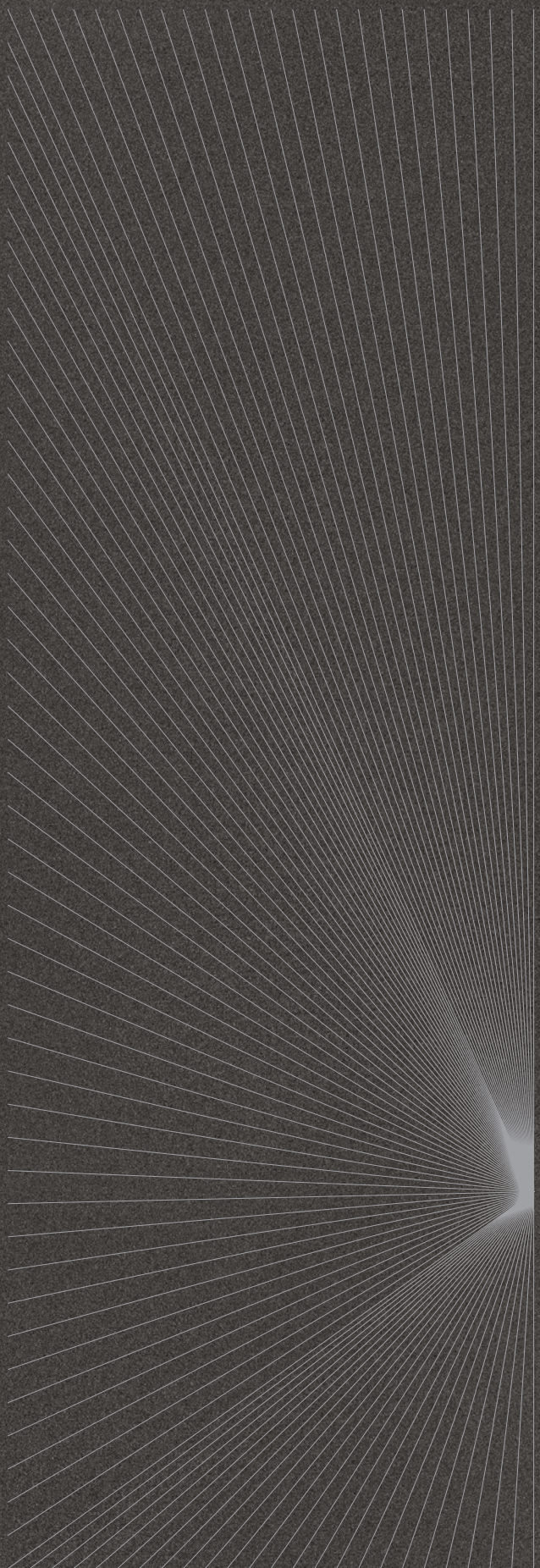
Spatial Landmarks



Philip Thor Morath

Spatial Landmarks

Philip Thor Morath - Kompas Fellow 2024-2025
Myefski Architects

Thank you to the team at Myefski Architects

For the time I've been given to conduct this research,

For the thoughtful and consistent feedback throughout the process,

For creating a workplace, I looked forward to returning to each day.

Am I overdressed or underdressed? Do I start with handshakes or do an awkward wink? These are some of the pressing matters on your first day at work – and it felt as if I got all of them wrong. On my first day, I was dressed too hot for the Chicago summer, and whenever I moved about around the office, felt like I was walking on stilts.

It is all part of the process I thought. When I entered the office on my second day, these questions would be cleared up – and they were. The next day I walked confidently through the front door. I knew how the working day was scheduled and how the coffee machine worked. I'd be safe - or so I thought.

What they don't tell you about this bright-lit office, placed at the fourth floor in one of the most iconic buildings in Chicago – is that they subject any new employee to a dark ritual. It is not something mentioned in any interview or office schedule. When it occurs, it is seemingly proposed as a spontaneous decision.

After work, my colleagues take me down the busy Michigan Avenue. Walking this street is a hasty game of avoiding getting caught by wedding photographers or packs of tourists. Then, to my surprise, we stop. Without hesitation, my colleagues turn toward a set of stairs leading into pitch-black darkness. We enter the city's underbelly, the one nobody mentions when speaking of the White City.

Within the dreary underground there are no people. It feels like nothing could ever thrive here but industrial machines and fast-paced cars. My colleagues take a sharp right around a corner. With hesitation, I follow. We've arrived at a red metal door. Just through here, they said.

To my relief, I am welcomed by the scent of burgers and sight of people. As soon as we step in, the cashier, shouts from the kitchen: "What do you want to eat?". Everyone gathers around a table, and I understand. It is a warm welcome to the city.

It turns out this isn't just an office ritual, it's a spatial one. A movement from light to dark, from surface to depth. Even though others led me here, it feels like I found something of my own. And once I experienced it, I began to see the same pattern in other places. Other transitions. Other spaces.

The city is full of them. Maybe you passed one without knowing. Or maybe you didn't have the words for it yet.

I call them spatial landmarks.

Land + mearc

For almost a thousand years the term *landmark* has carried various meanings.[1] Initially landmarks were objects used to mark boundaries of kingdoms and lands. By the 1500s the term evolves. The description of a landmark becomes that of a recognizable object, which by its known position can serve as a guide to travelers. The more figurative use of landmarks, being a significant moment in history—a "*landmark event*"—emerged around the 1860s.[2]

Today, the conversation surrounding landmarks is often related to history and preservation. Since the beginning of the 1900s, U.S. legislation began to incorporate the term into preservation acts. Landmarks became known as historic structures that pinpoint important time periods within American history.[3] Throughout the different use cases and meanings, one quality of the landmark stays consistent, that is *singularity*.

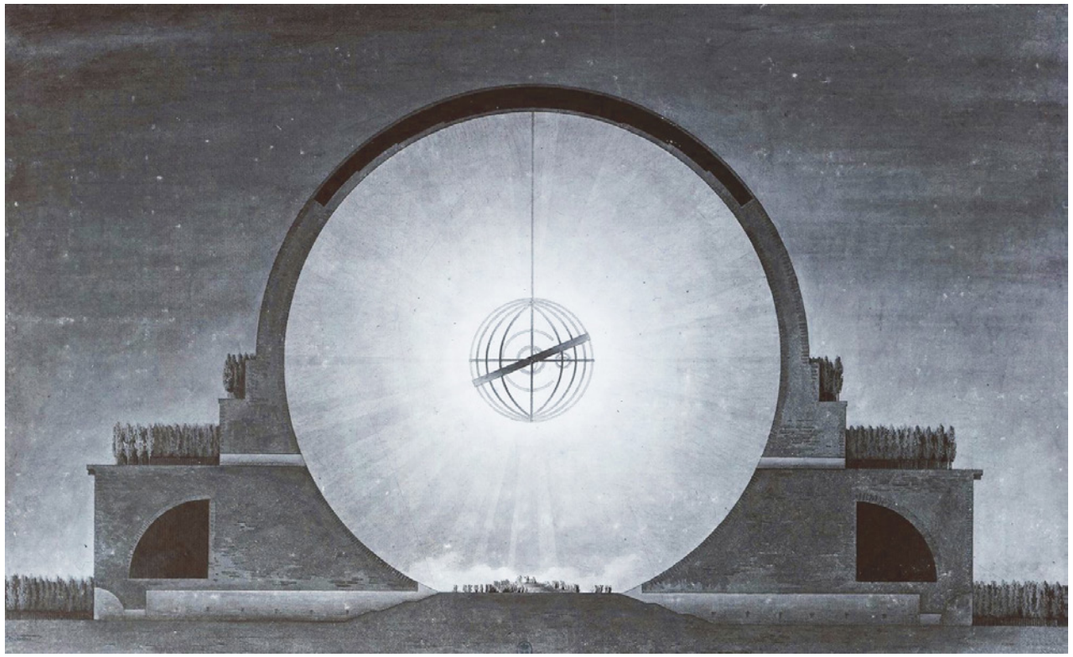
Any object, structure, or event that stands out from their environment can be described as singular. This quality is similar to that of being distinct or unique. Considering the tower as an example, it is its height that gives it singularity, provided that the surrounding buildings are lower. This can be compared to the major historical event, with its singularity revealed to the backdrop of time. It is this quality that stays consistent in landmarks.

