



**The Chicago Advocate**

# Is Chicago's Next Big Neighborhood...The Loop?

By **The Chicago Advocate**, Monday at 7:00 am



During the build up to this year's mayoral and aldermanic elections, Chicago's downtown was often depicted as the gluttonous beneficiary of preferential investment at the expense Chicago's spurned neighborhoods. As downtown has increasingly become the epicenter of the city's, and to a great extent, the region's economic engine, critics point out that job and commercial growth has not proportionately occurred throughout the city. While this is hard to refute, the reality is Chicagoans from all neighborhoods, suburban commuters, and legions of tourists converge on downtown daily to work, study, and take advantage of the cultural offerings and attractions that rival the canonized coastal cities. What's become increasingly noticeable is the eastern part of the Loop, the historic heartbeat of the city, has been shedding its reputation as a ghost town outside of the work week hours. Progressively, the Loop is transforming into a vibrant neighborhood where a diverse cross-section of the city coalesce around-the-clock. Evidence of the Loop's surge is found in its declining vacancy rate. Recently, Crain's reported that the retail vacancy rate is now under 11%, the lowest it's been in the past two decades. The largest contributor to the decrease is the restaurant boom taking place throughout downtown. Perhaps the most high profile evolution is the stretch of Michigan Avenue south of the Chicago River, where a series of noteworthy eateries are popping up. This section of the grand boulevard branded "The Millennium Mile", in recognition of the transformative nature of Millennium Park, is establishing itself as a restaurant row that is becoming more enticing to both locals and tourists alike.



Acanto, 18 S. Michigan Ave.

Up and running recent arrivals are the moderately upscale Italian eatery **Acanto** at 18 S. Michigan Ave. and former *Check, Please!* host and seasoned sommelier Alpana Singh's clubhouse inspired establishment **Seven Lions** at 130 S. Michigan Ave. Likewise, at 20 N. Michigan Ave. the group behind North Side spots Dunlay's and Smoke Daddy has delivered their first downtown spot with the opening of the American concept **Remington's**.



Chicago Athletic Association Hotel, 12 S. Michigan Ave.

Two eagerly anticipated newcomers are occupying the first two floors of the new **Chicago Athletic Association Hotel**, housed in the extensively rehabbed 1893 Henry Ives Cobb building just steps north of Acanto. Chicago's second location of the Madison Square Park (NYC) institution **Shake Shack** has filled the first floor space. On the second floor, Land and Sea Dept., the team behind Longman & Eagle, Parson's Chicken & Fish, Lost Lake, and finding [Bill Callahan unique venues to perform in](#), will be delivering **Cherry Circle Room**, a restaurant and bar concept with a tasting room and bocce court.

Throughout the Loop, announcements for new eateries have been circulating every few weeks. A few interesting restaurants that have just opened or are coming this summer include a Loop location of former Buenos Aires' empanada inspired food truck turned local chain **5411 Empanadas** at 175 N. Franklin, the fast-healthy, vegan-friendly, Austin, Texas import **Snap Kitchen** at 233 W. Adams, and the second U.S. outpost of New York based **Just Salad** at 20 E. Jackson. A particularly exciting development coming this fall will be **The Marketplace in The National**, a 10 stall food court from the team that delivered Longman & Eagle, Thalia Hall, and the Promontory. Housed on the ground floor of a rehabbed Daniel Burnham designed office building at 125 Clark St., The Marketplace will feature one stall for a revolving food truck, an artisanal coffee space, and a variety of local vendors. An outdoor terrace and vinyl record store are also planned for the expansive ground floor space.



Asado Coffee Company Pickwick Lane, 22 E. Jackson

Another significant movement is that increasingly coffee and pastry connoisseurs have a myriad of excellent alternatives to the glut of downtown Starbucks. In addition to popular establishments **Do-Rite Donuts** and **Intelligentsia Coffee**, the Loop has recently acquired a flagship, living green wall adorned location of Bay Area based **Pete's Coffee** at 20 N. Michigan Ave., the sixth location of local chain **Dollop Coffee Company** at 343 S. Dearborn St., and a new outpost of the beloved **Asado Coffee Company**, tucked away at the end of the quaint Pickwick Lane alley in the Loop's oldest and most clandestine building. Coming soon, new locations of local players **Bow Truss Coffee Roasters** and **Glazed and Infused** will be opening at 310 N. Michigan and 222 N. LaSalle respectively.



Naf Naf Grill, 28 S. Wabash Ave & Good Stuff Eatery, 22 S. Wabash Ave.

What is perhaps an even more extensive transformation than what is occurring on Michigan Avenue is the sprouting revival of Wabash Avenue. Once plagued by an abundance of vacant storefronts during the recession, recent newcomers **Naf Naf Grill**, **Goddess and the Baker**, **Good Stuff Eatery**, and **Protein Bar** have been the impetus for increased foot traffic and added momentum for a reimagined commercial district. Recently, the Chicago Loop

Alliance released a proposal for a number of promising plans, including dividing the Wabash corridor into distinct sections: a Nightlife District, Retail District, Maker District (e.g. design companies), Art Street District, University District, and a Container District made up of food stalls and food trucks. Additional ideas presented are an LED lighting installation beneath the L tracks, converting old L stations to elevated parks, creating a Route 66 Plaza, and adorning blank walls with murals.



