Immaculata High School and Convent Buildings

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

Originally Submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Historical
and Architectural Landmarks
in June, 1981

Revised April, 1983

Immaculata High School and Convent Buildings

Chicago, Illinois

Architect: Francis Barry Byrne

Immaculata High School (Mary Hall)
600-34 West Irving Park Road
Date of Construction: 1922

Immaculata Convent
4030 North Marine Drive
Dates of Construction: 1954-55

Immaculata High School Addition (St. Joseph's Hall)
636 West Irving Park Road
Dates of Construction: 1955-56

Barry Byrne's design for the original Immaculata High School building offered a sound affirmation of the architectural concepts promulgated by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright at a time when those concepts were falling into disfavor. The building was erected as a secondary school for Catholic girls and its design reflected Byrne's ability to develop personal and innovative architectural solutions through a thorough grasp of basic architectural principles and concepts. Because of his early architectural experience as an untrained apprentice in the Oak Park studio of Frank Lloyd Wright, Byrne was freed of the rigid precepts that characterized formal architectural training of the period, and instead he developed an insightful perspective into Wright's philosophies of organic architecture. Unlike many of Wright's former employees, who continued to design in the Wrightian idiom after leaving his studio, Byrne was one of the few who recognized the importance of using Wright's teachings as the basis for developing a personal style rather than designing hollow imitations of his work. As Wright had revolutionized residential architecture in the early years of his independent practice, Byrne similarly set new precedents in the development of modern church architecture with the numerous commissions that he received from the Roman Catholic Church throughout his long career. Immaculata High School remains as one of Byrne's finest ecclesiastical works, exemplifying his ability to create fresh, original expression in a genre usually associated with historic forms and long-established precedents.

Immaculata High School was established in 1921 by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a religious order based in Dubuque, Iowa. In July of that year, the order purchased a house and property at 640 West Irving Park Road near the shore of Lake Michigan. Classes opened the following September in the house which served as a

convent and temporary school. However, even as classes were beginning, the sisters were developing plans for a large school building on the site. The cornerstone for the new structure was set just before Christmas, 1921, and the building proceeded based on plans drawn up by the architect Barry Byrne. Construction was largely completed by September, 1922.

Born December 19, 1883 to Irish-Catholic parents, Francis Barry Byrne was baptized into the Roman Catholic faith. A voracious reader, Byrne was largely self-educated, having left school at 14. He worked for several years as a shipping clerk for Montgomery Ward and Company until the summer of 1902, when he went to Frank Lloyd Wright's studio in Oak Park to apply for a job as an office boy. Byrne had become familiar with Wright's work only a few days previously when he saw an exhibit of the Chicago Architectural Club at the Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibit featured 65 entries by Wright. "After that," Byrne stated later, "there was no architect for me but Frank Lloyd Wright."

During the six-year period Byrne worked for Wright in the studio, some of Wright's most famous works came to fruition. In time, Byrne learned drafting and worked on major projects such as the Unity Temple (1904-08) in Oak Park and the Ferdinand F. Tomek House (1906-08) and the Avery Coonley House (1907-09), both in Riverside. Wright's philosophy of an organic architecture using indigenous materials for designs that were unified in plan and elevation was imparted to Byrne and his other draftsmen through the informal atmosphere of the studio. Although Wright had a highly individualistic style, he did not impose it on his employees, but encouraged them to develop their own approaches to design. Wright wrote in 1908:

> It is urged against the more loyal [employees] that they are sacrificing their individuality to that which has dominated this work; but it is too soon to impeach a single understudy on this basis, for although they will inevitably repeat for years the methods, forms and habit of thought, even the mannerisms of the present work, if there is virtue in the principles behind it that virtue will stay with them through the preliminary stages of their own practice until their own individualities truly develop independently.

Such was the case with Byrne and other studio employees, as seen in the later works of Walter Burley Griffin, William Drummond, and Marion Mahoney.

Early in 1908, Byrne was afflicted with peritonitis and was away from the studio for three months. Upon his return, Byrne found that Wright and the studio had been badly affected by Wright's affair with Mrs. Edwin Cheney, the wife of one of Wright's clients. With the office largely unorganized and unproductive, Byrne decided to leave the studio in the middle of 1908. He worked briefly for Walter Burley Griffin, who had been Wright's office manager and construction supervisor until he quit the studio in 1905.

Byrne remained with Griffin only a few months. In November, 1908, he moved to Seattle, Washington, to honor a previous commitment to form a partnership with Andrew

Willatzen, another former Wright apprentice who worked in the studio between 1904 and 1907. According to Byrne, the two men "were not well suited in temperament and differed widely in [their] ideas of architectural objectives," and in February, 1913, the partnership was dissolved.