I was first introduced to the idea of landmarks being singular, in the urban study *The Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch. He defines landmarks as physical objects, that serve as point references, aiding people in orienting themselves and navigating their surroundings. Consequently, landmarks, among other city elements, help people form mental maps of their surroundings. Since the landmark acts as a single point of reference, this makes their impact dependent on singularity. As noted in his book, the function of landmarks "*involves the singling out of one element from a host of possibilities, the key physical characteristic of this class is singularity*".[4]

What I find most compelling however, is how Lynch deconstructs the idea that landmarks carry historical or symbolic value, instead introducing them as an urban element experienced at an individual level. The landmark, becoming an embodiment of the relationship between the individual person and collective city.

Figure 1. *Hodges, W. (1772). A view of the Cape of Good Hope, taken on the Spot, from on board the Resolution, Capt. Cook.*
A natural landmark, aided sailors navigating Africa's southern tip.

Figure 2. *Author (2024). The Wrigley Building, Chicago.*
At the time of completion, the Wrigley Building stood out as a singular structure in an otherwise industrial neighborhood.



Expanding singularity

While traditional definitions understand landmarks as objects or structures external to the observer, this study proposes an expanded understanding. If the defining quality of landmarks is singularity, could this concept be extended beyond physical objects? Specifically, can space itself, if identified as singular, be defined as a landmark?

In this study, I introduce the term *spatial landmark* to describe spaces that embody singularity. Their distinctiveness can only be perceived through spatial experience. This, of course, poses some questions.
How is singularity experienced spatially? What impact do spatial landmarks have on the people who enter them?

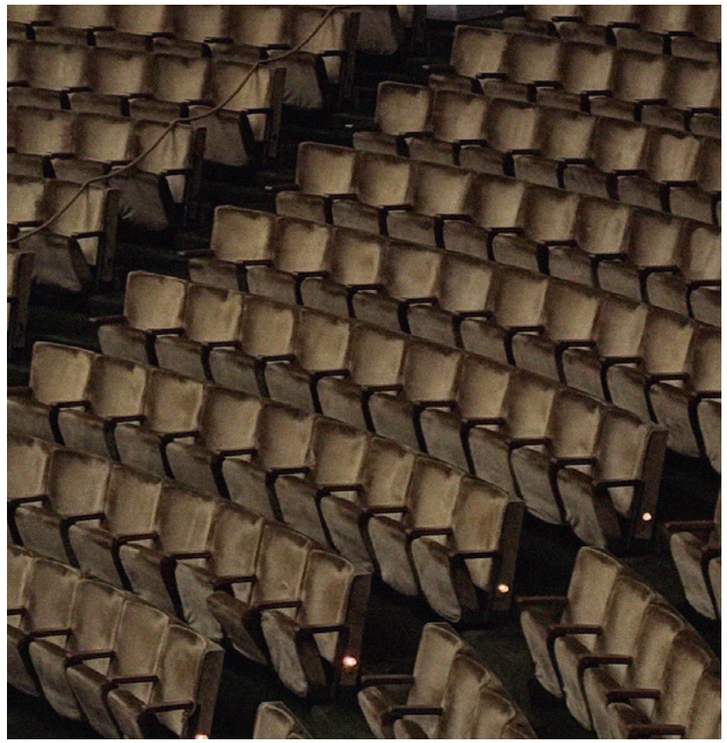
To understand how singularity is experienced, this study relies on basic *spatial qualities* like form, scale and proportion, openness and enclosure, texture and materials, light, and acoustics. Together, these spatial qualities form a *spatial context*. While all these qualities are present to some degree, one or several qualities may be perceived as dominant. One environment may be described as open and loud, another dark and quiet.

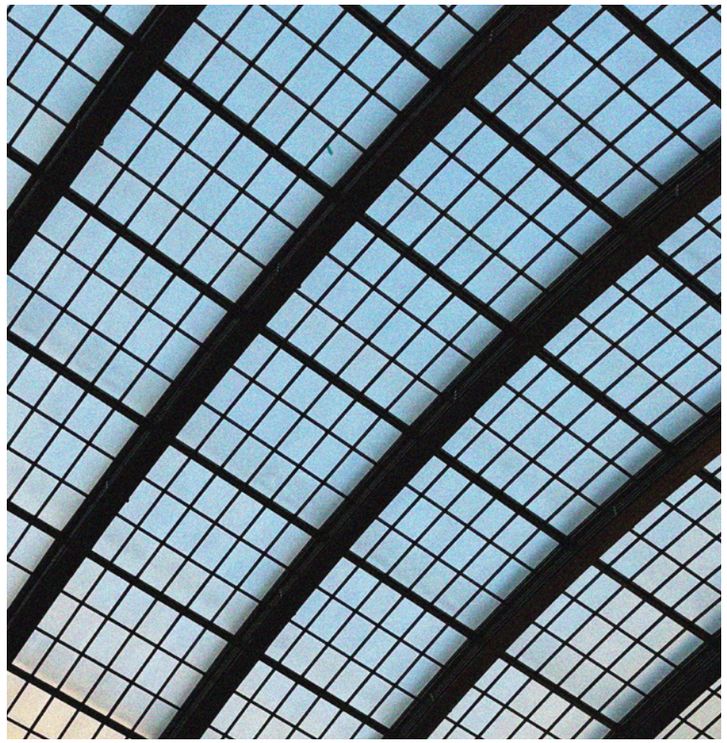
In the case of singular spaces, this quality reveals itself in relation to the surrounding spatial context. In the context of a bright open environment, such as the streets of midday Chicago, a dark and enclosed interior space located within that context may be described as singular. A distinct space, made singular by contrast with the series of spaces preceding it.

Over the course of one year, this study identified three spatial landmarks in downtown Chicago. To establish their spatial context, each case includes the sequence of spaces leading up to the landmark. These preceding spaces form a spatial context against which the spatial landmark becomes perceivable.

Through these case studies: a church, a station, and a tavern, this research aims to better understand how singularity is experienced spatially and the impact that spatial landmarks have on their visitors.

Figure 3. *Boullée, E.-L. (c. 1784). Cénotaphe à Newton (section).*
The illustration makes use of form, light, and scale to create a unique space.





The intersection of Wabash and Wacker Drive is one I've often crossed. Conveniently the neighboring river forms a sharp bend here, making many iconic buildings visible from this location. But looking in the opposite direction—south, across the intersection—I've always been intrigued by a more modest building. Cornered by its surrounding streets, is an exposed concrete structure carrying a circular marble wall. I had to look it up.

The image that caught my interest, when searching for "Seventeenth Church Chicago" was that of an auditorium, that from the looks of it, is a carefully articulated space. I decided that the next time I'd find myself standing at that intersection, I would venture inside.

Both Wabash and Wacker are loud streets, so when crossing the two, the noise is truly at its peak. After crossing, I enter the church lobby. Walking up to the receptionist, I ask where I can find this auditorium. To my surprise, she told me to just go up, pointing to a set of stairs. Up? What a strange thing, I thought. I imagined I would be going down. From my earlier experiences, such a large, enclosed space like an auditorium usually finds itself below street grade or embedded within the center of a building. Within this small footprint of a building, going up seemed odd. Nevertheless, I thanked her and continued.

Going forward I was met with two stairs. Both seem to symmetrically align so I assume they lead to similar outcomes. As of habit, I always go right. The stairway leads me to the expansive space I came for. I set my eyes upon countless seats placed in a half circle, with travertine walls lifting a tent-like ceiling. Just like the images I had seen. But what caught me by surprise was the complete silence.

Just a wall away are Chicagoan's honking in every direction, but in here I could not tell. Instead in this circular space, each quiet step I take fills the room. Not only was the acoustic noise gone, but the visual as well. There are no windows, other than the small slivers of light along the roof base and the skylights above. It is a contrast in noise, something that I've never experienced before.

A Church of Silence

The auditorium is made singular by isolating itself from the noisy streets of Chicago. Within the space the acoustics are also enhanced. It made me curious, how are the acoustics designed in this building? And why place such a carefully tuned, quiet oasis—right here, at one of the loudest intersections in Chicago?

Developing contexts

Since its formation in 1925, the Seventeenth Church congregation had met in various rental spaces within the Chicago Loop district, so it was a big decision when they decided to build a permanent home in the mid-1950s. Among their criteria for their new church was staying within downtown. The site picked was the only one within their budget that met this requirement.

