



# Blackstone Hotel

636 S. Michigan Avenue

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks on February 4, 1998



CITY OF CHICAGO  
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development  
Christopher R. Hill, Commissioner

# Blackstone Hotel

632-40 S. Michigan Ave.  
70-88 E. Balbo Dr.

Construction Date: 1908-10  
Architect: Marshall & Fox

Considered the city's best example of a turn-of-the century luxury hotel, the Blackstone is also an excellent and rare Chicago example of the so-called Modern French style of Beaux-Arts architecture. Known as the "Hotel of Presidents," the Blackstone is historically important—both in the political history of the United States and in the social history of Chicago.

In terms of the seven "criteria for designation" listed in the city's landmarks ordinance, the Blackstone Hotel meets six of them (only two are required); specifically:

- **It represents an important part of the heritage of the city and the nation**, as the site of numerous important social and political events, including its associations with several national political conventions. The hotel's construction also was influential in the development of South Michigan Avenue and the extension of the highrise building streetwall facing Grant Park.
- **It is the site of a significant historic event**, as the location of the famed "smoke-filled rooms" where Warren G. Harding was chosen as a compromise Republican nominee for President in June 1920. The term—which has become a political cliché—was coined by a reporter covering the convention.
- **It is identified with a significant person or persons**, most notably the dozen U.S. Presidents who have stayed in the hotel's Presidential Suite, including Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Richard Nixon. The hotel's original owners, Tracy and John Drake, who later built the Drake Hotel on North Michigan Avenue, were referred to as "Chicago's Innkeepers." Furthermore, they named the hotel for Timothy B. Blackstone, a prominent railroad executive and the founding president of the Union Stockyards. His mansion had stood on the site.
- **It exemplifies an architectural style distinguished by uniqueness and overall quality of design.** It is the city's only hotel that was given a top ranking (of "Red") in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey. Its exterior represents the "Modern French" style of architecture, a style popular in New York but rarely used in this city. The Blackstone's innovative plan was widely publicized, winning a gold medal from the Illinois chapter of the American Institute of Architects.



**ABOVE:** The importance of the Blackstone Hotel is readily apparent in this 1913 photo panorama by J.W. Taylor. The hotel (top right), marked by its prominent mansard roof, was an early anchor for the developing "streetwall" of highrise buildings facing Grant Park.

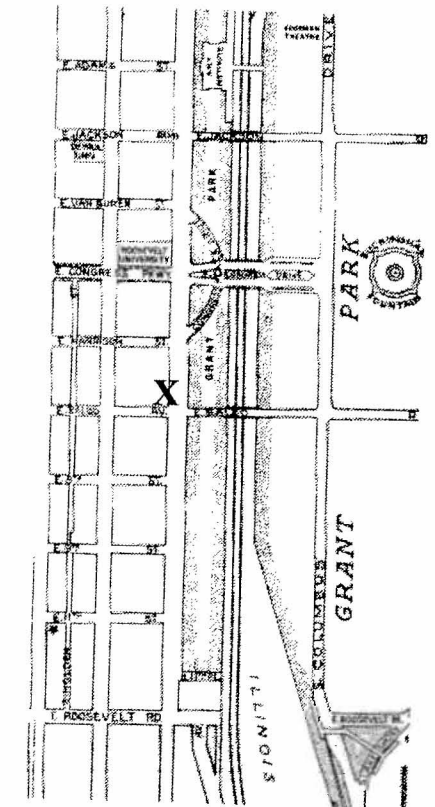
**COVER:** The Blackstone Hotel is considered Chicago's best example of the Modern French style of architecture, featuring lavish ornamentation and materials. This 1912 photograph demonstrates the changing scale of Michigan Avenue, including (left to right) a few surviving Civil War-era residences, the hotel, and the Musical College Building.

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

*The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council after careful consideration. The process begins with an extensive study, summarized in this report, which discusses the historical and architectural background and significance of the proposed landmark.*

*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 the landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.*

*This designation report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation proceedings. Only language contained within the actual designation ordinance approved by City Council should be regarded as final.*



**The Blackstone is located across from Grant Park, just north of the Hilton Hotel.**

It also was *the* place for prominent Chicagoans to congregate. The ballroom and its associated rooms were serviced by a mammoth kitchen facility that provided food for an elaborate public restaurant off the main lobby.

Notes architectural historian Carroll W. Westfall:

It quickly became the center for the city's most exclusive social activities, accommodating the coming-out parties and balls that Chicago's social leaders had formerly hosted in their homes. The Louis XV details presented in gilt-touched plaster inside the Blackstone and in bronze, marble, terra cotta, and elaborate electrical candelabra outside, established a new style for elegant social settings.

The hotel was so successful that the Drakes had its architect, Marshall & Fox, draw up plans for a 22-story annex, to be located west of the new Blackstone Theater, which had been built the year after the hotel. The lower seven floors of the proposed annex would be devoted to banquets and ballrooms. A passageway, running through an "art hall" atop the theater, would have connected the new tower to the Blackstone. However, World War I intervened, and plans were dropped after that.

Many prominent Chicagoans maintained their in-town apartments at the Blackstone. Among those listed in a 1911 directory were: A.B. Dick, a manufacturer of mimeograph and duplicating machines; the family of meatpacker Michael Cudahy; Mrs. Robert S. McCormick; and Mr. and Mrs. Avery Coonley, whose suburban residence in Riverside was designed by famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

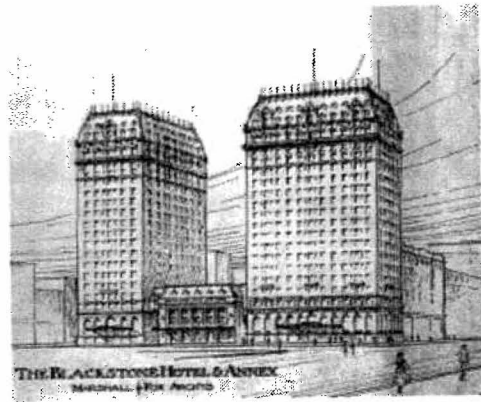
Several well-known politicians, including Mayor William "Big Bill" Thompson and Alderman "Hinky Dink" Kenna, also resided in the Blackstone during their later years. And, following World War II, the Blackstone became the preferred hotel for visiting jazz and blues musicians.

According to Shirley Dixon Nelson, the daughter of blues great Willie Dixon, musicians said they loved: the large size and tall ceilings of the Blackstone's hotel rooms, its South Loop location (convenient to nearby recording studios, such as Chess and VeeJay), and what they termed the hotel's "laidback atmosphere." Dixon continued to stay at the Blackstone up until his death in 1992. "He just loved the history of the place," Nelson says.

