

# LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



## 300 West Adams Street Office Building

300 W. Adams Street

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, February 2009



**CITY OF CHICAGO**  
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

**Department of Zoning and Land Use Planning**  
Patricia A. Scudiero, Commissioner

**Cover: Northwest corner of Adams Street and Franklin Street. Decorative terra-cotta pendants above the main entrance on Adams Street (top right), terra cotta pilaster detail (middle right), decorative terra cotta band above the storefronts (bottom right).**

*The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose ten members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.*

*The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.*

*This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.*

# 300 West Adams Street Office Building

300 West Adams St.

**Built:** 1927  
**Architect:** Jens J. Jensen

The 300 West Adams Street Office Building exemplifies several themes in the development of Chicago's Central Area. As a 1920s-era office building in the West Loop, the building reflects the outward expansion of Chicago's office business district from its historic core into formerly warehouse districts along the Chicago River. The twelve-story terra cotta-clad building is an excellent example of the Gothic Revival architectural style and a fine example of the important use in Chicago of architectural terra cotta for large-scale commercial buildings. Through its handsome design and excellent craftsmanship, the 300 West Adams Office Building epitomizes the high-rise office building boom of the 1920s and stands today as a significant example of this historic building type.

## THE CHICAGO SKYSCRAPER TO 1930

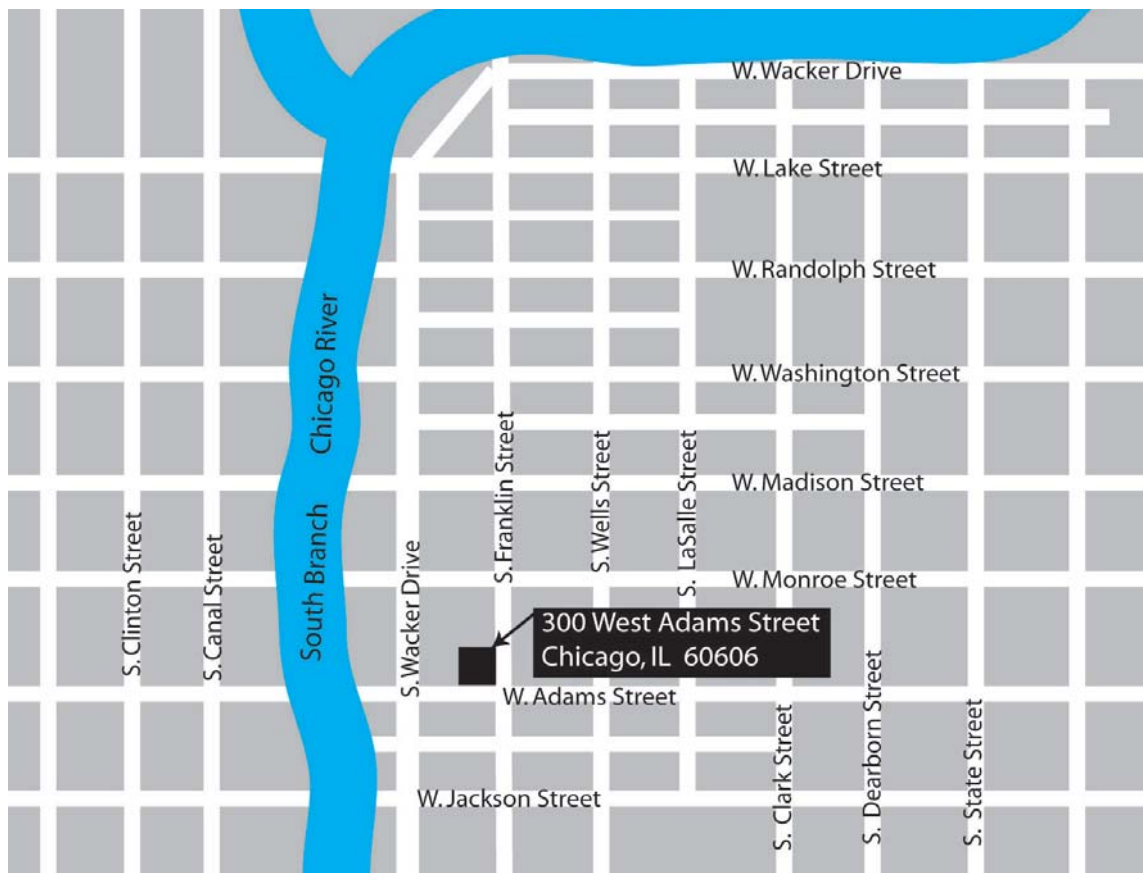
During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Chicago grew to become America's second-largest city. In the aftermath of the Chicago Fire of 1871, Chicago's historic core—today's Central Area—rebuilt as a predominantly commercial area. Retail and office buildings lined streets from Michigan Avenue on the east to LaSalle Street on the west, hemmed in by Lake Michigan to the east, railroad yards to the south, and warehouse and factory districts along the Chicago River to the north and west.

