



# The ALLIANCE REVIEW

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## RECENT PAST RECON



...and IN EVERY ISSUE:  
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## CHICAGO STYLE CONDUCTING A WINDSHIELD SURVEY OF THE RECENT PAST

*Jim Peters, Director of Planning and Advocacy, Landmarks Illinois*



A huge number of our nation's Post World War II structures have never been inventoried or evaluated  
*Photo courtesy of the author.*

Despite all the attention the "recent past" has received, a major challenge remains. How do you decide which recent-vintage structures actually merit preservation?

Many statewide historic building surveys were conducted in the late-1970s and early-1980s, soon after the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966. Most of these surveys were conducted by the State Historic Preservation Office, as mandated by the Act. However, because of the so-called "50-year-rule" for National Register eligibility, and a similar restriction on local designation, only a few of these surveys included buildings constructed since the 1940s. Indeed, many early surveys stopped at the 1910s or 1920s, well shy of the fifty-year mark. As a result, a huge number of our nation's Post World War II structures have never been inventoried or evaluated. This survey deficit is particularly true in the suburban communities surrounding urban centers, such as Chicago. Many of these areas, that were sleepy burgs before World War II, mushroomed after the war. Very few of these communities

have inventoried historic resources—apart from structures dating to early settlement. Meanwhile, the rate of change in these communities continues to be quite rapid, particularly among recent-past commercial structures along major arterial streets.

To address this group of buildings, Landmarks Illinois (a statewide preservation advocacy group) and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Graduate Program in Historic Preservation (SAIC) have teamed up on a multiyear effort to survey recent past *non-residential* architecture in the Chicago metropolitan area. During the fall semesters of 2006 and 2007—as part of a preservation planning studio for second-year master's degree students—more than two dozen communities were surveyed, encompassing nearly 1,500 documented properties.

Based on our experience from the first two years of the *Chicago Area Recent Past Survey*, here are some "lessons learned" that might be useful to those considering a similar effort.

- **Focus on a manageable goal.** While the concept of a region-wide survey is mind-boggling (an estimated 10 years), the effort has been greatly simplified by focusing only on *non-residential* structures. Residential surveys of individual properties can be far more time consuming and more difficult to do than windshield overviews of commercial properties. They also involve greater public outreach and dealings with local officials. Furthermore, in most of the communities surveyed, the greatest demolition threats involve non-residential properties, such as retail centers and small office and industrial buildings.
- **Nothing like a great map.** Even with the widespread use of GPS navigation devices, a series of good maps is critical for survey fieldwork—and in outlining the project scope. The more detailed the better, including at least one map that identifies schools, religious structures, public buildings, and shopping centers. This information is especially critical given the confusing—and ever-changing—boundaries of suburban communities. We also found school district maps and zoning maps helpful in identifying concentrations of survey objects<sup>1</sup>

- **Advance research.** Architectural publications from the period—including regional architectural magazines—help identify many significant recent past structures so that surveyors can look for them in the field. We also found the historic ProQuest files on our local newspaper to be extremely useful *after* a structure is identified.<sup>2</sup> We had assumed that local building permits would be helpful, but we found that many communities have discarded permits from this period. Although local historical societies often preserve “historic” building permits from the late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, seldom has there been a comparable effort to conserve mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century permits.<sup>3</sup>

- **Drive, don’t walk.** These types of surveys demand a lot of driving, given the far-reaching nature of suburban development. Over the first two years, our survey teams drove a total of 4,200 miles—roughly the distance from Chicago to Honolulu. Students were reimbursed for mileage, but this approach still required the use of private automobiles. Each car included three or four surveyors: the driver (who often doubled as the site investigator), a navigator/photographer, and the data entry person.<sup>4</sup>

- **Time saving technology.** Computers and digital cameras have revolutionized architectural survey work. Rather than using hand-held devices (which tend to get outdated quickly and require central server links), we used laptop computers and an Excel data base. We structured our survey forms, maps, and data base to be readily importable into Landmarks Illinois’ existing website ([www.Landmarks.org](http://www.Landmarks.org)), so that we easily could put the information online. Tip: Short battery lives mean that most survey teams also used power adaptors for the car or—during lunchtime breaks—for charging at local restaurants (“Could I have a seat by an outlet, please?”). Spare batteries and memory cards are essential for cameras.

