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Chicago’s Mecca Flat Blues

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Chicago’s late-nineteenth-century apartment buildings helped to dramatically transform the urban landscape. They provided architects with novel design problems and accommodated tens of thousands of residents. Nevertheless, architectural historians have more readily focused on other Chicago subjects, including the downtown skyscrapers and an alluring group of stylistically notable single-family houses dotting the suburban prairie. In contrast to these structures, neatly categorized as either commercial or residential, the city’s apartment houses represent an uneasy combination of public space and private realm, commerce and residence. These early apartment houses formed something of a hinge between the skyscraper and the single-family house, adopting skyscraper models for accommodating people at high density while navigating strong ideological commitments to the single-family residence. By their hybrid nature, they confounded the order that some observers believed appropriate to turn-of-the-century urban social life.

This essay explores the Mecca (Figure 1), one of Chicago’s largest nineteenth-century apartment houses. Designed in 1891 by Willoughby J. Edbrooke and Franklin Pierce Burnham, the Mecca reflects broader architectural developments, in particular the role of natural light and landscape in shaping turn-of-the-century Chicago architecture. Yet the Mecca, like many apartment buildings, differed from other urban structures in its unusually cosmopolitan combination of social and spatial elements. The Mecca’s extraordinary twentieth-century history reveals many urban planners’ intolerance for that openness intrinsic to some apartment-house designs. It also suggests the need for historians to pursue architectural history well beyond the tidy nexus of meaning that exists between original patrons, forms, and civic purpose. Over time, race intersected with urban space to alter the history and fragment public perceptions of the Mecca. These changing perceptions stood at the center of a decade-long preservation struggle. Although the early preservation movement generally adopted prevailing notions of Chicago School aesthetics as its point of departure, the Mecca campaign emphasized housing and neighborhood. In place of an aesthetic model for preservation efforts, the Mecca’s story recovers a series of alternative priorities. Its narrative enriches our understanding of American urbanism, architectural history, and preservation practice.

Apartment living vexed late-nineteenth-century Chicagoans. In 1891 the astute editors of Industrial Chicago argued that the economic depression of the 1870s had “banished the idea of a permanent home from many hearts.” Apartment buildings took the place of small homes by grouping between ten and forty units under one roof. Reflecting contemporary cultural concerns, the editors inquired: “What if the flat would destroy home life?” Similar questions dogged apartment designers and profoundly shaped building design. Architectural historian Carroll William Westfall has summed up the problem confronting Chicago residents: “Although the house became less practicable for the lives they found themselves living, they continued to equate the house with home. The result was a conundrum: civil manners forbade what utility required.”

The romanticized image of middle-class, nuclear-family domesticity hovered over apartment-house debates. A 1905 Chicago Tribune editorial, capturing the tone of contemporary critiques, reported that physicians in London had found that the “monotony” of apartment living was “driving an alarming number of women mad.... Her husband leaves for business early in the morning and usually doesn’t return until evening. Between the janitor and the maid she has little housework to do. ... The greater the number of the people living in the building with her the fewer she knows. ... Race suicide or the rules of the flat deprive her of the luxury of children.” Though the editors identified “avenues of escape,” including reading, art, charitable work, and even business occupations, the editorial gave credence to the fear that apartment living would lead Anglo-American couples to stop raising large families, further tipping the demographic balance toward immigrants. To the extent that women were charged with the moral stewardship of the family and the nation, the notion of the deterioration of their privacy and their possible jettisoning of family altogether troubled social commentators. This cri-
tique framed apartment-house design at the turn of the twentieth century.6

The Mecca’s size combined with the originality of its design to capture attention in the 1890s. Projected as a Mecca for “flat-seekers,” the building would require a large population, since the $600,000 structure included ninety-eight flats and occupied a site that cost $200,000. Built four miles south of downtown, the four-story building stretched 234 feet along State Street and 266 feet west along Thirty-fourth Street to Dearborn. The Mecca’s simple Romanesque-style elevations, with their arched entrances and round-arched, top-floor windows, rippled with projecting window bays and the play of shadows cast by the cornice and stringcourses. The style and composition reflected the popular forms of numerous commercial and residential structures built by leading Chicago architects during the 1880s. What struck reporters as unusual was that each floor covered nearly one and a half acres. The Mecca’s density contrasted sharply with the more familiar patterns of organizing domestic space in the growing city. The Chicago Tribune reported that the anticipated population of nearly five hundred residents would approach that of a “fair-sized village. Ninety-eight cottages would cover each lot in two five-acre blocks, and with twelve stores [the Mecca] would outrank many a rising suburb.”7

Many late-nineteenth-century Chicago architects actually fostered associations with the suburbs and disguised flats as houses in order to diffuse the hostility toward apartment living. In multifamily dwellings with from two to six units, architects could give apartments the appearance of single mansions. In larger buildings varied fenestration patterns, pitched gables, ornamental details, and choice building materials helped blend apartments into the broader residential landscape. When the size of apartment buildings stretched beyond that of the house or mansion, architects appropriated hotel and club models to maintain domestic associations.8 Although home owners in single-family neighborhoods often complained of the “flat invasion,” apartment-house builders in these areas proudly pointed to the exclusive character of the neighborhood.9

Beyond formal stylistic strategies for blunting the prejudice against flats, architects developed site plans that incorporated the cherished images of single-family suburbs. Landscaped courtyards proved central to the effort. When the Tribune calculated that the Mecca’s ninety-eight units would require ten acres of land if configured as suburban cottages, it implied that nearly eight and a half acres of trees, yards, and gardens would be jettisoned in the transit from suburb to Mecca. Some apartment buildings actually stood back from their lot line in order to incorporate a modest landscaped setting. The Mecca did not do this. Instead, Edbrooke and Burnham gave the Mecca an unusual U-shaped plan centered on a landscaped courtyard that opened south onto Thirty-fourth Street. On the way into the Mecca’s main entrance, residents and visitors traversed the apartment equivalent of a suburban lawn, a “miniature park” measuring 66 by 152 feet (Figures 1, 2).10

The Mecca’s exterior courtyard, with its handsome fountain, provided the first local example of the low-rise courtyard apartment building that proliferated in Chicago and its suburbs from 1900 through the 1920s.11 In Chicago small residential parks had earlier provided a focus for single-family row-house developments like Aldine Square, built in 1876 at Vincennes Avenue between Thirty-seventh and Thirty-ninth Streets (Figure 3). Beyond the landscaped court, the Mecca’s plan also provided a bay window in nearly every parlor, increasing light and air circulation through the apartments. In subsequent Chicago courtyard designs the concern for natural light expanded to include sunrooms, balconies, and individual

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**FIGURE 1:** Edbrooke & Burnham, The Mecca, Chicago, 1891–1892. Exterior perspective, looking north into courtyard. Detail from 1893 advertisement. ICHI-29342
porches. For a given-sized lot, the courtyard configuration created a much longer embellished front facade than was possible in a building massed on the front lot line. In the Mecca walls of high-quality Roman brick lined the courtyard and the three street facades. Cruder common red brick appeared only on the rear alley wall. In contrast to apartments built around interior light wells, these designs also opened a greater percentage of interior spaces to prime prospects over landscaped courts and to the street. These elements compressed suburban forms for apartment tenants.

Courtyards also addressed another critical issue in the debate over apartment houses—that of domestic privacy. Large apartment buildings that relied upon central stairs and elevators concentrated building residents and visitors at single main entrances, in lobbies, around stairs and elevators, and in common corridors linked to the circulation core. In contrast, courtyards diffused the building’s density before people actually entered. As the courtyard form developed in Chicago, numerous entrances opened onto the courtyard. Each entrance gave access to a stair that generally reached only two apartments on each landing (Figure 4). Thus only six to eight families, as opposed to all of the building’s tenants, used each entrance. Architectural critic Herbert Croly argued that Chicago courtyard buildings could “wear a domestic aspect,” “obtain a certain amount of propriety,” and “suggest the privacies and seclusion of Anglo-Saxon domestic life.”

