

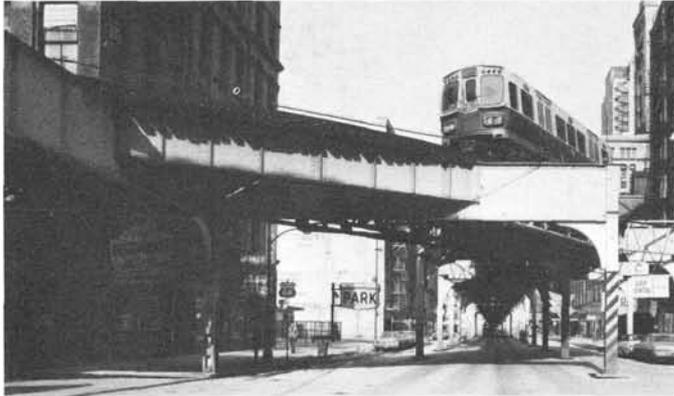
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TAMING CHICAGO'S WHITE EL-PHANT



THE LOOP, CHICAGO. Left: Wabash looking north from Harrison. Right: the crossing complex at Lake and Wells with Tower No. 18. Jack E. Boucher photographs for HAER, 1971.



As downtown after downtown experiences turbulent but energizing renaissance after renaissance, urban mass-transit systems are receiving therapy of the opposite order. New systems for old is the call issuing from city planning offices. Replace those outmoded trolleys with subways. Get rid of the decrepit downtown terminals. Bring on the superbuses and boutique "transit plazas." After all, what good's a renaissance if you can't get to it in the latest, fastest, and most comfortable style? Or so the logic goes.

At least two legs of Chicago's 1897 elevated "Loop" are slated for demolition, stations and all. The city considers such excision essential if their born-again downtown is to become the mecca they envision. A bittersweet decision, they concede, acknowledging the city's 82-year fellowship with the five-by-seven block riveted steel structure. But official perceptions of the Loop's inherent obsolescence render evanescent any such clinging nostalgia at City Hall.

"It's time we wake up and look at the Loop objectively," they intone. "Look at its filth, its archaic design and engineering. Listen to the banshee screeches of the cars careening overhead. Feel the bone-rattling vibrations on the ground below. See the way it straddles and obliterates four good downtown avenues—Wabash, Lake, Wells, Van Buren! Observe, if you dare, the drunkards and lurking criminal element inhabiting the sunless iron jungle beneath the tracks. All this is worth saving?"

"No," is the argument of the Chicago Transit Auth. It's also the argument of the Urban Mass Transit Admin., the Chicago Planning Commn., the Chicago Urban Transp. District, and Sears, Ward's, and Field's department stores, all of whom have backed CTA's proposal to replace the Loop legs with a subway under the downtown. Indirect support for the proposal has been provided by the Chicago Landmarks Preservation Council and the Illinois Historic Sites Advisory Council, who have refused to recognize the Loop's historical significance.

But, least we despair, there stands an equally formidable assemblage on the other side of the third rail. The Keeper of the Natl. Register of Historic Places, the (U.S.) Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Natl. Trust, the American Inst. of Architects, the Intl. Comm. for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage, and a sizable army of intrepid "juice line" irregulars collectively have challenged the city's objective view with an objective view of their own: the Loop works! It has proven itself eminently effective in channeling a deluge of passengers daily into and out of the city center. Expeditious service, they insist, is the Loop's chief attribute and will prove to be its ultimate salvation. The structure stands most solidly on its own merits, say the defenders. That it's ugly and dirty, that it shelters undesirables, that it lowers adjacent property values, are not functions of the structure itself, but indictments of the City's maintenance and rehabilitation programs. Clean it up, emphasize the Loop's vigorous structural integrity, upgrade its engineering with welded rails and sound-absorbant elements, and wonders might unfold. "Sure would be cheaper than a subway," they say.

Though local efforts to place the Loop on the Natl. Register have failed, the Keeper has declared it eligible. This alone requires that exhaustive proof be provided to show that no reasonable alternative to demolition exists. Currently, CTA has before it a number of diverse proposals. Among them: total rehabilitation; token commemoration (using markers embeded in the street to indicate the demolished Loop's former path); and reuse of the structure as an elevated walkway. Whatever route is taken, utilization of federal funds is a certainty, thus requiring that a complete HAER-level recording be made of the structure prior to any alternations.

Chicago City Architect Jerome Butler has declared the el a "dinosaur out of another era of transportation that doesn't fit into the future of Chicago." Such sentiment surely calls for the establishment of a whole new field of professional inquiry—industrial paleontology. *D.H.S.*