

# Urban Renewal in the Interwar Era: The Remaking of Chicago's Loop, 1918 to 1942



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Abstract

This dissertation argues that the quarter-century period between the two World Wars was a period of ongoing renewal that coincided with shifts in Chicago's economic geography. This is in contrast to older writings on the city's architecture and urbanism, which tend to feature a boom-and-bust narrative. Redevelopment of the 1920s cleared hundreds of older, loft industrial buildings, walk-up office blocks, and ornate yet small-scale theaters and hotels from the Loop's peripheral streets, while a host of substantial twelve- to fourteen-story elevator buildings on LaSalle Street fell as if along a fault line. Their replacement by high-rise garages, widened and double-decked thoroughfares, luxurious skyscrapers, massive business hotels, and dazzling movie palaces signaled the start of the Loop's gentrification to a high-end office, retail and entertainment district aimed to attract and retain upper-income customers and tenants during a period of rapid decentralization. Such private- and publicly-funded urban interventions pushed out low-end businesses and light-industrial uses considered incompatible with the downtown elite's vision of a modern, efficient business district. The 1930s featured widespread demolition of all buildings types for parking lots, creating large swaths of open space where previously none had existed. The simultaneous and universal embrace of Depression-era downtown building modernization also served to "renew" the urban landscape while showing confidence in downtown through reinvestment. The large-scale removal of older and unprofitable buildings during the interwar era served as a prelude to the redevelopment that occurred after World War II, a period more commonly associated with urban renewal.

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of alcohol was both immoral and unhealthy, and those who saw the ban as an intrusion on mainstream, everyday life. Prohibition led to the rise The “interwar” period in European history refers to the volatile decades (1918–1939) between some of the world’s most devastating wars. This contradictory era witnessed both the march of Progressivism and the rise of Fascism. The art of this period was also polarized, as movements like Dada and Surrealism responded to the unprecedented death toll of World War I by embracing absurdity, irrationalism, and the unconscious, while other artists “returned to order” by painting in more classical styles. In a similar way, utopian movements like de Stijl, Russian Constructivism, and Suprematism pushed