In the hopes of finding work in California, Byrne moved to San Diego, but he soon decided that the area did not hold promise. The decision coincided with a letter from Griffin asking Byrne to take over his practice. Griffin had just won an international competition for the planning of the new capital city of Australia, Canberra, and was making arrangements to move there to fulfill a three-year contract. In the interim, he wanted to maintain his office in Chicago. The partnership between Griffin and Byrne lasted for two years, during which Byrne oversaw the completion of several of Griffin's designs in Mason City, Iowa, and elsewhere. Disputes arising from misrepresentations of Byrne's role in the partnership eventually led to its dissolution in 1915.

In his associations with Andrew Willatzen and Walter Burley Griffin, most of Byrne's designs were for residences. As might be expected, these designs owe much to Wright's influence in their planning and massing. Yet, as H. Allen Brooks points out in his authoritative account, *The Prairie School*, these works also illustrated that Byrne "had learned a lesson in elimination from Louis Sullivan and [Irving] Gill." During this period he had begun to experiment with designs having simple, bold wall surfaces and straightforward, utilitarian window placement. This concept in Byrne's architecture is best illustrated in his 1915 design for the Chemistry Building at the University of New Mexico, a building whose flat wall planes shows the influence of architect Irving Gill and the indigenous architecture of the area. Gill, a California architect who had worked for Louis Sullivan, designed and built concrete structures with smooth exterior walls punctuated by bold window and door openings. Having met Gill in California in 1913, Byrne absorbed these ideas into his own developing architectural vocabulary.

Byrne established his own practice in 1915. The ensuing decade brought about not only the maturity of Byrne's personal thoughts on architecture and design, but also his reputation as an innovative and thoughtful church architect. His 1916 design for the Kenna Apartments, at 2214 East 69th Street in Chicago, again shows the broad wall planes precisely punctured by window openings, but executed in a manner independent of any direct influences. The construction of St. Thomas the Apostle Convent in 1919 in Hyde Park was the first of Byrne's ecclesiastical designs to be built. Preliminary discussions with the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary on a proposed secondary school for girls in Chicago were held the following year, resulting in the construction of Immaculata High School in 1922.

The Immaculata High School is a four-story brick structure with exterior walls of masonry bearing construction. Occupying a prominent site at the northwest corner of Marine Drive and Irving Park Road, the school is well sited. It has an L-shaped plan with a massive rectangular auditorium/gymnasium block at the junction of the two classroom wings. The facades of the classroom wings are divided into structural bays, five on Irving

Park Road and eight along Marine Drive. A strong visual rhythm results from the grouping of three, three-story, pointed arches, or lancets. Window openings are filled with multi-pane operable sash windows, a subtle detail which minimizes the effect of the large openings necessary for light and air in an institutional structure, and which significantly enhances the proportions of the building as a whole. The school is topped by a red tile hipped roof. In the classroom wings, dormers allow natural light into the full fourth story that originally housed music rooms and a cafeteria.

The entire corner block is occupied by the auditorium on the first and second floors and by the two-story gymnasium above. Having a different function from the wings, the corner block is expressed altogether differently. In the use of the pointed arches to accent the verticality of the design, the corner structure is similar to the classroom wings; however, the corner employs greater expanses of brick where the trusses between the gymnasium and auditorium, as well as those supporting the auditorium balconies, intersect with the exterior bearing wall.

The exterior detailing is subtle but is a major contribution to the success of the design. Structural bays and pointed arches are defined by stepped brick courses, in keeping with Byrne's belief in the plasticity of the material; he also preferred its warm color. The variegated earth-tone tapestry brick of Immaculata gives a warmth to its broad masonry plane.

The original main entry was from Irving Park. Above this entrance is a slightly larger than lifesize statue representing the Virgin Mary set into a larger niche. The statue, done in Bedford limestone, was designed by Alfonso Ianelli. Ianelli, who is most famous for the sculptures he designed in 1914 for Frank Lloyd Wright's Midway Gardens in Chicago (demolished), met Byrne in 1913 in California. Beginning around 1915, the two men collaborated on projects whose successes were the result of a relationship "in which both parties were able to give and take according to the requirements of the project," stated Joseph Griggs in his article, "Alfonso Ianelli, The Prairie Spirit in Sculpture." The statue of the Virgin is the focal point of the Irving Park facade of the Immaculata High School.

