

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



ESSEX INN

800 S. MICHIGAN AVENUE

Final Landmark Recommendation adopted by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, December 1, 2016



CITY OF CHICAGO
Rahm Emanuel, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
David Reifman, Commissioner

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within a designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

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ESSEX INN

800 S. MICHIGAN AVENUE

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION: 1961

ARCHITECT: A. EPSTEIN & SONS

INTRODUCTION

The Essex Inn was constructed during the rise in development following World War II. While South Michigan Avenue faced the economic ebbs and flows from the Depression years forward, the stature of the avenue allowed it to remain a premier address in the city for offices, clubs and hotels during the mid-century. Building in the 1950s and 60s was fueled by improvements in infrastructure including the expansion of Lake Shore Drive and the growing interstate network. These developments went hand-in-hand with new and renovated hotel and office buildings along south Michigan Avenue and helped usher in the age of Modern and International style architecture in Chicago. The Essex Inn is one such resource that played a role in this District's development.

The Essex Inn is identified as an associated building in the *Post-World War II Era Context Statement for the Historic Michigan Boulevard District* adopted by the Commission on May 5, 2016,. This building is an International-style high-rise motel that meets district designation criteria 1, 4 and 5 and has sufficient integrity to convey those values. The Essex Inn meets Criterion 1 for its role in the history of Michigan Avenue and the corresponding development of Lake Shore Drive. The Essex Also meets Criterion 4 as an outstanding example of the International Style. Furthermore, the Essex was designed by the noted local firm, A. Epstein and Sons, thereby meeting Criterion 5.



**Essex Inn, circa 1961
(Epstein, "Throwback Thursday, Essex Inn")**

BUILDING DESIGN AND DESCRIPTION

On February 7, 1959, the plan for the new Essex Inn was announced in *Realty & Building*. The developer was the Aristocrat Inns of America, a firm organized by Martin Gecht and Eugene Heytow. The Essex is one among three hotels built by Aristocrat Inns of America that were all located within blocks of each other on Michigan Avenue near Grant Park: the Ascot Inn (today a Best Western) at 1100 S. Michigan Avenue and the Avenue Motel at Roosevelt Road and Michigan Avenue (now demolished). Gecht and Heytow hired the same architecture firm for all three buildings: A. Epstein and Sons. Among the three – Ascot, Avenue, and Essex – the Essex was the largest investment.



Clockwise from Upper Left: 1. Postcard of the Ascot Motel (1100 S. Michigan Avenue) now a Best Western; 2. Postcard of the Essex Inn (800 S. Michigan Avenue); 3. Postcard of the Avenue Motel (Roosevelt and S. Michigan Avenue) which has been demolished. (1 & 3, <http://motelpostcards.blogspot.com/>) (2, Epstein, "Throwback Thursday, Essex Inn")

¹ James M. Gavin, "Downtown Invasion Continues," *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 1960.

Gecht and Heytow firmly embraced both the place of motels in the City's development and the need for more: "What makes a motel a success? Location, they said; that's why the motels are going up on Michigan [A]venue."² Gecht and Heytow's motels targeted the influx of people coming to Chicago for conventions, and the waves of motor-travelers that followed the development of the Interstate. The success of their previous venue, Avenue Inn, two blocks south, encouraged the development of the Ascot and the Essex.

More than just the Essex's location in relation to Chicago's attractions, the Essex site was planned for its convenience to Lake Shore Drive, which was one of the many planned and on-going highway and arterial thoroughfares created under Major Richard J. Daley and the Chicago Department of Development and Planning in 1956. Soon thereafter the completion of the Prudential Building on North Michigan Avenue ended the paralysis in downtown construction that had begun in the Depression years. Daley's public building program was enormous, and he moved it

swiftly forward. One element in that program that had an impact on the District was the construction of the first McCormick Place convention center in 1960. The construction of McCormick Place was an initiative funded using \$41.8 million in state-issued bonds.³ McCormick Place not only served the city to attract revenue but also as a landmark at Chicago's southern gateway; located where Lake Shore Drive linked to the Skyway and the Dan Ryan Expressway. Early in 1967, the first McCormick Place burned down. A new building was built on the same site, using the existing foundations, and opened in 1971.

...where the livin' is easy for business or pleasure!

