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Railway Museum Acquires Architectural Artifacts

The Illinois Railway Museum (“IRM”) is known for preservation of locomotives and streetcars. Now it will add architectural ornament from a ninety-four year old Lincoln Park building for reuse at its Union, Illinois campus. This salvage of glazed terracotta façade detail is a collaboration with Preservation Chicago, the Wrightwood Neighbors Association, the office Alderman Michele Smith, and the developers of 2448 -2462 North Lincoln Avenue.

Glazed trim and medallions will be removed from 225 feet elevations of the Lincoln-Montana Building built in 1923 by the noted Chicago architectural firm of Rissman & Hirschfeld. This site is kitty-corner the Biograph Theater. Its “orange-rating” in the CHRS-Chicago Historic Resources Survey implies that it has distinctive characteristics or is architecturally noteworthy. Preservation Chicago Executive Director Ward Miller states, “the ornament is superior in design and execution to that found on the majority of Chicago's jazz-era architecture”. Rissman & Hirschfeld designed other prominent Chicago buildings, including some Chicago Landmarks.

The two-story Lincoln-Montana building’s “Sullivan-esque Style,” is defined as reflecting the designs and principals of Chicago architect, Louis Sullivan. Similar buildings constructed using Midland Terra Cotta Company decorative pieces are scattered throughout the Midwest. While the stylistic term implies that the building was essentially a knock-off of the famous designer’s work, its intricate cream-colored geometric and floral embellishments are impressive. Used nationally, the style represents Chicago's influence on Twentieth Century architecture.

Redevelopment of the Lincoln Avenue site for transit-oriented housing precluded salvage for on-site use. Reuse of ceramic ornament from this site is part of a major development at IRM. The museum is building a two-block long vintage Main Street, complete with double-track streetcar line. The first building on that street, a relocated wooden false-front commercial structure, will open later this year. Lincoln–Montana Building ornament will enhance a planned visitors’ center on this street. IRM’s board recently approved this \$7.5 million project. It will house exhibits, a retail store, an auditorium, offices, and classrooms.

IRM is the nation’s largest railroad museum with over 500 historic locomotives, rail cars, trolleys and busses on a 57 acre campus. The architectural collection of the museum is less known, but includes railroad related buildings moved to on-site, restored neon signs, and salvaged stonework. One recent project was removal, restoration, and installation of the Santa Fe neon sign from atop Chicago’s Railway Exchange Building. IRM General Manager David Diamond states that the planned Visitor’s Center will be a game-changer advancing the museum’s educational mission. Of equal importance, it will allow all-year operation of what is now a summer-only attraction and it will provide the correct historic context for the museum’s popular streetcar ride.

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