Central Manufacturing District, Pershing Road

Pershing Road between Ashland and Western Avenues

OVERVIEW

The Central Manufacturing District was the first planned industrial district in the nation which experimented in large-scale land development, capitalized on new technologies in construction and power production, and became the national model for the post-World War II industrial park. The first buildings in the Original East District (OED) were constructed in 1902. Construction began along the Pershing Road Development in 1917. The area was ideal for its large tracts of available and inexpensive land, with access to railroads and the proximity to a large, working-class population. Rail line spurs connected the main tracks to each building making shipping and transportation of goods and products more efficient. Both Districts were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2015 and 2016.
HISTORY

The Central Manufacturing District (CMD) was originally envisioned in response to economic and geographic pressures in the Central Business District and to enhance business opportunities along Chicago’s flourishing network of national rail lines. Frederick Henry Prince, an East Coast investor, was behind the CMD concept. Within 10 years’ time, more than 200 firms were operating within its boundaries. The early years of the CMD were so successful that Prince expanded the development west on Pershing Road. It was anchored by a beautiful 11-story Tower Building, also called the Water Tower, designed by Samuel Scott Joy which measures 50 feet wide and 38 feet deep. The Water Tower and clock is emblazoned with “Central Manufacturing District,” and the Tower is surrounded by a series of tall, reinforced-concrete buildings sheathed in red brick, stone, terra cotta and a cementitious stucco. These industrial buildings share a unity of scale, volume, design and various detailed features. This model of the planned industrial district took off across the country. The founding company still maintains ownership of a later industrial development in the Chicago suburb of Itasca, Illinois.

In 1925 there were more than 40,000 people working at the CMD, and the complex provided a private bank, business incubator and ground maintenance as part of the development. It was once such a successful business operation that it required its own police force and telephone operations. During the Great Depression, the company extended credit terms and worked with firms at the CMD so that only one single company in the entire complex failed. It housed big-name companies like Wrigley, Goodyear, Westinghouse and manufacturers of all kinds of goods. It also housed warehousing and distribution facilities for the U.S. Army.

The CMD buildings are constructed of reinforced concrete and sheathed with red brick, terra cotta and limestone and are built in a variety of architectural styles including Classical Revival, Late Gothic Revival, Prairie, Art Deco, 
and even Mid-Century Modern. Many of the buildings have articulated corner towers with decorative terra cotta, further emphasizing the versatility and massive scale of the development.

The impressive streetwall along Pershing Road fronting McKinley Park is both breathtaking and massive in scale, as the buildings appear to “march down” Pershing Road for almost a half-mile. Visiting the District, one will observe many company logos and names emblazoned on the buildings. It’s all reflective of an era in our nation’s industrial history when America’s industrial and manufacturing might was at its zenith.

THREAT

Many buildings comprising the Central Manufacturing Pershing District are currently underutilized, under capacity or vacant. In 2019, Aberdeen Development removed the entire façade off the U.S. Cold Storage Company Building at 2055/2129 W. Pershing Road. While Aberdeen insisted a structural assessment was completed which indicated an imminent threat of brick falling from its facade, neither Aberdeen nor the City of Chicago have been able to produce documents confirming this information. The building is “orange-rated” in the Chicago Historic Resource Survey (CHRS) under the 2129 W. Pershing Road address, which would have mandated a 90-day demolition delay and closer scrutiny by the Department of Planning and Development. However, building permits were submitted using another numerical address, 2055, which is not recognized by the City of Chicago on its “orange-rated” building list.

McKinley Park residents and community leaders were caught off guard in 2018 when MAT Asphalt set up operations at 2055 W. Pershing Road. The community was not given advance notice that an asphalt plant would be coming to the neighborhood. The IEPA issued a 1-year construction permit for the operation of the facility located
directly across the street from the community’s namesake park and residential neighborhood boundaries. Neighbors for Environmental Justice, a group as diverse as the McKinley Park community in which it works, organized to stop operations at the asphalt plant or at least minimize the pollutants and odors that linger throughout the area. At times, the noxious smell and toxins emitted from the asphalt facility overwhelms the ability to enjoy recreation in McKinley Park, which is also part of the Chicago Park Boulevard System Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places. The asphalt plant is also feared to threaten development prospects for the remaining historic buildings in the CMD. Sadly, none of these National Register designations protect the area from being neglected, demolished or adversely altered.

Hispanic Housing Development Corporation has plans for affordable housing at 2159 W. Pershing Road. They also plan to lease the building at 2139 W. Pershing Road with commercial, residential and retail space. While the development team has committed to preservation of the building and restoration of its original lobby, there is currently no protections in place to ensure that they follow such plans. Aberdeen Development owns a second building at 1950 W. Pershing, the only building on the north side of Pershing in that district. The 1950 W. Pershing building previously served as a United States Post Office Station “C” (Governmental) and the Central Manufacturing District Inn.

In January 2013, the Pullman Couch Factory in the Original East Central Manufacturing District nearby caught fire in subzero temperatures that made it almost impossible to extinguish. It smoldered for days before being ultimately demolished. Chicago Fire Department officials noted at that time that vacancy is a great danger to these buildings, and it will be a serious and ever-present issue until new uses are found for the structures.
The recent demolition of the Wrigley Factory at 35th and Ashland, also in the Original East Central Manufacturing District, illustrates a particular danger: that the district will be disassembled piecemeal. It deserves protections and an overall plan for the reuse of the historic buildings.

Cushman & Wakefield’s 2020 Industrial Outlook report forecasts continued growth in the market for 2020 and 2021. “Industrial has been the investors’ darling in recent years, and there is no indication of this love affair coming to an end any time soon,” the report noted. The square footage of industrial space will grow nationally, rents are expected to increase, and vacancy rates are expected to stay around 5%. With this demand for space in more densely populated areas, the buildings in and the community around the Central Manufacturing District are especially vulnerable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

During recent community development meetings held by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), an overwhelming majority of neighbors expressed support for protecting the CMD historic buildings. The community vision is for equitable growth that will continue to make New City/McKinley Park a great community and preserve the character of the residential core of the neighborhood.

While the National Register designations make the buildings in the Central Manufacturing District eligible for both federal and state historic tax credits, they offer no protection for the buildings. The only tool available in Chicago to offer protection against demolition and adverse and inappropriate alterations is a Chicago Landmark District designation.
12th Ward Alderman George Cardenas has stated publicly and in private meetings that he supports a Chicago Landmark District designation for the Pershing Road-CMD complex of buildings. We at Preservation Chicago look forward to working with him in the near future to make that Landmark District a reality. The area can be protected and still offer excellent economic opportunities for future developers.

Given the number of properties and the distinct development time periods for the buildings, it would be ideal to have a Landmark District for the Pershing Road Development Historic District. While further degradation has occurred since the National Register nominations were written, it would be relatively easy to convert the research and documentation from that nomination into a Chicago Landmark District nomination.

The Central Manufacturing District defines McKinley Park. Neighbors there wonder when their history and historic built environment will be honored and protected like historic sites downtown and in other areas of Chicago. It is the right time for the Central Manufacturing Pershing District to be considered for a Chicago Landmark District designation to keep this important part of our city’s industrial history intact and to ensure that the community and all stakeholders will have more control over how the area can be developed in the future.