The interior retains its original plan and most of its original details. With its coved ceiling, proscenium arch, and suspended brass light fixtures all extant, the auditorium still possesses its original character and illustrates Byrne's understated and distinctive decoration of interiors. The auditorium, indeed all of the spaces in Immaculata, are unusually light because of the generous window openings. Doors and door frames are done in a light honey-colored wood with minimal applied molding. On the top floor of the Marine Drive wing is the cafeteria, nicknamed the "Sky Room" for its light blue ceiling. The room has been redecorated; despite the minor alterations to this and other rooms, the essential architectural and decorative features remain unaltered.

Byrne's architectural philosophy was very basic and illustrated well in the Immaculata High School. Foremost in Byrne's consideration of a project, according to Sally Chappell in her unpublished thesis, "Barry Byrne: Architecture and Writing," was:

> ...the simple *envelopment* of the interior space by the exterior walls. He is not inclined to treat the exterior wall as a sculpturesque end-in-itself. It is at one with interior space. He thus avoids unfunctional three-dimensional effects on the exterior.

The design for Immaculata proved to be a prototype for other school designs by Byrne. The vertical grouping of windows, use of tapestry brick, spartan wall treatment, and decorative brickwork are elements used by Byrne in such works as St. Francis Xavier School (1922-23) in Wilmette, St. Catherine's High School (1923-24) in Racine, Wisconsin, St. Mary's High School (demolished) in Chicago, and Holy Angels High School (demolished) in Milwaukee. While Byrne was developing drawings for Immaculata, he was also working on drawings for St. Thomas the Apostle Church (1921-24) at 55th Street and Kimbark Avenue, the first in a seried of church designs which would bring him repute as a talented ecclesiastical architect.

Like Immaculata, the design for St. Thomas the Apostle Church is highlighted by decorative brickwork which enhances the expanses of variegated earth tone brick. The interior plan did away with the traditional separation of the nave and sanctuary by placing the sanctuary so that it projected into the nave. For its innovative plan that anticipated the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council by more than forty years, and for its original exterior design independent of historic precedents, St. Thomas the Apostle Church is generally referred to as the first modern church. A devout Roman Catholic, Byrne earnestly interpreted his beliefs into a philosophy of church architecture. Unfortunately, the Archbishop of Chicago, the Very Reverend George Mundelein, did not appreciate Byrne's designs, and subsequently the architect received only a few ecclesiastical commissions in Chicago.

Despite the fact that some did not see the merit of Byrne's ecclesiastical designs, others, including prominent critics, praised his efforts to bring new forms to church design. Among them was Lewis Mumford, who wrote an article in the March 2, 1927 issue of *The Commonweal* in which he noted the universality of Byrne's architecture:

> Mr. Byrne has created a type of ecclesiastical design which can expand to meet great problems or contract to meet modest ones; his parish churches are admirable, and I have seen the sketches for a cathedral which uses the same direct and simple means to contrive an astonishing effect of solemn magnificence. In these buildings of Mr. Byrne's, the Catholic Church has made a genuine bequest to American architecture for the point of view he has expressed and the methods he has put to work are capable of being used on other buildings besides churches and schools.

Most of Byrne's best known designs are for churches. Those works, such as the Church of Christ the King (1925) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Church of St. Patrick (1923-24) in Racine, Wisconsin, and the Church of Christ King (1927-32) in Cork, Ireland, stand in affirmation of the spiritual aspirations of twentieth century society.

Commissions were few for Byrne during the 1930s as the Great Depression brought a halt to most construction. It was this period that saw Byrne's development as an architectural historian and critic in articles published in *Liturgical Arts* and the *Architectural Record.* These articles allowed Byrne to refine his philosophy of architecture and Catholicism.

Later buildings by Byrne, following the Depression and World War II, represent fresh interpretations of his basic philosophy executed in new materials. Such is the case for the school addition and convent for the Immaculata High School. The increasing enrollment and faculty of Immaculata made it necessary for the nuns to consider building a new convent and an addition to the school as early as 1945. Work on the project did not begin until 1954 with the construction of the convent north of the high school. With the completion of the convent the following year, the house immediately west of the school, which had been the former convent, was razed. Work then began on the high school addition, called St. Joseph's Hall, and was completed in 1956.

In hiring Byrne to design the new buildings, the religious order afforded him a rare opportunity for an architect: to design additions onto his original work well after its completion. Designing a three-story brick and limestone structure for the school addition, Byrne returned to the same format and materials used thirty years before. As in the older building, the addition has a formal entrance. This is marked by a massive four-story block topped by a stainless steel cross. The overall design evinces Byrne's philosophy of the exterior wall as a simple envelope for the interior space. The internal division between the classrooms, laboratories, and library are expressed in the cubic massing of the structure. As with all of his designs after 1915, smooth walls, in this case brick, predominate and are punctured by crisp window openings. The brick Byrne used on the original building was not available in 1955, but he selected a variegated earth-tone brick to approximate the character of the older structure.