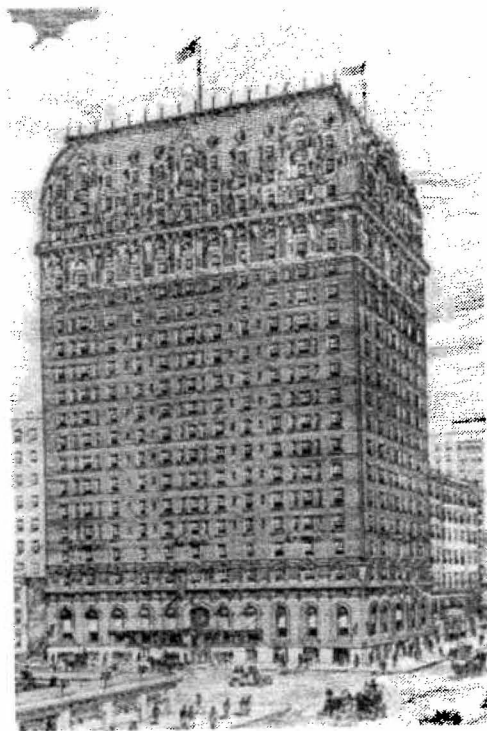
In 1920, the Drakes built another luxury hotel, also designed by Marshall & Fox. Named the Drake, it was located at the opposite end of Michigan Avenue from the Blackstone, where the street intersects Lake Shore Drive.

Given this increased debt load, the Drake Hotel Company decided to mortgage the Blackstone Hotel property in 1927, but with the advent of the Great Depression the hotel fell on hard times. The company lost the Blackstone to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, the holder of the mortgage, following the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition.

Metropolitan Life hired managers to run the hotel and, in



The success of the Blackstone Hotel led to this never-realized proposal (above) for a second tower, to be located west of the Blackstone Theater. Below: the architect's rendering for the original tower.



1936, leased the property to A.S. Kirkeby, Inc., which operated a series of hotels in New York, Los Angeles, and Florida. Five years later, the hotel was sold to Kirkeby and, in 1954, the Sheraton Hotel chain purchased the Blackstone.

Some remodeling work was done at this time, possibly including the replacement of the original decorative iron-and-glass entrance canopy facing Balbo and the removal of the ornamental balcony between the 15th and 16th floors. The hotel was sold to a group of Chicago investors in 1971, who also have done some minimal work. It was resold again in the mid-1990s.

## Politics and the 'Smoke-Filled Room'

I don't expect Senator Harding to be nominated on the first, second, or third ballot, but I think we can afford to take chances that about eleven minutes after two o'clock on Friday morning at the convention, when 15 or 20 men, somewhat weary, are sitting around at a table, some one of them will say, "Who do we nominate?" At that decisive time, the friends of Warren G. Harding can suggest him and afford to abide by the results.

— Harry Daugherty, Harding's campaign manager, Feb. 21, 1920.

Harding of Ohio was chosen by a group of men in a smoke-filled room early today as Republican candidate for President.

— Associated Press news dispatch, June 12, 1920

As could be expected, given the tradition of the Drakes' Grand Pacific Hotel, the Blackstone quickly became a political hub following its opening in 1910. Part of this was due to the city's longtime role as host to national political conventions, dating back to the 1860 Republican convention that nominated Abraham Lincoln. Starting in 1904, these conventions were staged at the Coliseum, at 15th and Wabash (demolished), close to a growing "hotel row" along South Michigan Avenue that included the Auditorium, the Congress, and the Blackstone.

The convention that etched the Blackstone into national political memory, however, was the Republican national convention in 1920. After four ballots on Friday, June 11th, the convention became deadlocked and delegates adjourned to their various hotels. According to *Inside the Wigwam*, an authoritative book on the city's various political conventions:

As the evening wore down, the prediction of a late-night compromise meeting made by Harding's savvy campaign manager Harry M. Daugherty four months earlier seemed to come miraculously true. Those involved denied it later. But others told of a "senatorial cabal" that met that night in the smoke-filled rooms 408 through 410 of the Blackstone

Hotel—reserved by Col. George Harvey, publisher of *Harvey's Weekly*—trying to break the logjam....Although they may have departed divided, they all left with a good word for their colleague, Senator Warren Harding, as a compromise candidate....By 3:30 a.m. (Saturday), press rumors were circulating through the hotel corridors where the Republican delegates slept that Harding would be the man to carry the party banner.

Later that day, on the tenth ballot, Harding claimed the nomination (he defeated the Democratic candidate, James M. Cox, in the general election to become President). An Associated Press article, written by Pulitzer Prize-winner Kirke L. Simpson, referred to the selection having been made in a "smoke-filled room." The colorful phrase quickly became a cliché, one that has come to symbolize professional party politics, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary of American Quotations*. (Ironically, these rooms are now located in the "non-smoking" portion of the hotel.)

Numerous other political stories center on the Blackstone. In 1940, aide Harry Hopkins called Franklin D. Roosevelt from the Governor's Suite to inform him that he had been nominated for a third term as president. Harry S. Truman said it was in the hotel suite (#708-09) of Democratic Party chairman Robert E. Hannegan that Roosevelt convinced him to be his running mate in 1944. As Truman told his biographer in *Plain Speaking*:

The room was crowded. Every damn political boss in the country was there...and they all said, "Harry, we want you to be Vice President." I said: "I'm not gonna do it." Then Hannegan put in a phone call to Roosevelt...who said,



The Blackstone Hotel was the site of the famed "smoke-filled room" where Warren G. Harding (above) was selected as the Republican candidate for President in 1920. At right, a scene from the convention, which was held in the nearby Coliseum (since demolished).



A dozen U.S. Presidents have stayed in the hotel's Presidential Suite, ranging from Theodore Roosevelt to Jimmy Carter.

"Bob, have you got that guy lined up yet on that Vice Presidency?" Bob said, "No. He's the contrariest goddamn mule from Missouri I ever saw." "Well," said Roosevelt, "you tell him if he wants to break up the Democratic Party in the middle of the war and maybe lose that war that's up to him."

The hotel also served as the convention headquarters for numerous other politicians, including Presidents William H. Taft (1912 convention), Dwight D. Eisenhower (1952) and Richard M. Nixon (1960). In fact, for decades, the Blackstone has been referred to as the "Hotel of Presidents." Its fifth-floor Presidential Suite, which includes a series of interconnected rooms facing Michigan and Balbo, has been used by 12 presidents, including every chief executive from Theodore Roosevelt through Nixon. The last president to visit the Blackstone was Jimmy Carter.

## The Architect of the Blackstone

To design the Blackstone, the Drake brothers selected the firm of Marshall & Fox, which was the city's most notable architecture firm for the design of theaters, luxury apartments, and hotels following the turn of the century. The preference of partner Benjamin H. Marshall (1874-1944) for extravagant style and decoration was just what the Drakes wanted in order to carry on the grand hotel tradition inherited from their father.

