

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



LITTLE VILLAGE ARCH

3100 W. 26TH STREET

Final Landmark Recommendation Adopted by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks,
on November 4, 2021



CITY OF CHICAGO

Lori E. Lightfoot, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development

Maurice D. Cox, Commissioner

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LITTLE VILLAGE ARCH

3100 WEST 26TH STREET

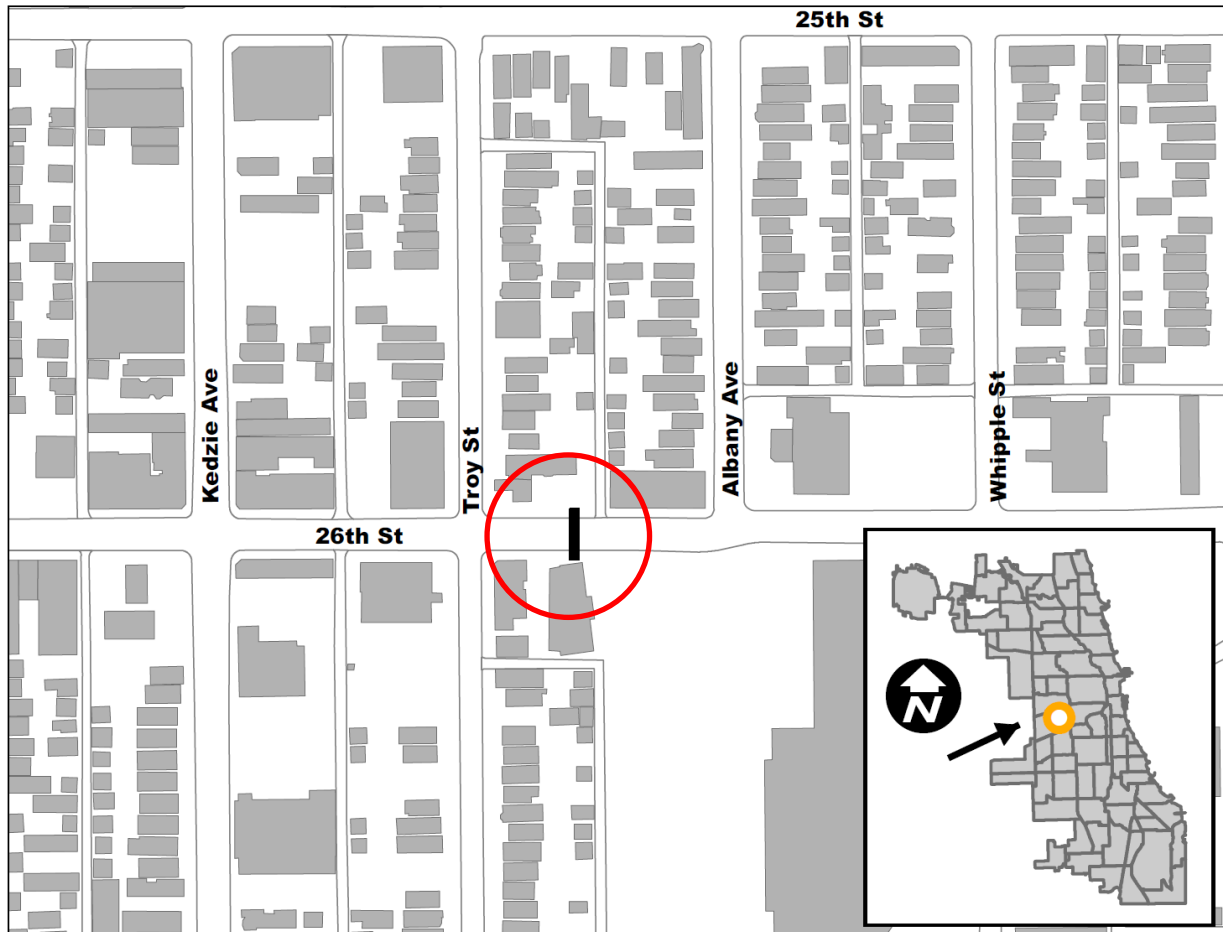
BUILT: 1990

ARCHITECT: ADRIÁN LOZANO

Standing proudly above West 26th Street is the Little Village Arch, which serves as the eastern gateway to what has been referred to as the “Mexican capital of the Midwest.” The two-story tall tiled archway spanning 26th Street is carried by dome-capped stucco towers at either end, with sidewalk passageways below. The arch is inset with a wrought-iron grille with a metal banner that reads “*Bienvenidos A Little Village.*” Above, the arch is faced on both sides with orange mosaic tile set in a diamond pattern and is capped by a clay tile roof. At the arch’s center is a grand mechanical clock.

