

Mccormick place



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The McCormick Place Story

The history of McCormick Place is quite remarkable for a building that is only thirty-nine years old. It was built in 1960, burned down in 1967, and was rebuilt and reopened by 1971. When we think of McCormick Place today, we think of the North, South, and East buildings together. But the North building wasn't built until 1986, and the South building was completed just last year; both well after the Richard J. Daley administration. The East Building, (Also known as Lakeside Center) built from 1967-1971, and the original McCormick Place, completed in 1960, are the main foci of this paper because Richard J. Daley was directly involved with their planning. Because the North and South buildings did not exist during this time period, the building (either the original or the East building) was called McCormick Place.

McCormick Place is named after the former President of the Chicago Tribune Colonel Robert R. McCormick. He was born on July 30, 1880 in Chicago. He worked as the head of Streets and Sanitation Department from 1905-1910, and in 1911 he became president of the Tribune. He worked there until he was called into action for World War One where he served in the first infantry; directly under the command of John J. Pershing. When he returned home to Chicago, Robert became somewhat of an entrepreneur ("Exhibition Center Hailed"). In the late 1940's, McCormick recognized the need for a permanent convention center in the city. He began the campaign for this exhibition hall that would eventually bear his name. Sadly, Robert McCormick passed away April 1, 1955, and never saw his dream come to life ([www. mccormickplace. com](http://www.mccormickplace.com)).

In 1927, a similar plan to build a convention center was blocked by the Illinois Supreme Court. Further progress was stunted in the 1930's by the Great Depression. After the United States' entrance into World War Two, industry got a jump-start. Then in 1951, a one-percent tax was added on running racetrack parimutuels. The tax was designed to pay for industrial, cultural and educational fairs in Illinois. Most of the money would be staying in Cook County, because downstate county agricultural fairs were getting comparable benefits for several decades (Tagge).

By 1953, it became apparent that the convention buildings in Burnham Park were no longer big enough to host the size of events that Chicago wanted to host. The owners of the Burnham Park buildings knew their buildings were inadequate, but they didn't want a new building to be built because they would lose money. At first, the state general assembly sided with the Burnham owners and defeated legislation in 1953. But when Richard Daley became mayor in 1955, things began to change (Tagge).

Daley enacted a series of bills to permit use of the Cook county cut of the racetrack one-percent to build and equip an exposition building. In the 1955 general assembly, because it had been learned that earlier cost estimates were to low, a revenue bond was created to finance the project. The state of Illinois created the Metropolitan Fair and Exposition Authority to over see McCormick Place's construction and operation later that year. Colonel Henry Crown, industrialist, also donated money for a section of that hall that would later be known as the Arie Crown Theater.

The final step before construction was when the Chicago Park District granted a lease of forty-two acres of land for forty years at 23rd and the lake

(Tagge). This was very controversial because by law, the Chicago lakefront is supposed to be for public facilities only (Jaskot: McCormick). Of course this building was for the public, but private capital was needed to fund the building as well. Henry Crown, Lennox Lohr and Marshall Field IV all made contributions for the building (Tagge). But what Mayor Daley wanted, Mayor Daley got. He quashed all opposition, and legislation in favor of the building was passed unopposed (Jaskot: McCormick). Shaw, Metz and Associates began construction in 1958, and the building opened ahead of schedule on November 19, 1960.

McCormick Place's early opening seemed like a positive at the time, but it provoked disastrous long-term effects; not only for McCormick Place, but for Shaw, Metz and associates next project the Robert Taylor Homes. The contractors didn't use all of the materials they should have. They did this in order to cut costs and to make a larger profit (Jaskot: McCormick). The roof was not well supported, and a quarter of it collapsed in the 1967 fire ("Blaze Fans Thru Hall").

In its first seven years, the 35 million dollar McCormick Place was a tremendous success. The exhibition hall produced one third of the city's 300 million dollar annual profit during the early sixties ("Tragic Loss to City"). In December of 1966, plans were in the works for a 204, 000 square foot addition to the building. An investment brokerage Blythe and CO. turned over fifteen million dollars in revenue bonds to the Metropolitan Fair and Exposition Authority to back construction costs. A parking garage was also in the works if money was managed properly. These were just modest changes that were part of a grander plan to create a "McCormick City" (Hughes "Lake Front Bonds").

Construction of a 25 story luxury hotel at the cost of twenty million dollars was to be started in the spring of 1967. The hotel was scheduled to be built on five acres of abandoned railroad yards just west of the original building. Six new buildings in all were scheduled for completion within the next ten years, including an apartment complex, an office building, and a commercial building for shopping (Hughes " Lake Front Bonds"). All these plans came to a crashing halt on the morning of January 16, 1967.