Being located near the riverfront was not an attractive place at the time. The river had become an established industrial corridor making way for the city to grow into a major urban center. Surrounding the river were warehouses, factories, and shipping facilities. But the hired architect, Harry Weese, was intrigued by the site.[5] Coincidentally, he had an interest of building humane urban architecture, and revitalizing cities with monumental public buildings. The Seventeenth Church provided the opportunity for him to design a church at a site where it could hardly have been imagined by others.[6]

Figure 4. *Google Earth (2025). Seventeenth Church of Christ, Scientist, Chicago.*
The church is located at the sharp bend of the main branch of the Chicago River

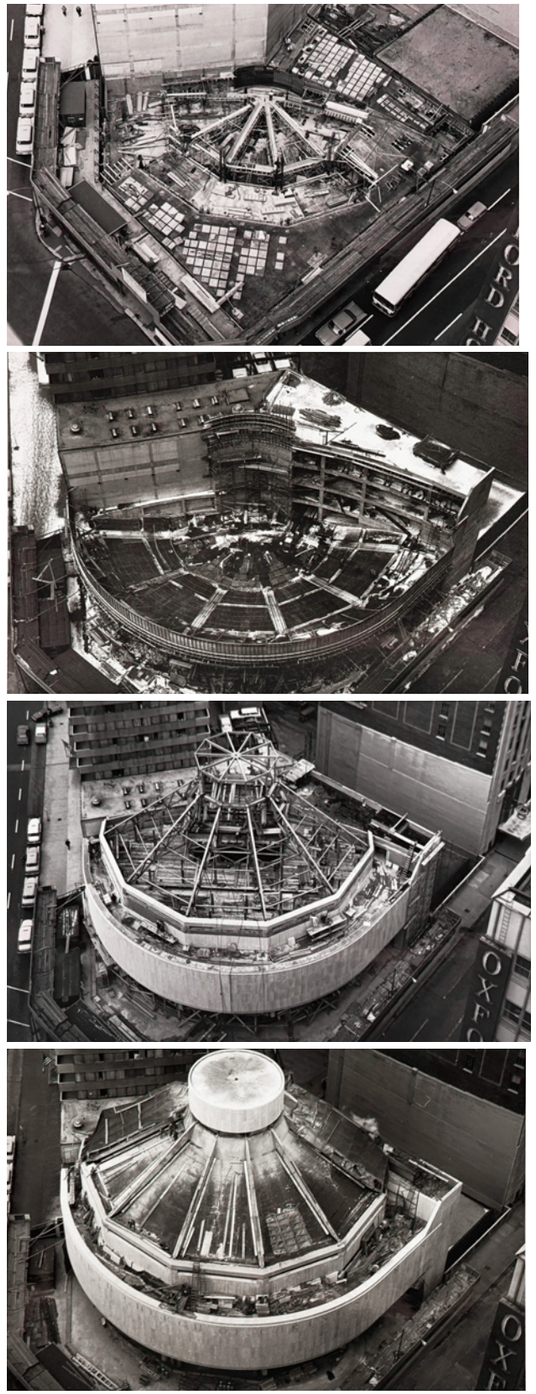


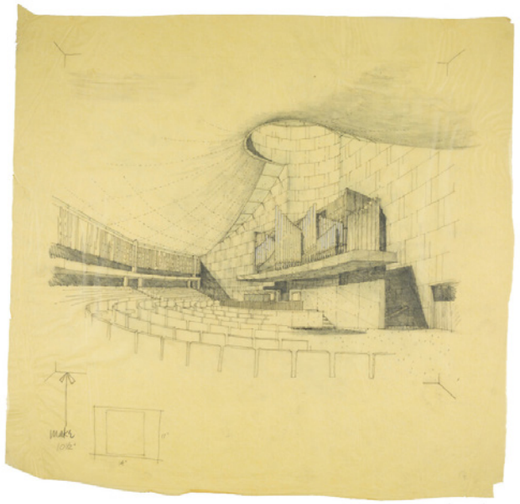
Figure 5. *Architectural Camera, Ltd. (1967). Construction of Seventeenth Church of Christ, Scientist, Chicago.*

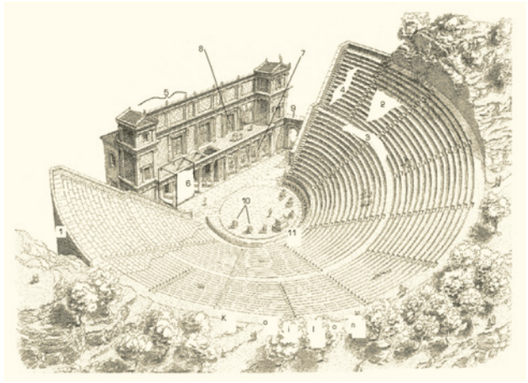
Figure 6. *Author (2025). Seventeenth Church of Christ, Scientist, Chicago.* Wabash Avenue meets Wacker Drive creating a busy intersection.

Constraints become opportunities

Due to the surrounding intersections, the site was an unusual six-sided shape. This constraint, along with the many requirements from the congregation, narrowed the design solution to a circular seven story structure. By stacking the required functions, Weese overcame the strange shape of the site.

With the raising of the surrounding streets, this easily allowed the building to start two levels below street grade, at the same level as Lower Wacker Drive. This places the lobby at the third floor, providing access to the auditorium on the fourth floor.





The auditorium

At the rear of the lobby, two set of stairs lead up behind the speaker's platform in the auditorium and into the center of the circular space. Noticeably, the walls have no windows. Instead, the space receives its source of natural light from above. Where the walls meet the ceiling, slit-like openings let light through. The wall behind the speaker's platform is illuminated with skylights that grow from each corner of the ceiling. The skylight leads your eyes towards the oculus crowning the roof at the center, which again makes use of narrow openings to let light filter through.

When standing at the elevated speaker's platform, you find yourself in the center of a Greek amphitheatre. This ancient layout is famous for its natural acoustics—and together with the tent-shaped ceiling—the space becomes ideal for sound.

In this congregation where the spoken word is emphasized, this layout provides a natural benefit. From the elevated platform, sound can be projected across the 800 seats.

Due to its location, isolating the space from the surrounding street noise was of great concern to the congregation. By avoiding windows in the exterior travertine walls and using a minimal amount of glass in the ceiling, the space is filled with both silence and light.[5]

As the contemporary nature of the church brings focus to these qualities, any traditional ornaments have been removed. From the formation of the seats to the choice of materials, design decisions seem to either enhance or highlight the qualities of light and sound. The result is a space that welcomes everyone.

Figure 7. *Weese, H. M. (c. 1965). Seventeenth Church of Christ, Scientist, Chicago, Illinois: Interior perspective.*

Figure 8. *Unknown author (2003). Greek theatre diagram. Image edited by author.*