In 2019, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks highlighted the Little Village Arch as part of the *Community Streetscape Markers: Context Statement*. The Context Statement recognized the cultural significance of this type of public improvement and laid out the criteria necessary for such types of installations to be designated Chicago landmarks.





The Little Village Arch is located in the 3100 block of West 26th Street, between S. Albany Street and S. Troy Street, in the South Lawndale Community Area, as represented in black on the map above.

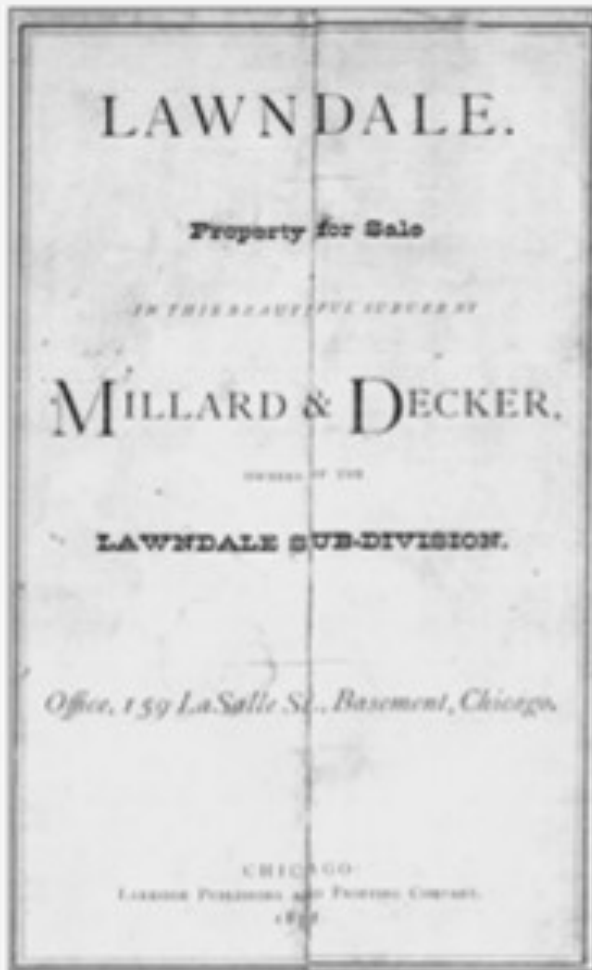
The Little Village / *La Villita* Neighborhood

Little Village is known for the cultural footprints left behind by waves of immigrants. Located just west of the intersection of S. Albany Avenue and West 26th Street, the Little Village Arch is the gateway to the Mexican and Mexican American community of Little Village, or *La Villita*. The neighborhood is located 5 miles southwest of the Loop in the larger South Lawndale Community Area, a wedge-shaped geographic area situated between the Stevenson Expressway at its southern limits and stretching roughly along Cermak Road to the north, with Western Avenue and Cicero at its east to west. The perimeter of South Lawndale is defined by industrial, rail and the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal which surround an island of residential blocks.