The convent addition of 1954 is a free-standing structure immediately north of the original school. Access between the school and convent is through an enclosed walkway at the second story which extends from a new stair tower abutting the original structure and bridges the service court driveway. Faced in a variegated tapestry brick and Bedford limestone similar to that of the original building, the convent addition complements the composition of the original structure through its similar set-back massing and juxtaposition of generous vertically articulated windows with unadorned masonry planes. The convent wing facing on Marine Drive and busy Lake Shore Drive was devoted to conference rooms, offices, and lounges, affording an excellent view of Lake Michigan to the east. The living quarters are located in a semi-detached wing at the rear that encloses an interior courtyard offering seclusion from street noise and privacy from the public portions of the complex.

The three buildings of Immaculata High School, designed by the same man and built more than thirty years apart, concisely represent the lifework of an important American architect. There exists in all of Byrne's work, and especially in his ecclesiastical designs, an economy of design. There are no superfluous elements or spaces or vague historic

references. Instead the designs are straightforward expressions of their functions and are rich in subtle artistic detailing. Writing in the mid-1920s, Byrne expressed his feelings on his architecture and what he was trying to convey by it:

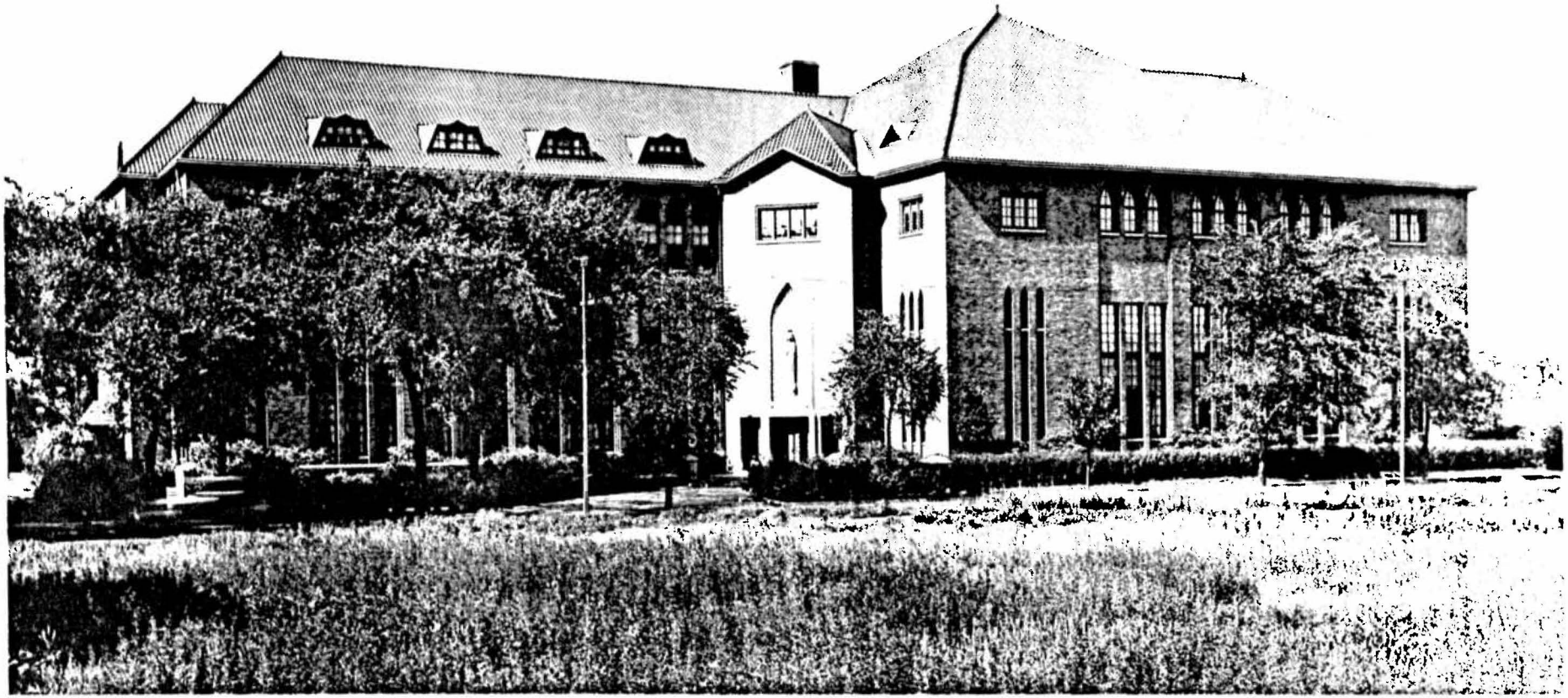
> The artistic expression, linked as it is with the traditions of our church, bespeaks our own time and country and is at once Catholic, American and of the twentieth century. This is in accord with the spirit of the church which, in the language and natural expression of each country and age, finds avenues for her message.
>
> The effect of aspiration and religious feeling has been given to each building, whether school or church. This has been achieved in simple ways, economical in construction and cost. The vertical line in flutings of brick still carries the message of the fluted shafts of the great cathedrals of the thirteenth century even though it is in humbler materials. The identity of the buildings as Catholic structures has been strongly emphasized in the character that has been given to each of them.