By the 1880s, these geographic and man-made constraints had increased downtown Chicago land values sufficiently to encourage innovations of building design and structure, leading to the development of internal-frame skyscrapers as a building type. Fireproofing techniques learned in the wake of the Fire joined with innovations in elevators and internal building systems.

Chicago engineer and architect William LeBaron Jenney is credited as the “father of the skyscraper” for his design of pioneering steel-frame buildings such as the twelve-story Home Insurance Building at LaSalle and Adams streets, built in 1885. Jenny realized that instead of designing a traditional load-bearing structure where the base floors supported the entire building, one could erect an iron skeleton strong enough to support the building, leaving exterior walls as non-load-bearing “screens.” This revolutionary building method formed the basis for tall office buildings that came after, including 300 West Adams.

As a national center of industry, commerce and finance, and with this new skyscraper technology, Chicago developed its historic “Loop” from the 1880s through the years leading up to World War I as an ever more densely developed downtown of giant department stores and soaring office buildings. The constraints to downtown development created by geographic factors (Lake Michigan and the Chicago River) and man-made barriers (the railroad yards south of the Loop and the warehouse districts along the river) along with high land prices, encouraged Chicago real estate developers to build up rather out.

Many of these early skyscrapers were built as relatively utilitarian structures with minimal ornamentation. Their designs emphasized the visual expression of internal skeleton framing and large window openings, and these “Chicago School” buildings remain some of Chicago’s best and most important buildings of the late 20th century. Many of these buildings were clad with terra cotta, which could be easily molded and created in the large quantities necessary for the scale of these new office and retail buildings. Such use of a masonry “curtain wall” gave these

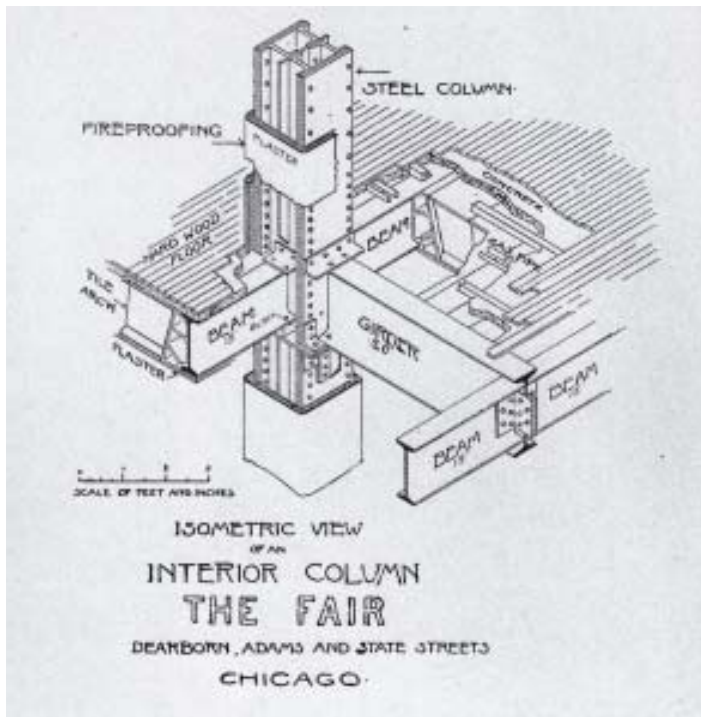


**The 300 West Adams Street Office Building is located in the West Loop, less than two blocks from the South Branch of the Chicago River..**





The building is a 12-story terra cotta-clad office building built in the Gothic Revival style.