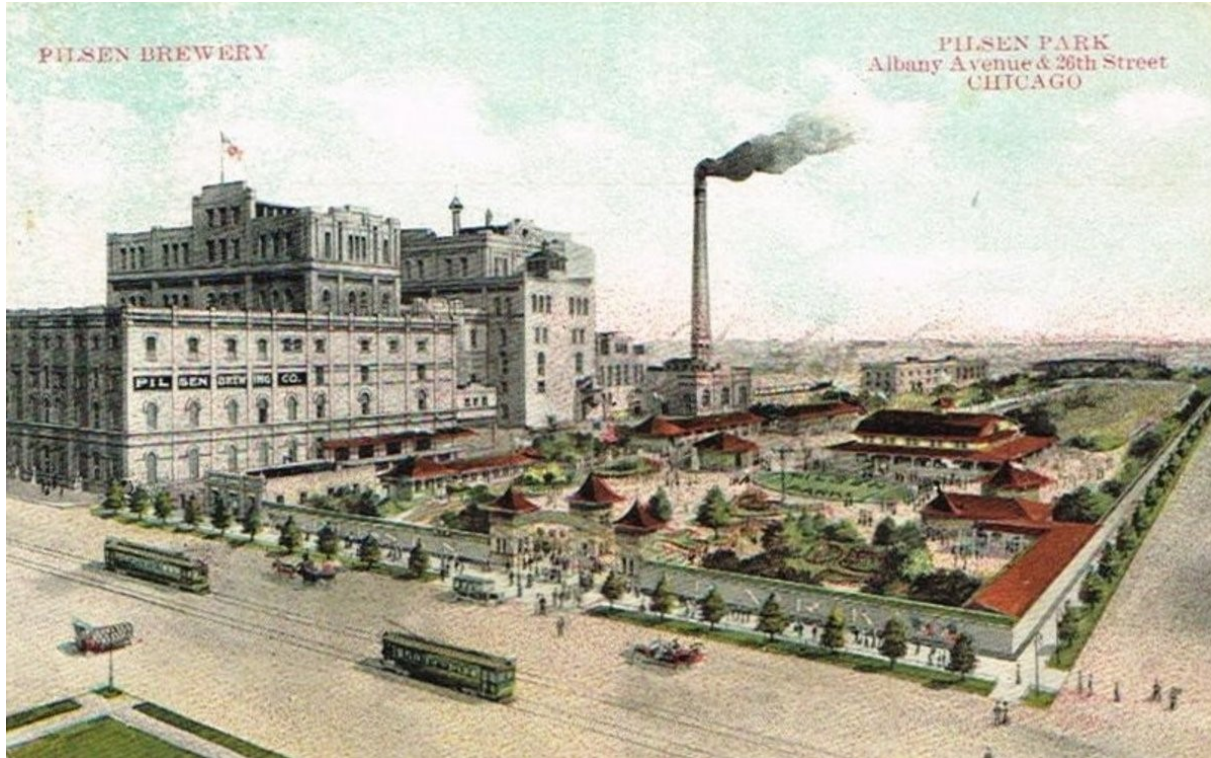
The Little Village Arch marks the beginning of a two-mile stretch of West 26th Street which runs west from the Arch to Kostner Avenue. This part of West 26th Street is the commercial and cultural heart of Little Village with a dense strip of small shops, bakeries, restaurants and offices run by and catering to the Mexican community. Though many of the buildings on West 26th Street were built prior to the neighborhood becoming Latino, the Arch identifies the living heritage and culture of the community. On top of caring for the historic neighborhood of Little Village, the community has added and preserved its own significant layer of culture and traditions in the neighborhood through language, food, religion, family structure, murals, music and dance.

The land that is now Little Village was familiar to generations of indigenous Americans who traversed the area. It was here that Native Americans discovered a low and short portage of land connecting the Great Lakes and Mississippi river systems. The Chicago Portage as it came to be known attracted the attention Marquette and Joliet in 1673, early European explorers into North America who perceived the economic and strategic importance of a connection between the Great Lakes and Mississippi river systems that ultimately gave rise to the City of Chicago. As the city developed, the route of the Chicago Portage has evolved into an industrial and transportation corridor containing the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, major railroads, and the Stevenson Expressway.

