Focus on: Lincoln Building

Located at the southwest corner of East Main and Market streets in downtown Champaign, the Lincoln Building was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places for Architecture as a locally significant example of the Commercial Style. With its tripartite division of base, shaft, and capital; fixed storefront sash and second story display sash, each with transoms; and regularly spaced double-hung upper story windows, the Lincoln Building represents a state-of-the-art store/office building for early twentieth century Champaign. Five stories tall and fireproof in construction, the mottled brown brick building with Classical Revival inspired brown terra cotta trim and a copper cornice includes fine materials and solid construction, an appropriately handsome building built by one of Champaign’s most prominent families. The interior of the Lincoln Building features an extensive use of marble, terrazzo, and wood trim in its office corridors of intact suites with single light doors and three-light interior corridor transoms. Today, the building’s architecture and impressive high degree of integrity contribute to this building’s continued landmark presence in downtown Champaign. The period of significance is 1916, representing the building’s date of completion. The building was designed by prominent local architect H.R. Temple, who had an office in the Lincoln Building upon its opening.

Commercial Style

Technical advances such as steel skeleton construction, elevators, electric lights, and telephones contributed to the innovation of the “skyscraper,” which, at the turn of the century, was any building five stories or taller. With the steel skeleton supporting the building, walls were new territory for design changes, chiefly in a greatly increased percentage of wall space occupied by windows. What, exactly, to call the style of these evolving late nineteenth and turn of the century buildings may be open to debate, but typically, some variety of these buildings get lumped into the term “Commercial Style.” Marcus Whiffen credits the first use of the term in print to an anonymous editor of four volumes of Industrial Chicago, published in 1891. Cites Whiffen,

The Commercial Style is the title suggested by the great office and mercantile buildings now found here. The requirements of commerce and the business principles of real estate owners called this style into life. Light, space, air and strength were demanded by such requirements and principles as the first objects and exterior ornamentation as the second.

The second principle of the aforementioned—exterior ornamentation—opens companion stylistic comparisons: Richardsonian Romanesque, Sullivanesque, and even Classical Revival. The term “Chicago Style” also comes into consideration. Whiffen notes the tendency toward crediting Chicago as the birthplace of the Commercial Style, as well as the city in which the style reached its ultimate development. He credits the period of the Commercial Style from 1875 through 1915.

Characteristics of the Commercial Style include a building height of five to sixteen stories; steel skeleton construction with masonry wall surfaces; minimal, if any, projections from the facade plane; flat roofs; level parapets or cornices; 1/1 double-hung sash; prismatic transoms; and minimal applied ornament. By far, the greatest element of the style is windows, comprising much of Commercial Style buildings’ main facades. The result of the total area of glass exceeding that of the brick (or other structural or facing material) is a skeletal appearance. If any ornamentation is used on the building, it is clearly ancillary to the fenestration.

Windows of this style are rectangular, very large, and variously divided; the fenestration pattern, whether of single or grouped windows, is quite regular. One popular form of grouped window used in the Commercial Style became known as the Chicago window—a broad central fixed sash flanked by narrow double-hung sash. In still other examples, windows are located in semi-hexagonal bays which extend the entire height of the building (above the first or second stories). Typically, facades are terminated in cornices, varying from plain to highly decorative treatments.
Built in 1915-16, the Lincoln Building in Champaign is a relatively late example of the Commercial Style. By the 1880s, the style was already popular in New York, Chicago, and other large Eastern and Midwestern cities. Despite William LeBaron Jenney's early examples of buildings in the style (First Leiter Building, 1879 and the Home Insurance Building, 1884-85, both in Chicago), some of the more notable Commercial Style buildings of the style's earliest period were designed by Adler and Sullivan. Included are the Troesch Building (the Chicago Joint Board Building), 1884; the Wirt Dexter Building, 1887; and, at the end of that period, the Wainwright Building in St. Louis, designed in 1890, and exhibiting the Sullivanesque treatment.

