

## 2018 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

### The Forum



*Credit: Terry Tatum*

- **Location:** 324 E 43<sup>rd</sup> St., Chicago, Cook County
- **Built:** 1897
- **Architect:** Unknown
- **Current owner:** Urban Juncture, Inc.
- **Historic significance:** A prominent former assembly hall and ballroom where music greats like Nat King Cole performed, and where important civil and labor rights meetings were held.
- **Why it is endangered:** Structure requires significant rehabilitation. Funding has been difficult to secure, and the City of Chicago continues to threaten demolition of the site.

The Forum, having experienced nearly 40 years of neglect and disinvestment, was saved from the wrecking ball in 2011 by Urban Juncture, Inc., a local community development organization. Urban Juncture has done much to stabilize and develop a rehabilitation plan for the building, but the process continues to present challenges.

Built in 1897, The Forum has long played an important role in the cultural and social history of the South Side neighborhood of Bronzeville. It not only contains one of the most significant assembly and performance venues on the South Side, but it also houses perhaps the oldest surviving hardwood ballroom dance floor in Chicago.

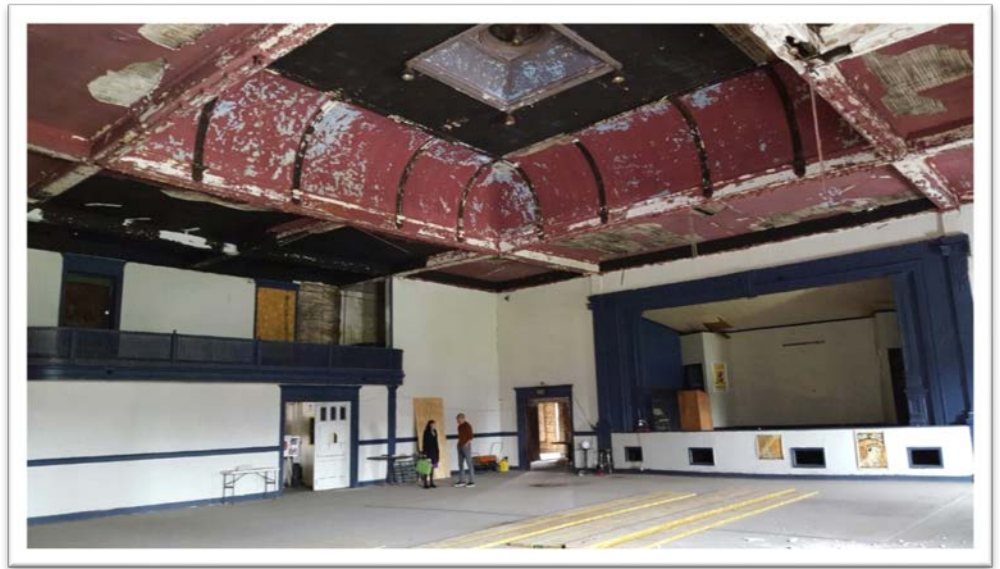
In the late 1800s, the area, originally referred to as Grand Boulevard, was primarily populated by immigrants of Irish, Scottish and English origin, as well as German Jews. The impressive red-brick building, adorned with brick detailing and Classical elements, embodies the old-world craftsmanship brought to this country by these groups.

The Forum functioned continuously as a dance hall, containing a large hardwood ballroom in the second floor *Forum Hall*. Predating the ballroom boom of the 1920s brought on primarily by the jazz movement, The Forum hosted concerts, dances and lessons, while also serving as a community meeting space. Six retail stores on the ground floor contributed to the diverse and

dynamic commercial core along 43<sup>rd</sup> Street well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Situated adjacent to the elevated transit line and along the street car route allowed commuters convenient access to this bustling urban center, helping make The Forum a popular area destination.

By the 1920s, the Great Migration had brought an influx of African Americans to Chicago's South Side. Grand Boulevard (now Martin Luther King Drive) saw much of this shift, and the 43<sup>rd</sup> Street corridor soon became a major music hub on the South Side. The Forum attracted some of the biggest names in the music industry, including Nat King Cole, Captain Walter Dyett, Muddy Waters, Floyd Campbell and Milt Hinton, just to name a few. It was also a site of important civil and labor rights meetings, making it a stop on the [Illinois Labor Trail](#).

While retail and other establishments continued to occupy the building into the 1990s, use of the ballroom had dwindled in the 1970s. By the late 1990s, the once vibrant Forum Hall sat vacant. Deferred maintenance over a 40-year period caused the building to fall into disrepair, eventually being threatened with demolition in 2011. Just days before it was



*Credit: Landmarks Illinois*

scheduled to be torn down, Urban Juncture, Inc., a Bronzeville-based community development firm, purchased the building, saving it from an unfortunate fate. Urban Juncture has invested \$250,000 in the cleanup and stabilization of the building and worked with a broad group of neighbors to develop a phased plan for rehabilitation. However, investment dollars for this unique historic building on a retail corridor challenged by decades of disinvestment are difficult to secure. In addition, the city's Building Department continues to threaten demolition.

### What you can do:

- To learn more about Urban Juncture and help support their crowdfunding efforts, visit: <http://www.urbanjuncture.com/the-forum/>

### Additional Links:

- Visit The Forum Bronzeville's website and stay up to date with events on The Forum Bronzeville's Facebook page: <http://www.theforumbronzeville.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/TheForumBronzeville/>
- "Revival of Bronzeville's Forum Would Restore Building to Its Former Glory," *DNAinfo*, December 23, 2013: <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20131223/bronzeville/forum-bronzeville-revival-would-restore-building-its-former-glory>
- "In Chicago's Bronzeville, The Forum Is Ready For Its Comeback," National Trust for Historic Preservation, February 6, 2017: <https://savingplaces.org/stories/in-chicago-bronzeville-the-forum-is-ready-for-its-comeback-.WpmOMWNMnwx>