European settlement in the area began in 1862 with the arrival of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. In 1871, Alden C. Millard and Edwin J. Decker, real estate partners from Chicago, began subdividing undeveloped land for a residential development they named Lawndale (an appellation which survives in the names of the North and South Lawndale Community areas). Bound by West Cermak Road, West 26th Street, South Hamlin Avenue and South Homan Avenue, the subdivision offered reasonably priced land that was still near enough to Chicago's Loop to be reached by the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad within 20 minutes. Lawndale also comprised a park located near West Cermak Road and South Millard Avenue, which served as an appealing feature for prospective residents. Today, this recreational area is



At left is an 1870s advertisement for lots for sale in the newly established subdivision of Lawndale, which was created by the real estate firm of Millard & Decker just west of Douglas Park. (Credit: Images of America, Chicago's Little Village, Lawndale-Crawford)



An early 1900s postcard showing the Pilsen Brewery and Pilsen Park, located in the vicinity of today's Little Village Arch. (Credit: www.taverntrove.com)



An early 1900s postcard view of West 26th Street between Trumbull and St. Louis Avenues. (Credit: *Images of America, Chicago's Little Village, Lawndale-Crawford*)

known as Shedd Park. Millard and Decker's venture failed in 1876, however it set the stage for future residential development in South Lawndale.

Industry has played an important role in South Lawndale's history. After the Great Fire of 1871, which did not reach South Lawndale, industry and commerce began to thrive as large manufacturing complexes moved into the area, subsequently encouraging residential development. The construction of the McCormick Reaper plant at 27th and Western in 1873, and Western Electric Company's Hawthorne Works in nearby Cicero in 1905, offered jobs that attracted ethnic European working-class families to settle in the area beginning in the 1880s.

Throughout the first two decades of the 20th century, South Lawndale developed rapidly as a working-class community with a strong Czech and Slovak ethnic identity such that the neighborhood became known as Czech California. Many came to Little Village from Pilsen in search of better housing in a less-congested neighborhood. Most families resided in two- and three-flats. By the 1920s, the neighborhood was completely built up and the Czech community was joined by Poles, Croatians, Slovenes and Lithuanians. The 1920s also saw the complete development of West 26th Street as a neighborhood commercial strip that has served successive waves of ethnic communities.

Known as racial or ethnic succession by sociologists, most neighborhoods in Chicago have evolved over time as new social groups replaced older ones. South Lawndale is no exception. Mexicans had been migrating to Chicago since the early twentieth century to escape the unrest of the Mexican Revolution and to seek jobs in the nation's industrial capital. They initially settled near places of work: in the Back of the Yards neighborhood which housed workers in the meatpacking industry and in South Chicago with its proximity to the steel industry. Mexicans began arriving in South Lawndale as early as the 1940s

At the same time, African Americans began to move into North Lawndale prompting "white flight" and rapid racial turnover by the 1960s. European ethnic business owners in South Lawndale, led by real estate broker Richard Dolejs, proposed renaming the neighborhood "Little Village" in 1964 to distinguish the European ethnic community from the African American community in North Lawndale. Dolejs also promoted plans to redecorate storefronts on West 26th Street in a vaguely Central European style though little of this was implemented. However, the name Little Village did take hold as did the racial boundary between North and South Lawndale.

The ethnic rebranding of Little Village failed to stem white flight. In the 1960s the neighborhood population was in transition as families of European descent moved out to suburban Cicero, Berwyn and Riverside and new Mexican residents moved in in a wave of immigration from Mexico from the 1960s to the 1980s. Little Village offered the Mexican community the same benefits enjoyed by earlier European immigrants: affordable housing and a walkable, self-contained community.

Many of the Mexicans who came to Little Village in 1960s were either displaced from their homes in other parts of the city, such as the Near West Side where large swaths were cleared by urban renewal programs and the University of Illinois Circle Campus. Others were new immigrants for whom Little Village and Pilsen have served as points of entry from Mexico to Chicago and the Midwest. The influx of Mexican immigrants reversed population decline in Little Village between 1960 and 1980 and revived its commerce and retail base, particularly on West 26th Street. Today Little Village is 84% Latino (of which 77% Mexican/Mexican American), 12% African American and 3.9% foreign born.