**The Fair Store, William LeBaron Jenney, 1891**

wealth of decoration. Some, such as the Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co. Department Store, exhibited non-historic ornament, but most were designed in historic styles. Many continued the same overall forms as earlier Chicago School buildings, but window openings became smaller and ornament more elaborate. The Railway Exchange and People's Gas Buildings on S. Michigan Ave. (both contributing buildings to the Historic Michigan Boulevard District) are fine examples of early 20th-century skyscrapers of this type.

a sense of visual solidity that reassured users and spoke to age-old notions of permanence in architecture.

Soon, terra cotta's easy malleability led architects to design buildings in a variety of historic styles, especially the Classical and Gothic Revivals. Buildings such as the south addition to the Monadnock and the Reliance and Chicago Buildings (all designated Chicago Landmarks) were all successful examples of these terra-cotta clad commercial buildings built in the 1890s.

By the early 1900s terra cotta-clad tall commercial buildings were increasingly ornate in their



**The Peoples Gas Company Building, 1911**

By the mid-1920s, at the time of the construction of the 300 West Adams Street Office Building, tall office buildings based on historic architectural styles had become increasingly elaborate. The Chicago Tribune Tower on N. Michigan Ave. (a designated Chicago Landmark) had been designed with an elaborate Gothic Revival-style crown based on the Butter Tower of Rouen Cathedral. The Wrigley Building had been designed in a Classical Revival style based on Spanish Renaissance precedents.

It also had been clad with gleaming-white terra cotta. The 1920s was the last major period for architectural terra cotta, with several important examples among Loop skyscrapers. The Pittsfield Building at Washington and Wabash, built the same year as 300 West Adams, is clad with white terra cotta as well, although designed in a “modernistic” variation of Gothic Revival. 300 West Adams exemplifies the use of these important architectural trends for an early pioneering office building in the West Loop.

## **THE WEST LOOP UP TO 1930**

Up to 1920, the prime location for office buildings in downtown Chicago continued to be streets in the heart of the Loop such as Dearborn and LaSalle, plus Michigan Avenue. The West Loop was a warehouse and factory district, convenient to both the Chicago River with its still-active maritime traffic and the railyards of the South Loop. The streets of the West Loop, including Market Street (today’s Wacker Drive), Franklin, and cross streets extending east from the river, were lined with loft buildings housing small-scale manufacturers, warehouse concerns, and a variety of wholesalers. Many of these buildings were large in scale, dominating entire blocks. The most famous of these remains the Marshall Field Wholesale Store, designed by renowned architect Henry Hobson Richardson, which was located diagonally across the Franklin-Adams intersection from 300 West Adams before its demolition in the 1930s.



**A view looking south along the South Branch of the Chicago River in the late 19th century. Although today one of Chicago’s premier office precincts, the West Loop was a warehouse and factory district into the 1920s, and the 300 West Adams Street Office Building is one of the earliest such office buildings to be built in the area.**



In April of 1879, one such warehouse was constructed at the northwest corner of Adams Street and Franklin Street on the site of today's 300 West Adams. Originally built for the Armour-Dole Grain Company, this building later was converted into the wholesale store for Carson Pirie Scott and Company. By 1905, this warehouse was surrounded by other similar structures including the Marshall Field Wholesale Store and a wholesale house for Lyon Brothers which was located on the northwest corner of Monroe and Franklin Streets.

As commercial real-estate pressure in Chicago increased and downtown land in traditional locations became sparse, these West Loop buildings became prime locations for redevelopment. Their large building lots, along with the opening of nearby Union Station in 1925, just three blocks to the west of 300 West Adams, encouraged office building development.