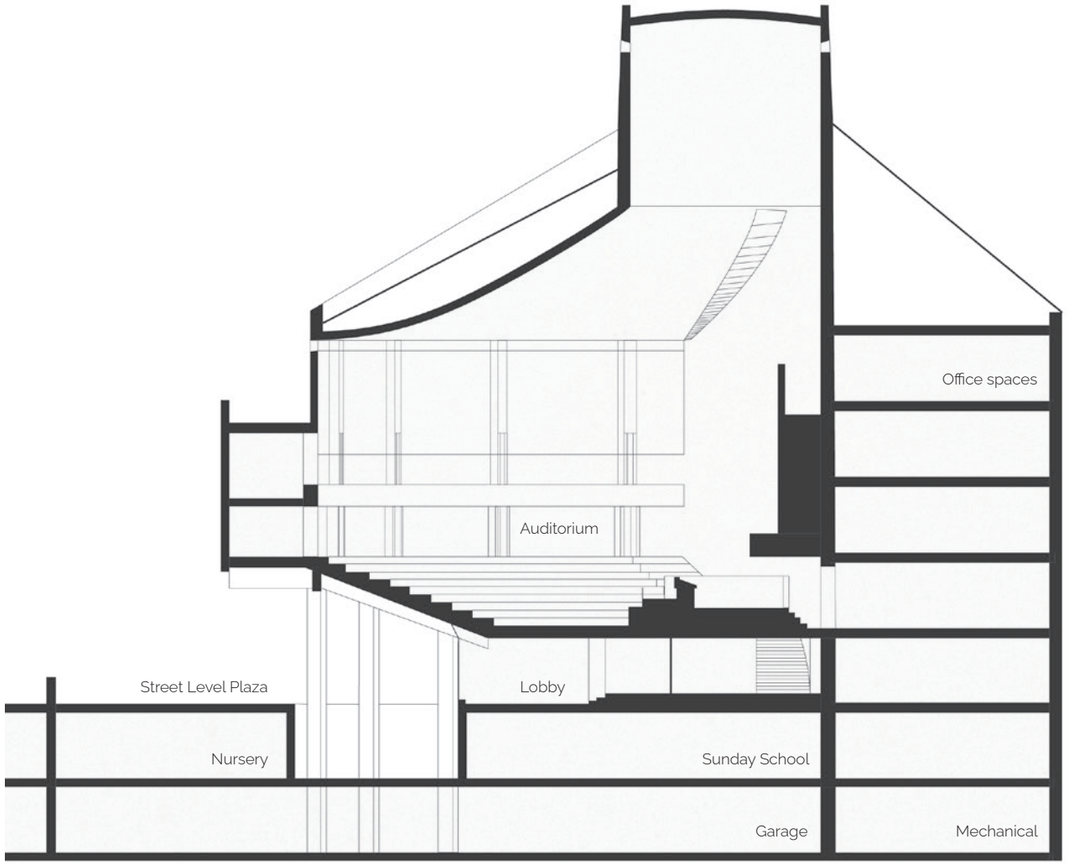


Figure 9. *Author (2025). Section drawing of Seventeenth Church of Christ, Scientist. Not to scale.*

Figure 10. *Author (2025). Auditorium, facing speaker's platform.*
Figure 11. *Author (2025). Auditorium, seat formation.*

The layout of the seats makes the space feel both comprehensible and unified—a stark contrast to the chaotic intersection just outside.

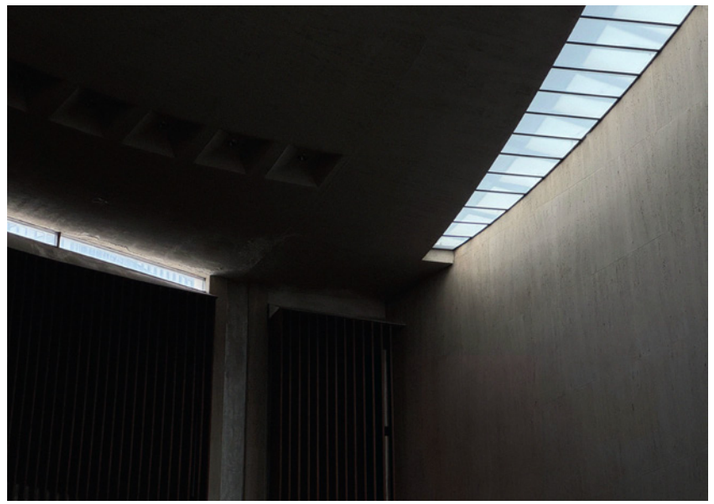


Figure 12. *Author (2025). The oculus crowning the ceiling.*
Figure 13. *Author (2025). Openings where walls meet the ceiling.*

Thin slivers of light brighten the entire space.

"Sometimes people just need to step away, whether something specific has happened or they just need the quiet"
– Congregation member

When speaking to a member of the church, it was explained to me, that the congregation welcomes others to share their space, whether that is a group of musicians or someone in need of silence. It could be a person who wants a space for their prayers or someone who could use a break from the loud downtown. Not only does the auditorium break away from the noise, but it also allows space for someone who can't find it elsewhere.[7]

Embodied in silence
Surrounding the site today is not an industrial landscape but a commercial one. The river now consists mainly of boat tours instead of barges. Despite the changes in the site's surrounding context, the auditorium still stands in stark contrast to its environment. While all the neighboring buildings reach upward to have the best view, this space reflects a different set of values. A circular sanctuary that invites you not to look out, but to listen in. As architect Harry Weese called the design challenge, "*On the Wacker Drive axis, a challenge to surrounding secular monoliths.*"[5]

Given the congregation's focus on acoustics, silence is an expected consequence. But then, in contrast with this quality, the church is placed in an abundance of noise. The immediate contrast could not be clearer.

But what started out as a question of noisy streets, transformed into the noise of everyday life. While the location of the church was driven by a budget restriction, its auditorium proves to be a well needed space among the busy life of downtown Chicago.

As a spatial landmark, the auditorium's singular quality is clearly articulated in its contrast with its surroundings.
A singularity embodied in silence.

Echo! Someone shouts as they enter the large atrium. Clearly you don't need to be an architect to notice these things, I thought. In the Great Hall at Union Station, each sound bounces off the hard marble interior. It creates a sort of muffled noise where you hear everything and nothing at all times. From the floor my eyes follow the white columns, reaching up to the skylight many stories high. It almost covers the entire ceiling. The glass isn't clear in the usual sense—rather than exposing the sky, it seems designed solely to provide light and bring clarity to the space. Because here everyone is heard, and everything is seen.

But prior to arriving here it was a very different journey. Starting off from the train platforms, I was immediately set in motion. The concrete deck stretches through the dark and cold underground, with trains crawling beside you. It's not a place I wish to linger so the only option is to move forward.

Stepping into the concourse, I am immediately picked up by the hordes of people passing through. Moving from one corridor to the next, I don't feel a sense of direction. It is as if everyone is mindlessly turning left and right into an endless maze made up of low tile ceilings and utilitarian lighting. I follow the others trusting they know the way.

But suddenly in my confusion, I notice I've reached a subtle upwards slope. Generally, when you want to gain an understanding of where you are, moving upwards is a good idea. I've gained some confidence. The corridor maze has now shifted into a designated path, taking me somewhere.

Trusting my instincts, the slope leads me to a large opening. From here I can see natural light by its reflection on the floor. The sloping hallway has turned into a large space. Moving forward, I arrive at the Great Hall. Any previous confusion has now been transformed into clarity.

A Demolished Station

The journey from the platform to the Great Hall shifts from disorientation to clarity. The utilitarian concourse seems like an afterthought in the station's design—until you reach the sloping corridor. From that point forward, the spatial design feels intentional, ending with the hall revealing itself as the last step before entering the city.

The spatial contrast raises a series of questions. Is the spatial sequence intentional? Is the concourse designed to contrast and heighten the impact of the Great Hall? Did the budget simply run out?

City-wide plan
Along with many other Chicago institutions, Union Station was proposed in Daniel Burnham and Edward H. Bennett's 1909 Plan of Chicago. It was a city-wide plan dealing with a great many issues, among which was the improvement of the city's railway system.[8] As competing railroads had built multiple terminal stations scattered throughout the city, it had become difficult for passengers to transfer between the stations. With Chicago's growth, the need for a single, centralized station became a political issue.[9] The solution would be to consolidate the city's passenger terminals into a single facility located along Canal Street. This is the site of the new Union Station, with tracks and platforms constructed below street grade.[8]

Figure 14. *Delano, J. (1943). Switchman throwing a switch at Chicago and North Western Railway Company's Proviso Yard.*

Figure 15. *Unknown author (c. 1925). Postcard of Union Station.*
Illustrating the new Union Station, the Concourse building stands before the river.

The two buildings

The main building of the station, that we think of today, is referred to as the Headhouse. It stands as the sole above-ground structure belonging to Union Station. But this was not always the case. Originally, Union Station was designed with two central buildings in mind. Neighboring the Headhouse was a building conveniently named the Concourse. This structure, less prominent in size, had an exposed steel truss design and a roof almost made completely out of glass. Canal Street was dividing the two buildings.

Compared to the four-story Headhouse occupying a whole city block, the Concourse appears modern and flamboyant, only covering a portion of its assigned block. When the station opened in 1925, the Concourse stood as the entrance pavilion, easily approachable for commuters.

The separation of the two buildings was deliberate. Crossing the two was primarily for intercity travelers. A sloping passageway under Canal Street could be used when leaving the Concourse and heading for the Main Waiting Room, located in the Headhouse. This room is what is today, commonly known as the Great Hall. The passageway's slope was to accommodate a two-foot difference between the buildings, with the Concourse being situated at the lower end. Overall, the layout functioned well at easing pedestrian flows, keeping busy commuters out of the Main Waiting Room.