West 26th Street, once referred to as "Bohemian Broadway" and now known as *Calle Mexico*, is claimed to be the second highest grossing retail sales district in the City of Chicago next to



Community leaders Richard Dolejs, Dominic Rossi and Mr. Dancho displaying a new Little Village light pole sign in 1965, part of an ill-timed effort to maintain the neighborhood's European ethnic identity. (Credit: *Images of America, Chicago's Little Village, Lawndale-Crawford*)



Richard Dolejs welcoming a new bakery business at 3648 W. 26th Street incorporating the Little Village name, date unknown. (Credit: *Images of America, Chicago's Little Village, Lawndale-Crawford*)



Mexican Independence Day Parade on 26th Street, circa 2010. (Credit: *Images of America, Chicago's Little Village, Lawndale-Crawford*)



First Mexican Independence Day Parade on 26th Street in 1964. (Credit: *Images of America, Chicago's Little Village, Lawndale-Crawford*)

Michigan Avenue.

At a vacated section of Kolin Avenue, West 26th Street includes a plaza with a memorial to Manuel Pérez Jr., a Mexican-American raised in Little Village and a World War II hero who was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions in the Battle of Luzon, Philippine Islands, in February 1945, a month before he was killed in action.

With its many murals, parades and festivals, and the *Bienvenidos a Little Village* sign on the imposing Arch, Little Village is a center of Mexican culture and community in Chicago and the United States, second in size only to the Mexican community in East Los Angeles.

Design and Construction of the Little Village Arch

At least as early as 1987, the idea of a celebratory community marker to highlight the growing Mexican population of the neighborhood was proposed. The initial idea consisted of twin iron gates at the eastern and western ends of Little Village's vibrant 26th Street retail corridor; however, then-alderman Jesus "Chuy" Garcia proposed a design inspired by the arched entrances found in Mexican architecture. It was intended by the City to build community pride and recognize the significance of the Mexican-American community to Chicago.

Construction of the arch was begun in late 1990 and was built over a period of six months by dr/Balti Contracting Company, which used scaffolding to prevent interruption to traffic. In 1991, then President of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, visited Chicago and stopped to speak to a rally of around two thousand Little Village residents near the newly completed arch. Salinas reassured the crowd that the Mexican government had not forgotten them and they were not alone. "As president of Mexico, it's very emotional for me to be here with you in Little Village, in the barrio with the Mexican people surrounded by Mexican flags and proud, honest hard-working people," he said. As a gift to the community and the City, Salinas presented a bronze clock manufactured by Relojos Centenario, the oldest clockmaker in Mexico. It was installed in the crown of the arch, with faces on both the east and west sides.

The Little Village Arch resembles the arched entrances found in Mexican architecture. The arched gateway is a distinctive feature of the *capilla abierta* or "open chapel" built in Mexico during the Colonial era in the early 16th century. These were built by Catholic missionaries to hold mass for large numbers of indigenous people and they were similar to the *teocallis* or sacred precincts of pre-Hispanic temples. Arched gateways are also found in Mexican towns that were fortified with walled enclosures. Here the gateway controlled access to streets leading in and out of the walled settlement. While no longer serving as a control point, these gateways survive in Mexico and are a distinct feature of towns and cities. Similar arched gateways are found in Mexican *haciendas*, large estates dedicated to farming or manufacturing.



Ron Baltierra, president of Baltierra dr/ Balti, the contractor that built the arch stands atop one of the towers. The span of the arch shows a light-gauge steel structural frame and metal lath prior to application of finishes.

(Credit: August Sallas)



One of the challenges encountered during construction of the Arch was the need to keep traffic flowing on W. 26th Street.

(Credit: August Sallas)



The Arch near completion, before the installation of tile across the span, and the installation of the clock, a gift from the President of Mexico in 1991.