Yet unlike Chicago courtyard apartments constructed later, the Mecca turned both outward toward its exterior courtyard and, most unusually, inward toward extraordinary interior atria. Edbrooke and Burnham planned each of the two primary wings of the Mecca around an enormous interior skylit atrium, each one measuring 33 by 170 feet (Figures 2, 5). In each wing a ground-story lobby, stairs, and heavily foliated ornamental balconies, cantilevered from the atrium’s walls, provided access to the individual apartments. Each apartment’s interior rooms had windows opening onto the atria courts and received natural light from the gabled skylights. The atria provided the Mecca with two expansive interior spaces flooded with light that expressed in monumental form a pervasive cultural concern for light and air. Although suburban landscapes reflected this same desire for light, they rarely captured it in the monumental architectural forms that emerged as middle-class residents started living and working at much higher densities.

The Mecca’s exterior courtyard helped establish a Chicago precedent for courtyard buildings; however, the atria distinguished it in important ways from subsequent courtyard buildings. The Mecca had two entrances on State, two on Dearborn, three in the courtyard, and one on the rear alley. The multiple entrances conformed to the general pattern of later courtyard buildings that discretely diffused the building’s density. Yet the Mecca’s atria made a spectacle of the comings and goings of residents, of the concourse of daily human life. In the atria, on the balconies, at interior doors and windows, the massing of people in the Mecca clearly manifested itself. With their “promenade balconies,” the atria developed as public places where people would see and be seen. The atria thereby negated the potential for privacy made possible with courtyard entrances. Thus the Mecca design contained two rich but
contrary tendencies. One tendency, captured in the exterior courtyard and separate entrances, responded to entrenched fear over the compromise of single-family living and familial privacy; the other tendency, represented in the skylit atria, cultivated the possibilities of a gregarious and cosmopolitan gathering of five hundred people under a single roof. It took only a few years for the more private model to completely rout the cosmopolitan one in the work of Chicago apartment architects.

The Mecca’s novel courtyard followed the general logic
example, Burnham & Root designed the six-story Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad’s office building around an atrium measuring over 100 by 50 feet. Iron galleries encircled the light court, giving access to the offices (Figure 8). Wheelock & Clay adopted a similar plan for the Open Board of Trade Building in 1884. Burnham & Root’s 1893 Masonic Temple Building contained a central light court that ran 302 feet to a rooftop skylight. Other Chicago office buildings incorporated central light courts without fully developing such dramatic architectural effects. Burnham & Root’s 1885 Rookery Building, for example, enclosed a central light court at the level of its two-story lobby rather than at the top of the building and relied upon an internal double-loaded corridor system rather than galleries for access to offices.17

Chicago’s skylit commercial and residential interiors drew upon a broad nineteenth-century building tradition. Technological developments in the manufacture of both glass and metal permitted the expansive lighting of interior spaces, which proved especially important given the increasing size and complexity of nineteenth-century buildings. Skylit retail arcades, with shop-lined pedestrian corridors, opened in major cities throughout Europe and the United States. The arcades, with central skylights and multistoried}

![Figure 6: The Mecca, 1891–1892. Interior atrium with detail of foliated metalwork of the promenade balcony rail. Photograph Wallace Kirkland, 1951. ICHi-29352](image1)

![Figure 7: Baumann & Huehl, Chamber of Commerce Building, Chicago, 1888–1890, demolished. View of balconies and interior skylit atrium where the developer and architect of the Mecca had offices.](image2)
galleries, included key features of the atria system at the Mecca. Art galleries, train stations, conservatories, prisons and asylums, department stores, and office buildings all used skylights to great effect. Buildings like J. B. Bunning’s Coal Exchange, London (1846–1849), had offices open onto galleries around a circular court topped by a glass and metal skylight. Many retail arcades provided housing on the floors above the shops.

The purely residential application of the arcade found formative expression in early-nineteenth-century utopian plans for phalansteries made by French social reformer Charles Fourier. It is notable that Fourier’s vision of collective housing communities of two thousand residents incorporated an interior “street gallery” to give access to apartments on several floors. It also included enclosed skylit passages between different parts of the community. The architecture of the phalanstery highlights the gregarious and collective basis of the residential atrium with its gallery corridor system. Indeed, the preferences for domestic privacy in Chicago contrasted sharply with Fourier’s conception of communities as well as with prison atria used for better supervision of inmates. The Chicago structures extended the disparate uses of the building type.

The Mecca’s atria also reflected aspects of a broader European and American tradition of central-courtyard apartment buildings. Central courtyards provided a semipublic space with possibilities for weaving the fabric of community. In some notable model tenements, such as Alfred Treadway White’s 1890 Riverside Apartments in Brooklyn, designers established courtyards as protected areas of leisure for both children and adults. Courtyards also undoubtedly accommodated informal patterns of social life. Making a cultivated virtue out of the need to provide light to interior rooms, some developers planned handsome courtyard gardens, lawns, and carriage driveways. Nevertheless, most central courtyards functioned in the same way that exterior courtyards did; they distributed tenants into separate stairways and elevators located inside the walls of the building, giving access to only a few apartments per floor. Placing the entire circulation system outside in the courtyard space was far more unusual. The Ashfield Cottages, built in 1871 by the Liverpool Labourers’ Dwelling Company, included exterior stairs and continuous balconies to reach apartments on the three upper stories. In 1895 Frank Lloyd Wright’s two-story Chicago model tenement, Francisco Terrace, provided access to second-story units along a continuous balcony ringing a central courtyard. These unusual designs shared with the Mecca a level of spectacle and gregariousness lacking in more common courtyard buildings. In the United States, in general, domestic ideology deterred developers of central-courtyard buildings from promoting or exploiting their potential for collective activity.

The Mecca rose as the first Chicago residential building to appropriate the atrium. In 1892 local architects constructed two other Chicago apartment buildings around skylit atria. John T. Long designed the Yale, an apartment building at the corner of Yale Avenue and Sixty-sixth Street. The seven-story, Romanesque-style building had a six-story skylit and galleried atrium measuring 25 by 82 feet (Figures 9, 10). Like the Mecca, the Yale’s fifty-four apartments had interior rooms with windows opening onto the atrium. Built on its lot line, the Yale stood as a striking anomaly in its suburban neighborhood of Englewood, where two-story wood frame houses, set on landscaped lots, dominated the local streetscape. Nevertheless, the flood of light entering the Yale’s atrium evidenced a shared concern for light and air that characterized the area’s development. In 1892, in a somewhat denser urban neighborhood on Chicago’s North Side, Enoch Hill Turnock designed the city’s third skylit-atrium residential building (Figures 11, 12). The eight-story Brewster Apartments at the corner of Diversy Boulevard and Pine Grove Avenue was initially planned in 1892, but it was not completed for several years. The Brewster’s central light court was narrower than the courts in the Mecca.
and the Yale. Glass-decked bridges extended across the center of the interior court on each floor, while short gangways extended to the doors of the building’s forty-eight units.21

Developers constructed the Mecca, the Yale, and the Brewster during the building boom that accompanied the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. In 1894 the boom yielded to a deep depression that lasted until the turn of the century. When apartment building resumed, the significance of the forms established in the Mecca quickly became clear. At the turn of the century developers constructed more than ten thousand apartment units in Chicago every single year. The number was usually four to five times higher than the number of single dwellings.22 Looking back to the period of intense experimentation with building plans and technologies, these developers built hundreds of apartment buildings with exterior courtyards like the one at the Mecca. They built no buildings with skylit, galleried atria; the interior skylight turned out to be a road not taken in Chicago residential design. Instead of atria, high-rise apartment buildings that concentrated tenants and visitors at main entrances and around elevators often included quite ornate lobbies that similarly provided grand interior public spaces. These elevator apartment buildings tended to cluster in a narrow geographical strip along the Lake Michigan shore. The effort to take advantage of the lake’s scenic and recreational resources pushed land values higher and encouraged designers to orient floors toward prime views. In these high-rise areas, developers appeared less willing to make the generous allotments of space required for an interior light court when the real amenity of the location existed in exterior views of the lakeshore. Cultivation of views in high rises and continuing efforts to foster images of domestic and suburban privacy in low rises spurred alternative apartment arrangements at the turn of the century.