## **BUILDING HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION**

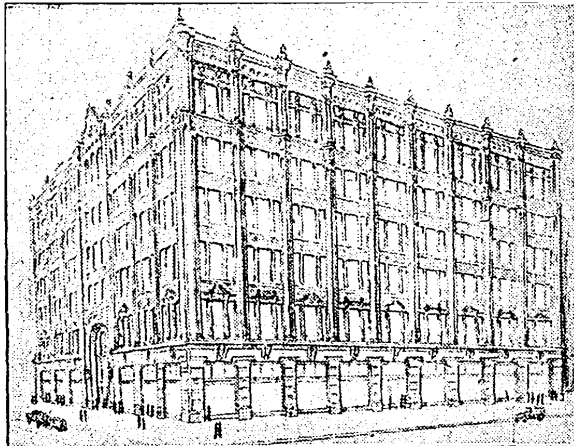
In January of 1926, a news item in the *Chicago Tribune* announced that the former Carson Pirie Scott and Company wholesale building at Adams and Franklin would be remodeled into a "high class office building," while retaining its six-story height. Only a few months later, the plan



**The 300 West Adams Street Office Building was featured in the *Handbook for Architects and Builders: Illinois Society of Architects, 1928.***



*New Building for Downtown*



Left: The original rendering for the six-story conversion of Carson Pirie Scott and Co. wholesale house, published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 31, 1926.

Below: Before the 300 West Adams Street Office Building was completed, leasing advertisements were found in newspapers.

NEW  
ISSUE

In the opinion of counsel these Bonds are  
Legal Investments for National Banks

*Choice Security in the Heart of Chicago*

First Mortgage **6 $\frac{1}{4}$ %** Building  
and Leasehold Gold Bonds

**\$1,850,000**  
(TOTAL ISSUE)

## Franklin-Adams Block

(To Be Known as 300 West Adams Building)  
Adjoining the "Loop" District of Chicago

\$100, \$500, \$1,000 Bonds. Interest Payable April 1 and Oct. 1.  
Maturing Semi-Annually 3 to 12 Years.

Northwest Corner Adams and Franklin Streets

### Personal Obligation of Individual of Recognized Responsibility

1. Security comprises a Closed First Mortgage on 12-story and basement store and office building of fireproof construction, being erected; 99-year leasehold estate, on valuable land in the heart of Chicago, equipment and earnings.
2. Expert independent appraisal of the property shows a valuation which makes this Bond Issue a 59 $\frac{1}{8}$ % loan, affording substantial margin of security.
3. Independent estimate of net annual income of property when completed is over two and one-half times greatest yearly interest charges on entire Issue.
4. A strong demand for space is indicated by leases signed by United States Gypsum Company for three entire floors and R. G. Dun & Co. for one floor.
5. Ownership of the property is in the hands of an individual of recognized financial standing, with wide business experience and the owner of a considerable amount of other valuable Chicago real estate.

Based Upon a Record of Leadership in Safety to Investors for 71 Years, these Bonds of the Highest Standard are Approved and Recommended by the Oldest Real Estate Bond House

Offered to, as, and when issued and subject to approval of Counsel.

**Price** [Maturities 6 to 12 Years] 100 to Net **6 $\frac{3}{4}$ %** to Investors  
(Maturities 3 to 5 $\frac{1}{2}$  Years, Inclusive, to Yield 5.87% to 6.16%)

For Complete Details, Call, Write or Phone Randolph 3360 for Circular No. T-928

## Greenebaum Sons Investment Company

La Salle and Madison Streets  
Uptown Office—4752 Broadway, at Lawrence  
Offices in Principal Cities  
Oldest Real Estate Bond House—Founded 1855

**MAIL THIS COUPON**

Greenebaum Sons Investment Company  
La Salle and Madison Streets, Chicago

Please send me Descriptive Circular on The Franklin-Adams Building First Mortgage 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ % Bonds.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... T-928



**300 West Adams Street has a highly detailed bronze entrance with two revolving doors in the center bay of the Adams Street facade.**



was revised to include the demolition of the existing structure and its replacement with an entirely new twelve-story office building. The property owner, David Schetnitz, is quoted that this change was due to “the demand for space.”