In the 1890s, the Chicago based architectural firm of Holabird and Roche became the most successful firm specializing in commercial work in the city. Their Tacoma Building, 1887-89 represented their first attempt at the Commercial Style; demolished in 1929, that building was in the vertical bay mode of the style. Later examples of the firm's use of the style, including the Marquette Building of 1893, discontinued that mode, using instead, broad rectangular windows extending the full width of structural bays. Contemporaneously, Sullivan was employing facades with piers and spandrels in the same plane, with long horizontal lines at the sill levels being unbroken. Examples are the Meyer Building, 1893, and the Carson, Pirie, Scott and Company Store, Chicago, 1899. The idea of base, shaft, and capital tripartite vertical divisions of the building was a popular trend attributed to Sullivan. While sometimes architectural stylistic categories may be subjective, few, if any, Champaign-Urbana buildings would be classified as Commercial Style.

Champaign-Urbana's architectural preferences favored the Classical Revival style or at least classical architectural elements. The Inman Hotel, the First National Bank Building, and the Masonic Temple, all within a few blocks of each other, are Classical Revival in influence or style, although varying considerably in degree of detail. The style was also apparently favored by H.R. Temple, as, in addition to the Lincoln Building, Temple himself with Spencer and Temple) designed the Inman Hotel and the Masonic Temple in Urbana. The Spencer and Temple design for the Champaign High School also used Classical Revival elements.

Opened in 1914, the school was later renamed Central School then Edison Junior High School.

Designed by prominent local architect H.R. Temple, the Lincoln Building was part of a new, modern era of building in downtown Champaign. As a result of downtown Champaign fires, including a blaze in 1915 which destroyed several businesses, fireproof construction was emphasized in advertising. Included in the "boom" with the Lincoln Building were the Inman Hotel (1915) and the Lewis Department Store (1915).
The Lincoln Building was built by Isaac Kuhn with his father, Joseph. Joseph Kuhn was a pioneer Champaign merchant, the city's oldest clothier and founder of the Joseph Kuhn Clothiers. His son Isaac followed well in his father's footsteps, becoming known as "the man who built Main Street."

Joseph Kuhn was born in Germany in 1835, the son of Isaac and Sarah Herz Kuhn. The elder Kuhn was a farmer and stock dealer. Apparently in an effort to escape recruitment by the German army, he emigrated to America, arriving in Mississippi at the age of nineteen; a sister of his was living there at the time. Joseph worked for his brother-in-law from 1857 until 1862 when he was drafted into the Confederate army. He served with the Confederate forces for about thirteen months before taking "French leave," allying himself with a Federal outpost and being sent to New Orleans. Joseph Kuhn ended up in Lafayette, Indiana in 1863 where he worked until moving to Champaign County in the latter part of 1864.

In 1865, he opened a store on University Avenue in Champaign. Kuhn was married that year, to Lena Loeb of Cincinnati; she was also a German immigrant. Two years later, he moved his store to a building at 45 Main which he purchased. Before 1905, he bought the adjacent building to increase his store's capacity; by 1905, a third building was added.

Isaac Kuhn was widely noted for his involvement in the Jewish community and his charity locally. He had a keen interest in the welfare of Jewish students at the University of Illinois, but his assistance and support to non-Jewish groups was equally as extensive. He was active with the Grand Prairie Lodge and the Cleveland Orphans' home. He served on the first B'nai B'rith Hillel commission and was credited with being one of the primary movers in the founding of the Hillel movement. He was also an ardent supporter of the Wesley Foundation on the University's campus and the McKeen YMCA. Eclectic in his interests, in 1930, Kuhn provided the handmade suit which was worn by the University's Chief Illiniwek; the suit was made by the Sioux Indian tribe in Rapid City, South Dakota. The Chief tradition, created by Ray Dvorak in 1926, and the suit, continues albeit with controversy today.

Kuhn was married to Rose Adler of York, Pennsylvania. They had four daughters.