The Immaculata High School and Convent Buildings are excellent examples of Barry Byrne's architectural achievement.

OPPOSITE:

When completed in 1922, Immaculata was isolated on the shore of Lake Michigan. Lake Shore Drive was constructed on landfill two years later.

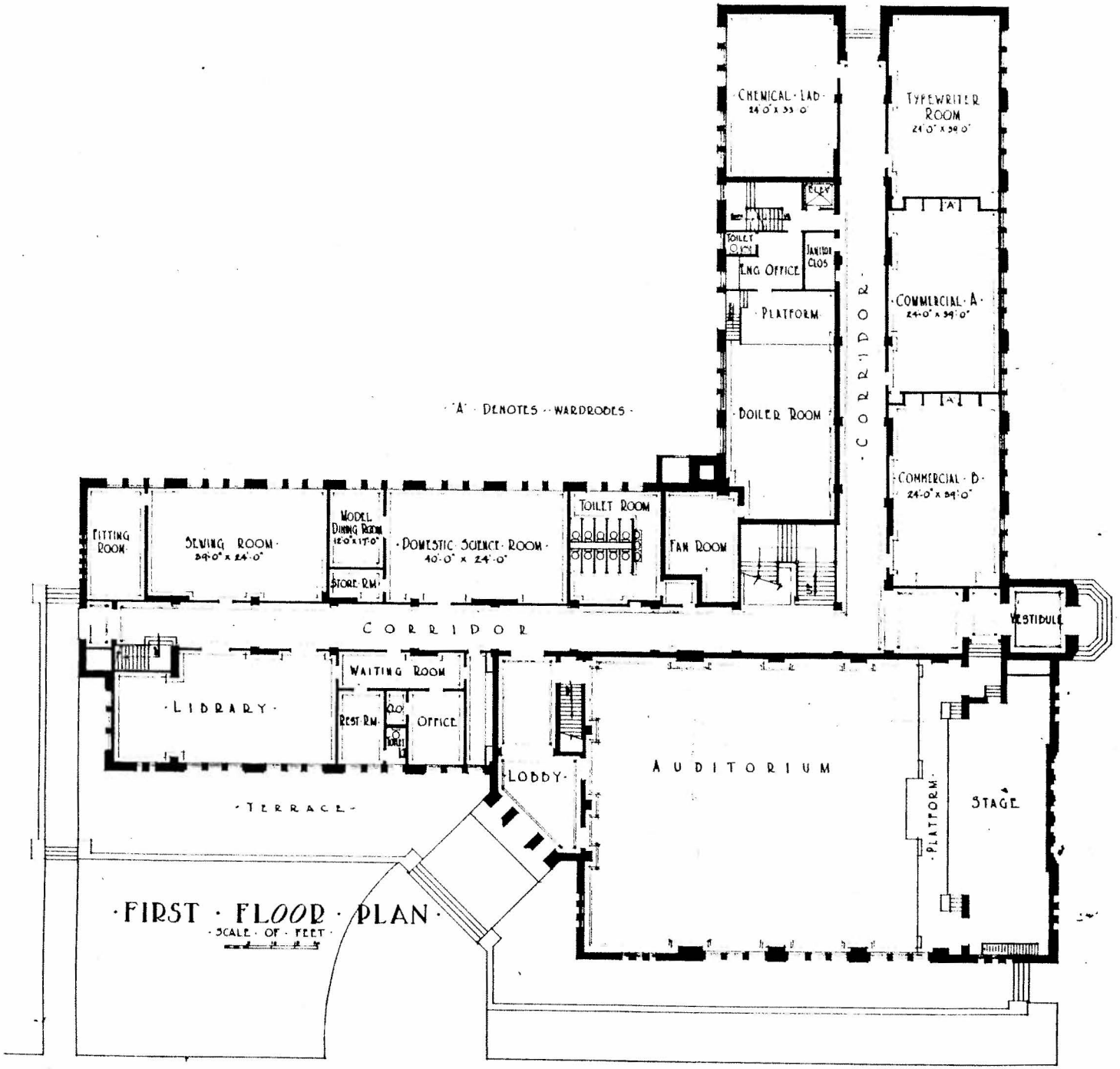
(courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



OPPOSITE:

Ground floor plan of the original school building.

(courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

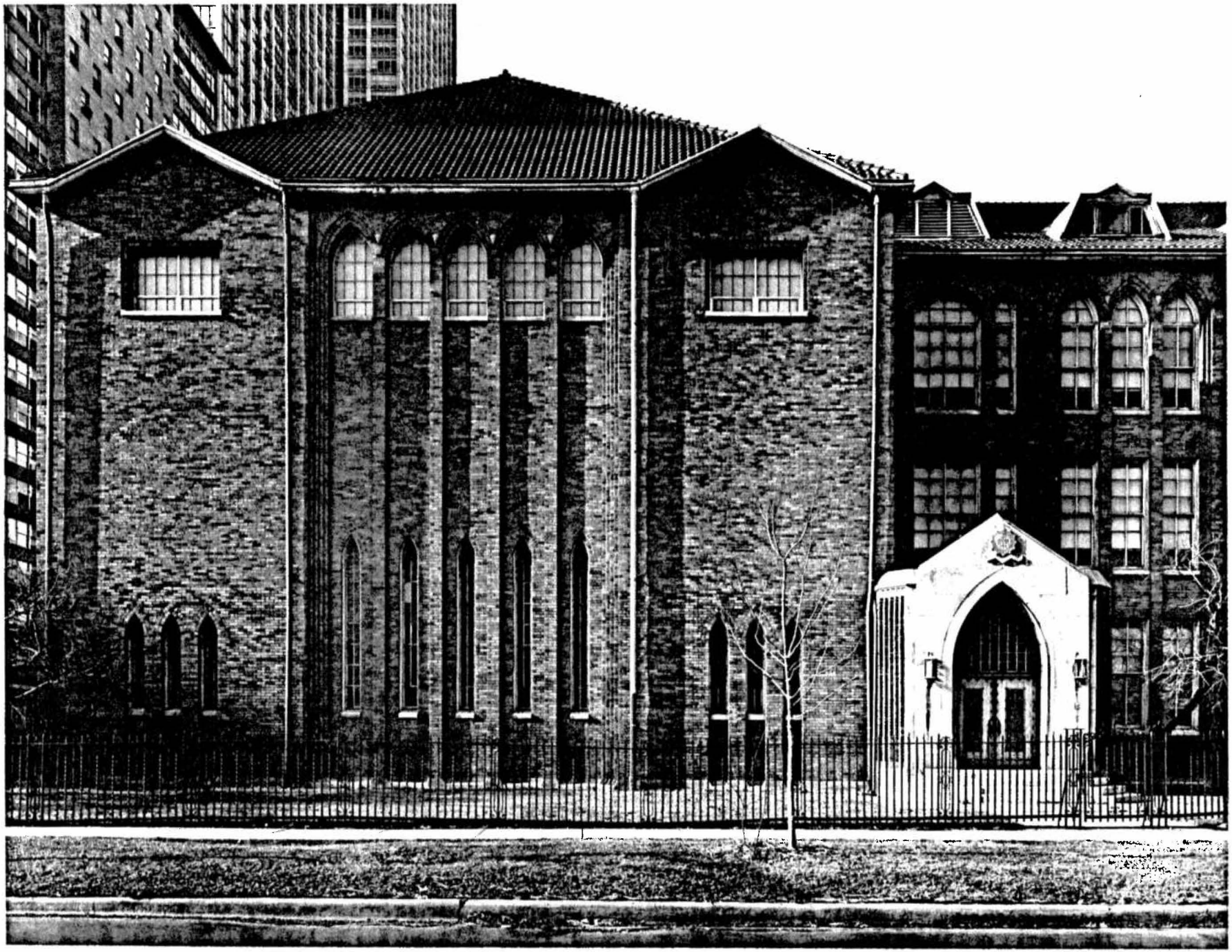

CHEMICAL LAB
24'0" x 33'0"
TYPEWRITER ROOM
24'0" x 39'0"
ELEV
TOILET
JANITOR CLOS
ENG. OFFICE
PLATFORM
COMMERCIAL A
24'0" x 39'0"
BOILER ROOM
CORRIDOR
COMMERCIAL B
24'0" x 39'0"
'A' DENOTES WARDROBES
FITTING ROOM
SEWING ROOM
24'0" x 24'0"
MODEL DINING ROOM
12'0" x 17'0"
STORE RM.
DOMESTIC SCIENCE ROOM
40'0" x 24'0"
TOILET ROOM
FAN ROOM
CORRIDOR
VESTIBULE
LIBRARY
WAITING ROOM
REST RM.
OFFICE
TERRACE
LOBBY
AUDITORIUM
PLATFORM
STAGE
FIRST FLOOR PLAN
SCALE OF FEET