- On famed Michigan Avenue, overlooking Grant Park and the Lake... close to McCormick Place and other convention centers, commercial and shopping areas, theatres, museums, art centers, and concert halls. All airport limousines stop at our door.
- Free covered parking in motel.
- Heated outdoor swimming pool, with food and beverage service, cabanas and lockers.
- Free TV, radio, ice cubes, and wake-up coffee in every room.
- Luxury rooms and hospitality suites, air-conditioned and soundproofed for comfort and privacy.
- Meeting and banquet rooms for up to 500 persons, with closed circuit TV, projection and public address systems.
- 24-hour switchboard, self-dialing telephones... valet, laundry.
- 3 atmospheric dining rooms and unique cocktail parlour, room service.

ESSEX INN
CHICAGO'S NEW DOWNTOWN MOTEL

MICHIGAN AV. AT 8TH ST., CHICAGO, ACROSS FROM CONRAD HILTON
WE 9-2800 • TWX CG 82

Advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune*, August 13, 1961

² James M. Gavin, "Downtown Invasion Continues," *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 1960.

³ Miles L. Berger, *They Built Chicago: Entrepreneurs Who Shaped A Great City's Architecture*, (Chicago: Book Bonus, Inc., 1992) p. 200.; "History," McCormick Place Chicago, <http://www.mccormickplace.com/about-us/history.php>.

The location, development, and marketing of the Essex Inn are interwoven with the introduction of the Interstate highway network and the creation of new convention sites in and around Chicago. These changes to infrastructure and the addition of conference centers were a long time in the making, which gave motel developers like the Aristocratic Inns of America an opportunity to capitalize on the forthcoming increase of visitors.



**Essex Inn, Pool, circa 1961
(Epstein, “Throwback Thursday, Essex Inn”)**

names such as Breakers, Sands, Tides, and Tropicana, and architecture and images that would not have been out of place in California or Florida. Besides their locations near the lake, shoreline motels also emphasized their newness, in contrast to the rest of Chicago’s existing and aging hotel accommodations.⁵

The Essex is also significant as a superior example of the glass-box Modern style that came to fruition in this era. Post-War architectural styles have not been sufficiently categorized and are often branded under blanket terms like ‘International’ and ‘Modern.’ Nevertheless, the International style is defined by box shaped buildings that have a strong vertical articulation, revealed skeletal frames, smooth wall surfaces, and an absence of ornamentation. Materials and composition are largely used to define style. Often expressed as curtain wall system of enameled spandrels and glass, Epstein’s design for the Essex is a superior example of the style.

The property is noteworthy for its association with the growth of the motel industry in Chicago. Dating back to the Crash of 1929, only one hotel was built in downtown Chicago, the Executive House built in 1958 at 71 Wacker Drive. In contrast, “motels” were popping up around the edges of Chicago, as well as in and around the Loop.⁴ A characteristic of many of these motels was marketing that suggested a destination far from the Midwest, with

⁴ James M. Gavin, “City’s Hotels Wage Battle for Business,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 22, 1962.

⁵ Patrick Steffes, *Forgotten Chicago: Chicago’s Shoreline Motels* (7-20-2012, 9-8-2012, 2-27-2013, 6-30-2013), <http://forgottenchicago.com/features/>

The Essex Inn was the largest and most expensive of the three motels built by the Aristocrat Inns of America on Michigan Avenue. The fourteen-story glass and aluminum building featured 285 guest rooms, the first outdoor swimming pool along Michigan Avenue, a restaurant, cocktail lounge, and an adjoined parking structure with room for 200 cars.⁶ All in all, the Essex Inn cost \$6 million, or \$48 million today, and was to be operated under a 50-year lease by Gecht and Heytow.⁷

Ground breaking for the Essex Inn was held on March 14, 1960, and the event included guest speaker Mayor Richard J. Daley.⁸ At the event, the head of the Michigan Boulevard Association, Ross J. Beatty, Jr. declared, “We view the project as a significant step in the growing development of the south end of Michigan Boulevard.”⁹ Bernard Weissbound, president of Metropolitan Structures, the owner of the land leased Gecht and Heytow, said of the Essex, “We feel the inn will reflect the architectural boldness and imaginative planning characteristic of Metropolitan, which is completing large scale urban renewal projects initiated by Greenwald in Newark, Detroit, and New York City.”¹⁰

The Essex Inn advertised itself as a destination for vacationing families and convention going businessmen alike. An ad in a 1961 *Tribune* boasted its location “on famed Michigan Avenue overlooking Grant Park and the Lake...close to McCormick Place and other convention centers, commercial and shopping areas, theaters, museums, art centers, and concert halls.” Some of the other amenities highlighted included air-conditioned and soundproofed rooms and suites, self-dialing telephones, and “wake-up coffee” in every room. In some ways, Essex’s location – both near the lake and easily accessible from the expressways – made it a destination in its own right. Gecht and Heytow explained that they chose the Essex Inn’s site adjacent to the Grand Hilton to entice guests who don’t like the formality of large hotels.¹¹

