

# Neighborland



## Historic Chicago – Michigan Avenue

*By Liz Chilsen, Monday, June 6, 2012 at 9:30 am*

I'm often on South Michigan Avenue, and on a recent morning as I walked to my office I noticed an historic landmarker posted on the street. It got me thinking, and took me down this path connecting [Columbia College Chicago](#), the [Spertus](#) Museum, the [Museum of Contemporary Photography](#), the [International Harvester Corporation](#), the [McCormick Reaper Company](#), Cyrus McCormick, the [Wisconsin Historical Society](#), [Wirt Dexter](#) and [Louis Sullivan](#), [Krueck+Sexton](#) and [Dream Town](#).

Join me on this exploration of buildings and places -- and see how you can get from glittery historic Michigan Avenue to utilitarian farm implements in Wisconsin. That's how buildings are. They surround us and support us. We create them as places to pursue our ambitions and as embodiments of our dreams. We rest in them, and play and plan. We change them to fit our new uses and needs. They nurture our spirit, and they survive us as evidence of and contribution to our time on this planet and community.



The Michigan Avenue Streetwall marker with Columbia College and the Spertus buildings.



This view is emblematic of the historic design of the Michigan Avenue “streetwall” along Grant Park. It's an historic landmark district, designated in 2002, as "one of the most iconic images of Chicago, known around the world, and comprised of many of Chicago’s finest individual buildings." Centuries".





The 'streetwall' is a "dramatic ensemble reflecting the city's development as a grand lakefront metropolis during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries". Those are quotes from the historic land-marker pictured above. The Spertus Museum, completed in 2007 was the first new building added to the 'streetwall' since Landmark status was bestowed.



At 600 S. Michigan Ave. sits the cornerstone of Columbia College Chicago, the first building the College bought (in 1974). It houses the Museum of Contemporary Photography, one of the only museums in the world dedicated solely to photography. The Museum's rooms once held a showroom for the International Harvester Company, which built the building in 1906 as its world headquarters.



For me, all of the above offers a little bit of personal synergy because in the 1980's I worked on a massive project at the Wisconsin Historical Society, organizing and researching a huge collection of photographic materials produced by International Harvester and its predecessor, the McCormick Reaper Company which was founded in Chicago. For something like 5 years, I spent my days in the darkness of the archives, sifting through boxes of old photos and glass plate negatives, some of them pretty big at 11x14". They were pictures of farm implements and machines. Most of what I did was decipher what these were pictures of and how they came to be made. I created a database to categorize the collection which held over 30,000 images, so that researchers would be able to use them.





Spertus' glittering facets created by 726 panes of glass in 500 different shapes and sizes is set off against its neighbors. The building is the first LEED museum in the City of Chicago.



Around the corner from this lovely glittering façade sits a vacant site. It's labeled "Dream Town"...



The empty lot, on Wabash Avenue, is a hole in the street that once contained a little gem of a building by one of Chicago's great architects, Louis Sullivan. The Wirt Dexter building sat vacant for years, and caught fire one night in 2006; set by scavengers using acetylene torches to cut out an old boiler in the basement and sell it for scrap. By the time the firetrucks got there the poor thing was already too far gone, and they let it burn. Loss of that building was a great disappointment, and the vacant spot is emblematic of the complexities of use, and the failures of foresight that urban spaces sometimes contain. It looks like some plans might be underway for the site now. In this region of great architecture and deep thinking (surrounded as it is by institutions of higher learning) I harbor hope that the site will not be given over to "dreamy" luxury condos.





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