

THE HISTORY OF THE MEDINAH ATHLETIC CLUB AND THE INTERCONTINENTAL CHICAGO



1929 was a significant year for American architecture. Unaware of the approaching Stock Market crash that would stall the progress of any new projects, the nation was in the midst of a building boom. In New York City, where the metallic Art-Deco spire of the Chrysler Building was nearing completion, an architect named Walter W. Ahlschlager was preparing to debut three new projects. The first, the Beacon Hotel and Theatre on Manhattan's Upper West Side, came on the heels of his other recent New York creation, the 5,920 seat Roxy Theatre. The second was the 49 story Carew Tower in downtown Cincinnati. And finally, a 42 story tower commissioned by the Shrine Organization to become the future home of the Medinah Athletic Club in Chicago, the birthplace of the skyscraper. Although his selection for the latter project had been the result of a design competition, it was widely speculated that with so many other notable buildings on his resume, his appointment was practically preordained.

The Chicago skyline welcomed the addition of many new buildings that year. The Burnham Brothers' Art-Deco style Carbon and Carbide Building at 230 N. Michigan Avenue made a bold statement with its dark green polished stone and gold detailing. On the opposite end of the avenue, famed architects Holabird and Root were debuting their Palmolive Building, which would become one of the country's premiere Art-Deco style "set-back" skyscrapers. Its navigational Lindbergh Beacon could be seen from the air as far away as 225 miles, lighting up the night sky from atop the towers' highest point. Many years later, from 1965 through 1989, this Chicago landmark would become known as the Playboy Building because of its world famous tenant. Another Holabird and Root building, The Chicago Board of Trade, had also begun to rise in the city's Loop district, with its unrelieved vertical face providing a dramatic termination to LaSalle Street.

The Medinah Athletic Club, in contrast, would combine elements of many different architectural styles. At the eighth floor, its Indiana limestone facade was decorated by three large relief carvings in ancient Assyrian style. Each frieze depicted a different scene, with Wisdom represented on the north wall, Consecration on the west, and Contribution on the south. The figures in all three scenes are said to be modeled after the faces of club members at the time of its design. Three Sumerian warriors were also carved into the facade at the twelfth floor setback, directly above the Michigan Avenue entrance, and remain visible today.

The exotic gold dome, which is Moorish in influence, originated as part of a decorative docking port for dirigibles before the Hindenburg disaster changed the country's mind about the future of travel by blimp. Years later, the building would lose several feet with the dismantling of an ornamental canopy on the small turret north of the dome. This chimney-like structure was originally intended to assist in the docking of these air ships, but was never used. Inside the dome, a glass cupola and spiral iron staircase resembling the top of a lighthouse led down to the hotel's upper elevator landing.



In the heart of the tower beneath it, the club featured a twenty third floor miniature golf course, complete with water hazards and a wandering brook, a shooting range, a billiards hall, a running track, a gymnasium, an archery range, a bowling alley, a two story boxing arena, and a junior Olympic size swimming pool. All of this in addition to the ballrooms, corporate meeting rooms, and 440 guest rooms which were available for the exclusive use of the club's 3,500 members and their guests. The pool, with its blue Spanish majolica tiles and terra-cotta fountain of Neptune on its east wall, is one of the hotel's few features which to this day remains virtually untouched. At the time of its unveiling, it was one of the highest indoor pools in the world, and its fourteenth floor location was heralded as a feat of engineering. Today it is commonly referred to as the Johnny Weismuller pool, a testament to the famous Olympic athlete and actor who trained in its waters. The rows of seats which remain on its western wall recall the days when swimming was a popular spectator sport. The elegant Grand Ballroom, a two story, one hundred foot long elliptical space, was decorated with Egyptian, Assyrian, and Greek ornament and surrounded by a horseshoe shaped mezzanine. In its center hung a 12,000 pound Baccarat crystal chandelier, the largest in North America. The King Arthur Court, a far more masculine room built to function as the men's smoking lounge, featured heavy timbering, stained glass, and a mural depicting the stories of King Arthur and Parsifal. Because the club was originally built as a men's club, there were only designated areas in which women were allowed. They were given a separate entrance and elevator to visit the Grand Ballroom for social gatherings or to access the Women's Plunge, Lounge and Tea Room. At that time, the women also had access to an outdoor loggia overlooking Michigan Avenue and decorated to evoke the feeling of a Venetian terrace, perched high above the Adriatic Sea.

