Preservation Chicago Unveils the 2018 Chicago 7 Most Endangered...

William Rainey Harper High School

OVERVIEW:
Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Board of Education are moving forward with a plan to close four Englewood community area high schools, including William Rainey Harper High School, and replace them all with one single, $85 million state-of-the-art campus projected to open in 2019. More recently, Chicago Public Schools announced that the closing of Harper will be delayed until the new school building is completed. However, the future of Harper High School and its building remains uncertain.

HARPER HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY:
Harper High School, located at 6520 S. Wood Street in the Englewood community of Chicago, opened in 1911. The school was named in honor of William Rainey Harper (1856-1906), a legendary educator who served as president of both the University of Chicago and Bradley University, and who was a champion of modernizing the facilities and standardizing the academic curriculum of the Chicago Public Schools.

Designed by celebrated architect, Dwight Perkins, the four-story brick structure is bold in its execution, with its well-organized composition expressing its strong massing and verticality. This effect is further emphasized by wide brick piers and accentuated with large flat masonry surfaces, at both the corners and uppermost portions of the building. Within these flat-plane surfaces are elaborate patterns of intricate brickwork which are integrated with bands of ornament. The interlaced and accentuated fenestration of the facade further emphasizes the verticality of the structure. This is an amazing and very creative use of a two-toned patterned brickwork to create a beautifully ornamented facade with inexpensive materials; thus reducing the amount of expensive materials like limestone or terra cotta required for construction.

William Rainey Harper High School

Address: 6520 S. Wood Street
Neighborhood: Englewood
Architect: Dwight Perkins
Date: 1909-1911
Style: Prairie Style / Chicago School

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Portions of the building's base and entries project from the building's surface and create a composition of a defined base, middle and top-section, much like the tall and refined commercial buildings of the period and following the principals and methodology of architect Louis Sullivan and the Chicago School of Architecture. The overall effect of the design creates a very sophisticated and beautiful series of elevations and facades that visually enhance the building and surrounding neighborhood.

Being one of several such designs in this similar genre, William Rainey Harper High School, along with Grover Cleveland Elementary School on the Northwest Side, were among the first to be constructed by the Chicago Board of Education/Chicago Public Schools in this style, employed by architect Dwight Perkins. Others constructed in a similar style followed in the coming years included Noble, Gary, Jefferson, and Corkery which all vary slightly. However, this is one of the finest examples of Perkins’s work using this artistic patterned brickwork composition and in this style.

DWIGHT PERKINS HISTORY:
Dwight Perkins left school to work in the Chicago Stock Yards after the untimely death of his father, but soon found employment as an apprentice with an architecture firm. After receiving his degree in architecture from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Perkins returned to Chicago and began working for the architectural firm of Burnham & Root. His talents were soon recognized and he became a highly-valued employee. Perkins was entrusted with running the prestigious and busy office after John Wellborn Root's unexpected death from pneumonia in 1891 and with Daniel Burnham heavily involved in preparations for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893.
During this period, he supervised the completion of the Root-designed Monadnock Building, Chicago's tallest masonry skyscraper and a Designated Chicago Landmark. In 1894, Perkins left to start his own architectural practice. His first commission was an 11-story office building at 64 E. Van Buren Street with an 850-seat theater for Steinway Piano Company, which later became known as Steinway Music Hall/Ziegfeld Hall, an outstanding building demolished in 1970. Perkins's architectural office was located in Steinway Hall which became a magnet for innovative architects inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement and the writings of Louis Sullivan, such as Robert and Allen Pond, Robert Spencer, Walter Burley Griffin, Perkins's cousin Marion Mahony, and Frank Lloyd Wright, a core group of architects who kept offices in the building and who would later develop the Prairie School style of architecture.

In 1905, with stellar recommendations from Daniel Burnham, Dwight Perkins was appointed as the Chief Architect to the Board of Education. He served in this capacity for five years during a productive time for the construction of public schools. Perkins designed 25 schools throughout the city for the Chicago Board of Education, and made drawings for school building expansions and additions for up to 40 more.

The most recognized of his school buildings is Carl Schurz High School, built in 1910 on Chicago's Northwest Side, and a Designated Chicago Landmark. Another Perkins-designed building, Lyman Trumbull School on Chicago's North Side in the Andersonville community is in the process of being reopened as a private school after being closed for five years, and this extraordinary building is being considered for Chicago Landmark Designation.

