Overview:
The Maxwell Street neighborhood has experienced tremendous change and urban renewal over the past century. The structure at 1352 S. Union reflects this. First constructed as a German School in 1869, it later became home to a Romanian synagogue, an African-American church, and then briefly an arts center. All of these changes in use have reflected the changing ethnic and socio-economic character of what was once Chicago’s port-of-entry neighborhood. While the appearance of the structure has been partially altered and now stands in the middle of new construction, the Dan Ryan Expressway, and urban renewal, this context simply reflects the transient nature of the neighborhood and demonstrates the tremendous staying power of one of the few structures to remain from before the 1871 Chicago Fire.
History:
As a pre-fire structure that served many purposes in the port-of-entry Maxwell Street neighborhood, Gethsemane Church has a rich history. Designed by Augustus Bauer (architect of St. Patrick’s Church) and constructed in 1869, the structure initially served as a German School (the city’s first, in fact) for the neighboring Zion Evangelical Church. Though it was tied in with the church, this was not an explicitly religious school. The congregation later moved west in the typical Chicago pattern of migration, and the building was transformed to a new use -- a Romanian Jewish congregation moved in and the building became a synagogue in 1905. This congregation later moved west to Lawndale, and the building became Gethsemane Missionary Baptist Church – an African-American congregation – by 1935. Alterations to the front of the building took place soon thereafter. The church was noted as being “one of the most important institutions in family life” in the surrounding neighborhood (then known as “Black Bottom”), and the structure remained in use as Gethsemane until 2002, when it briefly became an arts/performance space called South Union Arts. While the structure has been altered over time (a new façade was added in 1944 when the building served as Gethsemane Church), the alterations reflect the changing uses of the structure over time to serve different populations that came through the Maxwell Street area.

Threat:
The church has been vacant for several years. The John Paul II Newman Center at neighboring University of Illinois at Chicago is aggressively trying to purchase the property in hopes of razing the building and constructing a Catholic-centric dormitory facility. Neighbors are opposed to this plan, citing density and traffic.