Jensen’s design called for a terra-cotta clad structure with Gothic-style details. One advertisement for the building in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* stated:

Attracted by the high quality of its construction—the imposing beauty of its Terra Cotta exterior – the dignity of its Rose-Travernelle marble and bronze lobby—the efficiency of its layout—and its excellent location—leading concerns are making The 300 West Adams Building their Chicago headquarters.

At the time of this ad, substantial space had already been leased to the U. S. Gypsum Co.; the R. G. Dun & Co.; the Transcontinental Freight Bureau, and the General Chemical Co. The McLennan Construction Company was the general contractor, and the building was completed by April 1, 1927.

#### *Building and Site Description*

The 300 West Adams Street Office Building is located at the northwest corner of West Adams Street and South Franklin Street, just east of the Chicago River. The building is a large rectangular block with a central light court maximizing the amount of light in the office spaces. The structure extends approximately 150 feet along Adams Street and approximately 184 feet along Franklin Street. The building is twelve stories in height. The structure expresses symmetry in the two street facing facades. They are both comprised of nine window bays, the central seven bays extending twelve stories while the end and corner bays extend only nine stories. These corner set backs create a visual distinction between the base of the building and the upper three stories.

The building has two primary facades, Adams Street (south façade) and Franklin Street (east façade). Both are clad with ivory glazed architectural terra cotta. The north facade, facing an alley, is clad in Chicago common brick. The west façade is a party wall with the adjoining building.

There are nine pilasters on each street-facing façade that begin at the street level and continue vertically up the building. The facades feature bands of Gothic-style detail wrapped around the building above the second, ninth and twelfth stories, creating visual breaks in the terra-cotta cladding. The southern façade (Adams Street) is distinguished as the primary façade with a center bay that extends thirteen stories. The main entrance of the building is located at the base of this central bay. The decorative thirteenth floor contains elaborate gothic details including a terra-cotta tracery screen.

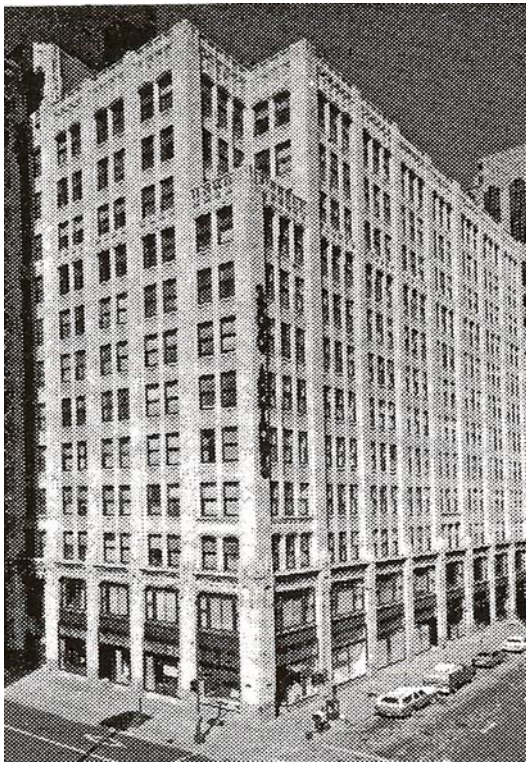
The primary difference between the two street facades is the width between each pilaster. Each bay of windows on the south (Adams) façade (from the third floor up) is comprised of sets of two one-over-one, double-hung, sash windows separated by terra-cotta pilasters that extend the entire height of the bay. The east façade features the same number of bays and the same window types, but each bay contains three windows instead of two.



The 300 West Adams Street Office Building has a plethora of finely-crafted Gothic-style ornament.











The storefronts of the 300 West Adams Street Office Building retain original cast-iron details.