Marshall was born in Chicago, the only child of a prosperous bakery executive. He attended the Harvard School, located in the South Side neighborhood of Kenwood, where he was a schoolmate of his future client, John B. Drake II. Following graduation, instead of college, he took a clerk's job with a clothier, where he soon began designing men's suits. (This



Benjamin Marshall

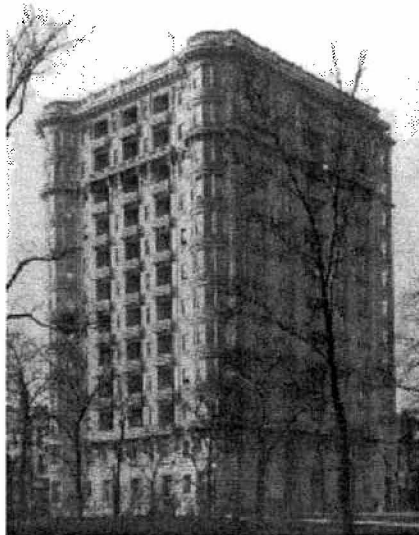


background may account for Marshall's later fame for his distinctive wardrobe, which included white suits, white shoes, and a white hat with a black band.)

Two years later, Marshall began his architectural career as a clerk with the firm of Marble and Wilson, under whose guidance he learned the disciplines of interior planning and practical construction. When Marble died two years later, Marshall became a full partner in the firm, at age 21. During the next seven years, Wilson & Marshall was responsible for the design of dozens of large residences, primarily in the Kenwood community and on the West Side.

In 1902, Marshall went into practice for himself, where he soon gained a reputation as a theater designer, including the Illinois Theater (demolished), the home of the Ziegfeld Follies, and the Iroquois Theater, which was destroyed in a 1925 fire that killed 602 persons and led to fire safety reforms.

In 1905, Marshall formed a partnership with Charles E. Fox, who had studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, before coming to Chicago in 1891 to work for the firm of Holabird & Roche. According to Miles Berger's *They Built Chicago*, Marshall was the firm's idea man, whereas Fox had "a more conventional orientation to the profession," serving as president of the Illinois Society of Architects and an organizer of the Architects Club of Chicago.



Marshall & Fox, the architects of the Blackstone, designed some of Chicago's most-luxurious buildings of the early-20th century, including (from top): the adjacent Blackstone Theater (1911), an apartment building at 1550 N. State Pkwy. (1918), the Drake Hotel (1919), and several buildings in the East Lake Shore Drive Historic District. The checkmarks visible on the photo at lower right were made by Marshall to indicate his firm's designs.

It was during this partnership that Marshall designed his most significant buildings, beginning with 1100 Lake Shore Drive (demolished), the first luxury highrise apartment building to be constructed along that lakefront boulevard. "Marshall had a sense of how wealthy people wanted to live," one of his associates said. According to Berger:

That was what he provided. He built apartments in a manner calculated to allow their occupants to simulate the lifestyle of the Gold Coast's great mansions....All of the rooms were described by French names on the floor plans, a Ben Marshall touch that lent his designs the cachet of the grand Parisian apartments.

From 1911 through the 1920s, Marshall & Fox became perhaps the most important architect-developer of luxury apartments in Chicago, each "with more space, more fireplaces, more silver vaults, more amenities than the one before," notes Berger. The firm's designs for the Blackstone Hotel and the adjacent Theater resulted in dozens of new commissions, most of them at exclusive addresses on Chicago's North Side.

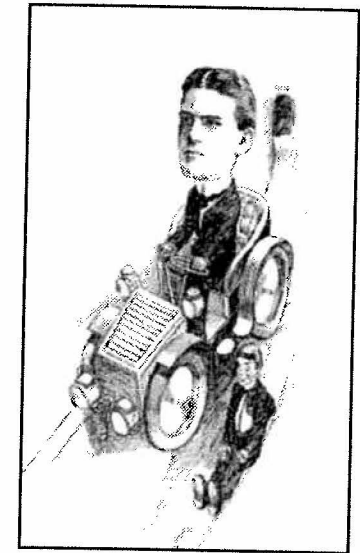
Marshall designed the 999 North Lake Shore Drive Apartments in 1912, followed by the South Shore Country Club (1914) and the Edgewater Beach Hotel (1923; demolished). In 1918, he designed 1550 North State Parkway and, in 1919, the Drake Hotel, which today remains a dominant fixture along Lake Shore Drive. Marshall also designed banks and office buildings, including the Burlington Building, at Clinton and Jackson (1911); the Lake Shore Bank, Michigan and Ohio (1921); and the Uptown Bank, Broadway and Lawrence (1923).

## The "Modern French" Style of Architecture

In choosing Marshall & Fox to design the Blackstone, the Drakes had the ideal architect for the luxurious hotel they envisioned. "In reaching beyond colonial and federal America and Adamesque England," historian C. W. Westfall noted, "the Blackstone was bringing to Chicago's social elite the broader, cosmopolitan world they now visited and wished to have at home as well."

Marshall selected a French variation of Beaux-Arts classicism for the Blackstone, a style referred to at the time as the "Modern French." The popularity of the style had originated with the design for the Paris Opera House (1862-74), according to *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism*, and it was used widely throughout Paris during the 1890s.

Soon, the Modern French also became a dominant style in New York City, to the extent that Chicago's famed Prairie School architect, George W. Maher, accused New York of "being a French city." That city's St. Regis Hotel (built 1904), Maher



A cartoonist's view of architect Benjamin Marshall in 1904. The smaller figure is presumed to be his partner, Charles Fox.



The Modern French was a popular architectural style for luxury hotels in the early-20th century, including New York's Hotel Rector (above) and Chicago's Sherman House (below; since demolished).



claimed, "destroys Americanism in the Americans who stop there. Before they know it, they are talking French and shrugging their shoulders."

Other critics, *New York 1900* notes, termed it:

Cartouche Architecture, because of its extensive use of that particular ornamental device, as well as swags, garlands, festoons, and a host of other overscaled motifs to enrich the facade....Yet, Modern French voluptuousness was perhaps an appropriate expression of a clientele that enjoyed excessive display, gastronomy, and girth.

Yet, many others were proclaiming it the style of the age. Wrote H.W. Desmond in *Real Estate Record and Guide*:

In turning from the Romanesque and the Classic to the Modern French, American architects (are turning) from styles archaic and obsolete...to a style 'foreign' it may be, but alive....As a matter of fact, no style today is quite so "taking" with the crowd as the modern French. Its very defects are of the sort that attract the public.