In the absence of architectural emulation, continued public and historical recognition of the Mecca’s grand atria and innovative plan was more dependent on the fate of the building itself than on the structures it inspired. The Mecca’s history thus became bound up with the dynamics of urban change that drastically altered both public and private perceptions of the building. In the mid-nineteenth century, few people had built or settled in the area around the future South Side site of the Mecca. When the railroads extended lines through the area in the 1850s, they brought in their wake various factory operations and block after block of working-class residences. The Mecca’s site stood just a block east of the Chicago Rock Island and Pacific Railroad. A major industrial belt opened on the far side of the track, where the sprawling Union Stockyards opened in 1865. In the area east of the...
three- and four-story buildings with 194 large middle-class apartments. The profits from rentals would support the mission. Patton & Fisher, architects of the Armour Flats, took advantage of the whole-block site to disguise the dense apartment development in the formal elements of single-family row houses. Rusticated Marquette sandstone fronts, with pressed brick and terra-cotta, conspicuous placement of chimney stacks and corner turrets, bay windows, varied massing, and variable

Mecca’s future site Stephen A. Douglas established a seventy-acre suburban lakeshore subdivision in the early 1850s and provided land there for the campus of the first University of Chicago. Between the suburban residences to the east and the stockyards to the west rose a large neighborhood of modest working-class homes—one- and two-story wood frame and brick houses standing on 25-foot-wide lots.

Situated on an emerging commercial artery and surrounded by rather modest homes, the lot at the corner of State and Thirty-fourth Streets did not seem to provide fertile ground for investing hundreds of thousands of dollars in a building intended for middle-class residents. The construction of monumental buildings in the 1880s and early 1890s on the single block immediately west of the Mecca’s site undoubtedly encouraged the Mecca’s developers. On this block the meat-packing Armour family made a substantial philanthropic investment in middle-class domesticity. In 1886, with a fund of over $200,000, the Plymouth Congregational Church opened its Armour Mission. Occupying a handsome Romanesque-style building designed by Burnham & Root, the mission provided spiritual, educational, and recreational programs for the neighborhood’s poorer residents (Figure 13). In 1886, in an effort to establish a system of perpetual support for the mission, Philip D. Armour constructed the Armour Flats, twenty-nine


design treatment of adjacent sections adopted the general forms of the city's recent single-family architecture (Figure 14). Armour encouraged middle managers and other employees in his company to rent apartments in the Armour Flats.

In 1891 Armour laid the cornerstone for a massive five-story building, designed by Patton & Fisher. Built to house the Armour Institute, chartered with one million dollars from Armour, the impressive structure accommodated a college for training industrial technicians and engineers. The building added a final note of monumentality to the block it filled just west of the Mecca's site (Figure 15). By the time the institute opened its doors, the Mecca was nearing completion on State Street. The connections between Armour and the Mecca intensified in the coming decades; simple geography and complex urban dynamics increasingly enmeshed their institutional and architectural histories.

When the Mecca opened, it provided apartments for Chicago residents; however, hoping to cash in on World's Columbian Exposition business, the owners rented hotel rooms. The Mecca stood midway between the fair and the downtown “business and amusement” area. State Street cable cars ran by the door, and the Thirty-third Street station of the recently completed South Side elevated train stood a block away. The Mecca hotel offered special advantages to families, who could stay in five- to seven-room furnished suites with bathrooms. The hotel also rented single rooms for seventy-five cents to two dollars per day, with corner and bay-window rooms costing slightly more. Patronage by visitors to the fair passed quickly and was followed by a deep national economic depression. The Mecca failed to establish a solidly middle-class tenant population. In fact, its initial owners lost the building in foreclosure. Paul J. Sorg, an industrialist from Middletown, Ohio, who had purchased and leased the Mecca's site to the developers for $12,000 a year, ended up owning both the land and the building. Sorg subdivided some of the flats; renters could obtain two- to seven-room apartments for between ten and thirty-five dollars per month. These rents were generally lower than those charged for middle-class South Side apartments located both east and south of the Mecca.

When the United States government's census taker visited the Mecca in June 1900, he found 107 units occupied by 365 people. There were blue-collar and white-collar employees and relatively few middle-class professionals. The Mecca accommodated carpenters, electricians, house painters, dry-goods, railroad, and grocery clerks, as well as clerks in insurance and other business offices, traveling salesmen, egg inspectors, day
laborers, several bartenders, waiters, cooks, tailors, bookkeepers, a typesetter, machinists, a butcher, a packing-house foreman, an architect, a physicist, an optician, a musician, locomotive engineers and firemen, railroad and elevator conductors, music teachers, a watchman, a postal clerk, a glass cutter, a freight checker, janitors, a real estate agent, a coachman, a teamster, a decorator, a retired capitalist, and a frog dealer. Some families made the rent by taking in boarders. No family had live-in servants. The vast majority of Mecca residents in 1900 were born in the United States; many had parents born in the United States. Some residents had Scottish, Irish, German, Canadian, or Polish-born parents. All of the Mecca’s residents were white.

The surrounding neighborhood was not nearly as uniform. During a time in which the black population of the city was expanding rapidly, poverty and racial exclusion in housing had spurred an increasingly concentrated black settlement pattern. South Side blacks settled in an area known as the Black Belt, a narrow strip of land along the railroad and industrial land just west of the Mecca, from the downtown southward. It extended east of the Mecca to Wabash Avenue, which after the early 1890s suffered from the blighting effects of the elevated transit line running down the alley between Wabash and State Streets. In 1900 blacks occupied many houses in this area, stretching from the Loop south to Thirty-ninth Street. They lived in some of the more modest houses on the north end of the block occupied by the Mecca and they pursued many of the same occupations as their white neighbors in the Mecca—house painter, day laborer, cook, paperhanger, and porter. Set in an integrated neighborhood, the internalized atria in the Mecca constituted a more exclusively white realm.

The racial disparity between the Mecca and its neighborhood increased over the next decade. In 1910 the Mecca’s residents were still white, while blacks occupied many adjacent houses and apartments. Like the Mecca apartments, the Armour Flats continued to have only white tenants. In 1910 native-born Americans still predominated in the Mecca, though there were also Germans, Swedish, Austrian, Canadian, Irish, Scottish, English, and Russian immigrants living in the building. Russian-born Israel Goldman, for example, the fifty-year-old sexton of a local synagogue, lived in a Mecca unit with his wife, Golda, and three of his four children, including a son who worked as a tailor and a daughter who was a dressmaker. In 1910 the Mecca housed porters, cooks, waiters, hatmakers, actors, journalists, day laborers, piano movers, elevator operators, and many other people with occupations similar to those who had lived in the building in 1900.