(Credit: August Sallas)



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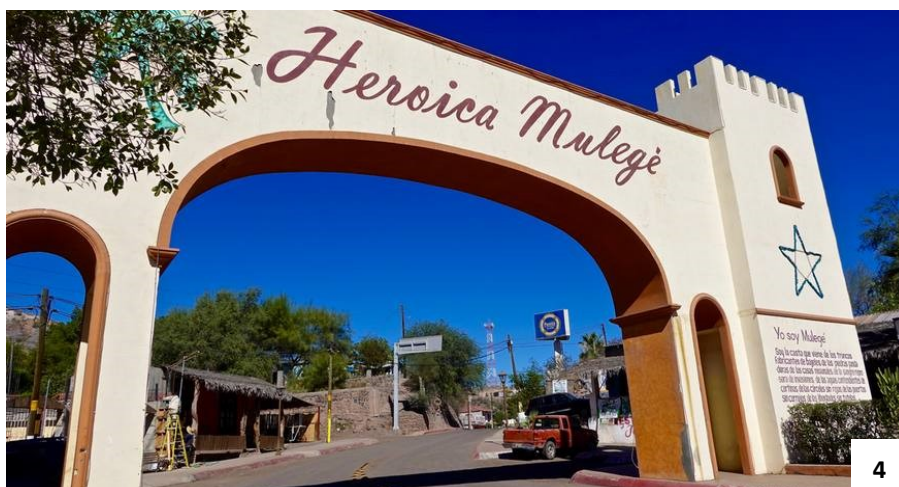
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The Little Village Arch is inspired by arched gateways found at historic Mexican religious sites, haciendas and walled settlements.

1. A gated entrance to a 16th century *capilla abierta* in Puebla, Mexico. (Credit: Armando Salas Portugal)
2. Mérida, Yucatán. (Credit: Flickr)
3. Izamal, Yucatán. (Credit: Flickr)
4. Mulegé, Baja California Sur. (Credit: Flickr)



3



4

Adrián Lozano, Artist and Architect

The Little Village Arch was designed by Adrián Lozano (1921-2014), a Chicago artist and architect of Mexican descent whose career has not been well documented. Despite the lack of documentation, it is known that in addition to the Arch, Lozano contributed to two other buildings important to the Mexican community in Chicago: the National Museum of Mexican Art (1978, 2001 and 2006) and the Benito Juarez Community Academy (1977), both in Pilsen.

Lozano was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico and came to Chicago at age four with his parents. His family appears to have lived in the Mexican community on the Near West Side before neighborhood residents were displaced by urban renewal programs that include the construction of the University of Illinois' Circle Campus. The young Lozano was active at Hull House and at age 20 painted the *Progress of Mexico*, a 1941 mural inside the Benito Juarez Club room at Hull House. Lozano depicted himself in scenes from Mexican history. The mural was destroyed during the late 1960s with the expansion of the Circle Campus. Though it does not survive, the mural holds the distinction of being the first work of Mexican Muralism in Chicago, a community based art tradition that continues to thrive in the city.

Lozano earned a diploma from Wright College and taught fine arts there in the 1940s. In 1942 his work was exhibited at the Benedict Gallery of Hull House and in 1957 Lozano's work was exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago.

It is unknown when Lozano entered architecture or where he studied. His first documented work of architecture was the 1978 adaptive re-use of a Chicago Park District boathouse into the National Museum of Mexican Art, with later additions designed by him in 2001 and 2006. The facade of the museum features a frieze with pre-Columbian motifs from the archaeological Zapotec site at Mitla, Mexico.

In 1977, as part of Bernheim, Kahn & Lozano, Lozano served as the architect of record for the Benito Juarez Community Academy, which was designed in consultation with Mexican architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez. The massing of the building and its sloped walls evokes pre-Hispanic temples and the design stands as the only example of *Neo-aztecismo* architecture in Chicago. The exterior also includes a prominent frame for a 1979 mural entitled *La Esperanza* depicting the struggles faced by Mexican-American youth by Malú Ortega y Alberro, Jimmy Longoria, Oscar Moya, Marcos Raya, Robert Valadez, and Salvador Vega.