The Modern French style found its greatest expression in the luxury hotels and apartment buildings of New York City, including the Knickerbocker (1902), the St. Regis (1904), the Astor (1904-09), and the Rector (1910-11). Each of those hotels is very similar in design to the Blackstone, particularly in their tripartite division of a stone base, brick middle stories, and a mansard roof with dormers and a wraparound balcony.

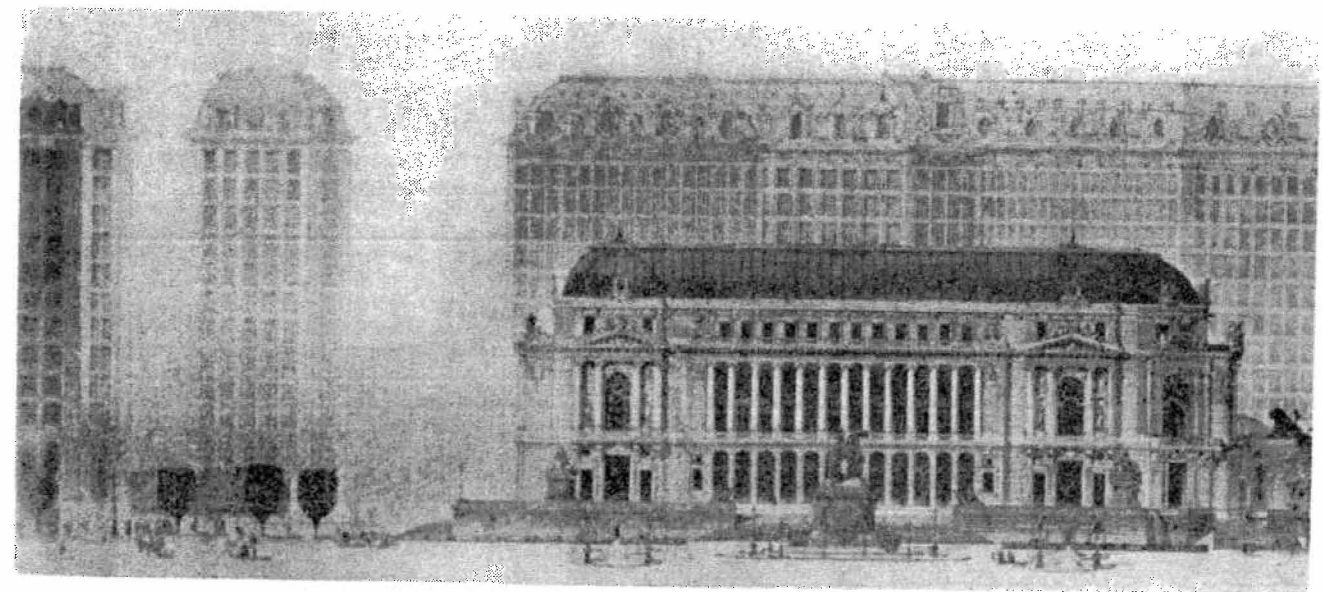
In Chicago, the style was used only on a few selected buildings, including the Blackstone Hotel, the LaSalle Hotel (1910; demolished), the Sherman House (1911; demolished), and the Belden Stratford, 2300 N. Lincoln Park West (1922). *Architectural Record* called the first three hotels the:

First buildings of the kind in which the prevailing 'fashion' in hotel building in the Eastern cities has had its introduction at Chicago....The Blackstone Hotel is far superior to the others, as it is an attempt to localize and introduce some originality in a conventional style.

The architects who chose to use classically inspired Beaux-Arts designs believed these forms made skyscrapers visually more interesting and appealing. They saw the unprecedented height of these buildings as an awkward problem that demanded a Beaux-Arts solution. Using the classical column as a prototype, they divided skyscraper facades into three distinct zones, corresponding to the base, shaft, and capital of a column. The lower floors were elaborately treated to set them off from the uniformly treated floors of the tall middle zone which, in turn, was capped by a distinctively treated top that forcefully terminated the building. Everything was calculated to be visually pleasing to the passersby.



The Blackstone Hotel's Modern French architecture was consistent with the Beaux-Arts style of the grand civic designs envisioned in the 1909 Plan for Chicago (below). This c.1925 photo (left) shows the hotel flanked by the Blackstone Theater and the Musical College Building, with its new seven-story addition.





The Blackstone includes a wealth of exterior decoration, including ornate cartouches featuring the hotel's shield and located above both entrances. Below, the hotel in 1983.



This Beaux-Arts emphasis on rational order also found expression in early-20th century American city planning. Daniel Burnham's Plan of 1909, for example, was partially designed to transform Chicago into a City Beautiful-style, Beaux-Arts city.

The various improvements that directly resulted from the Plan, including the Michigan Avenue Bridge, dual-level Wacker Drive, and the statuary, bridges, and esplanades in Grant Park all carry the imprint of Beaux-Arts style designs.

Given this emphasis, the Modern French design of the Blackstone Hotel was fully complementary to what was going on all around it at the dawn of the new century.

## The Opulent Exterior of the Blackstone

The exterior design of the 22-story Blackstone Hotel also embodied the business strategy of the hotel's founders. Its elegant opulence was purposefully reflected in the historical ornamentation, architectural details, formal massing of the building's shaft, the distinctive mansard roof, and high-quality materials. The following description appears in the National Register of Historic Places nomination form for the building, which was listed on the Register in 1986:

The plan of the building is rectangular. The east side is 80' 5" and the south is 173'. The entire envelope is filled on the lower floors. The guest room floors and roof are slightly U-shaped, as the north facade was indented as a creative strategy by Marshall to provide a court and natural light and ventilation for the west room windows. It has a structural steel frame encased in tile and plaster fireproofing, supported on rock caissons. The exterior facades on the east (facing Michigan Avenue) and south (Balbo Drive) have a one-story base of pink granite topped by four stories of high-quality, white glazed terra cotta. The second and third floor exterior walls are punctuated by large windows which originally brought light into the lobby, restaurants, and ballroom. A 12-story shaft of red brick, with white terra cotta window surrounds, constitutes the main bulk of the building. This is topped by an elaborate belt course of terra cotta, followed by two stories of terra cotta and brick. On top of this, the original structure supported a large intermediate terra cotta cornice topped by a cast iron railing. This has been replaced with glazed brick, which is flush with the rest of the building. The north facade is brick and terra cotta, with the rooms above the adjoining 14-story building having windows similar to the east facade. The last three guest floors are transition zones of elaborate terra cotta and brick and form the base of the three-story mansard roof. The mansard roof exterior was originally constructed of red tile perforated by oculus windows. It was topped by a balustraded parapet of iron medallions and iron light poles. The elaborate medallioned parapet and light poles were removed and replaced with a four-foot parapet wall of red brick with a limestone cap. The original red tile mansard roofing is now vertically battened lead, with horizontally crimped seams. The oculus windows at the roof level remain in place on the east and south facade. However, terra cotta medallions and urns have been removed on the west facade.