Both primary façades feature a terra-cotta base with a faux granite finish that runs along first-floor storefronts. These storefronts have retained cast-iron decorative elements accenting plate-glass display windows. Entrances are recessed. Cast-iron spandrels decorated with Gothic ornament divide storefronts from second-floor windows.

The second floor of both façades feature Chicago School wood windows with a large fixed central window pane, flanked on either side by one-over-one, double-hung, sash windows in each bay. A terra-cotta ogee caps the corners of these openings, and a decorative leaf-inspired Gothic pattern runs along these headers.

The main entrance to the building is located in the middle of the building on Adams Street. This elaborately detailed bronze entrance is comprised of two revolving doors separated by a bronze panel of floral details. A band of fleur-de-lis ornament crowns each of the projecting semicircles of the revolving doors. Three large transom windows continue up vertically to the terra-cotta band above the second floor.



**One of the building's elaborately-detailed entrance doors.**

*Jens J. Jensen*

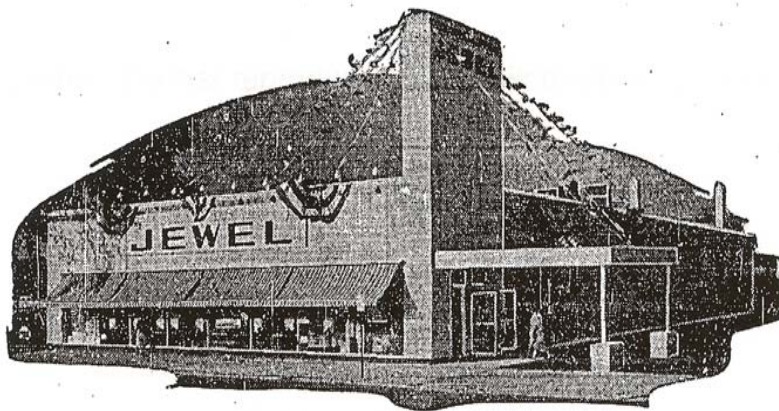
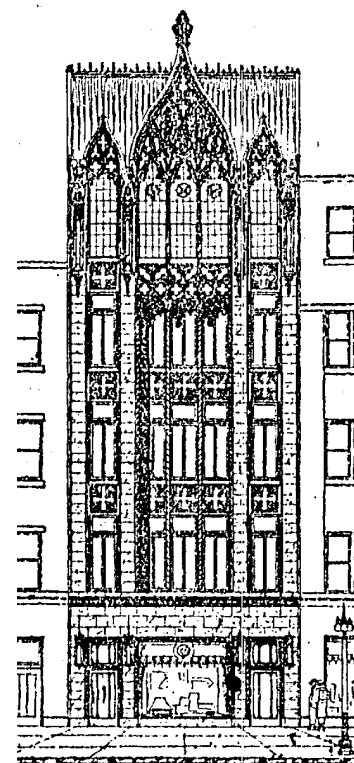
Architect **Jens J. Jensen (1891 -1969)**, the designer of the 300 West Adams Street Office Building, has often been mistaken for noted Prairie-style landscape architect Jens Jensen. 300 West Adams appears to be by far Jens J. Jensen's largest commission. He was predominately an architect of two- and three-story retail-and-office buildings throughout Chicago and surrounding suburbs. He began his practice in Chicago in 1915, and became a member of the Illinois Society of Architects by 1921. In 1923 Jensen designed a building for a 30-foot-wide



Above: Jensen designed many two- and three-story storefront and office buildings like the one above, located at the southeast corner of Argyle and Kenmore Streets in Chicago and designed in 1927.

Left: In 1923 Jensen designed this elaborate Gothic Revival design for a thirty-foot site along North Michigan Avenue, published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 22, 1923

Below: For over twenty-five years Jens J. Jensen worked with the Charles L. Schrager Company, designing Jewel Food Stores for the Chicagoland area, including this one published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 9, 1954.



lot along Michigan Avenue. His unbuilt design for a highly-ornate Gothic Revival-style building shows his interest in the style before his use of it for the building at 300 West Adams. Interestingly, the lot for which this building was designed had previously been owned by David Schetnitz, the builder of 300 West Adams.

