OVERVIEW:
In the early 20th century, electrical substation buildings were built across Chicago to electrify the city. They were built in various architectural styles, including Prairie School, Art Deco, and Classical Revival, and their unique ornament often celebrated the innovative new technology.

Electrification was extraordinary innovation that allowed a tremendous leap forward in the quality of life for city dwellers. The novelty and excitement around the distribution of electricity has faded and today’s electrical infrastructure is largely utilitarian.

Constructed by Samuel Insull’s Commonwealth Edison utility conglomerate, many of the early electrical substation buildings were truly architecturally magnificent. They were designed to be assets to their surrounding communities and present Commonwealth Edison in a positive light. Many electrical substation buildings remain in operation in conditions that range from good to poor, while others are vacant and endangered. As the utility grid has been modernized over the years, we hope that these marvelous buildings will be repurposed and preserved.
Chicago 7: Washington Park Substation

HISTORY:
The history of electric power in Chicago begins with multiple electric generation companies in the 1880s, followed by utility baron Samuel Insull consolidating many of these companies into his Chicago Edison (later Commonwealth Edison) company in the 1890s.

Insull’s first substation was opened on the Near North Side in 1899 which transformed power generated from its efficient generating plants to home-use voltage in an area nearest the largest load demand. The substation concept was a huge success, and Insull began constructing substations all over the city, initially in rented property, and then beginning in 1901 in purpose-built structures. This concept created efficiencies in power generation and distribution that resulted in falling electricity rates, more subscribers and massive expansion of the metropolitan region over the next 30 years.

These purpose-built substations, particularly from the 1910s, were mostly built of a high quality by notable architects including Holabird and Roche; Shepley, Rutan and Coolidge; and particularly Hermann von Holst, whose firm Von Holst & Fyfe and his own independent practice designed a majority of the substations built between the 1910s and 1930s, many in a unique Prairie School style. These substations were constructed of durable materials and were designed to house heavy electrical equipment. Other substations were constructed for the streetcar and elevated railroad companies, as well as municipal agencies, and many are of a similar architectural pedigree and quality.
INDIVIDUAL HISTORY/THREAT:
One substation, in particular, faces a threat of demolition by neglect.

The Washington Park Substation at 6141 S. Prairie Avenue is an excellent example of the many substations built across the Chicago region, and it currently faces a threat of “demolition by neglect”. This substation is larger than most as it was built to distribute higher voltages to neighborhood substations.

Constructed in stages between 1928 and 1939, it was designed by prolific substation architect Hermann von Holst. It features unique power-related ornament, including carved limestone light bulbs on its façade.

Unfortunately, it currently sits vacant and is currently listed for sale.

6141 S. Prairie Avenue is orange-rated in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey.
RECOMMENDATIONS:
Preservation Chicago recommends that the City of Chicago seek a Landmark Designation for significant substation buildings as part of a larger Thematic Chicago Landmark District. The best examples of different eras and styles of substation construction across the city should be identified and protected.

Also, the city and utility company should be proactive in finding new uses for substation buildings that are obsolete or no longer in use, such as the building identified above on Prairie Avenue in Washington Park. These structures are a unique part of Chicago’s built environment and their story and architectural pedigree, as well as their distinctive interior spaces, make them ideal candidates for landmark protection and adaptive reuse.

The von Holst substation located at 924 N. Clark Street in Gold Coast has been beautifully renovated and converted into a single family home and is being marketed for $10 million.
LIST OF SUBSTATIONS:
von Holst Substations Requiring Maintenance

• 6141 S. Prairie Avenue
• 6249 S. Prairie Avenue
• 6913 S. Kenwood Avenue
• 6921 S. Kenwood Avenue
• 1708 W. Carroll Street
• 626 E. 40th Street
• 2195 S. East End, Chicago Heights
• 15737 West Avenue, Harvey

Well Maintained von Holst Substations

• 4401 N. Clifton Street - “Suggested for Chicago Landmark Designation” as part of a thematic Power Station/Substation Landmark District by Preservation Chicago in 2017
• 1500 W. 123rd Street
• 1618 S. Prairie Avenue
• Butterfield Road and Eastern Avenue, Bellwood

Well Maintained Substations by Other Architects

• 1042 N. Western Avenue
• 121 N. Dearborn Street
• 924 N. Clark Street (residence)