The Blackstone Hotel's mansard roof is one of the most exuberant building tops in Chicago. Several of its original features, however, as seen in this c.1920 photograph (above), are now missing, including a wraparound balcony, decorative roof cresting, ornamental light standards, huge flagpoles (see cover photo), and several terra cotta details (below).

The *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*, a citywide inventory of significant structures published in 1996, assigned its top ranking (of "red") to the Blackstone Hotel. This survey rating was accorded to just over 200 buildings citywide. Among the city's other "reds" are: Jane Addams' Hull House, the Board of Trade, Carson Pirie Scott department store, the Old Chicago Water Tower and Pumping Station, the Reliance Building, Robie House, Schurz High School, and Wrigley Field.

In assessing the Blackstone, the surveyors cited several particularly noteworthy architectural features, including:

The elaborate broken arched pediments on the third floor (outside the ballroom)...the fifth floor terra cotta balconettes, balusters, and decorative panels (outside the Presidential Suites and)...the elaborate cartouche keystones (above the Michigan and Balbo entrances, which include the carved logo of the Blackstone Hotel).



## The Blackstone's Elegant Interiors

Marshall had a unique gift in understanding interior space and how to embellish its appearance, which was coupled with the Drakes' insistence that the hotel contain many unique properties, such as putting bathrooms and direct ventilation on the exterior wall and using an innovative mechanical system to provide air conditioning and ice water.

The Illinois Chapter of the American Institute of Architects gave the Blackstone Hotel its top award in 1910. The building's interior was particularly emphasized in the gold medal of design citation:

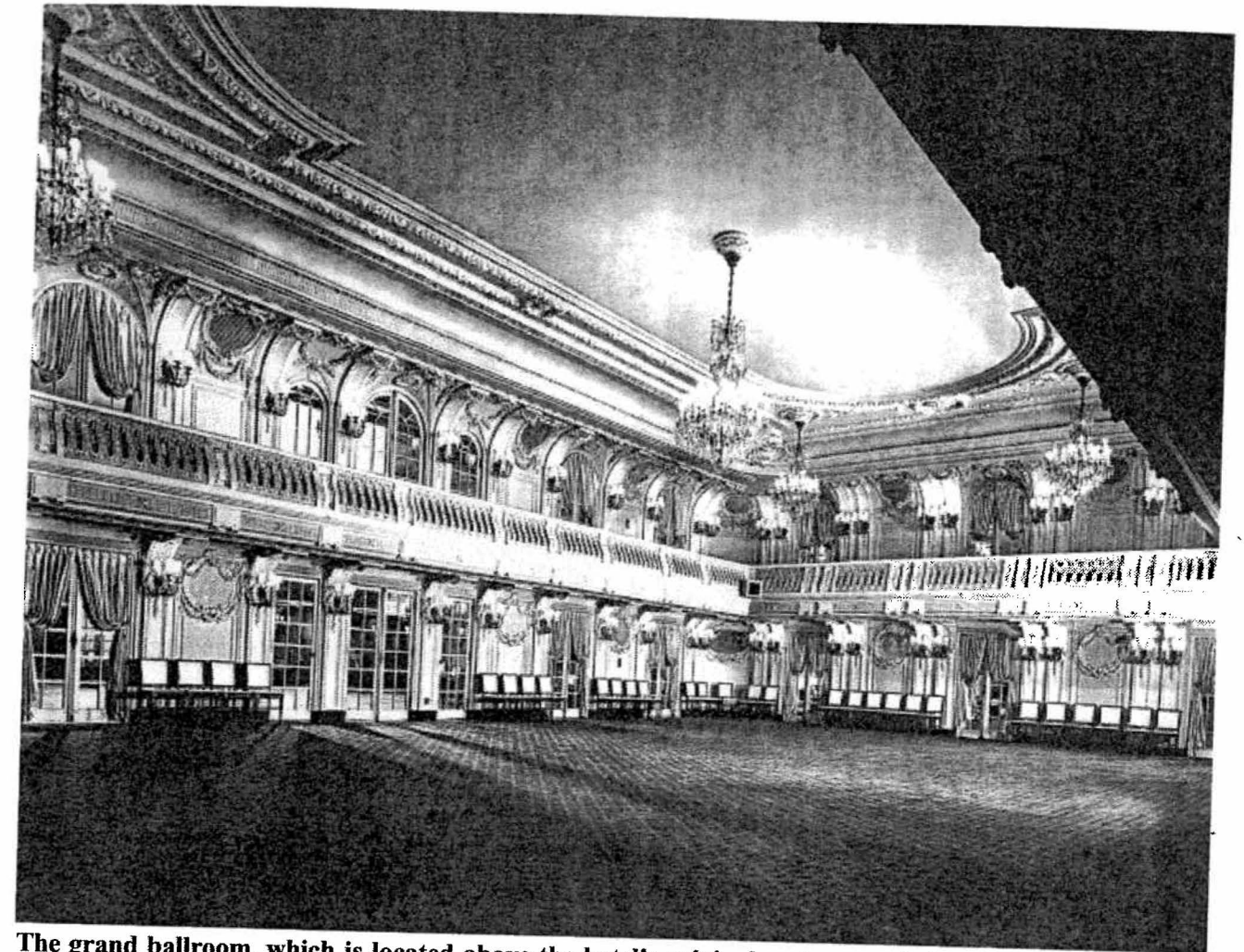
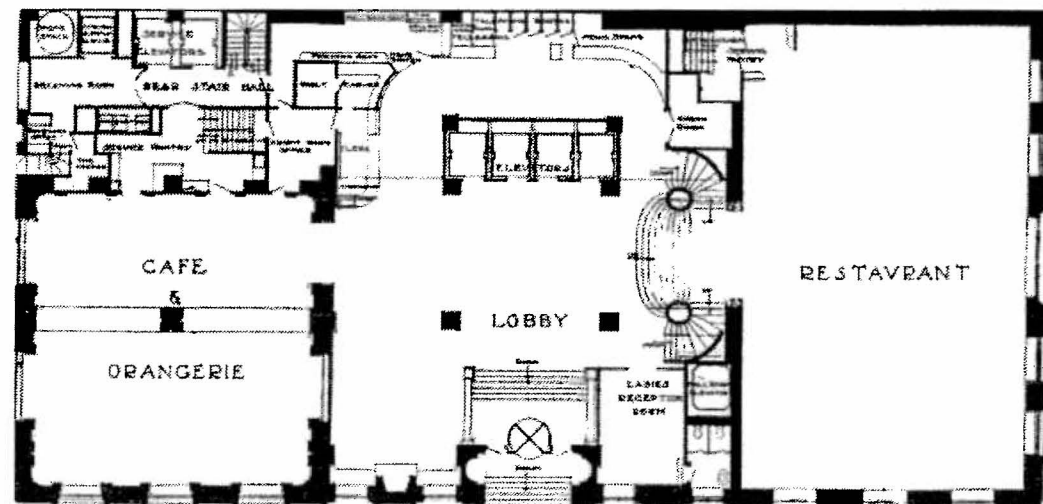
It is a fine example of modern hotel planning; it is conveniently arranged for the comfort of the guests, perfectly planned for service, and in every way expresses the best thought in this class of building....The interior combines dignity with a certain feeling of homelikeness rarely found in hotels. On the whole, the building was considered by the jury of awards a step in the advance of this type of architecture.