One of Jensen's most prominent projects before the design of 300 West Adams was the Pioneer Arcade at 1535-41 North Crawford. In a news account, this building was described as "one of the most elaborate recreation building in the city." Jensen used ivory terra cotta in an elaborate Spanish design for the primary façades of this building.

As early as the late 1930s and continuing through the 1950s, Jensen was a leading designer for the Charles L. Schrage Company, the developers of Jewel Food Stores throughout the Chicago area. Jensen worked almost exclusively for Schrage until the mid-1950s. His son, Jens J. Jensen, Jr., became partner of their firm in 1955. The firm of Jensen and Jensen still retains offices in Oak Brook, Illinois. Jens J. Jensen, Sr., retired from architecture in 1961 and moved to Arizona. He died in Phoenix in 1969.

## **THE GOTHIC REVIVAL ARCHITECTURAL STYLE AND THE USE OF ARCHITECTURAL TERRA COTTA**

Before it was erected, the design of the 300 West Adams Street Office Building was described as "a modern adaptation of the Gothic." Jens J. Jensen utilized decorative Gothic-style commercial architectural details, but modernized them somewhat with streamline details and an emphasis on height and symmetry.

Originating in France in the twelfth century, Gothic architecture developed from the desire to achieve great height and maximum light in European cathedrals. Originating with the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis near Paris, and flourishing throughout Europe through the sixteenth century, Gothic was a structural style of great audacity, utilizing rib vaults and flying buttresses to open great interior spaces that were lighted by large stained-glass windows. Gothic buildings also had a distinctive vocabulary of ornamentation, including pointed arches, elaborate trceries, pinnacles, clover-like foils (quatrefoils, trefoils, etc.) and tall, narrow window lancets.

This decoration became the basis of twentieth-century Gothic Revival-style architecture as used for commercial buildings such as 300 West Adams. Gothic Revival seemed tailor-made for tall buildings due to its historic associations with grandly-scaled European cathedrals and the vertical orientation of its ornament. By accenting buildings with pointed arched lancet windows, trceries, quatrefoils, decorative motifs, and even flying buttresses, architects of buildings such as the Tribune Tower and 300 West Adams made visible such connections with the Gothic.

### *Architectural Terra Cotta*

Another reason for the prominence of ornamental detail in commercial structures, especially the elaborate detail of the Gothic Revival style, was the availability of architectural terra cotta. The finely-crafted terra-cotta façade of 300 West Adams Street exemplifies the importance of the terra-cotta industry to Chicago in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the





**Gothic Revival-style designed skyscrapers were popularized in Chicago with the successful prize-winning design of the Tribune Tower building by Howell and Hood in 1922.**

**300 West Adams street is designed in the Gothic Revival style with many details executed in terra cotta.**



immediate post-Fire years of the 1870s through the early 1930s, Chicago was a leading American center for architectural terra-cotta design and manufacturing. Terra-cotta factories took advantage of Chicago's vibrant and innovative architectural community, its strategic location at the center of the nation's great railroad transportation network, and its proximity to clay deposits in nearby Indiana.

In Italian, terra cotta means "baked earth." For architectural purposes, however, terra cotta generally refers to building cladding or ornament manufactured from clay, hand molded or cast into hollow blocks with internal stiffening webs, and fired at temperatures higher than used for brick. Developed first to produce clay urns and garden statuary, the Chicago Terra Cotta Company was the first terra-cotta company in the United States, opened in 1868 and soon expanded into architectural terra-cotta production.

During the great Chicago Fire in 1871, cast-iron structural members in buildings melted in the extreme heat, and brick and granite had broken and crumbled. After the Fire, while early builders used the cement and plaster-of-paris method, it was soon found that terra cotta could be used to encase steel structural supports such as I-beam and columns and produce the same desired fireproofing effect. These terra-cotta pieces were much lighter than stone because of their hollow nature, and could be glazed a variety of colors to produce unique building finishes. Terra Cotta also provided the ability to make molds for any decorative element to be repeatedly produced, compared to hand carving stone, or hand molding and firing clay. This method saved considerable time and money during the rapid building growth of Chicago in the 1920s.

