OVERVIEW

Chicago was once the railroad center of the nation, linked to a network of substantial passenger and freight railroads, many crisscrossing the country through our city, and often terminating at one of the great railway stations. These railroad structures, terminals, power plants, office buildings and stations at one time dotted downtown Chicago and its perimeter. Since the 1970s, many of these buildings have been lost to demolition. With those losses, our City’s strong connection to the railroads, and its shared history, has been almost completely obliterated.

The iconic and austere, Chicago Union Station Power House is truly a significant building, worthy of preservation, protections...
Chicago 7: Chicago Union Station Power House
and reuse, with its streamlined Art Moderne/Art Deco facades and smokestacks. The building exemplifies the story of Chicago’s growth as a railroad and transportation center beginning in the pioneering days of the 1850s.

The Union Station Power House, also known originally as the Union Station Boiler Plant, is part of a network of buildings, systems, and rail tracks constructed in the 1920s and 1930s by the architectural firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst & White for the Chicago Union Station Company – CUSCo. Their work also included Chicago’s Union Station, its Great Hall and grand Waiting Room, along with the separate and expansive Beaux-Arts Concourse Building, which was senselessly demolished in 1969. The Chicago Union Station Power House has been out of service since 2011, is currently mothballed, and is being advanced by Amtrak for demolition to make way for a storage and maintenance shed.

HISTORY

Chicago’s central role in the national rail network was unparalleled by any other city in the nation, with the highest amount of passenger and freight traffic. This allowed for early industries to flourish, ranging from coal and raw products for manufacturing, to agriculture including wheat, corn, grains, and meat packing. Chicago’s robust rail system also affected the city’s residential population. As industrial business expanded in Chicago, its population also expanded as laborers and their families came to the city to work and live. Chicago’s location at the hub of the national railroad network established Chicago as the capital of the Midwest.
Today, most of Chicago’s grand terminal train stations have been demolished, including:
1. The old Northwestern Terminal by architects Frost & Grainger, completed in 1911, with the largest Guastavino tile arch vault ceiling in the world. The grand station, with its columned Waiting Room, was considered for Chicago Landmark designation, but denied under the Mayor Jane Byrne administration and demolished in 1987. It was a great tragedy which could have been avoided;
2. The LaSalle Street Station with its tower offices above, also designed by architects Frost & Grainger of 1903, which was senselessly razed in 1981;
3. The Illinois Central Station by architect, Bradford L. Gilbert in 1893. This station was the gateway railway station for the Great Migration of African-Americans from the South to Chicago and beyond. It was demolished in 1972.
4. Grand Central Station, with its soaring stone tower and adjoining hotel, by architect Solon S. Beman. The station operated from 1890 until its demolition in 1969;
5. The Pennsylvania Railroad Freight Terminal, once the largest in the country, was designed by architect William Lightfoot Price in 1915-1918 and located at 323 W. Polk Street until its demolition in 1974; 6. The massive Concourse Building of Chicago’s Union Station, designed by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White and opened in 1925. It was replaced with two commercial buildings in 1969; and 7. The original Illinois Central Depot, also known as The Great Central Depot, constructed in 1856 by Otto Matz for the Illinois Central (I.C.) and Chicago & Alton Railroads and located at South Water Street and Michigan Avenue—below current grade. The station was used as an I.C. freight terminal from about 1893 until its demolition for the Illinois Center complex in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

Demolition has erased most of our railroad-related buildings and terminals with the exceptions of the great passenger terminal buildings in the Chicago Union Station Headhouse & Waiting Room/Great Hall and Dearborn Station, which is no longer a rail terminal but Landmarked and repurposed as a small office and retail center. It is simply tragic that these once grand buildings and industry, with it transportation-related facilities, which helped to build Chicago, have been destroyed.

In contrast to the more Beaux-Arts style Chicago Union Station complex, the Union Station Power House was designed and constructed in the Art Moderne and Art Deco styles, reflecting the streamlined style of the time. The building, with its large volume and strong vertical massing, also exemplifies the industrial might associated with generating and supplying power to operate a system of train-related infrastructure and buildings.
Chicago 7: Chicago Union Station Power House

Union Station Power House and “The 78” Technology Development

Rendering of the 78 with Chicago Union Station Power House © Related Midwest with markings from PreservationChicago

Chicago Union Station Power House © Eric Allix Rogers
The architects of the Union Station Power House were Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, a firm that descended from the legendary architectural firm of Daniel Burnham and John Wellborn Root and D.H. Burnham & Company. The firm designed many of Chicago’s most iconic buildings and designated Landmarks, including the Wrigley Building, the Field Building/Bank of America Building, and the Merchandise Mart – once the largest building in the world. The firm also designed the old Chicago Post Office, once the world’s largest; the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago; and Illinois Merchants Bank Building/Continental Illinois Bank/Wintrust Bank. The list also extends to The Straus Building, Pittsfield Building, John G. Shedd Aquarium, Chicago Civic Opera House, Insurance Exchange Building and many other notable structures, both in Chicago and across the United States.