In 1911 the Sorg estate sold the Mecca for $400,000—half the amount it cost to build twenty years earlier. With a gross annual rent of $42,000 and a $170,000 mortgage at five and a half percent, the Mecca investment looked attractive. In 1912 Franklin T. Pember, a banker, fur trader and commission merchant, agricultural-implement manufacturer, and prominent naturalist and philanthropist in upstate New York, and his wife, Ellen J. L. Pember, of Granville, New York, purchased the Mecca for $400,000. The Pembers’ investment came just a few years before a massive migration of African Americans from the rural south to Chicago industrial jobs, spurred by World War I production. As Chicago’s black population more than doubled in the 1910s, from 44,103 to 109,458, the neighborhood around the Mecca received an influx of new residents. Real estate interests and many white Chicagoans greeted African-American residential expansion with alarm and hostility, ranging from threats and broken windows to house bombings. Racial violence encouraged a more concentrated settlement pattern among blacks than had previously existed. It also created both economic and social pressure for the conversion of white-occupied residential buildings within and adjacent to the already established Black Belt neighborhood.

In July 1919 racial tensions on Chicago’s South Side burst into a full-scale riot. A group of whites stoned a black youth swimming in Lake Michigan, who drowned as a result. The incident sparked over a week of mob action that took a huge toll, including thirty-eight people killed, 537 injured, and over a thousand people displaced from their homes. Some of the most serious rioting occurred up and down State Street both north and south of the Mecca. The building had changed over from white to black tenants before the riot. In 1920 it was occupied by people with many of the same occupations as those who had previously lived in the building. There were porters, foundry molders, machinists, upholsterers, tanners, tailors, mattress, mantle, shade, dress, and cigar makers, butchers, bakers, cooks, laundresses, janitors, maids, bellboys, hairdressers, manicurists, day laborers, switchmen, steelworkers, musicians, chauffeurs, postal clerks, shipping clerks, and peddlers. Nearly all of the residents were born in the United States, and the majority were born outside of Illinois, largely in southern states. The census takers counted 148 occupied units with 510 residents. Many families took in boarders to help pay the rent. Mecca households were now large and complex. Thomas McClure, for example, a thirty-one-year-old native of Alabama, worked as a chauffeur for the Nash Motor Company and lived with his wife, Lula, a twenty-eight-year-old native of Tennessee, who was not employed outside of the home. The McClures accommodated a forty-eight-year-old uncle, Nobles Clark, a native of Tennessee, who worked as a packing-company butcher. Jesse Walker, a twenty-nine-year-old packing-house laborer from Alabama, and Mattie Pierson, a twenty-one-year-old restaurant waitress from South Carolina, also lived with the McClures.

When the Mecca turned from white to black, the spectacle of public life played out in the exterior courtyard and around...
the atria became more closely patterned after life in the immediate neighborhood (Figure 16). In the late 1910s the Mecca stood just a block north of what emerged as Chicago’s African-American business and retail center. Around Thirty-fifth and State Streets, business buildings, many constructed by African Americans, housed banks, real estate and insurance offices, retail stores, fraternal lodges, and newspaper offices. In the 1910s and 1920s this area also accommodated a dynamic nightlife, including many of Chicago’s leading jazz clubs, featuring such musicians as King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and Jelly Roll Morton. The Pekin Theater at Twenty-seventh and State Streets led the way when it opened in 1905; other clubs included the De Luxe, a block south of the Mecca; the Dreamland Cafe, two blocks south; and the Elite Club, three blocks north. The Royal Gardens on Thirty-fifth Street and the Sunset Cafe on Thirty-fifth Street shared local nightlife with other clubs such as High Life and the Entertainers.35

Links between the Mecca and jazz were immortalized when local bands began to play and record improvised blues tunes titled the “Mecca Flat Blues.” In August 1924 pianist and composer James “Jimmy” Blythe recorded “Mecca Flat Blues” with jazz singer Priscilla Stewart. Two years later Blythe followed with a song, “Lovin’s Been Here and Gone to Mecca Flat.” In 1939 pianist Albert Ammons also recorded “Mecca Flat Blues,” and musicians have continued to record versions of the music down to the present. Jimmy Blythe and Priscilla Stewart’s version of the song gave dramatic personae to the “Mecca Flat Man” and the “Mecca Flat Woman,” who led sensual and adulterous lives, causing no end of heartbreak to their partners. Local “extemporizing troubadours” continually added episodes to the “Mecca Flat Blues,” charting the “trials, tribulations, and tragedies” of the residents. One observer speculated that if collected and printed the verses would “make a book.”36

The musicians were doing more than simply punning on musical notations when they seized upon the Mecca “Flat.” By referring to the local people and landmarks, they could root their blend of New Orleans, St. Louis, and other jazz expressions into a distinct Chicago idiom. Tales of heartbreak and adultery, the stuff of the blues, were perhaps more apparent at the Mecca because of the urban spectacle captured around the atria; these tales seemed to confirm the nineteenth-century critique of apartment-house living. Here, according to the songs, were concentrated the temptations and evils of high-density living and the obvious intrusions on familial privacy and domestic virtue. Nevertheless, the public space of the atria helped give the Mecca a sense of place and a comprehensible identity that few other “private” buildings enjoyed. The public permeability of the domestic realm that had made the design problematic in its conception now contributed to its fame, or notoriety, in Chicago culture. In the 1960s Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks expanded the Mecca canon in verse. Her work, “In the Mecca,” follows family members in search of a lost child, visiting flat after flat and making inquiries along the balconies. The poem nicely captures the cosmopolitanism of a building with an array of alluring, fascinating, as well as repulsive characters.37

Simple geography had always united the Mecca and the Armour Mission, Institute, and Flats. On the face of it, the shifting racial composition of the neighborhood should not have affected Armour, with its ecumenical and racially inclusive vision. The mission was established to be “broad and wholly non-sectarian, without any restrictions whatsoever as to race, creed, and color.” Armour Institute was an integrated school since its founding in the 1890s. Nevertheless, Armour officials were troubled by the expansion of the Black Belt, as they found it increasingly difficult to persuade company employees and Armour Institute faculty to live in the Armour Flats. Mission and institute officials responded curiously to the housing crunch caused by the migration of African Americans to Chicago: they demolished the Armour Flats. Between 1917 and 1919, 131 of the 194 apartments were torn down, and many of the remaining units were converted to offices, laboratories, and classrooms (Figure 17).38

In demolishing the Armour Flats, the officials eliminated vestiges of the middle-class residential landscape that had provided the context for construction of the Mecca. Despite
creating a physical buffer between its academic buildings and the surrounding residences, Armour actively tried to relocate the campus altogether. There had been some discussion as early as 1902 of becoming affiliated with the University of Chicago. In 1920 J. Ogden Armour paid a million dollars to purchase an eighty-acre tract of land in South Shore, a growing suburban neighborhood of Chicago, five miles south of the institute. Subsequently experiencing financial difficulties, Armour sold the South Shore site in 1922, stating that it had grown too valuable to hold while awaiting the resources to fund the institute’s relocation.39

Armour Institute persisted in efforts to raise an endowment and leave its historic campus. In the 1920s it attempted to affiliate with Northwestern University, and in the 1930s Armour considered a move into an eleven-story building on Lake Shore Drive, north of downtown. The Depression heightened the distress with which institute officials viewed their location and at the same time diminished the possibility of amassing resources for relocation. In 1937 a committee of the institute’s Board of Trustees intensively studied Armour’s prospects. Board President James Cunningham insisted that the institute had a bright future as a leading school of scientific and engineering education, governed by a board of industrial leaders who “think straight,” in one of the world’s largest industrial centers.40

In 1937 the board clearly viewed the institute’s fate as tied to its location. After spending months looking at sites in the Loop, on the North Side, on the West Side, as well as in suburban locations, a board committee advocated remaining at the existing location. Cunningham reported, “This will undoubtedly shock some of you out of your chairs. The present site, at Thirty-third and Federal, was, and I say ‘was’ advisedly, in the heart of the Black Belt, but it got too dilapidated and run down for the Negroes so they have moved further south. They have left a totally devastated area in their wake, to be sure. It is axiomatic that when anything has gotten to the very bottom the only direction it can go is up, and this is just the conclusion of the Committee. The present Institute occupies a site of nine acres. It is proposed to purchase about thirty acres of property adjoining the nine acres. . . . Wrecking of the buildings in the entire area could be accomplished, I think, by a moderate wind storm, so dilapidated are the structures. . . . There is a possibility of having State Street boulevarded from the Loop south, which, of course, would greatly influence the trend of this entire district. Many students of real estate are definitely committed to the development of this area from the Loop south, as a so-called white collar community.” 41 The board then mapped out a strategy for quietly purchasing the necessary parcels, including the Mecca, to control the area from Thirty-first Street south to Thirty-fifth Street, from State west to the Rock Island tracks.