Like the exterior, the interiors were designed to attract the "most discriminating" class of customer. The public spaces were richly appointed with walnut, marble, and elaborate plaster decoration. The majority of these details remain today. Again, excerpting from the building's National Register nomination:

The first, or "club," floor contains a direct entrance to Michigan Avenue. Shops were originally installed on both sides of the entrance, but they have been replaced by a coffee shop and lounge. The rear area contains meeting rooms because a fire destroyed the interior of the original Blackstone Grill. The second floor, or lobby floor, is entered directly off Balbo Drive. Two levels of steps are interrupted by a vestibule of cast iron and terra cotta construction, which is original. The lobby walls and columns are richly appointed with walnut, and the plaster



The hotel lobby, which fronts on Balbo (at bottom in floor plan), is largely intact.



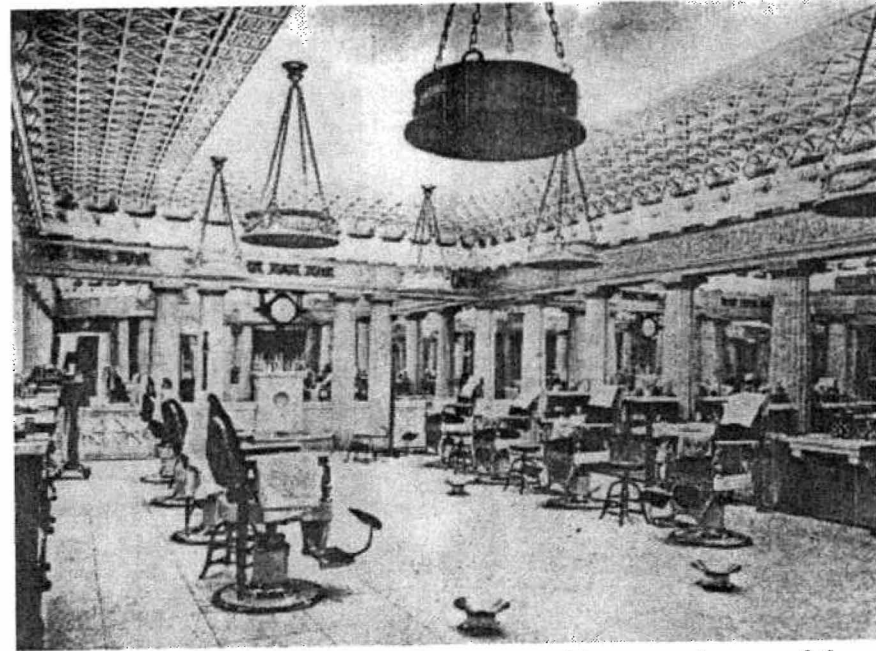
The grand ballroom, which is located above the hotel's original restaurant, is intact, although its rich ivory and gold colors have been painted a uniform white.

ceiling coffers and beams are formed with elaborate plaster decoration. The former "orangerie" [west of the lobby and later occupied by a nightclub, the Jazz Showcase; it is currently vacant]. The main desk wraps discreetly around the rear of the elevator shafts, and the original balustraded stairs leading to the "restaurant" [on the east] are intact....Now the Mayfair Theater, it is the only room in the public area that has been completely altered.

The Ballroom is located on the fourth and fifth levels, above the restaurant. It is particularly notable for its elegance and detail which, according to a review in *Architects' and Builders' Magazine* (1910), "is in the style of Louis XVI, decorated in ivory and gold." Although the colors are covered with many layers of white paint, the plaster ornament is still intact. Two stories of windows, recessed behind louvered doors, provide natural light for the 76-foot long x 48-foot wide room, as well as panoramic views of Lake Michigan and Grant Park. A long Art Hall, which fronts on the upper level of the ballroom, leads to the English Room, which has an elaborate ceiling.

Another notable interior space is the old barber shop, located in the basement beneath the lobby. Although no longer





The hotel barber shop (above, in 1910) provides a good sense of the hotel's luxurious character. It still survives, although no longer in use as a barber shop.

used for its original purposes, it remains largely intact. Marble classical columns support a richly ornamented frieze, and the decorative plaster ceiling features recessed lighting—referred to at the time as the “Eye Comfort” system of indirect illumination. A marble fountain survives at one end of the room, as well as the original ornamental light fixtures.

With the exception of the fire-destroyed Blackstone Grill and the altered restaurant, the hotel's interior finishes are surprisingly intact, including those of the 16 floors of guest rooms. The original lobby chandeliers have been removed; the current crystal chandeliers may be those that had hung in the restaurant.

## Evolution of the Michigan Boulevard Streetwall

The 13-block stretch of Michigan Avenue (originally *Michigan Boulevard*) that faces Grant Park, between Roosevelt Road and Randolph Street, is one of the most familiar images of Chicago. In a snapshot, it reflects the city's beauty and its progress from a fort on the marshy edge of a lake to a handsome commercial skyline along a magnificent lakefront park.