When the club finally opened, it was criticized by many for its “wasteful extravagance,” although in time it’s eclectic mix of multicultural styles would become widely recognized as a genuine historical treasure. With only 32 percent occupancy upon its opening, many saw this elaborate fortress of excess as overly decadent, but it never failed to keep the architectural community talking.

Although October 29th of that year would become known as the “Blackest Day in Stock Market History,” it would be another four years before the effects of this financial disaster would force the Shriners to file for bankruptcy. In 1934 they lost their beloved clubhouse, and in the decade that followed the building went through various incarnations, including a brief stint as residential apartments. In 1944 it began its life as a hotel, debuting as the Continental Hotel and Town Club, where Esther Williams would swim in the now famous pool. Subsequently it would operate under both the Sheraton and Radisson hotel chains. In 1961 the Sheraton expanded, adding a second tower just north of the existing building and bringing the northern boundary of the hotel all the way to Grand Avenue. During this era, the hotel featured an outlet of the popular Polynesian themed Kon Tiki Ports restaurant chain. A facade of lava rock adorned the northern wall along Grand Avenue, where today only a small section remains visible, tucked at the end of the balcony of the Continental Restaurant. When the Radisson’s contract ended in 1983, the hotel’s name was changed back once again to the Continental. It would remain open for only three more years before finally closing its doors in anticipation of major remodeling and restoration.



In 1989, Intercontinental Hotels and Resorts purchased the property outright and completed the first phase of extensive renovations prior to it’s grand re-opening in 1990. During that time, a former Medinah Club member heard of the renovation and donated a 1930 anniversary yearbook entitled “The Scimitar,” filled with photographs which would serve as reference for much of the work. Many of the inner walls above the eighth floor were restructured to expand the size of the guestrooms. Gutting and redesigning the size of these rooms would prove difficult because almost none of the original architectural drawings had been saved. Therefore, there are now 175 different room configurations in the historic tower. In addition to the guestroom modifications, the balcony of the Grand Ballroom, which had long since been removed, was rebuilt to match its original design. The murals and gold leaf detailing on the room’s ceiling were restored

by Lido Lippi, the same man who consulted on the restoration of the Sistine Chapel. On the ninth floor, which had at one time housed the shooting range and billiards hall, renovations included raising the floor two and a half feet to accommodate plumbing for additional guestrooms. In the public areas, designers used painstaking attention to detail. Photographs of the original carpeting were enlarged and used to recreate its exact pattern, even making sure not to incorporate more colors than were originally available from the manufacturer. Initially, workers utilized a process called cornhusk blasting to strip away the many layers of paint from the marble walls in the Hall of Lions, as traditional sandblasting would have destroyed the intricate details of any etchings beneath. When it was determined that a single marble column would require close to a ton of ground corn cobs, restorers decided to scrub away the paint by hand. The two carvings of lions which were discovered underneath have become an emblem used throughout the hotel.

When the Hotel Intercontinental Chicago opened its doors to the public in March of 1990, every step had been taken to return this classic beauty to its original splendor. The north tower, which had opened the previous year as the Forum Hotel, now operated as a separate property, although the two shared back-of-the-house facilities. While the Forum catered mostly to business travelers, the Intercontinental continued its tradition of elegance and attention to detail. A decade later, a second phase of renovations would unite the two once again. Remaining open this time during construction, a new entrance and a four story lobby were built, combining elements of both architectural styles. Its grand staircase, which ascends to the banquet space above, is lined with banisters bearing intricate cast bronze ornamentation. An illuminated rotunda is capable of changing colors and creating the illusion of twinkling stars against a night sky.

Today, the Hotel Intercontinental Chicago is a world renowned destination hotel which embraces the contemporary traveler's tastes while proudly acknowledging its own rich past. Occupying a prominent place in Chicago's Michigan-Wacker Historic District, the hotel is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It features 807 guest rooms, over 40,000 feet of meeting and banquet space, and the largest fitness facility of all the downtown hotels.

The building's creators, in a ceremony which took place on November 5th of 1928, placed within its cornerstone a copper box to commemorate its place in history. Filled with records of their organization, photographs of its members, a copy of the Chicago Tribune announcing the proposal of the building, coins, and other historic data, this time capsule remains sealed within the hotel's limestone exterior. If given the opportunity to add to its contents, there would be no shortage of memorabilia, gathered over the near century which has passed since that day, to document the impressive evolution of this grand hotel.



With the Medinah Athletic Club in the distance, an airship crosses over the Chicago Skyline circa 1929.