- **The better the photograph...** The architectural significance of many buildings from the recent past is best revealed by dramatic photographs of the structure and its details. In order to build support from community residents—many of whom do not fully appreciate this period of architecture—the photograph needs to “sell” the building. Simple documentation is not enough. We impressed this fact on the students with photography seminars and chose those students with the best photography skills.

- **Stick to a schedule.** The beauty of a class survey exercise is its predictability. Our class met one day a week, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Half of the semester (seven weeks) was spent doing field survey work. The rest of the time was divided between pre-survey research and finalizing survey results. The downside of this arrangement, of course, is that when the semester ends, the project ends. So the scope of work has to be structured to ensure there are no un-surveyed gaps.



*Technology like laptops and digital cameras can really save time in surveys.*  
Photos courtesy of the author





*Get as much information on a building by going inside, but always make safety first priority*  
Photo courtesy of the author.

surveyors did not categorize styles or types, although they did develop a list of different roof shapes. After a couple more years of survey work, we hope to create a glossary of styles for subsequent review by an independent committee of professionals.<sup>5</sup>

- **Keeping costs down.** Even though student labor is “free,” there are some costs associated with this type of survey work. The initial year of the project was partially covered by a grant from the Kohler Intervention Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Subsequent expenses, like gasoline and website design, were funded by Landmarks Illinois. Additional grants are being sought to defray future survey costs.
- **Publicize the results.** In addition to the survey data base, our recent past survey website also features “slide shows” of representative buildings from each community, as well as various building types and architectural details. Press releases have been sent out to village managers, planning directors, and local historical societies. In addition, feature articles about the survey have appeared in local newspapers and architectural publications. For complete details on the survey process itself, check out the survey methodology section at: [www.landmarksil.org/recentpastsurvey.htm](http://www.landmarksil.org/recentpastsurvey.htm).

As one can imagine, the scope of the Chicago Area Recent Past Survey project is monumental. The Chicago metropolitan area encompasses seven different counties and hundreds of communities. We estimate that the effort will take a decade to complete, provided funding and staff resources continue to be available, but, with each year of survey effort, the task becomes smoother and more efficient.

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<sup>1</sup>Many of the communities are now utilizing GIS (Graphic Information Systems) to guide their survey work. For more information on how GIS can be used in historic resources, see “**Postwar Modern Housing and a Geographic Information System Study of Scottsdale Subdivisions**” on the City of Scottsdale website at: <http://www.scottsdaleaz.gov/historiczoning/neighborhoods.asp>.

<sup>2</sup>ProQuest, which has archived all the newspaper articles and advertisements in the Chicago Tribune. The archival sources for the various architectural publications referenced was the Burnham Library at the Art Institute.

<sup>3</sup>Although many cities now have permits on microfilm or, increasingly, digitized and available on-line during the course of the survey no communities were located that had their permits on-line, in fact, many had disposed of older permits.

<sup>4</sup>Data fields included: historic Use/Name, Current Use/Name, Est. Date of Construction, Exact Construction Date, Date Research, Rating, Roof Form, Primary Material, Secondary Material, Noteworthy (Classification), Features, Major Alterations/Additions, Additions, Noteworthy Site Features, Noteworthy Landscape Features, Sign Type, Sign Materials, Architect/Builder, Surveyors, Date Surveyed, Notes, Permit Info.

<sup>5</sup>For more information on terminology see “The Recent Past is Groovy: Researching American Architectural Styles after WWII in this issue as well as the “Recent Past Resource Guide” also in this issue for links to communities that are pioneering the naming process.