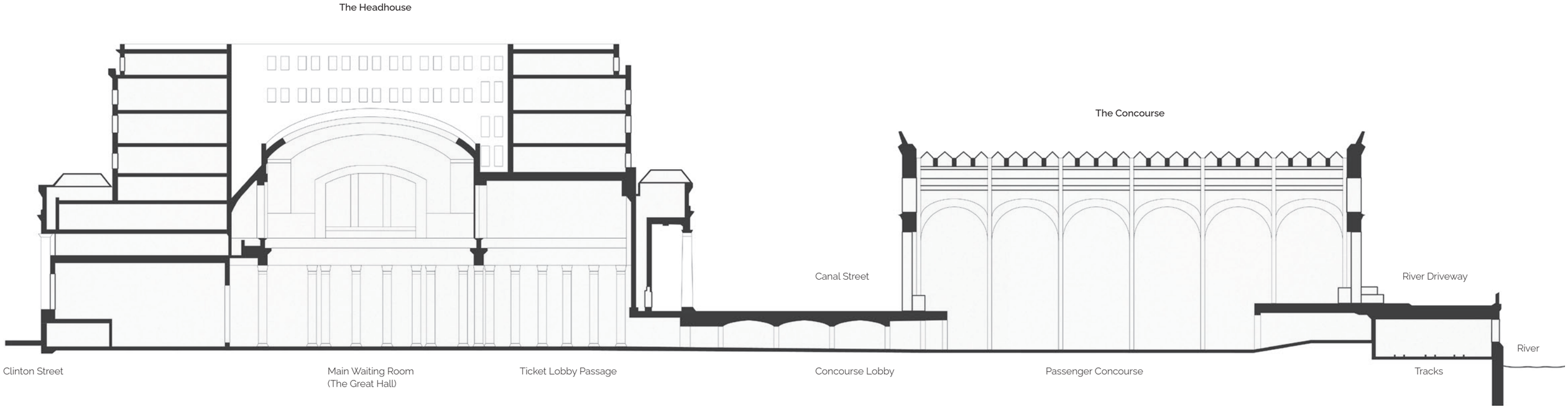


Figure 16. *Author (2025). Section drawing of Union Station 1925. Not to scale.*
Section on an east–west axis, showing the transitions between the tracks and the Great Hall.

Spatial hierarchy

In its original state, moving through the station could be described as a planned sequence of spaces, eventually leading up to the Great Hall.

In contrast to the dark underground experience seen today, early passengers stepping off their train and onto the platforms might already have noticed beams of light reaching in from the Concourse. The Concourse floor was deliberately made of glass blocks which allowed natural light to reflect, continuing into the basement.

Entering the Concourse, you would be greeted by a greenhouse-like glare. The space was illuminated by its glass gable roof along with a clerestory, flanked by windows at the north and south walls. Intercity passengers would then continue onward into the passageway between the two buildings.

Originally named the Concourse Lobby, this passage had integrated cabstands that flanked it on the north and south sides.[10] Unlike prior terminals, Union Station was the first to accommodate automobile traffic in its design.

The idea was that future travelers would never leave the basement level, as all necessary amenities were conveniently located on one level.[11]

The passageway ran under Canal Street limiting its ceiling height. Rather than treating this as a restriction, the passage provided the context for what is called a *visual compression*. For any traveler entering this space, their visual sense would first be confined, only to be expanded moments later. When entering the Great Hall, this would cause them to instinctively lift their eyes towards the skylight.

Starting with the passage, a hierarchy was staged in a three-part spatial journey. First, the one-story passageway. Next the Ticket Lobby, which heightens the ceiling close to that of the Great Hall. Finally, the Great Hall which expands its atrium north and south, letting natural light through its large barrel skylight. This spatial hierarchy deliberately plays with contrast in light, form, and space.[10]

Figure 17. *Delano, J. (1943). Chicago, Illinois. Union Station concourse.* Image of the Concourse - with a view towards the Concourse Lobby.

Figure 18. *Author (2025). View from Concourse Lobby, facing the Great Hall*
Figure 19. *Author (2025). View from Ticket Lobby, facing the Concourse Lobby.*

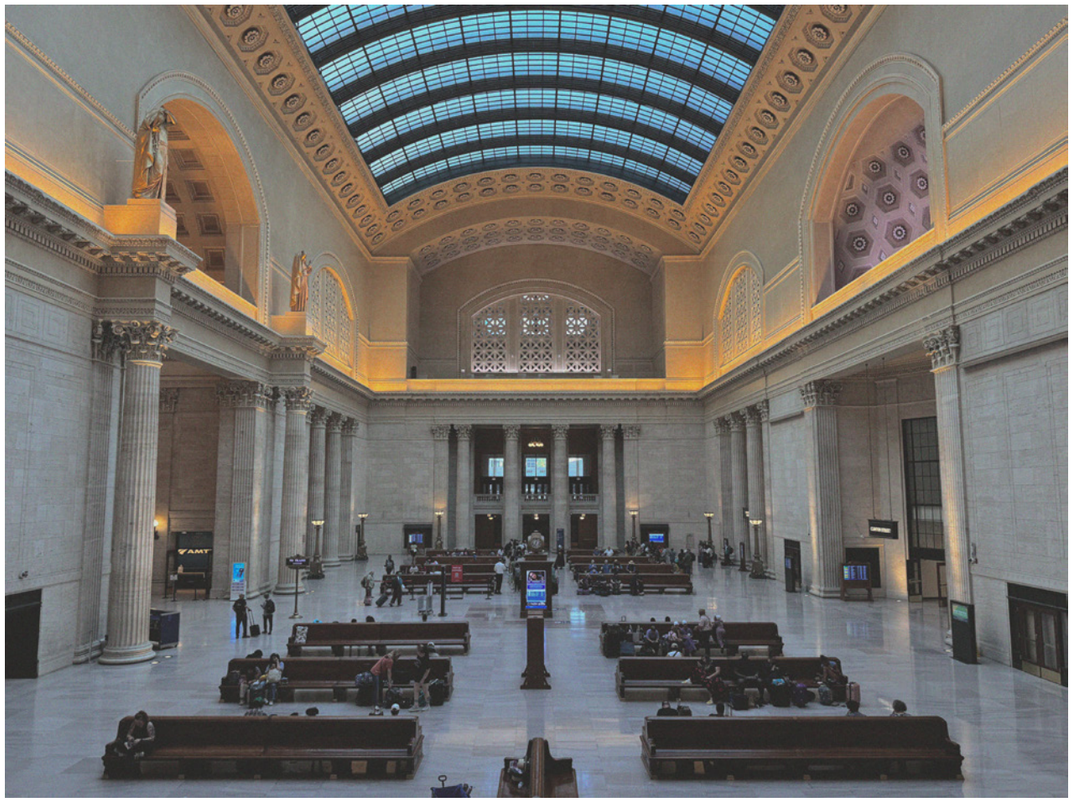


Figure 20. *Author (2025). The Great Hall.*
The barrel skylights illuminates the entire space.