***Progress of Mexico*, a mural painted by Adrián Lozano in 1941 which was located in the Benito Juarez Club Room on the Second Floor within Hull-House. (Credit: *Pots of Promise*)**



Adrián Lozano holding a framed image of *Progress of Mexico*, date unknown (Credit: *Pots of Promise*)



Benito Juarez Community Academy (1977) 1450 W Cermak. Lozano served as the architect of record for the building which shows the influence of Pre-Hispanic architecture of Mexico. (Credit: <https://ecuip.lib.uchicago.edu/>)



The National Museum of Mexican Art. Lozano designed the adaptive reuse of a former Park District building into an art museum in 1978, as well as additions in 2001 and 2006. The frieze is based on archaeological finds from a Zapotec site at Mitla, Mexico. (Credit: Chicago Sun Times)

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sections 2-120-690), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a recommendation of landmark designation for an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art or other object with the City of Chicago if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for designation,” as well as possesses a significant degree of historic integrity to convey its significance.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Little Village Arch be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion 1: Critical Part of City’s Heritage

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

- ◆ With its *Bienvenidos a Little Village* sign, the Little Village Arch exemplifies the cultural and social heritage of the Mexican community in Chicago in general and the neighborhood of Little Village specifically.
- ◆ The Little Village Arch spans West 26th Street, a commercial street with significant economic heritage as it has served waves of immigrant residents over time including Europeans and Mexicans. Though many of the buildings on West 26th Street were built prior to the community becoming Mexican, the community has added and preserved its own significant layer of culture to West 26th Street through language, food, religion, family structure, murals, music and dance

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 Little Village Arch is unique in Chicago as the only example of a street gateway inspired by historic gateways built at Mexican religious sites, haciendas and walled towns in the Colonial era. It may be the only such example north of the Rio Grande River.
- ◆ With its clay tile roof, stucco towers with domed roofs, and tiled span, the Little Village Arch exhibits materials and design details that are typically found in Mexico and conveys the living heritage of the community in Little Village.

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 the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

- ◆ Mexican-American artist and architect Adrián Lozano holds the distinction of being involved in the design of three buildings in Chicago treasured by the Mexican community: the Little Village Arch, the National Museum of Mexican Art and Benito Juárez Community Academy.
- ◆ In 1941 Lozano painted the *Progress of Mexico*, a mural inside the Benito Juárez Club room

at Hull House. Though the work no longer survives, it is significant as the first manifestation of the Mexican Muralism Movement in Chicago, a Movement that continues to thrive in the city.

The Little Village Arch also meets the additional requirements for designation outlined in the *Community Streetscape Markers Context Statement* adopted by the Commission on March 7, 2019, which state the following:

- The design of the marker must employ the use of symbolism or imagery that is significant and/or reflects a certain social, ethnic, or cultural group. The work does not only recognize a geographic place within the city (street, neighborhood, or community area).
- The community marker must be visible from the public-right-of-way.
- The marker is a work of original art and/or architecture designed by an artist or architect. It is not a stock piece, or an element comprised of prefabricated components.

Integrity

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, architecture or aesthetic value.

The Little Village Arch possesses a high degree of integrity. It remains in its original location and the neighborhood commercial street setting has changed little since it was built. In 2012, the arch was repaired and painted. Missing roof tiles were replaced, and the reddish granite base was replaced with limestone. The clock was repaired by a technician from the Relojos Centario factory in 2013. Over three decades the Little Village Arch has continued to convey its historic community and aesthetic values.

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 historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based upon its evaluation of the Little Village Arch, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All elevations, including the roofline, of the Arch.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CITY OF CHICAGO

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine 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 that individual building, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development; Bureau of Citywide Systems, Sustainability and Historic Preservation, City Hall, 121 North LaSalle Street, Room 905, Chicago, IL 60602; (312-744-3200) phone; web site: <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dcd/provdrs/hist.html>

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

COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS

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