



The Isabella Building

Address: 21 East Van Buren Street

Date: 1892-1893

Architects: William Le Baron Jenney and William Bryce Mundie (Jenney & Mundie)

Style: Chicago School Skyscraper, Gothic Details

**CHRS
Rating:** None

Threat:

Located in the downtown Loop, the Isabella building is obscured from view by the overhead tracks of the elevated train at Wabash and Van Buren. Recently used as part of the facilities of Old Saint Mary's Catholic Church, the building has been vacated and since acquired by DePaul University as part of a larger parcel. DePaul has expressed interest in redeveloping the site.

Designed by the father of the Skyscraper, exhibiting several key developments in high-rise design, and one of only a handful such William Le Baron Jenney skyscrapers remaining, the Isabella building is of critical importance to Chicago and to the building arts.

Fulfillment of Landmark Criteria:

The Isabella building meets a required number of the criteria established by the Chicago Landmarks Commission for preliminary landmark status.

Integrity: The Isabella Building is a unique example of a potential Chicago landmark, in that its present state is not a perfect reflection of the building's original character. The building was damaged in a fire, and consequently its upper five floors were removed. Additionally, a portion of the base of the building is currently obscured behind the false façade of the Old Saint Mary's Church, which was added in 1964.

- 1. Significant Architect:** William Le Baron Jenney is one of Chicago's most noteworthy and important architects. Widely considered the father of the Skyscraper, Jenney's Home Insurance Building in Chicago (1885, demolished) revolutionized building construction, subsequently changing the appearance of cities worldwide.
- 2. Significant Architecture:** Jenney's Manhattan Building (1890) contained the first use of wind bracing, now considered a necessity in high-rise design. At the Isabella building, Jenney refined the process, creating a technique called Knee Bracing, which still figures prominently into high-rise construction today.

Isabella was also a stylistic departure from Jenney's earlier, more directly Chicago School skyscrapers. The building features Jenney's trademark expressed structural frame, but also was designed with lavish Gothic copper detailing and pitched roof. This feature, most often recognized in conjunction with Cass Gilbert's Woolworth Building in New York (1913), gave the Isabella building a unique and lasting distinction as an office building. Jenney's projects from this point forth would reflect this more stylized version of Chicago School design.

- 3. Critical Part of City's Heritage:** The Isabella Building was commissioned by *Levi Z. Leiter*, the same retailer and office developer who erected city's famous First and Second Leiter Buildings, also designed by Jenney. The Second Leiter building, a Chicago Landmark, is directly west of the Isabella Building.

The Isabella Building was named for the Daughters of Isabella, a charitable Catholic women's group that occupied the uppermost floor of the building upon its completion. The presence of this group may explain the office building's unconventional gothic design.



A View of Existing Facade