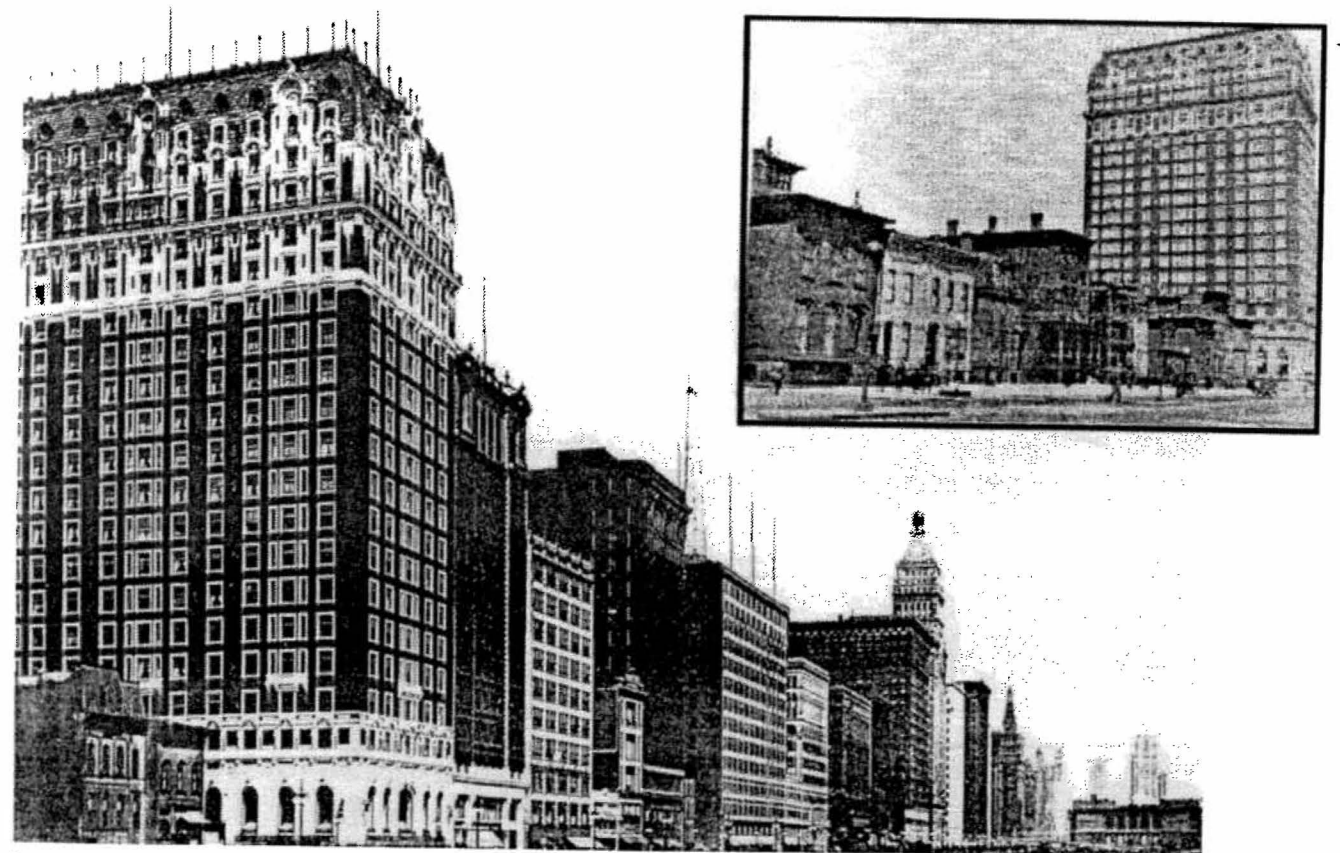
The Michigan Avenue “streetwall” also ranks as one of the world's most famous one-sided thoroughfares—of the same class as the wall of buildings along New York City's Central Park; Princes Street in Edinburgh, Scotland; the Grand Canal in Venice; or the Bund in Shanghai, China. The Blackstone Hotel

stands as one of the most visible and significant landmarks along the South Michigan Avenue “streetwall.” The decision by the Drakes, in 1908, to construct the Blackstone in this location also played a critical role in the overall development of the streetwall.

At the beginning of the 1900s, most new luxury hotels (e.g., LaSalle, Sherman) were being constructed within the Loop. While both the Auditorium Hotel (1889) and the Congress Hotel (1893) were located along South Michigan Avenue, the rest of the street was dominated by smaller buildings. By the turn of the century, however, the development of the new skyscraper technology was bringing taller buildings to Michigan Avenue, helping to define the streetwall as it appears today.

The first skyscraper to take advantage of the prominence of Michigan Avenue had been the 270-foot-tall Montgomery Ward Tower (at 6 N. Michigan) in 1899. It was followed in 1904 by the 235-foot Railway Exchange Building (224 S.), and by the 253-foot Blackstone in 1908. When the Blackstone was completed, it became an important highrise anchor at the south end of the Michigan Avenue streetwall.

Although several mid-scale buildings were located south of the Blackstone (e.g., YWCA at 830 S., the Graphics Arts at 1006 S., and the Bordeaux Hotel at 1140 S.), most of the structures were much smaller in scale, including a group of Civil



The construction of the Blackstone Hotel in 1910 literally changed the face of the south end of Michigan Avenue (top, in an early postcard view), extending the street's wall of buildings south to Balbo Drive. Above: the “streetwall” as it appeared in 1924.



This sketch of Michigan Avenue, looking one block south of the Blackstone, appeared in a 1920 city guide-book. The panoramic photo (below), which was taken from the steps of the Field Museum in 1933, shows the Stevens (now Hilton) Hotel at far left.

War-era residences on the next block south. Following construction of the Blackstone, several taller structures began to appear, including the Crane Building (836 S.), the Karpen-Standard Oil Building (910 S.), and—15 years later—the city’s largest hotel, the 3,000-room Stevens Hotel (now the Chicago Hilton). As one 1920 tour book noted:

It was hard to induce business and buildings to come [to South Michigan Avenue] until a few years ago....[Now] it is one of the most wonderful city miles of the world, holding shops and office buildings, clubs and hotels, built closely and massively and with splendid effect, and facing out across a superb roadway to the water.

The architecture of the Blackstone Hotel, as well as other buildings of this period along Michigan Avenue, take full advantage of the visibility that the streetwall provides. Unlike buildings being built elsewhere in the Loop, where it was difficult to view the full height of a building from the street, the buildings along the streetwall are very prominent. Their heavily decorated tops and facades—featuring statuary, balconies, medallions, and ornamented window trim—as well as their styles, which tend toward the picturesque of the English Tudor, Modern French, and Venetian Gothic, are essential components of Chicago’s architectural history. As someone once described the streetwall: “It’s as if some of the best Chicago architecture gathered along the lakefront and posed for a group photo.”

The full visibility of the Blackstone, as well as other buildings along the streetwall, enabled the architects to use the tops of their buildings as an identifying feature. Mansard roofs (as in the Blackstone), gabled roofs (the Monroe Building and University Club, which flank Monroe Street), and setback towers (the Hilton and the Britannica Center) add interest to the silhouette of the streetwall—and to the downtown in general. The Blackstone survives as an irreplaceable part of that skyline.



## APPENDICES

### Criteria for Designation

The following criteria, as set forth in Section 2-210-620 of the Chicago Municipal Code, should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether the Blackstone Hotel should be recommended for designation as a Chicago Landmark.

#### CRITERION 1 (*Critical Part of City’s Heritage*)

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

The Blackstone Hotel is the last and best survivor of the city’s early luxury hotels. As such, it was long known as one of the city’s most significant gathering places, playing an important part of the social and cultural heritage of Chicago. “Its Louis XV details,” both inside and out, says historian C. W. Westfall, “established a new style for elegant social settings in Chicago.”