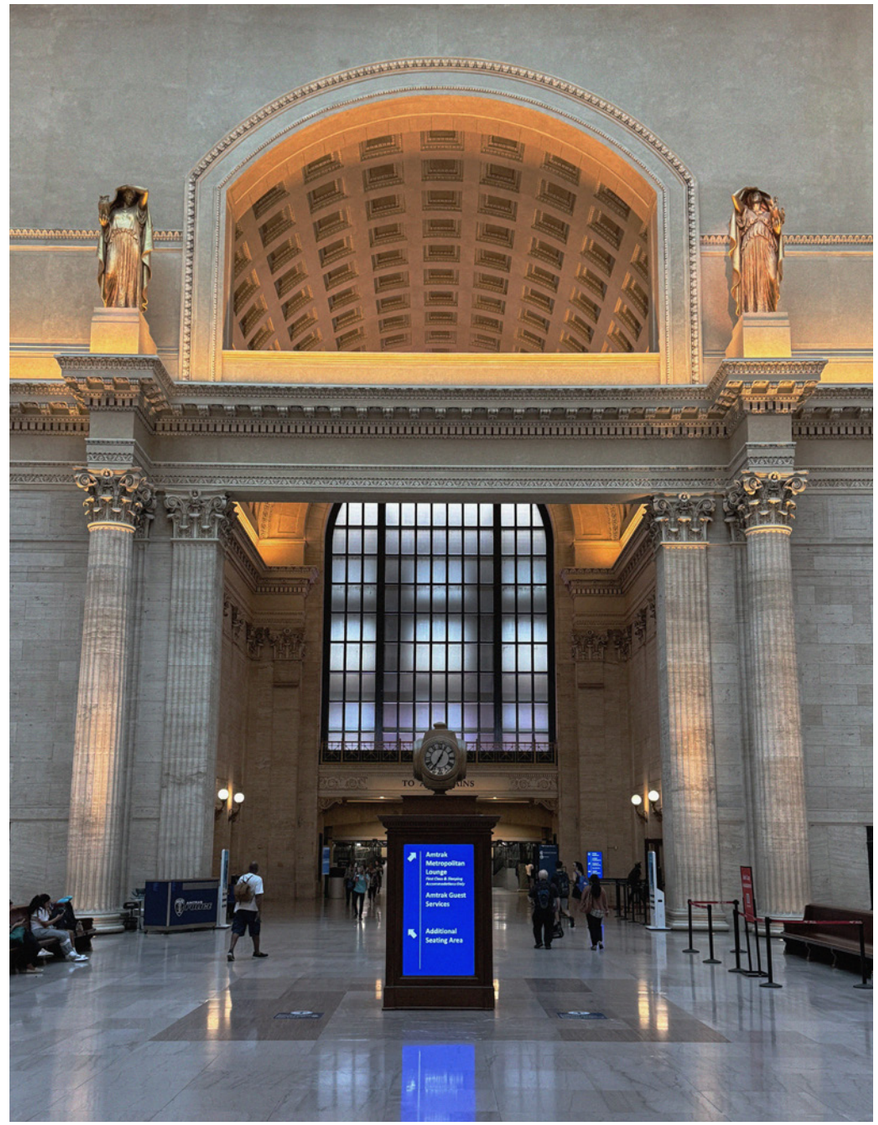
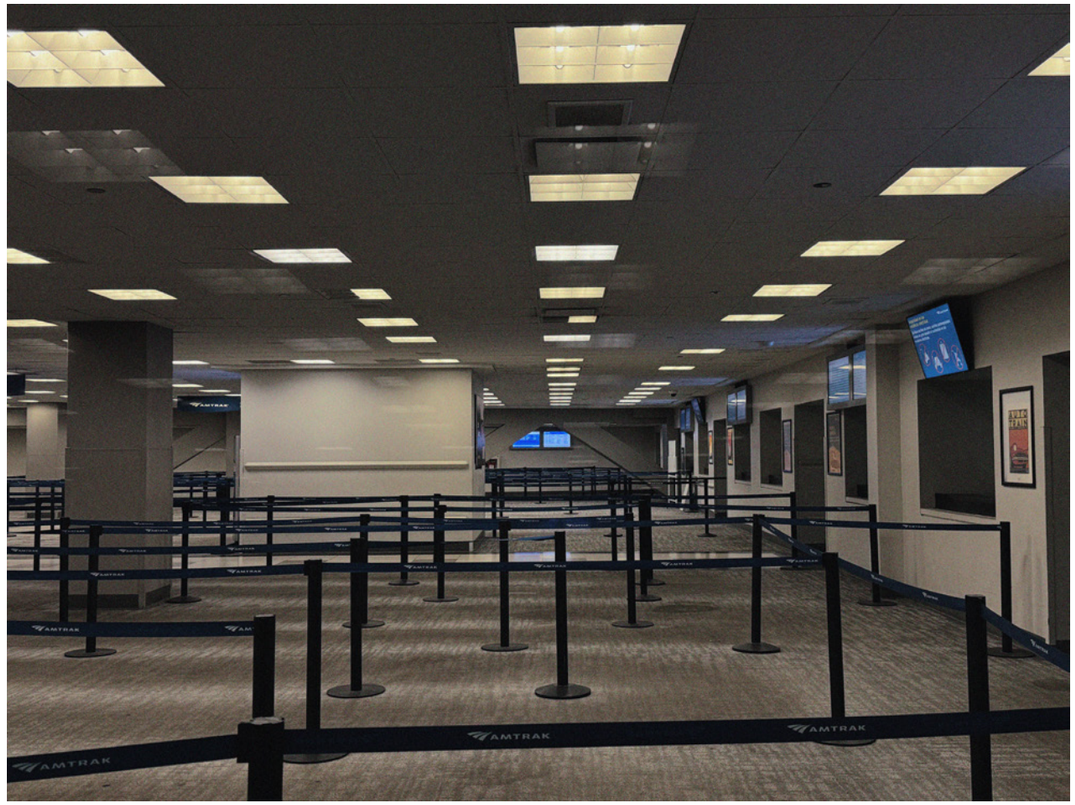


Figure 21. *Author (2025). View from the Great Hall, facing the the Ticket Lobby.*
The hierarchical spaces begin to show - when standing in the center of the Great Hall.

Figure 22. *Daly. R. (Facebook post, 2018). Demolition of Union Station Concourse 1969.*



Demolishing the concourse

Following a steady decline in ridership, in 1969 the Concourse was demolished in favor of a 35-story office tower. The radical shift transformed the spacious Concourse into a low-ceiling maze of underground hallways. About five years later the Regional Transportation Authority was created, and began to consolidate the region's private commuter rail lines. Ironically, since then, an increase in ridership has occurred.[12]

The Concourse having been through many different iterations since its demolition, still cannot keep up with passenger demand. [13] Today, passengers describe Union Station as utilitarian, uncomfortable, cramped, and disorienting.[14]

Disorientation and clarity

The demolition of the Concourse explains much of my first experience of Union Station. The disorientation that I and many others experience is caused by a poor alteration of the station's original design. However, after years of reconstruction, parts of the original design still function spatially. From the moment you step onto the sloping passageway, you can feel the deliberate momentum toward the Great Hall.

But in relation to the Great Hall's singularity, the current Concourse cannot be disregarded completely. While the low ceiling beneath Canal Street originally imposed a constraint, it ultimately set the stage for a powerful spatial device: a deliberate *visual compression* that heightens the impact of entering the Great Hall.

Similarly, replacing the Concourse with a modern tower provides the context for the current low ceiling Concourse. Although done poorly, the original passageway has been extended throughout the station, exaggerating the original spatial hierarchy. Arriving at the Great Hall today becomes a singular event, contrasting all spaces before it.

Both by design and unintended consequence, the Great Hall emerges as a spatial landmark within the context of Union Station.

Figure 23. *Author (2025). Union Station Concourse*
The low ceiling of the concourse, provides the spatial context for the Great Hall.

I return to the tavern one last time. I'm by myself. Michigan Avenue carves out a long sightline between tall glass facades. Looking out north, it feels like I could venture into eternity.

A few blocks down, I see the stairs. Without hesitation, I turn to see the descent into darkness. From here you cannot tell what lies there, the contrast from the sunlit street is too much. Carefully taking the first few steps, I notice a greasy scent that punches through the air as it escapes up the stairwell. Its familiar. By the next step, I've entered the underground.

First, I feel the temperature drop. Then the dense air. Even without sight, you can tell this is not a place for people to dwell in. There is lots of traffic running by, roaring like an echo chamber. Already I miss the upper-level streets of the city. You can distinctly hear the cars on upper Michigan Avenue rumbling the ceiling above you.

As my eyes adjust to the darkness, they are immediately caught by a bright sign spelling out BILLY GOAT TAVERN. Still with haste, I turn around the corner. That scent from the stairs has grown stronger. I arrive at the door, that opens to another set of stairs. This time, leading into a warm-lit tavern.

It's just a regular tavern. I see the grill steaming. I hear people laughing. I feel relief. It is as if life found its way into this basement, where you thought it never could. But something about it feels larger than it is. The tense underground made me long for warmth and light, which is precisely what the tavern offers. It is a space uplifted by the journey taken there.

A Neighborhood Tavern

Since my first experience of the Billy Goat Tavern, it has intrigued me. The placement in the underground is something I haven't encountered elsewhere in the city.

It makes me wonder. How did a tavern end up in this subterranean location? And how does the underground shape the way we experience this space?

Beneath the surface of Chicago

The Billy Goat Tavern is located beneath the surface of Michigan Avenue, tucked into the basement of the Realtor Building. Though often mistaken for the original, it's actually the bar's second home. The decision to move here was made in 1964, thirty years after its first opening at a more regular storefront space across from the United Center, then Chicago Stadium. Two reasons caused the move. First, Chicago had regulated saloons to be closed at 4 am, and so the new location likely came with more time diverse customers. Secondly, the number of sports events and political conventions were on a decline, making the move away from the area inevitable.[15]

Since its move in the sixties, Billy Goat Tavern is described as a time capsule, as it intentionally looks the same as it did 50 years ago.[16] What's more interesting for this study, is that the spatial experience is consistent as well. Due to it being subterranean, the tavern's space feels the same regardless of the time of day.