17414

OPPOSITE:

The broad expanse of walls precisely punctured by window openings is a characteristic of Byrne's architecture.

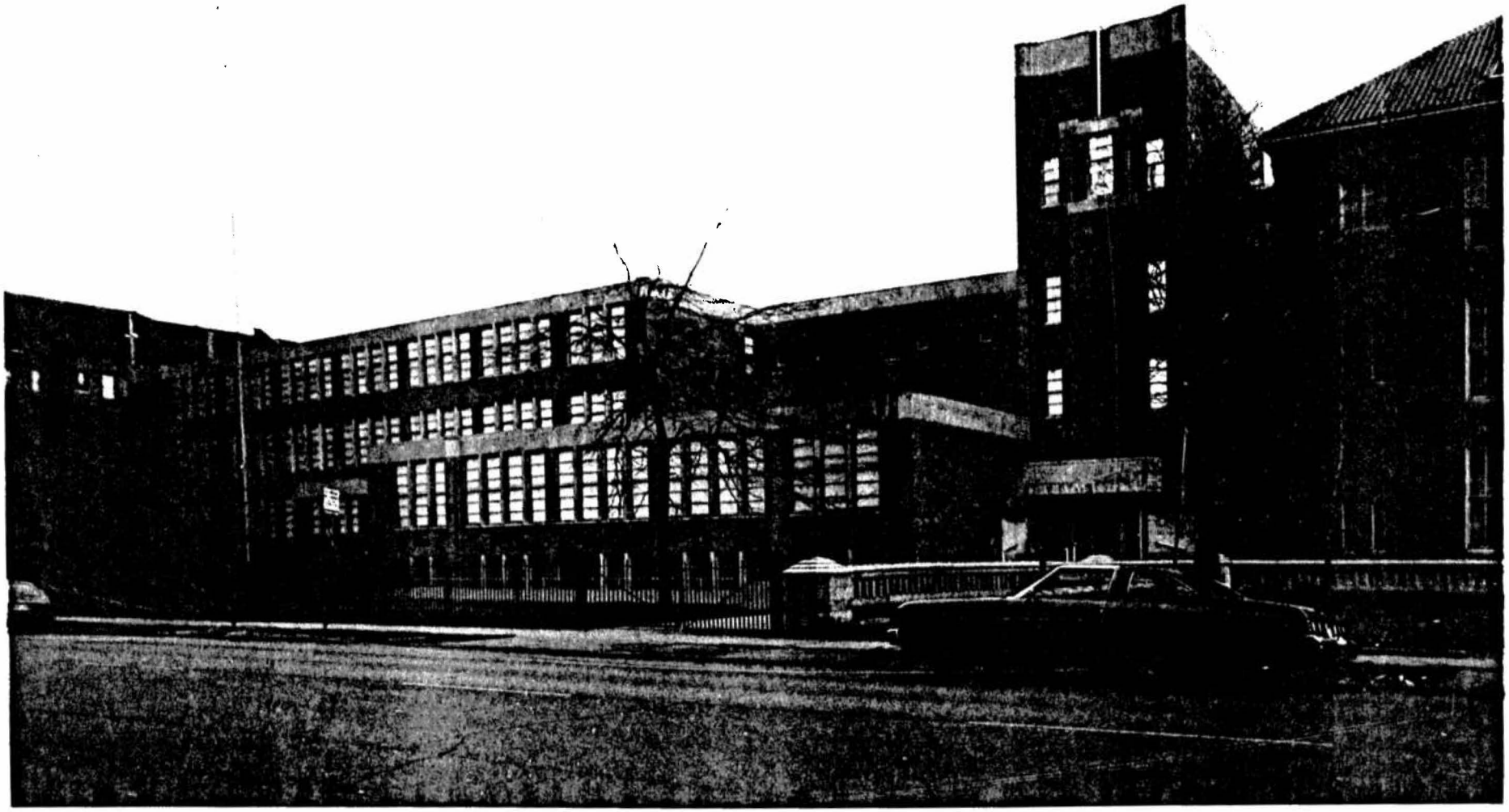
(Bob Thall, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

The addition to the original school building was built in 1955-1956 and named St. Joseph's Hall. The internal division between classrooms, laboratories, and library are expressed in the cubic massing of the structure.