Due to its proximity to the Coliseum at 15th and Wabash (since demolished), which was a frequent site for national political conventions, the Blackstone Hotel has direct associations with the political life of the city and nation. It served as the headquarters for numerous U.S. Presidential candidates, ranging from William Howard Taft in 1912 to Richard Nixon in 1960.

The construction of the Blackstone also played an important role in developing the south end of the Michigan Avenue “streetwall.” The building’s introduction of French Modern architectural details complemented the Beaux Arts-style development of Grant Park and Michigan Avenue, which was done in accord with Burnham’s 1909 Plan for Chicago, further contributing to the city’s architectural heritage.

#### CRITERION 2 (*Historic Event*)

*Its location as a site of a significant event which may or may not have taken place within or involved the use of any existing improvements.*

The Blackstone Hotel was the location of the famous “smoke-filled room,” where Warren G. Harding was reportedly chosen as the compromise Republican nominee for President during the 1920 national convention. The colorful term, which has become a political cliché, was coined by a reporter covering the convention. Other historic events, including Harry S Truman’s selection as the vice presidential nominee in 1944, took place in rooms at the Blackstone.

#### CRITERION 3 (*Important Person*)

*Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

The Blackstone Hotel is referred to as the “House of Presidents.” A dozen U.S. presidents have stayed in the hotel’s Presidential Suite, including Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and most recently, Jimmy Carter. The complete list of hotel visitors ranges from kings and queens to prominent business people to influential jazz and blues musicians.

In addition, the hotel's original owners, the Drakes, were among the city's most influential hotel operators, ranging from their operation of the post-Fire of 1871 Grand Pacific Hotel to the Blackstone Hotel to the Drake Hotel. Tracy and John Drake, who built the Blackstone and Drake, have been called "Chicago's Innkeepers."

Finally, the hotel was named for early Chicagoan Timothy B. Blackstone, the influential president of the Chicago & Alton Railroad and the founding president of the Union Stockyards. His mansion had formerly stood on the site of the Blackstone Hotel.

#### **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 Blackstone Hotel is the city's only hotel to be given the highest possible architectural rating in the *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*. Only 200 buildings—citywide—received a comparable ranking of "red" in the survey, which was published in 1996.

The exterior design of the Blackstone also represents a rare Chicago example of the Modern French, a style of Beaux-Arts architecture that was quite common in Paris and New York City during the 1890s and early 20th century. This style was known for its classically inspired details, which reflect a high level of quality of design, craftsmanship, and materials.

The hotel's interior is equally opulent, and the hotel's innovative interior plan was given a gold medal from the Illinois Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1910. The intactness of the hotel's interior, 90 years after its construction, is a tribute to its lasting influence.

Finally, the Blackstone Hotel is also an important example of the "luxury hotel" building type, which developed in Chicago and New York City during the early 1900s, thus reflecting Chicago's emergence as a national and international destination.

#### **CRITERION 5 (Important Architect)**

*Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.*

Benjamin H. Marshall, the designer of the Blackstone Hotel, is acknowledged as one of the most important and influential architects in Chicago during the early 1900s. The Blackstone was the first hotel designed by Marshall and his partner, Charles E. Fox. Their Chicago architectural firm of Marshall & Fox previously had been known as a developer and designer of theaters, residences, and apartment buildings, bringing a new classical elegance and luxury to these building types, including such renowned apartments as 1550 N. State Parkway and several buildings located in the East Lake Shore Drive Chicago Landmark District.

"They built apartments in a manner calculated to allow their occupants to simulate the lifestyle of the Gold Coast's great mansions," says Miles Berger in *They Built Chicago*. Following their design for the Blackstone Hotel and Blackstone Theater, Marshall & Fox became even more popular and influential. Their later commissions included the South Shore Country Club (1914), the Drake Hotel (1919), the Edgewater Beach Hotel (1923; since demolished), the Lake Shore Bank (1921), and the Uptown Bank (1923).

#### **CRITERION 6 (Theme as a District)**

Applicable only for landmark districts.

#### **CRITERION 7 (Visual Landmark)**

*Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.*

The Blackstone Hotel is an important visual landmark as seen from Lake Michigan, Grant Park, and Michigan Avenue. The hotel's high-profile location—adjacent to Grant Park—and its prominent mansard roof and ornamental details make it an important, distinctive, and irreplaceable part of the city's famed "streetwall" of buildings along Michigan Avenue.

## **Significant Features**

*In carrying out its permit review responsibility, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks must review the effect of proposed alterations to "any significant historical or architectural feature" (2-120-770 of the Municipal Code of Chicago). When buildings and districts are under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission identifies these features in order that owners and the public understand the specific elements that distinguish the landmark.*

Based on its evaluation of the Blackstone Hotel, the staff recommends that the significant historical and architectural features of this building include:

- All exterior elevations of the building, including its roofline.
- The main lobby, its stairs to the second level, and its entrance to the hotel on Balbo Street.
- The ground-level corridor leading between the basement stairs and Michigan Avenue.

## Building Rehabilitation Issues

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks bases its review of all city-issued permits related to a landmark property on its adopted *Guidelines for Alterations to Historic Buildings and New Construction*. The purpose of the Commission's review is to protect and enhance the landmark's existing "historical and architectural features."

The Blackstone Hotel retains the majority of its significant original exterior features although some have been modified:

- **Building Roof**

The original roof has undergone the most extensive changes of all the exterior elements. The original tile and terra cotta roofing was removed along with decorative cresting, window surrounds, original light fixtures, and other trim. Some original window(s) located in the roof were covered over, and a standing seam lead, or lead-coated copper roof was installed.

- **Windows**

Although the original configuration of window openings is intact, the existing windows are replacements installed in 1986.

- **Masonry Exterior**

The original masonry is in relatively good condition although tuckpointing and various repairs are required. In addition in some areas the brick and terra cotta are cracked. As noted above some exterior masonry has been removed, particularly in the roof area. A continuous, decorative balcony at the 15th floor, believed to have been made of terra cotta and ornamental metal, was removed at some point in the past.

- **Entrances**

The Michigan Avenue entrance has been altered, with the addition of an awning and replacement of the original entrance doors. The hotel's main entrance on Balbo is largely intact, however, the existing awning at that location appears to be a modern replacement for the original iron-and-glass canopy that appears in early photographs.

- **Storefronts**

The original storefronts have been altered. Although the original stone base survives, as well as most of the openings themselves, the ironwork that originally filled the ground-level windows and doors has been replaced by modern materials.



A 1910 photograph of the hotel's Michigan Avenue storefronts.



The hotel's original iron-and-glass entrance canopy (below) has been replaced by a modern version (above).



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Original Blackstone directory courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society.



**The Blackstone Hotel is part of the wall of buildings facing Grant Park (second from left).**

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