Isaac Kuhn continued daily trips to his store beyond his 86th year. He died on January 21, 1956 at the age of eighty-nine. His importance in the community is illustrated in part by the news of his death—the top headline and full-length article on the front page of The News-Gazette. The Champaign-Urbana Courier also carried the news on its front page. Following the end of World War II, in his conclusion, Isaac Kuhn states:

"Lincoln expressed (democracy) in his day for himself and for America—'with malice toward none, with charity for all.' Democracy meant—and still means—the rejection of bigotry, the devotion to justice, the pursuit of liberty and equality of opportunity to all, regardless of descent, denomination or income. Democracy meant—and means—the government of the nation in keeping with such principles by the people. Who are the people? You and I, and our next door neighbors."

The Kuhn Family

The Lincoln Building

Anticipation for the opening of Champaign's new, modern "mercantile and office building" was great, with an article on the building's opening making front page news in the local newspaper three months before the building was opened. With a photograph accompanying the article, four bold faced headings were given: "Fine Lincoln Building Now Nearing Finish," "Expected Handsome Structure Will be Ready by April 1," "Absolutely Fireproof," and "Bas Relief Tablet Will Occupy Conspicuous Place in Large Lobby on the First Floor." The article commented on the "remarkable feature" of the building having been under construction mostly during the winter months with not a single week's delay. Highlighted were the building's extensive terrazzo floors, adding an expense of $6,000 to the building's construction costs. Originally, the terrazzo floors were only to be in the lobby and corridors, with finished cement floors in the offices, but the new tenants were pleasantly surprised with the extensive use of terrazzo. The walls of the lobby (and the walls of the toilets) were reported as Kasota marble, "an expensive marble obtained in the northern part of Minnesota and never used in a Champaign building until this time." A bronze tablet with a carved bust of Abraham Lincoln in bas relief and a quotation from his message to Congress in 1861 ("The struggle of today is not altogether for us but is also for the vast future.") was to be placed on the wall of the lobby and opposite the building's directory. The newspaper reported that the rooms had been designed to the "wishes of those who will occupy them and as a result no two floors of the building are laid out any thing alike." Metal cabinets were to be furnished in all of the offices. A large vault on each floor was designed to receive a "strong box" for each tenant on that floor. Each suite was also provided with hot and cold water.

The Lillard & Getman furniture store was announced as the building's main tenant for the east side of the first and entire second stories, with display windows on the first and second stories. Applications had been received from several out-of-town potential tenants for the west side of the first story, but owner Isaac Kuhn was looking for a local firm. The building was equipped with a "large size" Otis passenger elevator, in addition to a freight elevator geared toward the furniture store, but available to all tenants. Most exciting was the feature "entirely new in building plans in [Champaign]." This was the "sun parlor" and...
proximately 20,000 square feet in total

Commenting on the store's new Lincoln firm, the store opened that day, occupying half of the first floor, all of the second floor, and half of the basement, approximately 20,000 square feet in total. Commenting on the store's new Lincoln Building quarters, the newspaper reported that the rooms were large, unusually well-lighted, and elegantly finished. Quite the downtown Champaign event, Lillard and Getman's opening was front page news. The opening featured an orchestra and flowers were distributed as souvenirs "to the ladies." The music and flowers were featured in the morning when the doors were opened, and again in the evening from 7 - 9 p.m. Factory representatives were also present for several of the furniture lines.

Only about a week after the lead tenant's opening, Isaac Kuhn placed an advertisement for the building, proclaiming the building's "Fire-Proof, High Grade Construction." This advertisement was part of what the newspaper had noted were Mr. Kuhn's plans to "introduce many things never before done in Champaign business operations." Included among these plans was an advertising campaign to have weekly advertisements for six months listing the announcements of every tenant in the building. The initial advertisement continued,

The Lincoln Building is Champaign's newest office and business building and rightly named because it is a building 'for the people.' The rental is such as to benefit the occupants and not to enrich the owners.