When describing the tavern, people often start with the journey downward to the underground. The distinct presence in the lower level of Chicago, is a direct result of the raising of Michigan Avenue – the city's first elevated boulevard.

Figure 24. *Author (2025). Exterior view - Billy Goat Tavern.*
The red neon lights reaches far into the underground.

"*The germ of the elevated street, I care not when and how it was conceived, had gotten into this committee, and reason and protest were om vain to eradicate it.*"
- George Packard

A Boulevard on stilts

By the early 1910's, plans to turn the then-crowded Michigan Avenue into a commercial boulevard sparked intense debate. The transformation proposed raising the street, something never done before in the city. George Packard, representing local property owners, expressed concern that the transformation would depreciate the value of their existing properties. The prominent lawyer was certain that it would not lead to an enhancement of the area.[17] The opponents mocked the plan, calling it a "*boulevard on stilts*."[18]

Even though there were talks about transforming the street as early as the 1880s, the proposal was resurrected when Daniel Burnham and Edward H. Bennett were commissioned to make the Plan of Chicago.[17] In a 1908 report on the plan, it was asserted that with the downtown Loop growing, its congestion issues would expand as well. The report's conclusion was that widening and raising Michigan Avenue would be the foundational answer to the city's growing pains, stating that "*Michigan Avenue is probably destined to carry the heaviest movement of any street in the world*".[19]

Michigan Avenue would be divided into a two-deck street: the lower level would efficiently accommodate cross traffic from east-west streets while also including shipping and receiving functions for the boulevard itself. Meanwhile, all storefronts and entrances would be located on the upper level, establishing the commercial scene we know today. This would also allow the construction of a new double-deck bridge, today called the DuSable Bridge. The two-level Michigan Avenue along with its accompanying bridge, opened to traffic in May of 1920.[17] Following the successful Michigan Avenue transformation many more two-level and three-level streets were introduced in downtown Chicago.[20]

Figure 25. *Author (2025). Lower Michigan Avenue.*
Today the lower level is still primarily for heavy traffic.

Figure 26. *Guerin. J. (1908). Plan of Chicago: boulevard.*
The raised Michigan Avenue Boulevard - as envisioned in the 1909 Plan of Chicago

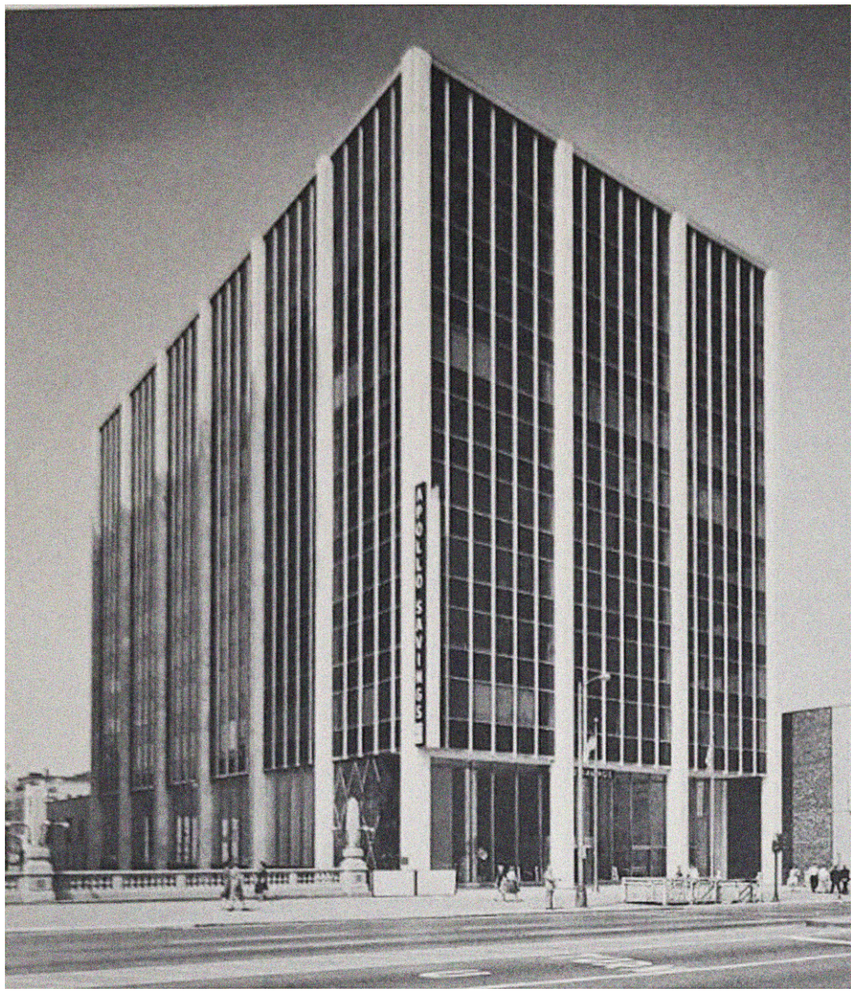


Figure 27. *Unknown author (1965) The Apollo Savings & Loan building.*
The newly built home of the Billy Goat Tavern, with its basement open to the sky. Photographed shortly before construction of the Plaza of the Americas began.

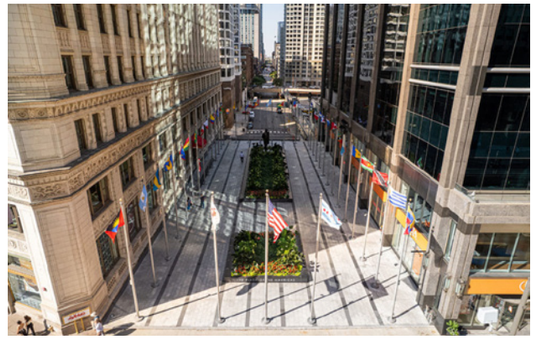


Figure 28. *Author (2025). E. Hubbard St. View towards Plaza of the Americas.*
Figure 29. *Unknown Author. (c. 2025) Aerial view of Plaza of the Americas.*
The plaza covers the basement facade, reducing light to the tavern below.

Cut off from sunlight

Safe to say, lower Michigan Avenue was not made for pedestrians, nor a tavern for that matter. When speaking to pedestrians today, it is described as dark, dingy, and uncomfortable. An intermediate space filled with loud echoes. But the few times pedestrians do use it, it is often as a form of passage. Usually, to get east or west of Michigan Avenue.[21] Which begs the question, how did a tavern end up here?

In 1964, Sam Sianis, the second-generation owner of Billy Goat Tavern, spearheaded its relocation to what would become its most famous location – beneath Lower Michigan Avenue.[22] Just across the loading dock of Tribune Tower, the tavern moved into the newly built Apollo Savings & Loan Building, today the Realtors Building. The entrance of the tavern is located on East Hubbard Street, which at that time was open to the sky above. But soon thereafter, the Plaza of the Americas began construction, essentially capping off Hubbard Street and extending the underground character to cover the tavern's front windows. The tavern was tucked deeper into the city's subterranean layers and forever cut off from sunlight.[23] [24]

Figure 30. *Author (2025). Interior view - Billy Goat Tavern.*
The tavern's interior has not changed much since its move in 1964.

Shaped by context

When walking down the stairs to Lower Michigan Avenue today, I am reminded of the term *visual compression*—the architectural strategy used in the original design of Union Station, where visitors first enter a smaller, confined space that focuses their attention, only to then emerge into a grander, more extensive space. Something similar can be traced on the journey to the Billy Goat Tavern, although less intentional and more a result of urban development.

On Upper Michigan Avenue you are in the very heart of Chicago's grid. Standing at the culmination of Upper Michigan Avenue's raised street, there are prominent sightlines east, west, and especially north. But in contrast to this urban openness, when descending into Lower Michigan Avenue, your senses must adjust to a new climate. A poorly lit environment, where the sky is replaced by a concrete ceiling, and sight is obstructed by columns lifting the street above.. Stepping into the cold, dark environment makes you instinctively want to move to a warmer and brighter space. The *compression* of the underground is not only visual but involves many of your other senses.