The Essex was a leader within the motel movement in Chicago. Not only were motels moving into downtown, but the Essex was located amongst some of the most prominent hotels in Chicago.¹² To not limit the motel to just leisure travelers, the Essex also advertised its meeting and banquet rooms that could hold up to 500 people and included projection and public address systems. The Essex was also located within close proximity to Chicago’s newest convention center, McCormick Place, which opened in 1960. The addition of McCormick Place did in fact make Chicago a leader amongst U.S. cities for hosting conventions. In 1964, the city hosted more than 1,100 meetings and trade shows, which brought in more than 1,300,000 visitors who spent an estimated \$300 million on hotels, meals, and other expenses.¹³

⁶ James M. Gavin, “Downtown Invasion Continues,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 1960.

⁷ Annual Review of 1960 - Realty and Building – January 28, 1961; “Essex Inn Opens,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 18, 1961; “Work Starts on \$4-Million Hotel at Michigan and 8th,” Realty and building, February 20, 1960.

⁸ Groundbreaking Event Invitation – available at the A. Epstein and Sons International Archives

⁹ “Break Ground for 4 Million Motor Hotel,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 15, 1960, p. 4.

¹⁰ James M. Gavin, “Motel Hotel for S. Michigan Av.,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 15, 1960.

¹¹ James M. Gavin, “City’s Hotels Wage Battle for Business,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 22, 1962.

¹² James M. Gavin, “Downtown Invasion Continues,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 1960.

¹³ “The Nation’s Leading Host City,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 5, 1964.

The Essex Inn was sited, developed, and advertised in a way that epitomized contemporary travel and tourism trends in the mid-century United States. The Essex Inn was convenient to Lake Shore Drive and conference centers and offered an informal atmosphere with above average amenities. Gecht and Heytow used the publicized expressway and convention center development to capitalize on their Michigan Avenue locations. Their heavy investment in the Essex Inn appealed to convention-goers and travelers alike.



Essex Inn groundbreaking, 1960, (from left to right) Mayor Richard J. Daley, Ralph Epstein, Ray Epstein and Barney Weissbourd (Epstein, “Throwback Thursday, Essex Inn”)

ARCHITECT: A. EPSTEIN AND SONS

A. Epstein and Sons was founded by Abraham Epstein in 1921. Abraham Epstein emigrated from Kiev in 1905. He studied civil engineering at the University of Illinois and graduated in 1911. Epstein typically did work with industrial buildings – most notably, Epstein was responsible for much of the Central Manufacturing District warehouses. As his son Sidney later put it, “We ended up with Central District Warehouse #123. We did over a hundred buildings because of that [first] building.”¹⁴ In addition to working on the Central Manufacturing District, A. Epstein constructed many traditional industrial and commercial buildings throughout the city during the 1920s and mid-1930s, including the City Furniture Company Building (1922), the J.S. Hoffman Company Building (1922), the Independent Casing Company Building (1922), the Klee Brothers’ Building (1925), the Chicago City Bank & Trust Building (1929), the International Amphitheater (1934), and Spiegel Administration Building in Chicago, Illinois (four-story addition, 1941-42). These buildings were typically multi-story, masonry structures with Classical Revival or Art Deco ornamentation in terra cotta or limestone.¹⁵

After serving in World War II, Abraham’s sons, Raymond and Sidney, joined and Abraham added “and Sons” to the name. The firm started with a staff of only four, and by 1950, the firm had forty employees, fairly small compared to rival firms at the time.¹⁶ When Raymond and Sidney joined the firm, they strove to expand their geographic area and building types.¹⁷ In the 1950s, the A. Epstein & Sons secured commissions for its first high-rise structures in Chicago – the Twin Tower Apartments (1950), the Cabrini-Green Apartment Complex (1958), and the Borg-Warner Building (1959).



Borg-Warner Building, 200 S. Michigan Avenue, Designed by A. Epstein & Sons, Completed 1958 (Epstein, “Throwback Thursday, Borg-Warner Building”)

¹⁴ Betty J. Blum, *Oral History of Sidney Epstein*, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1994, revised 2006, p. 186-187

¹⁵ City of Chicago, “Landmark Designation Report: Spiegel Administration Building,” November 2010. P. 26.