You are cordially invited to look through the building. A few offices are yet to be rented and if you need an office, be one of the fortunate ones. There will be a slight advance in rents July 1st.

Occupancy by lawyers was not surprising, nor was the degree to which the building was apparently occupied by the time it opened. Fifty-one of the building's sixty-three rooms were under lease before the building opened. Cleverly, the building's owners had been soliciting downtown Champaign lawyers who were in "walk-ups" (second story spaces accessed by only staircases) for rental deals in the proposed state-of-the-art Lincoln Building, complete with elevator and design as you wish office suites.

Today, lawyers and other professional offices continue to occupy the Lincoln Building, with plenty of space available for more occupants. The two storefront spaces are fairly consistently available for rent, with the Champaign County Democrats occupying the west half periodically (usually every two years, election years.) A barber shop is still located on one of the upper floors. Occasionally artists rent the observatory for studio space. The building continues to contribute substantially to downtown Champaign, serving as one of the anchor buildings in the core of the downtown. Its interior spaces are still very much intact, with interior windows providing light to office suites detailed with woodwork and terrazzo flooring. The building is owned by the grandson of Isaac Kuhn, Dr. William Youngerman, and Mrs. Ruth Youngerman, one of Isaac Kuhn's daughters.

This article was condensed from an article about the Lincoln Building National Register nomination written by Alice Novak and Karen Kummer of ArchSearch, a local historic preservation consulting firm. The building was listed on the Register in August, 1996.

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Membership Application P.A.C.A.

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:

☐ NEW
☐ RENEWAL

☐ Adult ........................................... $15.00
☐ Student (1/2 time or more) ................... $10.00
☐ Senior Citizen ................................. $10.00
☐ Family .......................................... $20.00
☐ Corporate ...................................... $75.00

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTION

NAME

ADDRESS

Make checks payable to: PACA, Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61825
An Ordinance is Passed!

After twenty years of lobbying and prod-
ing, in November the City of Champaign
passed Champaign County’s first historic
preservation ordinance. Contained within
the 1996 Zoning Ordinance, Article IX
creates a Champaign Historic Preserva-
tion Commission. The seven member
commission is charged with identifying
buildings and areas within the City that
are historically significant, advising the
Plan Commission and the Council on
designating such property or areas as
either Landmarks or as Conservation or
Historic Districts, and reviewing Certifi-
cates of Appropriateness for designated
properties.

PACA is now eagerly awaiting the ap-
pointment of commission members and
urges interested Champaign PACA mem-
bers to seek appointment. In addition,
owners of historically and architecturally
significant properties or neighborhoods
containing a concentration of such build-
ings should contact the Plan Department
about nominating the property under the
new ordinance.

Heritage Award Nominations Sought

The Heritage Award Committee is seek-
ing nominations for the 1997 Heritage
Awards. Recent restoration, rehabilita-
tion, or adaptive use of historic buildings
in Champaign County are eligible for
nomination. Owners, developers, ar-
chitects, or contractors are urged to
nominate their own buildings or projects.
Enclosed in this newsletter is a nomina-
tion form or nominations can be called to
PACA at 328-7222. Deadline for submis-
sion of nominations is January 15, 1997.
The following is a list of 1996 awards.

Residential Heritage Award
• 505 East Warren Street
  St. Joseph
• 606 West Washington Street
  Champaign
• 108 North Webber Street
  Urbana
• 200 East Newkirk
  Tuscola

Commercial Heritage Award
• Novak & Jones Law Offices
  Urbana
• Shurts House Inn
  Savoy
• Radio Maria
  Champaign

Landmark Heritage Award
• Altgeld Hall, UI
• Tina Weedon Smith Memorial Hall, UI
• Experimental Dairy Farm Historic Dis-
  trict, UI

Environmental Heritage Award
• Urbana Street Light Program

Rescue Heritage Award
• Center for Women in Transition

Oomph! Award
• 613 West Stoughton Street
  Urbana
• Habitat for Humanity
  210 West Maple & 707 North Elm
  Champaign