The institute modeled its plans on slum-clearance precedents of the 1930s. Federal legislation enacted in 1934 and 1937 supported massive assembly and clearance of urban tracts. Starting in the mid-1930s, planners proposed numerous South Side clearance projects. In 1934 the federal government selected a forty-seven-acre tract at Thirty-seventh Street and South Park Avenue for the Ida B. Wells Homes. Opened in 1941, the project provided 1,662 units of public housing on a site that had previously contained nineteenth-century brownstone row houses and single-family detached houses. Landlords had subdivided many of these buildings into more modest units, occupied primarily by African-American tenants.42 These land-clearance programs provided some institutions with an alternative to suburbanization; they might choose to stay in their historic locations, buffered from neighborhoods in decline by cleared land and renewed neighborhoods.

Departing from prevailing approaches to Chicago urban renewal, the institute initially adopted a plan for pursuing renewal through the private real estate market. Newton C. Farr, a Chicago realtor who directed the board’s campaign to purchase property for the institute, reported that the Mecca,
with 178 apartments “occupied by colored,” was one property that “has caused us some concern in the expansion.” Farr thought that the building, with a gross annual income of $38,881 and a net income of $9,799, could be purchased for $85,000. In 1938 the board’s secretary, Alfred L. Eustice, acting as a private citizen, bought the Mecca from Franklin Pember’s estate for $85,000. Meanwhile, the institute’s land-acquisition program secretly continued for several years and involved dozens of purchases.

People deliberating the institute’s future proved acutely sensitive to the landscape and racial character of the surrounding neighborhood. In 1940 the institute’s president, Henry Townley Heald, wrote that it had been “beset” by the “increasing deterioration of its neighborhood.” The board saw the “morale” of both faculty and students decline. For years, through all of the various relocation plans, people openly worried that the institute’s immediate urban context might frustrate its effort to rival national institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and California Institute of Technology. These concerns intensified when Armour merged with the Lewis Institute to form the Illinois Institute of Technology in 1940. The next year the institute went public with its plans for a new campus, with modern buildings on a site cleared of its Black Belt identity. Even with the central site under control, the board continued to worry about the approaches to the campus; it had hoped for a boulevard from the Loop, but also wanted to control the frontage of all streets approaching the future campus.

In 1941, when Alfred Eustice deeded the Mecca to the institute, the building quickly crystallized the racial and class calculus that governed the board’s view of its neighborhood’s people and buildings. By the early 1940s the Mecca accommodated more than a thousand residents. The combination of a decade of depression, the onset of further war-induced migration, and continuing white hostility to the expansion of black housing resulted in the Mecca’s having far more residents than the building was designed to accommodate. The sheer density and visibility of the people who resided there made the place an object of cultural interest in the 1920s. As the institute pursued its campus plans, that same density and visibility came to symbolize all that the board deplored about its location. By the same token, the fact that so many people called the Mecca home presented a problem for the institute’s clearance plans. The board hoped that the mere act of purchase would let it tidily clear a monument of neighborhood “blight” from one of its approaches. It soon became clear that local residents had not, in fact, moved farther south and that it would require more than a “moderate wind storm” to clear the site.

When the institute took control of the Mecca in 1941, it aimed to demolish the structure as quickly as possible. The board resolved to wait until Mecca leases expired in September 1942 to vacate the building. A sense of urgency hung over the Mecca deliberations because Chicago’s Fire Prevention Bureau had brought suit against the institute to force it to install a fire sprinkler system required by the local building code. The sprinkler for the Mecca was estimated to cost as much as $26,000. The institute stalled on the sprinkler litigation, hoping that either tenant leases would lapse or the court would order it to demolish the building immediately. By 1942, however, the war had exacerbated the housing crisis, and the proposed demolition took on a very different meaning. As the leases began to expire, the institute tried vacating the building. This stirred public debate, as the Metropolitan Housing Council, Chicago Urban League, Chicago Welfare Administration, and local politicians joined with Mecca’s tenants to protest. The Metropolitan Housing Council pressed no great affec-

In 1942 Newton Farr expressed some sympathy for the plight of Mecca tenants. As long as the war limited campus building, the $22,000 in net rental income seemed attractive as a means of funding institute real estate purchases. President Heald was unmoved by Farr’s arguments. Ignoring the number of boarding families, he insisted that surely it would be possible to “absorb” 175 families “somewhere in the total colored population.” Giving voice to entrenched distaste for the Mecca and the appearance of the institute’s neighborhood, Heald concluded: “As long as it stands, it is a distinct handicap to our efforts to clean up our campus area and, even though it produces an income, I really believe that it is worth more to us torn down than in its present state.” Despite this view, the pressure of the civic organizations as well as a direct appeal from Alderman Lindell, chair of the Chicago City Council’s Housing Committee, persuaded the institute to defer demolition of the building.

In 1943 the Mecca preservation battle moved to the Illinois House and Senate. State Senator Christopher Wimbish, an African-American graduate of Northwestern University Law School, effectively galvanized a huge coalition against the Mecca’s impending demolition. His bill barring the demolition passed in the House 114 to 2 and in the Senate 46 to 1. The legislative debate featured impassioned appeals to patriotism. Advocates of the bill pointed out that more than forty residents of the Mecca were fighting abroad “for democracy they did not enjoy at home,” and yet the institute proposed to tear down the roof over the heads of their families. One delegate charged that the bill’s interference with private property rights was “un-American.” This claim met a harsh rejoin-
der from one of the bill’s supporters: “You who refuse to vote to prevent the eviction of these women, children, and war workers, the lame and the sick, from the Mecca flats; you who vote ‘No’ on this roll call, you are un-American, you are vicious.”

Beyond patriotism, the bill’s supporters hoped to vote ‘No’ on this roll call, you are un-American, you are workers, the lame and the sick, from the Mecca flats; you who prevent “trouble” that could be expected when Mecca tenants searched for housing in adjacent white neighborhoods. Despite broad support, Governor Dwight Green vetoed the Mecca bill as unconstitutional.

After the governor’s veto, Senator Wimbish pushed the battle forward in Chicago Municipal Court, where he represented tenants threatened with eviction. Wimbish argued that the case involved “property rights versus human rights.” He pointed to the difficulties faced by blacks in finding housing in a city where “restrictive covenants and neighborhood clannishness prohibits normal expansion”; the tenants were “hemmed in by an American ghetto system.”

Institute lawyers had to admit that the site could not be rebuilt until after the war, but they argued that the building was unsafe and should be torn down immediately. In his ruling, Judge Samuel Heller barred the evictions and ordered the institute to abide by all municipal building and safety codes. The institute hired a watchman rather than install sprinklers. It also sent a letter to tenants demanding that they move out, stating, “ALL PERSONS WHO CONTINUE TO REMAIN IN THE BUILDING DO SO ON THEIR OWN RESPONSIBILITY AND AT THEIR OWN RISK.”

These developments added a dimension of political history to the building’s significant architectural and cultural history.