¹⁶ Blum, *Oral History of Sidney Epstein*, p. 49

¹⁷ Blum, *Oral History of Sidney Epstein*, p. 35

Abraham Epstein died suddenly in 1958. That year *Architectural Forum* ranked A. Epstein and Sons as the fourteenth largest architectural firm nationally and the sixth largest specifically in industrial construction.¹⁸ After Abraham's death, Raymond and Sidney took over the company. In the 1950s, A. Epstein and Sons continued to broaden their work into high-rises, factories, medical centers, and more. The firm began working in Design-Build projects and expanding the firm domestically and internationally. In the late fifties and early sixties, A. Epstein & Sons worked alongside Mies van der Rohe on the Federal Center (1974). Simultaneously, Epstein completed four motel buildings, the Avenue Inn (1960), the Essex Inn (1961), the Ascot Inn (1961), and the McCormick Inn (1973). Epstein's work from this era is highly evocative of Miesian architectural principles. It utilizes rectangular forms with precision and pattern as established from the structural frame. Other local Epstein buildings from this era include 300 S. Wacker (1972) and the Crain Communications Building (1984).¹⁹ The firm remains headquartered in Chicago.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Section 2-120-690), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

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

Criterion 1: Critical Part of City's Heritage

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

- The Essex Inn exemplifies the history of Michigan Avenue and the corresponding development of Lake Shore Drive and the Interstate network.

Criterion 4: Important Architecture

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

- Essex is one of two glass-box International style buildings in the Michigan Avenue Historic District.

¹⁸ Blum, *Oral History of Sidney Epstein*, p. 74

¹⁹ Blum, *Oral History of Sidney Epstein*, p. 74

Criterion 5: Important Architect

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

- The Essex was designed by A. Epstein & Sons. The firm was responsible for the design of both glass-box International-style structures in the Michigan Avenue Historic District. Founded in 1921, the firm was prolific but particularly noted for modernist designs.

The Essex Inn also meets the additional requirements for designation outlined in the *Post-World War II Era Context Statement for the Historic Michigan Boulevard District* adopted by the Commission on May 5, 2016, which state the following:

- The building must be built during the post-World War II era, or between 1930 and 1972, and be located within the boundaries of the Historic Michigan Boulevard District.
- The architectural style of the building must reflect the influence of the Modern Movement in architecture.
- The building must have been built as an entirely new structure and not be a new façade or remodeling of an earlier building.
- The height, massing and orientation of the building must contribute to the Michigan Avenue street wall which is a character-defining feature of the Michigan Boulevard District.
- The building must reflect the historic context of the Historic Michigan Boulevard District in the post-World War II era.

Integrity Criteria

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, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.

The Essex Inn possesses a high degree of integrity. On the exterior, changes have been limited. Of particular note, storefronts, ground floor openings and upper floor fenestration is intact. Also of note is the retention of the rooftop sign. The primary exterior change was the infilling

of the three bays at the ground level east. This infill was done sensitively, working within the existing framed opening and without structural modifications. Similar upper floor glazing has been replaced within the original frames.

As with most buildings, the interior has been upgraded with new finishes. There have been few modifications to interior configurations. Floors three and up essentially reflect the original condition but with updated finishes and furnishings. The first floor has been modified but not inappropriately. With the infill of the recessed storefronts, the lobby area was enlarged slightly at the east, though without significantly altering the overall feeling. The space remains dominated by the full height floor to ceiling glass storefronts. The stair to the second floor at the southwest is indicative of many of the changes; it is original and many of the salient materials remain, but the surrounding walls have a modern paint scheme. Similarly, the lobby area to the north features a largely intact configuration and organization, but while the elevator location, setting and surrounds are original, the adjacent areas, including the front desk, have new finishes to create a more modern feel.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district 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 the most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark. The significant historical and architectural features of the Essex Inn are identified as follows:

- all exterior elevations of and rooflines of the Building visible from public rights-of-way; and
- The rooftop sign reading Essex Inn on the east elevation. The sign may be changed, though the size, proportion and open character of the existing sign should be maintained. This does not constitute approval of said changes which will still need to be reviewed by the Permit Review Committee of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks per 2-120-720 of the Municipal Code. And any changes must also comply with current zoning and building regulations.

The three-story parking structure located to the south of and attached to the hotel is not considered a significant feature for the purpose of this proposed landmark designation and may be demolished. The demolition of the parking structure would not adversely affect any significant historical or architectural feature of the Building or the Historic Michigan Boulevard District, and would be in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings, as well as the criteria for review of permit applications established in Article III of the Commission’s Rules and Regulations. The foregoing is not intended to limit the Commission’s discretion to approve other changes.

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Heritage Consulting Group: Essex Inn, cover

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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