Block 37 Tower

Just a block west on State Street, the revival of **Block 37** may be the single greatest emblem of the Loop's present resurgence. The long-beleaguered development is finally on track to activate its massive commercial space. Coming in 2016, an 11-screen dine-in **AMC Theater** will be occupying 44,000 square feet of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, featuring a full food and drink menu. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, the 5,000 square foot **Chicago Design Museum** opened last year and will be joined by celebrity chef Richard Sandoval's planned Latin-themed food court. Most prominently, the construction of a massive residential component is now well underway. When completed, the tower will rise 34 floors above the mall and include a whopping 690 apartment units, easily making it the largest Loop apartment development in recent memory.



Hilton Garden Inn (on the far right) , 66 E. Wacker Pl.

Though the Block 37 tower is the most voluminous, it's just one of several highrise projects either recently delivered or in the pipeline. Just around the corner from a 42-story tower completed in 2014 at **73 E. Lake St.**, a sleek 42-story apartment building with 402 units and two floors of retail space is steadily rising at **200 N. Michigan Avenue**. Newly visible towers just south of the Chicago River include the 60-story **111 W. Wacker** delivered in 2014 and the 27-story **Hilton Garden Inn** nearing completion on Wacker Place. Filling in the final gap of a row of towers on Wacker Dr. between Wabash Ave. and Michigan Ave. is the under-construction 20-story addition to the **London Guarantee Building**.

In addition to the new residential and hotel towers popping up, the Loop has been accelerating its tradition of rehabbing and converting vintage office buildings to apartments and hotels. As high profile tenants continue their preference for open layout concepts, much of the prewar highrise stock is seeing new life. Just north from the 240 boutique rooms coming to the **Chicago Athletic Association** are 450 rooms being delivered to the **London Guarantee Building** (1923) at 360 N. Michigan, a **Hampton Inn** with 191 rooms in the **Chicago Motor Club Building** (1928) at 68 E. Wacker, and 250 rooms at the **Virgin Hotel** in the **Old Dearborn Bank Building** (1928) at 203 N. Wabash. Even on LaSalle, the Loop's financial district thoroughfare, two new hotel conversions are taking shape: a **Marriott Residence Inn** with 375 suites in the **Roanoke Building** (1915) and a 281 room **Kimpton Hotel** in the **New York Life Insurance Building** (1894). Residential projects include the creation of 230 apartments in the **Oriental Theater** office tower (1926) and new student housing in the **Old Colony Building** (1894).



Millennium Park (on the left) & Maggie Daley Park (on the right)

Adding to the Loop's outdoor treasures, two long anticipated, high-profile park attractions have now become accessible to the eager masses. Since its soft opening in December, visitors to **Maggie Daley Park** have been able to audition the ice skating rink, children's play garden, and climbing wall. Forthcoming features include grass lawns for lounging and an all glass building equipped with a retractable wall that will house a restaurant and serve as the base of a sloping, elevated green roof. The park has already garnered rave reviews and established itself as a worthwhile destination for those meandering from Millennium Park's eastern border via the Frank Gehry designed BP Pedestrian Bridge. On the Loop's northern border, the first two blocks of the **Riverwalk** extension debuted on May 23<sup>rd</sup>. Marina Plaza and The Cove, which span from State to Clark, feature varied seating and spots to dock motor boats and kayaks. A third block, The River Theater, with its expansive terraced seating stretching from Clark to LaSalle, is set to open later this month. Additionally, vendors ranging from the City Winery to Flander's Belgian Beer & Fries will join the already up and running Tiki hut just east of Columbus Drive. Construction on the subsequent three blocks from LaSalle to Lake, which will include a children's play fountain, floating gardens, fishing piers, and a distinctive bridge, is expected to begin later this year and conclude in 2016.



Washington/Wabash CTA Station, CTA

With the Loop's population surge and procurement of all the new and enhanced attractions, city planners have been busy cultivating improvements to the transportation infrastructure. On Wabash, two deteriorated L stations have shuttered and are being replaced by the **Washington-Wabash superstation**. The dazzling steel and glass structure, which will resemble a rib cage, will feature a new mezzanine, bike racks, and elevators, providing desperately needed access to riders in wheelchairs. The \$75 million station is expected to be completed in September 2016. Also in the works is the **Central Loop BRT** (Bus Rapid Transit) also known as **The Loop Link**. Dedicated bus lanes and raised platforms are coming to Washington, Madison,

Clinton, and Canal, which will reduce round trip bus rides across the Loop by an average of 7.5 minutes. Additionally, new protected bike lanes will span the stretch of Washington and Randolph. Sans unforeseen days, the Loop BRT will be operational by the end of the year.



Central Camera, 230 S. Wabash Ave.

The Loop that is emerging is a neighborhood that celebrates its cultural, recreational, and commercial assets in a manner that more comprehensively engages both residents and visitors. Monuments of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture are being artfully restored and repurposed to attract dwellers, patrons, and passersby. Deftly designed new restaurants, bars, and shops are conceived to complement charming old school mainstays such as Miller's Pub, The Berghoff, Monk's Pub, and Central Camera. New park amenities are augmenting the existing grand green spaces by emphasizing active uses. Steadily, this new dynamic Loop is continuing its transition from sleepy outside of the traditional 9 to 5 bustle to a neighborhood that never sleeps.

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