Just a few months after failing in its effort to demolish the Mecca, the institute sought to put some distance between itself and the building. In July 1943 the United States War Department decided to sell the Stevens Hotel, purchased at the outset of World War II to serve as a training school and barracks. The twenty-five-story building on Michigan Avenue between Seventh and Eighth Streets, designed between 1922 and 1927 by Holabird & Roche, had three thousand rooms, a myriad of public meeting spaces, a convention hall seating four thousand, and kitchen and dining facilities. With over 1.5 million square feet of space, the building could easily be converted to house the institute’s dormitories, laboratories, offices, classrooms, library, auditorium, and gymnasium. When the board heard about the availability of the Stevens, it jumped at the chance to move from the “heart of the Black Belt” to the “heart of Chicago’s cultural center.” One board member insisted that the move would have a positive “psychological effect” on faculty and students. The board reported that dormitory space with a view across Grant Park to Lake Michigan would help the institute cultivate “national importance.”

Proximity to the Art Institute, the Field Museum, the Planetarium, the Chicago Public Library, and other institutions would add a “humanistic-cultural background” to the institute’s “scientific-technological education.”

The institute lost the Stevens with a cash bid that was $581,000 less than that of an investor who planned to reopen the building as a hotel. The institute then revived earlier plans to clear a space for itself in and around its original campus. President Heald vigorously advocated clearance and redevelopment of broad tracts well beyond the institute’s immediate bounds. In 1946, at a Chicago housing forum, Heald termed the existence of fifteen thousand acres of blighted land in Chicago “intolerable.” “Blight is a deadly disease which attacks and destroys cities and devours the property and investments in them,” he stated. He advocated eminent domain to assemble large tracts and subsidies to encourage developers to rebuild in urban areas rather than in expanding suburbs. He declared that institute officials “had only two choices—run away from the blight or to stand and fight. I submit that this is everybody’s choice—and that behind the principle of ‘Stand and Fight’ is where we must all be counted.”

After years of flirting with running away, the institute would stand. Fighting meant, among other things, fighting to demolish the Mecca. It also meant that the institute would become a key partner in the massive postwar South Side urban-renewal program. In 1946 the institute and Michael Reese Hospital joined forces to establish the South Side Planning Board, a not-for-profit organization advocating a new vision for the area. The planning board, with Heald serving as its first chairman, focused on a large area from Roosevelt Road to Forty-seventh Street, the Rock Island tracks to Lake Michigan, maintaining that this seven-square-mile tract was the minimum planning area needed for successful redevelopment. The board advocated the South Expressway construction, which involved demolition of a huge area of very modest housing just west of the campus. It also quickly identified 333 acres for public clearance, including the entire neighborhood between the institute and the lake.

Despite advocating construction of private and public housing, the institute did not want low-income housing just anywhere, and continued its efforts to transform the immediate campus area into a middle-class, white-collar community. In 1944, when the institute’s board learned that the Chicago Housing Authority was planning a low-income housing project just north of the campus, toward the Loop, it lodged a strong protest. Heald had envisioned neighborhood housing for students and faculty “unhampered by the construction of low-cost housing.... We believe that with a great Center of Technology as a stimulus, a large area of the South Side can be completely rehabilitated and once again become a really important commercial, residential, and cultural area of the City.”

The institute failed to keep public housing away. Just to its north, the Dearborn Homes, the first high-rise public housing...
in the city, opened in 1950. With sixteen elevator buildings, six and nine stories high and including eight hundred units, the Dearborn Homes took the form of modernist towers spread across expansive greenswards. Modernizing neighborhood form and style, the buildings did not alter the area’s racial or class character.

As plans for South Side renewal and the institute’s campus developed, it became obvious that the Mecca represented more than a social and political challenge. The building stood in stark contrast to the palette of modern architecture envisioned as a key to a new urbanism and a changed neighborhood. The arrival in 1938 of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to head the institute’s Department of Architecture boosted the vision of a new architecture for the area. Mies used a number of early studio classes to design a new campus and then opened a private office to develop the plans more fully. Proposing a radically different architectural expression, Mies’s plan called for demolition of the Romanesque-style Armour Mission and Armour Institute. In their place, Mies, who eventually designed twenty-two buildings for the institute, proposed strikingly modern-styled buildings in brick, glass, and welded steel. Clean, abstract lines and carefully proportioned spaces resonated with the broader agenda of “cleaning up” the neighborhood.

Mies’s style also reinforced the vision of a radical break with the historic and, in the minds of institute officials, the blighted character of the neighborhood. Photocollage techniques used to present the campus plan underscored the institute’s effort to establish a unified stylistic and urban form. The visual representations effectively placed a photo of an architectural model of the proposed campus on top of an aerial photograph of the South Side. Order and harmony confronted the hodgepodge of high and low, wide and narrow, wood and brick, commercial and residential buildings (Figure 18). Since the campus plan aimed to demolish the adjacent neighborhood, it adopted a dominant low-rise, low-density form that sprawled across a landscaped site made up of cleared land and vacated alley and street right-of-ways of the earlier urban grid. In place of older buildings pressed to the lot line (Figure 19), the new campus would move buildings away from street fronts and surround them with grass (Figure 20). The Mecca, built on its lot line on both State and Dearborn Streets, and including patches of terra-cotta ornament, obviously frustrated the stylistic and urban intentions of the early campus plans, disposed symmetrically around an axis running along Thirty-third Street (Figures 18, 21). Planners also hoped that the campus would “have a harmonious relation to its environment,” which they felt would be built up with “well planned housing developments surrounded by large park areas.” In fact, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Walter Gropius, Reginald Isaacs, and other noted modern designers who consulted on South Side planning shared Mies’s commitment to a radical break with historic architectural and urban forms. Modern urbanism generally eschewed historic patterns of retail spaces oriented to streets and pedestrians. These older patterns, exemplified by the Mecca’s twelve stores fronting on State Street, ran counter to the single-use zoning and specialized patterns advocated by modern planners.

Campus plans and Mies’s aesthetic ideals contained little room for accommodation with the fifty-year-old Mecca. The rigid ideal of campus symmetry did eventually give way to incorporate the institute’s earliest building, designed by Pat-
ton & Fisher, but the inclusion of this historic structure memorializing the institute’s origin in philanthropic support undoubtedly proved easier than preserving neighborhood narratives associated with the Mecca. A more complicated form of campus planning that might have incorporated the Mecca and other existing buildings did not take place. Moreover, the institute never considered using the Mecca as a dormitory for students, even though its atria could have ideally accommodated the many students who reveled in the gregariousness of campus social life. Using the Mecca as a student residence hall would have compromised part of the institute’s rationale for displacing the Mecca’s black tenants—that the building had to be demolished because it failed to meet building codes.

In the mid-1940s Skidmore, Owings & Merrill made a plan for institute student and faculty housing, reporting that, beyond a few old residences on Michigan Avenue that could be temporarily used as fraternity houses, none of the neighborhood buildings were suitable for housing. Failing to view existing buildings, such as the Mecca, as a resource for campus expansion entailed steep costs. The institute’s housing program adopted a high-rise model that led it to spend over a million dollars apiece for ten-story apartment buildings, such as Gunsaulus Hall designed by Mies, that accommodated many fewer residents than had lived in the Mecca in the 1890s. The institute and its planners saw little value in neighboring buildings. Leaders of the African-American community, including realtor Oscar C. Brown, president of the Chicago Negro Chamber of Commerce, advocated a planning approach that would identify the numerous dwellings that should be “left standing and integrated into the larger redevelopment program.” More concerned with decent housing opportunities for African Americans than with developing buffers between South Side institutions and their neighbors, Brown urged a less radical, more preservation-oriented vision of South Side renewal. Yet planners were determined to carve out a single-purpose academic campus where engineering students would be insulated from the very society they were being educated to serve.

