago Landmarks Ordinance.

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**Top:** A plan (not to scale) of the building's current first floor, including the existing building lobby and retail spaces carved from the original U-shaped building lobby. These retail spaces retain, to varying degrees, original granite flooring and granite-clad elevator walls, as well as original spatial volumes.

**Bottom:** These retail spaces also retain visual transparency between their interiors and the existing building lobby, as well as between their interiors and the exterior colonnade.



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### CITY OF CHICAGO

Rahm Emanuel, Mayor

### Department of Housing and Economic Development

Andrew J. Mooney, Commissioner

Patricia A. Scudiero, Managing Deputy Commissioner, Bureau of Planning and Zoning

Eleanor Gorski, Assistant Commissioner, Historic Preservation Division

### Project Staff

Jean L. Guarino (consultant), researching, writing

Terry Tatum, editing

Eleanor Gorski, editing

Alexia Vanek (consultant), layout

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Christopher R. Reed  
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The Commission is staffed by the:



Department of Housing and Economic Development,  
Bureau of Planning and Zoning

Historic Preservation Division  
33 N. LaSalle St., Suite 1600  
Chicago, Illinois 60602  
312.744.3200 (TEL) ~ 312.744.9140 (FAX)  
<http://www.cityofchicago.org/landmarks>

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