At approximately 2: 00 AM, a fire broke out in an exhibit booth at the north end of the hall. The fire raged until 9: 30 AM when it was brought under control. On that day Chicago's fire department fought the blaze. Sub-zero temperatures froze many fire hydrants limiting the amount of water that could be accessed by firefighters. A night watchman Kenneth Goodman passed away in the fire, but fortunately there were no more casualties (" 12 Hour Chronology"). In the end, the inferno was the costliest disaster Chicago experienced since the great fire of 1871. Investigators to this day aren't sure exactly what ignited the fire. But they did conclude that if the ceiling had been made of concrete, the steel frame in the roof would not have buckled under the intense heat (" Mayor Brands Blaze").

The 1, 095 by 345-foot building was covered by insurance policies totaling \$29, 650, 00 (Insurance on McCormick). This covered most of the building costs, but the revenue brought in by the conventions was in jeopardy of being lost if McCormick place wasn't rebuilt quickly.

The Metropolitan Fair and Exposition Authority (six of the twelve members were appointed by Daley) set up a special committee of architects and engineers inspect the damage. The Authority chairman John Evers suggested

the building be restored, but ultimately the special committee voted to invest in a new building (Buck). The famous C. F. Murphy and Associates, who were close friends of Mayor Daley, were selected alone to rebuild ("Plans Reveal"). C. F. Murphy assigned his star pupil Helmet Jahn to head the project. The model for the new building was the National Gallery in Berlin. Jahn and Murphy's teacher Ludwig Mies van der Rohe planned this building (Jaskot: Murphy).

In 1967, architects drew four sets of plans before a decision could be made on the East Building. The first plans called for a division the building in two parts. An exhibition hall, and five levels for exhibits. The materials were to be marble and granite on the base and with pratt trusses and steel columns on the roof. The plan was rejected because Daley wanted a uniform building (Condit).

The second plan had one uniform building with more floor space, but the design was too radical for the lakefront. The third plan submitted was a combination of the first two sets. But when construction began in May of 1968, builders realized it would be ten million dollars over budget. They did not accurately estimate the cost of the parking garage and the property taxes. The final plans were approved two months later, and construction recommenced in the fall. When the East Building opened in early 1971, its total cost was 97 million dollars. McCormick Place was way over budget, and the original plans they rejected were cheaper than the final plans (Condit).

The East Building is an easily recognizable landmark along Chicago's lakefront because of its oversized roof and construction. Its contrasting black steel separates it from the classical building neighbors Soldier Field, the

Natural History Museum, and Shed Aquarium. It is rectangular shaped building where steel, glass and dark brick masonry are the emphasized materials. The building is basically broken into two parts; the roof, and the actual building. Both are unified by the grid effect. The main support system of the East Building is four rows of nine rectangular piers, spaced one hundred fifty feet apart (Condit). The I beams in the roof are completely visible on the outside and are organized in a way unlike any other building.

In the roof, two grid sets of beams run parallel to the ground. Then every ten feet or so, a grid perpendicular to the ground criss crosses the parallel grids. Two new sets of grids that are at a forty-five degree angle in relationship to the ground, run around the outside edge of the roof. In relationship to each other, they are perpendicular; creating a decorative horizontal zigzag line on the outer edge of the roof.

At the base of the building, the grid squares on the ground outside continue into the floor on the inside, just like the Inland Steel Building. What makes McCormick place so identifiable and unique is the fact the roof is the focal point. The sides of the roof stick out seventy-five feet from the inner most columns causing a break in conformity of the building as a whole (Condit). Not only is this decoration, but the roof provides shade and shelter for pedestrians who walk along the grounds outside the building.

By early 1980's the East Building was too small for the growing city. In, 1986, a second structure was built across Lakeshore Drive and is known as the North Building. A pedestrian skywalk connects the North Building and Lakeside Center today. In 1996, McCormick Place expanded once more with

the opening of the South Building. The South Building added almost three million square feet, a food court, and forty-five meeting rooms. Finally in 1997, the East Building was remodeled and reopened as Lakeside Center at McCormick Place. Now, Lakeside Center hosts Chicago's small to medium sized conventions ([www. mccormickplace. com](http://www.mccormickplace.com)).

Today, The East Building is a shell of what it use to be. It costs more to upgrade and comply with new safety rules than its worth. Ironically while I was typing this paper tonight, I heard our current Mayor Richard M. Daley, speak of tearing down Lakeside Center because he's in favor of more green space along the lakefront (5 o'clock News).

In conclusion, Mayor Richard J. Daley was heavily involved in the planning of McCormick Place. He selected both builders, and he passed legislation to get the building site he wanted. Lakeside Center was a tremendous success for three main reasons. (1) It gave the city a world famous exhibit hall to attract conventions. (2) In its prime it was providing one-third of Chicago's annual income. (3) Lakeside Center was the starting point for what has become of McCormick Place today.

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