In addition to this, the tavern also makes use of its *intensity* in this climate. From the moment you step down the stairs, the unmistakable grilled aroma rises to meet you. And within the darkness, the tavern's neon lights reach far. Whether by design or circumstance, not once do you hesitate where you are going. While brief, Lower Michigan Avenue makes you long for a more human place, and Billy Goat is quick to answer.

When speaking to longtime cook Bouchaib "Bouch" Khribech, one fact was made clear: the success of the tavern comes from its people. The moment you step down the stairs, the cashier shouts from across the room, "*What do you want to eat*?" Regardless of who you are, you're pulled into an atmosphere where everyone is treated like family. Here you find a tourist sitting next to a famous reporter, who is sitting next to a prominent lawyer. It is a warmth based on values and tradition. This made me realize a second contrast beyond the tavern's physical location underground. Among Michigan Avenue's rooftop restaurants and guarded luxury stores, the tavern is set apart with its unpretentious atmosphere and down-to-earth attitude.

"*It is a neighborhood tavern, in a place that is really not a neighborhood. You know what I mean – we're in the middle of downtown*"[25]
- Rick Kogan, Chicago Tribune Columnist

The Billy Goat thrives on contradiction. It is a spatial landmark not because of grand design, but because of its location and the values it is built upon. Its singularity is shaped by its context. A context few would have considered when imaging the perfect spot for a neighborhood tavern.

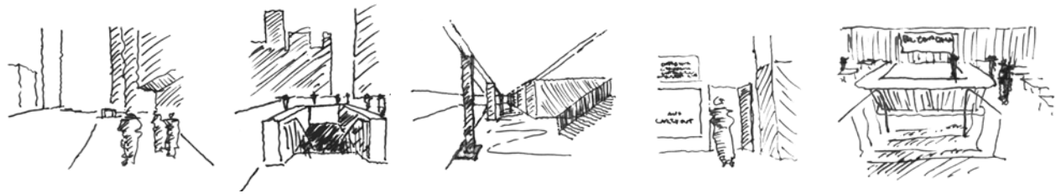


Figure 31. *Author (2025). Walking down Michigan Avenue to the Billy Goat Tavern - a journey of compression and expansion*

How is singularity experienced spatially?

This study began with a curiosity about what landmarks can be, and how the use of the term has evolved with singularity at its core. A curiosity to experience landmarks, not as a silhouette but from within. While these case studies form only a short list, they begin to point to some common features when considering the question; *How is singularity experienced spatially?*

Singularity

While all case studies embody singularity, the auditorium in Seventeenth Church is a clear example for defining singularity and spatial context. Quietness defines the auditorium. Meanwhile, the church is placed within an abundance of noise. This noise can be considered on several scales. A visiting friend once told me Chicago was the loudest city he'd ever been to, so one could argue the entire downtown area is a relevant spatial context. Still, the auditorium's singular quality becomes clearer when compared to its immediate context, a particularly loud intersection. But this singular effect can only be perceived through *transition* - from the immediate loud environment to the utterly quiet space.

Transition

Singular spaces must be perceived as distinctive and recognizable. This can be achieved by an effective transition from the general spatial context into the singular space. Returning to the example of the auditorium, two aspects are prominent: a *heightened contrast* and a *sharpness of boundary*.

Essentially, transcending from a loud intersection to a quiet auditorium creates a clear contrast. By effectively sealing off the auditorium from the surrounding noise, the distance between loudness and quietness is shortened. Therefore, a sharp boundary has been created.

Taking the example of the Great Hall at Union Station, there is a deliberate attempt at increasing the vividness of the space's singularity through transition. The corridor that leads into the hall is compressed by its ceiling height, which in turn makes the Great Hall even more expansive. The body, first compressed by the low ceiling, is now given vertical space. Upon entering the Great Hall, one's eyes instinctively look upward, where they meet a large skylight.

Not only do one's eyes look upward, but in moving towards the Great Hall, the entire body moves upward as well. The passageway at Union Station provides an example of space that engages with *motion*.

Motion

As per the station's original design, you generally always move across a flat-level subterranean landscape, and don't leave unless you are returning to street grade. But in this horizontality, there is one moment of upward motion - the passage leading into the Great Hall. The hallway detaches from the rest of the station, committing to an ascending motion.

To ascend means to go to a higher place – one often characterized by openness and light. These are defining features of the Great Hall. In addition to a compressive corridor, the ascending motion creates an expectation to arrive in a brighter space. Light in the Great Hall is not singular solely because of its spatial context, but also because of the spatial transition. The rising motion heightens anticipation, which in turn intensifies the arrival to the space.

Along Michigan Avenue lies another example of motion and descent, the Billy Goat Tavern. The street has a prominent horizontal movement, but in the middle of the sidewalk lies a set of stairs, leading you into the underground. Each step downward brings you deeper into darkness, sharpening your awareness of movement. This descent creates a sense of tension and uncertainty, a spatial unease.

Amid this tension, the Billy Goat waits just around the corner. The warmth and familiarity of the tavern is made more distinct by the journey required to reach it.

Motion is a key aspect of spatial landmarks. It considers how movement shapes our perception of spaces to come. Spatial landmarks are not objects seen from afar - they are discovered by moving through a sequence of spaces. It is in this approach, through transition, through motion, that singularity is felt.

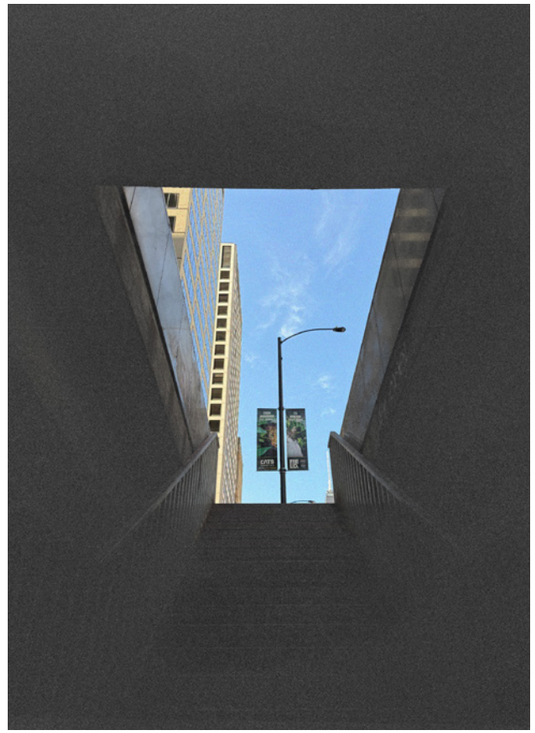


Figure 32. *Author (2025). View towards Upper Michigan Avenue*
The transition from Upper to Lower Michigan Avenue is one of immense contrast and motion.

Markers of time and space

Having explored how spatial landmarks are experienced—through singularity, transition, and motion—what remains is to ask how they affect us. *What impact do spatial landmarks have on the people who enter them?*

When I first entered the Billy Goat Tavern, I was reminded that impactful architecture does not necessarily correlate to grand and complete designs. Instead, I was caught with surprise, marking the space as memorable. Stepping into that tavern made me realize a simple truth:

Spaces cannot be conceived from a distance. They can only be revealed from within. Therefore, entering such a space becomes a *discovery*.

Finding an extraordinary space on your own, or being led to it by others, transforms these spaces into recognizable moments where the city is unveiling itself to you. A discovered space that is inscribed in memory, tied to a specific *moment* in time.

Spatial singularity can only be achieved by moving through a sequence of spaces. While these spaces are static, it is in the brief moment of transition where singularity is revealed. The act of arriving in a singular space, then, becomes a *spatial landmark event*. It marks a point not only in space, but in *time*.

This study has primarily focused on the basic spatial qualities of landmarks, but time reveals itself to be an essential aspect.

Singularity, though shaped by spatial conditions like light or scale, is ultimately experienced as a moment in time—most clearly at the discovery of those spaces. No matter how often I revisit these places, it is still that first impression that defines them.

Lynch's understanding of landmarks is that they are point references used at an individual level to build a mental map of the city. While spaces are inherently different from objects and structures, when singular, both are tied to an individual's memory. Spatial landmarks, while not structured by geography and orientation, become markers of a specific *time* and *space*.

For me they represent my second day at work or the first time I arrived in Chicago by train. Not as reference points on a city map, but markers within my personal narrative.

Spatial landmarks are static in form, but momentary in experience. They cannot be seen from a distance. They cannot be repeated. But from the moment one is found—the impact is a spatial revelation that stays with you, long after you've left.

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