The strong verticality of the Union Station Power House, from its linear groupings of parallel window bands to its tall chimneys, emphasizes the building’s strength. Its massive cream-colored brick walls, horizontal stone banding and austere ornament create additional visual impact. Unique in form, this is a rare example of power house industrial design by Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, an architectural firm of great note.

**THREAT**

Amtrak is the successor passenger railway system, which condensed 20 passenger railroads across the nation into one semi-governmental or quasi-public corporation body, under the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration. Amtrak was formed by the Congressional Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970 and began train service on May 1, 1971. Amtrak is officially recognized as The National Railroad Passenger Corpora-
tion, and the entity receives a combination of state and federal subsidies but is managed as a for-profit organization. Since its founding, and since the consolidation of service occurred and with these mergers, many of Chicago's railway-related buildings have succumbed to disuse and demolition.

Only recently, and through a long-term lease to a developer, has Amtrak invested in decades-long repairs to Chicago Union Station and its Great Hall, including the 1980 fire-damaged Fred Harvey space. We commend the recent restoration work to one of Chicago's most amazing interior spaces to Union Station and want to encourage the same type of commitment to the Union Station Power House.

Amtrak is the current owner of the Chicago Union Station Power House and has determined that this structure
is no longer necessary for its operations. Therefore, they are about to again conduct federally mandated Section 106 hearings to make determinations, including if it may be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. However, these hearings do not rule out demolition of the structure in the future. Demolition would be an expensive option, ranging in cost between $9 million and $13 million of potentially taxpayer funds to create a maintenance shed with expansive views of Chicago adjoining the Chicago River.

Amtrak’s plan for a maintenance shed on the site is problematic. Such a shed could most certainly be built along the vast rail yards – extending for miles which it controls in Chicago’s South Loop. It appears that there was a direct effort to again replace a significant historic structure, with another non-descript building, which will most likely cost millions of dollars to construct, in addition to the demolition of a historic structure, which could be repurposed. Losing an iconic and historic building to a maintenance shed along the Chicago River is tragic.

Noting recent Chicago’s Union Station switching and communication failures issues, and the National Public Radio article which reported on an wheelchair-bound passenger being charged a $25,000 fare for a 136-mile ride to Bloomington, Illinois for the removal of seats and special accommodations to meet ADA requirements, it appears that Amtrak priorities are not aligned with Chicagoans’ priorities.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago recognizes the limitations of the site due to the railroad tracks to the west and the South Branch of the Chicago River to the east. To minimize access issues, we are encouraging a adaptive reuse of the building and site by either a data center, a possible chilling center, or another use. This building is across Roosevelt Road from plans for The 78 just to the south. This could even serve as an amenity for the many nearby residents and commercial enterprises relocating to Chicago’s South Loop. The idea of a third-party use could stimulate long-range plans for addressing the riverfront along this stretch of the South Branch and could catalyze the creation of riverfront access, riverfront green space and perhaps even a future Riverwalk, in addition to the reuse of a potential Chicago Landmark.

The building could be reused and repurposed by Amtrak or a private developer for a data center, or a control center relating to Amtrak’s Midwestern and Chicago operations. At one point, Amtrak entertained selling the building and issued an RFQ that did not yield any bids. Preservation Chicago continued to actively seek potential new users and recently identified a well-capitalized, highly experienced Chicago developer with excellent credentials for large projects who desires to reuse the building as a data center. Amtrak has refused to consider any purchase offers at this time and is pressing forward with the process toward demolition of a National Register-eligible building and a potential Chicago Landmark. Because of its eligibility for the National Register, demolition of the Power House may impact potential federal funding for the agency.

The Union Station Power House’s connection to Chicago’s incredible railroad and architectural history makes it a prime candidate for a Chicago Landmark designation. A Chicago Landmark designation for this unique building would ensure its preservation and reuse. A preservation outcome for this building would be a win-win for Chicago, Amtrak Rail Systems, and future generations of Chicagoans.

The Opportunity:

Available for adaptive reuse as a data center, chilling center or other use, the Union Station Power House by one of Chicago’s greatest architectural firms is in close proximity to central business district. Amtrak has plans to demolish the building at an estimated cost of $13 million and replace it with a maintenance shed.

Benefits:
- Solid masonry fireproof building
- Zoned: DS-5
- Height: 115’
- Footprint: 9,000 sf (95’x95’)
- Potential square footage: 100,000
- Central Location Close to Central Business District
- Close proximity to exchanges, financial district and tech firms
- Proximity to fiber optic trunk lines
- Adjacent to Chicago River for low-cost cooling plant option
- Adjacent to ComEd electric substation

Potential Eligibility:
- 20% Federal Tax Credits
- Illinois Historic Tax Credits
- Adopt-a-Landmark Funds
- Class L Tax Designation
- Permit fee waivers