Use of terra cotta expanded when Chicago passed an ordinance in 1886 requiring the all buildings over ninety feet in height should be absolutely fireproof. Builders of skyscrapers found terra cotta an attractive medium because of its lightness, durability (crisp details did not erode over time and could easily be cleaned), and potential for decorative uses (terra cotta's plastic quality allowed for highly original ornament) – all attributes which stemmed from the nature of the material.

As virtues of terra cotta for architectural cladding were recognized, Chicago became a center for the architectural terra cotta industry as the location for three industry leaders: the Northwestern Terra Cotta Co., the American Terra Cotta Co., and the Midland Terra Cotta Co. Of these three companies, Northwestern Terra Cotta, which provided the terra cotta for the 300 West Adams Street Office Building, was the largest. It provided architectural terra cotta for many of Chicago's most significant buildings, including the Rookery, the Reliance Building, the Chicago Theater, the Wrigley Building, and the Carbide and Carbon Building.

The availability of terra cotta, the ease and speed of its production, and the popularity of the Gothic Revival style made it a very desirable building material. 300 West Adams Street is an excellent example of a 1920s commercial high-rise clad in terra cotta with Gothic Revival details.

## CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sect 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, object or district if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for designation,” as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that 300 West Adams Street Office Building be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

### ***Criterion 1: Critical Part of the City’s History***

*Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

- The 300 West Adams Street Office Building epitomizes the historically important theme of commercial office building design in the history of Chicago.
- 300 West Adams exemplifies the history of the early transformation of the West Loop from a warehouse and factory district to an area of office buildings.
- 300 West Adams is a fine example of a tall commercial building clad with architectural terra cotta, epitomizing this significant aspect of Chicago’s architectural history.

### ***Criterion 4: Important Architecture***

*Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.*

- The 300 West Adams Street Office Building is a handsome and noteworthy example of a terra cotta-clad, 1920s-era office building, a significant building type in the history of Chicago’s Loop.
- 300 West Adams is a fine example of the Gothic Revival architectural style, one of several revival styles important in defining the historic character of Chicago’s commercial buildings.
- 300 West Adams has a beautifully-detailed exterior of traditional building materials, including glazed terra cotta, cast iron and bronze executed with fine craftsmanship.



### ***Integrity Criteria***

*The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.*

The 300 West Adams Street Office Building possesses excellent exterior physical integrity, displaying through its setting, scale, setbacks and overall design its historic relationship to the Loop. It retains its historic overall exterior form and most historic exterior materials and detailing. Its primary first-floor storefronts retain almost all of their historic integrity in terms of cast-iron decorative elements and other detailing.

Changes to the building's exterior include areas where patch pieces of similarly-colored limestone have been used as replacements for damaged terra cotta. These areas are almost exclusive to flat wall surfaces, while the majority of decorative terra-cotta elements remain intact. Several large central panes of second-floor windows have been glazed with additional center mullions. The main entrance lobby has had extensive remodeling and few visible original elements remain.

### **SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered the most important to preserve the historic and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its preliminary evaluation of the 300 West Adams Street Office Building, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the Building.

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*Award Winning Structures, 1979 through 1994,* Structural Engineers Association of Illinois (SEAOI), 1995.



**The 300 West Adams Street Office Building retains excellent physical integrity.**



## **Acknowledgements**

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From *Chicago Architecture and Design 1923-1993*: p.3.

From *Chicago Then and Now*: p.4.

From *Handbook for Architects and Builders: Illinois Society of Architecturs, 1928*: p.5,  
p.20 (top).

From *Chicago Daily Tribune*: p. 7, page 15.

From *Realty and Building*: p.11 (bottom left).

From *Award Winning Structures 1979 through 1994*: p.14



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