After the war the institute started construction of its modern campus. In February 1950 the board noted an easing of South Side housing and renewed its push to demolish the Mecca. President Heald again insisted that the building was unsafe. Mecca tenants responded with mass protests (Figures 22, 23). Again Senator Wimbish advised them of possible legal and administrative remedies. Lillian Davis, a Mecca tenant, argued that it was “unconstitutional” to evict rent-paying tenants: “It’s a law of life that a person has to have a place to live.” Ward aldermen filed proposals to bar issuance of wrecking permits until tenants had been legally evicted and a
program initiated to alleviate their hardships. These proposals went to the City Council’s Committee on Housing, which failed to take action. Despite the echoes of earlier arguments, the dynamics of the preservation campaign had changed. Tenants did not argue against demolition so much as insist upon expedited assistance in locating alternative space in private or public housing. The institute had sapped the energy of the preservation movement by continually lowering rents and filling the building with poorer and poorer people while refusing to put money into maintenance and repairs. The exterior courtyard deteriorated into an unkempt dirt patch and graffiti covered interior walls. When the courts permitted relocations and evictions to proceed, squatters quickly moved into the Mecca apartments, furthering the building’s reputation as “a prime example of the worst slum tenements.”

In the early 1950’s these renewed efforts to demolish the Mecca were framed by a distorted historical narrative. A Mecca myth arose that embodied a classical story of a fall from grace. In this rendering of Mecca history, the “last word in show apartments” had fallen into a “slum tenement,” brought on by “deterioration” that originated when blacks moved into the building. Built during “Chicago’s golden age” for “fat cats” and the “rising rich,” the Mecca was once a “showplace because of its floors of Italian tile, its rising tiers of balconies overlooking enclosed courtyards where fountains played.” Then “the rich tenants moved out; and the not-so-rich who replaced them gave up the Mecca’s elegance to underprivileged Negroes”; the Mecca became “Chicago’s most notorious . . . slum.”

Author John Bartlow Martin extended the Mecca myth in an extended essay on the building titled “The Strangest Place in Chicago,” which was published in Harper’s Magazine in 1950. Martin developed the story of a “splendid palace,” a “showplace” that had dazzled people as the “finest apartment building in Chicago if not in America.” Then came the fall, providing a “showplace but of a very different sort . . . one of
the most remarkable Negro slum exhibits in the world.” Martin’s article, illustrated by haunting line drawings by Ben Shahn, absolutely captured the building’s gregarious life that centered on the interior atria (Figure 24). Here the disorder of the place appeared. Martin wrote of men and women spitting from the balconies to the floor below. The noises of the building’s tenants always filled the atria. A toddler urinated from the balcony to the floor below. People reported the time when a pimp threw a prostitute from the balcony and when a man murdered the building’s janitor in a struggle over a woman. Martin’s essay recognized the same public massing of humanity around the atria that versions of the “Mecca Flat Blues” had captured. In the view of the institute and other South Side planners, the Mecca’s fall from grace crystallized and rendered inescapable the logic of urban renewal and the need for inaugurating a new “golden age.”

Martin’s essay contrasted the institute’s modern campus of “sleek brick-and-glass buildings surrounded by new trees and new grass” with the Mecca, a “great gray hulk.” The conceptual tropes of traditional style and materials giving way to the modern, of novelty gone stale, high gone low, white gone black all supported the institute’s demolition plan. The overall treatment of the Mecca presented it as a building unworthy of a longer life, a building that had slipped so far from its intended social station that it failed to stir a sense of historic veneration. Yet the tenants anticipated loss. Jesse Meals, who had lived in the Mecca for thirty-one years, told a reporter, “You watch, a lot of people who lived here, they gonna die from grief.”

A year after the Harper’s essay appeared, Life Magazine reworked Martin’s narrative in captions for a photo essay by Wallace Kirkland titled “The Mecca, Chicago’s Showiest Apartment Has Given Up All But the Ghost” (Figure 25). The building’s social standing had undoubtedly declined, but the decline was not nearly so precipitous as commentators suggested; the building had remained a largely working-class place throughout its entire history. The myth carried a note of truth only in relation to the Columbian Exposition promotion that had heralded the richness of the “elegantly furnished” rooms and fine dining available at the Mecca “Hotel.” Nevertheless, this portrayal of decline into blight strengthened the case for demolition. In 1950 Jim Hurlbut presented a radio commentary on WMAQ that celebrated the institute’s plans for demolition, stating, “Undoubtedly there are those in the city who will sigh regretfully over the passing of the once fabulous apartment house. . . . Even a few may be listening who lived in its richly appointed suites, when residence there was a sign of opulence and social position. Now, of course, residence at the Mecca is more a sign of desperate poverty.” In Hurlbut’s view, demolition would help the institute develop “a beauty spot in the center of one of the city’s worst slum areas. . . . It will be one of the city’s most attractive sections.” For both planners and the institute, the demolition of the Mecca stood at the center of this vision.

The institute hired social workers to help relocate tenants and to coordinate the effort with housing agencies. It took nearly eighteen months to empty the building. In early January 1952 the Speedway Wrecking Company demolished the Mecca (Figure 26). The Chicago Sun-Times reported the event under the headline “Fabulous S. Side Slum Reaches End of Road.” In what soon became a tradition in the culture of Chicago architecture, some people salvaged architectural bits of the Mecca. The distinctive foliated balcony panels that had lined the Mecca’s atria proved popular among collectors of local architectural fragments. This method preserved forms and memories of the building while leaving the economic and social program of urban-renewal advocates largely unfettered.

Nearly three years after the demolition of the Mecca, the institute’s board, led by Cunningham, gathered on the Mecca’s original site to break ground for a new building (Figure 27). Crown Hall, designed by Mies, would house the architecture department and at the same time assume the Mecca Flats’ old street address. In its program and formal elements, Crown
Hall sharply contrasts with the Mecca. The roof is suspended from four exposed plate girders that project from the simple facade of plate glass and steel. Taking the form of a glass pavilion (Figures 28, 29), Crown Hall appears as a huge but relatively simple one-room glass box floating above the ground. Mies used modern materials and forms to monumentalize an interior space, flooded with natural light and enlivened by the spectacle of people coming and going. Ironically, Edbrooke & Burnham had incorporated similar elements in the Mecca's atria.

Upon completion, Crown Hall was quickly assigned its own set of myths. Architect Eero Saarinen, who participated in the Crown Hall dedication ceremony, insisted that Mies's work established him as the third great Chicago architect after Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, ensuring the city's position as the “center of the universe in modern architecture.” “This same bold spirit that created the Chicago architectural tradition [motivated] the creation of this campus.... Because Chicago is a place of courageous thinking, a slum gives way to a brand new campus—crisp and clean and beautiful and harmonious—a model of a total environment.” This connection between Sullivan and Mies (Figure 30) omitted, among other things, Sullivan's abundant and often foliated ornament, his sense of the vital connection between buildings and the street, and his knowledge of how to build urban density. These qualities are more akin to the Mecca than to Crown Hall. The institute's new buildings cultivated a myth of connection to Chicago's historic architecture even as they destroyed the physical basis for taking the measure of the architectural continuities and changes represented in Mies's designs.
In many ways, the South Side “slum” created a lens of race through which institute officials had viewed the Mecca for decades, failing to see the building’s architectural innovations. They failed to appreciate the tenants’ efforts to preserve housing and to define a neighborly domestic realm in a market hedged by racism, violence, and a domestic ideology that spun on the axis of single-family housing. Moreover, the critical enthusiasm for Mies’s teaching and his designs fostered a narrative of Chicago history and preservation that, on the face of it, viewed buildings like the Mecca as largely irrelevant. Certainly, the Mecca’s exterior courtyard represented a precedent of great relevance for Chicago domestic architecture. The extraordinary interior spaces, with their massing of tenants, failed to win broad emulation. In fact, the intensity of
the institute’s efforts to demolish the Mecca turned upon the visible massing, around the atria, at the windows, in the courtyards, of an African-American cultural presence. The cultural vitality evoked in the “Mecca Flat Blues” and the strength of the Mecca preservation campaign usefully underscore the value of an architecture and an urbanism that could embrace rather than jettison the possibilities of human density and public life in the city. Such spaces would undoubtedly enrich rather than detract from any “total environment.” Capturing the richness of the Mecca’s changing meaning and history necessarily involves following its story beyond the circumstances of its origin to those of its use and ultimate demolition.