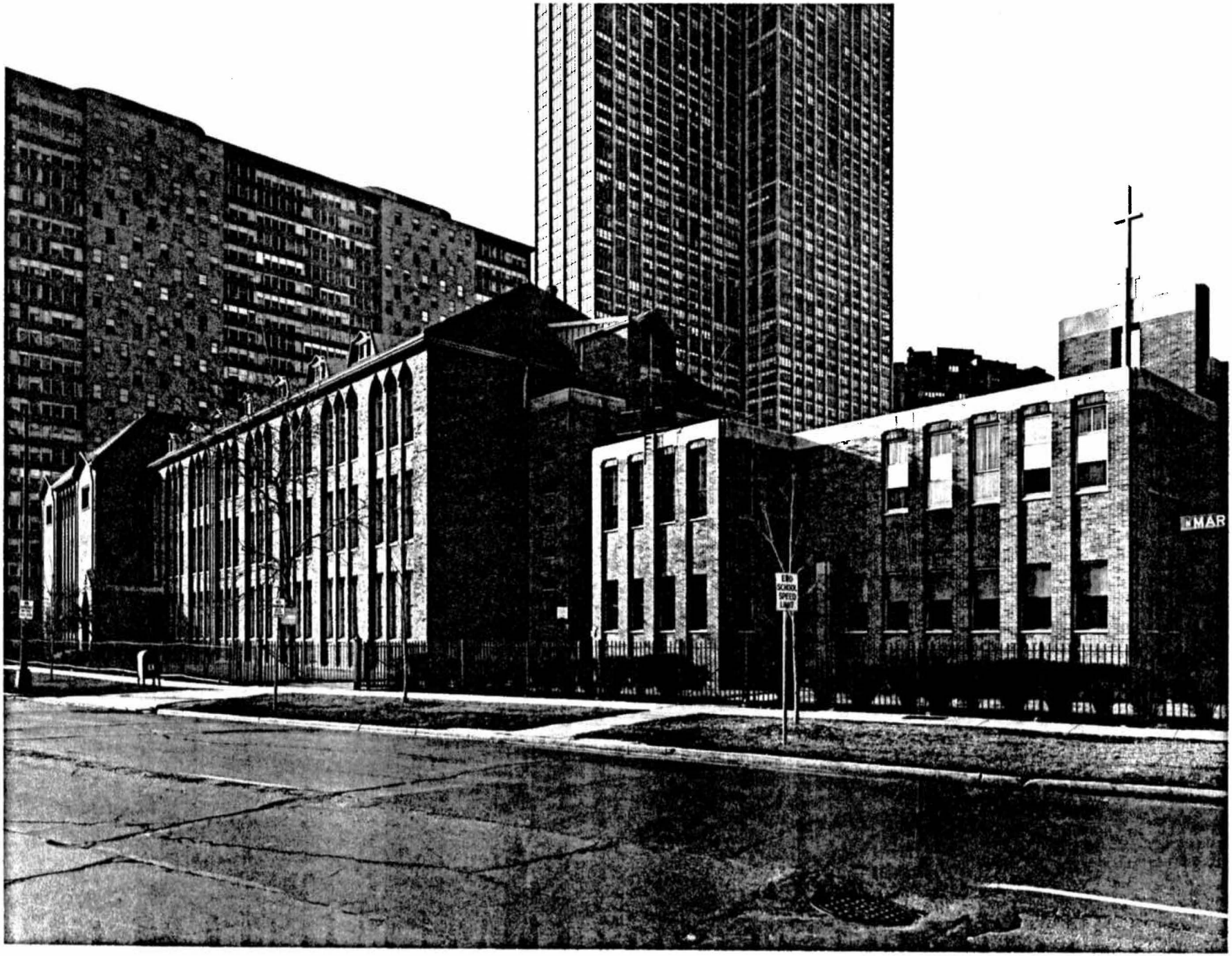
(Tim Barton, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

The convent addition of 1954 complements the Marine Drive facade of the original structure through its similar set-back massing and its juxtaposition of generous articulated windows with unadorned masonry planes.

(Bob Thall, photographer)


SCHOOL
SPEED
LIMIT
MAR

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

William M. McLenahan, Director
Room 800
320 N. Clark Street
Chicago, Illinois 60610
(312) 744-3200