Construction of Harper High School in Englewood began in 1909 and the school opened in 1911. Perkins incorporated his sense of humanity and progressive attitude into his school designs and brought about some important changes to school architecture. He wanted the buildings to serve as community centers after regular school hours, so he placed auditoriums on the first floor to make them accessible for community functions.
Perkins widened stairways and hallways to reduce overcrowding. Additionally, he placed bathrooms on every floor and maximized natural light in the classrooms. These were innovative design concepts that have since become standard features of contemporary school design.

Perkins was a strong advocate for children's playgrounds and open space, which were radical ideas in his day. Most schools of that period were built close to the street and often without playgrounds. In his commissions, he provided more generous setbacks, more extensive landscaping, and created more open-space around the school buildings for larger playgrounds.

Perkins's advocacy for open space led to him to be appointed as a member of the Special Parks Commission headed by prominent Chicago architects, and in 1904, he became the first president of the Chicago Regional Planning Commission, which later evolved into the Cook County Forest Preserve. His leadership contributed to the formation of the Cook County Forest Preserves along with his friend and colleague, Jens Jensen, the celebrated landscape architect for Chicago’s West Park System. Dwight Perkins continued to serve on the Chicago Park District and Cook County Forest Preserve Boards until his retirement.

Despite his remarkable contributions, Perkins was forced to leave his role of Chief Architect to the Chicago Board of Education for political reasons, presumably his refusal to direct over-priced contracts to politically-connected contractors. Returning to private practice, Perkins remained busy designing settlement houses, park buildings, and private residences. At the Lincoln Park Zoo, he designed the much-beloved Lion House and Cafe Brauer, both Designated Chicago Landmarks, and North Pond Cafe (originally a warming station for North Pond skaters).
Some of his other existing public school buildings are Moos, Hayt, Stewart, Cleveland, Pullman, Jahn, Tilton, Trumbull, Pullman, Bowen, and Schurz High Schools.

HISTORY OF ENGLEWOOD:
The history of Englewood begins in the 1850’s at the crossing of two rail lines, near what is now 63rd and Wentworth. The early settlers were primarily German and Irish railroad workers and truck farmers who settled near the railway junction. The Stock Yards opened in June of 1865, a few miles to the north, and many of the people who were employed there found homes in Englewood. In 1889, the City of Chicago annexed Englewood and investment in the community expanded significantly with the construction of brick two flats, apartment buildings, banks, schools, hospitals, churches and other institutions among the existing older wooden cottages. The city’s street car system extended into Englewood, and in 1907 Englewood got its own “L” line extension into the community, now known as the CTA’s Green Line.

The South Side community of Englewood has seen many changes since it was annexed into the City of Chicago in 1889. What was once a thriving residential and commercial area, centered around 63rd and Halsted Streets, has suffered decades of disinvestment and population loss. The community continues to struggle to overcome a host of challenges and reverse these declines.

THREAT:
In late 2017, Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Board of Education announced they will be moving forward with a project that would close four Englewood schools: Harper High School, Hope College Prep, Paul Robeson High School, and TEAM Englewood. The latest proposal by the Chicago Board of Education is to demolish Robeson High School and use the site to construct a new $85 million high school campus. The remaining three schools will be closed over the next few years, and their futures remain unknown.

This comes on the heels of the Chicago Board of Education’s decision to close 49 public schools in 2013. At that time, Mayor Rahm Emanuel created the “Advisory Committee for School Repurposing” in an effort to create a plan and to implement that plan for repurposing these buildings.
Some of the schools are being used for new schools or administrative offices. Others have been sold to developers for adaptive reuse. However, many of the closed schools remain unused with an uncertain future, such as the Perkins-designed Francis Scott Key School in the Austin Community.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**
There are reports of a possible sale of two of the Englewood schools, but Preservation Chicago worries that if William Rainey Harper High School remains empty, it could fall into disrepair. If Harper High School is not used as a school, Preservation Chicago recommends that the building be adaptively reused for affordable housing, senior housing, and/or veterans housing. Classrooms could easily be converted into housing units. Additionally, Harper High School has a large auditorium, an indoor pool, and a gymnasium which could be utilized as a community fitness center and community gathering space, possibly a Chicago Park District field house.

Recently, there has been positive development in the Englewood shopping district at 63rd and Halsted Streets, including a new Whole Foods and other smaller investments. The repurposing of this significant Dwight Perkins designed school building would be a highly visible investment that could serve community members and catalyze further investment in the Englewood community. Additionally, reuse would protect and celebrate the neighborhood’s existing historical and aesthetic resources. We further recommend that Harper High School be considered for a Chicago Landmark Designation to protect it from possible demolition or harm in the future.