Notes

This essay originated in 1997 when my friend Philip Krone, a keen advocate of historic cities, called to discuss strategies for preserving the Yale, a distinguished but abandoned apartment building in Chicago. As the project developed, the Mecca provided a rich context for approaching the problem of the Yale. Many people have my special thanks. They made contributions that ranged from sharing information to opening inaccessible archives, from making cogent criticisms of a first draft to digging through dumps looking for misplaced research notes. I would especially like to thank Timothy Barton, Eve Blau, LeRoy Blommaert, Robert Bruegmann, Diane Dillon, Gordon Field, Scott Meacham, Joan Powell, Timothy Samuelson, Barbara Clark Smith, and Carroll William Westfall.


3 Industrial Chicago: The Building Interests (Chicago, 1891), 1: 240.


5 Chicago Tribune, 13 March 1905.


9 Apartment-house advertisements championing “exclusive” suburban areas often appeared in the Chicago Tribune. For example, advertisements for Chicago’s Patterson Apartments declared, “This beautiful property is located in the exclusive residence section of the north shore” (Chicago Tribune, 17 March 1905). Advertisements for a Clarendon Avenue apartment declared that its apartments were “overlooking large private lawns” of adjacent single-family residences (Chicago Tribune, 21 April 1907).

10 Chicago Tribune, 12 September 1891.

11 In 1898, upon completing the Richmond Court Apartments in the Boston suburb of Brookline, Ralph Adams Cram and Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue declared that the courtyard plan was “quite unusual in this country, though frequently found abroad.” With the “effect of a large English Manor,” Richmond Court took on the “qualities of strength, dignity, and repose, while the court is not forced into fulfilling the ignominious function of a mere lightwell.” Quoted in Douglass Shand Tucci, Built in Boston: City and Suburb, 1800–1950 (Boston, 1978), 118–119.

12 E. S. Hanson, “As the Editor Sees It,” The Apartment House 1 (January 1911): 18.


15 Chicago Tribune, 15 July 1888.

16 Ibid., 12 September 1891.


21 Synopsis of Building News,” Inland Architect and News Record 20 (December 1892), 56; Condit, Chicago School of Architecture, 157–158; see also W. C. Westfall, “The Civilized 2800 Block on Pine Grove Av.,” Inland Architect 18 (July 1974), 13–18; the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for 1894 records only foundations for the Brewer, suggesting that it was still incomplete in 1894; the Blue Book does not record residents until 1897.


26 Chicago Tribune, 12 September 1891, 21 April 1901; “The ‘Mecca’ Hotel,” advertisement (see n.14); Cook County Deed Books, Chicago, Illinois.

27 Manuscript Population Schedule, Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, Enumeration District No. 84.


30 Chicago Tribune, 8 April 1911, 2 February 1912; see “Franklin T. Pember,” in History and Biography of Washington County and the Town of Queensbury, New York, with Historical Notes on the Various Towns, ed. Gresham Publishing Company (Richmond, Ind., 1894.), 287–291.

31 Commission on Chicago Landmarks, Black Metropolitan Historic District (Chicago, 1994), 45.


33 Accounts vary on when the first black tenants moved into the Mecca; Life Magazine reported in 1951 that the first blacks moved in “by 1912”: see “The Mecca. Chicago’s Showiest Apartment Has Given Up All But the Ghost,” Life 31 (19 November 1951): 153; Harper’s quoted a tenant in 1950 as saying that in 1917 “white people hadn’t been gone so long”; see John Bartlow Martin, “The Strangest Place in Chicago,” Harper’s Magazine 201 (December 1950): 89.
These accounts and local newspaper stories all agree that by World War II the Mecca was occupied entirely by African Americans.

30 Manuscript Population Schedule, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, Enumeration District No. 84.

31 Commission on Chicago Landmarks, Black Metropolis, 5–6.

32 Chicago Tribune, 29 March 1943.


34 Irene Macauley, The Heritage of Illinois Institute of Technology (Chicago, 1978), 36.


37 James Cunningham Report to the Board of Trustees, 17 May 1937, in Armour Institute of Technology Board of Trustees Minutes, 1934–1940; this report and other manuscripts cited are located, unless stated otherwise, in the Illinois Institute of Technology Archives, Paul V. Galvin Library, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago.


39 Minutes of Annual Meeting of the Board of Trustees, 11 October 1937, in Armour Institute of Technology Board of Trustees Minutes, 1934–1940.

40 Henry T. Heald, “President’s Report, for the Year Ended August 31, 1940,” in Illinois Institute of Technology Board of Trustees Minutes, vol. 1, 1940–1941.

41 See, for example, Illinois Institute of Technology, Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees, 9 July 1943, Illinois Institute of Technology Board of Trustees Minutes, vol. 2, 1942–1945.

42 Buildings and Grounds Committee Minutes, 17 May 1944, Board of Trustees of Illinois Institute of Technology, 1943–1947, box HB 12; see similar concern in original campus proposal, in James Cunningham Report to the Board of Trustees, 17 May 1937, in Armour Institute of Technology Board of Trustees Minutes, 1934–1940.

43 James Cunningham Report to the Board of Trustees, 17 May 1937, in Armour Institute of Technology Board of Trustees Minutes, 1934–1940.

44 Illinois Institute of Technology, Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees, Minutes of Meeting, 24 September 1941, box HB 4, 1941–1944.


47 Chicago Defender, 1 May 1943.

48 Ibid., 15 May 1943.


50 Chicago Defender, 5 June 1943; draft of “Petition for Mandamus,” Board of Trustees of Illinois Institute of Technology, box HB 2.

51 Illinois Institute of Technology, Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees, 9 July 1943, 9 August 1943, Illinois Institute of Technology Board of Trustees Minutes, vol. 2, 1942–1943; “Black Belt” reference is from James Cunningham Report to the Board of Trustees, 17 May 1937, in Armour Institute of Technology Board of Trustees Minutes, 1934–1940.

52 “Additional Considerations Which Should be Given Weight By The War Department In Determining Acceptable Bid,” Board of Trustees of Illinois Institute of Technology, box HB 1.


54 Henry T. Heald, Reclaiming Chicago’s Blighted Areas (Chicago, 1946), Metropolitan Housing Council pamphlet without pagination located in Chicago Historical Society.

55 Wilford G. Winholtz to Members of the Chicago Land Clearance Commission, 29 January 1948, South Side Planning Board Files, July 1947 to April 1950, Board of Trustees of Illinois Institute of Technology, box HB 62.


62 Ibid.


65 Chicago Tribune, 23 May 1950.


68 Chicago Defender, 27 May 1950.

69 Chicago Tribune, 23 May 1950.


72 John Bartlow Martin, “The Strangest Place in Chicago.” 86–97 (see n. 33).

73 Ibid., 86.


75 “The Mecca, Chicago’s Showiest Apartment Has Given Up All But the Ghost” (see n. 35).


78 Eero Saarinen, quoted in Macauley, Illinois Institute of Technology, 78.

79 Bluestone, “Preservation and Renewal in Post-World War II Chicago.”

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