

Bridgeport Art Center – History & Overview

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Bridgeport Art Center

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Updated: October 10, 2025

Origins and Redevelopment

In 1999, Chicago developers Paul Levy and Tony Augustine of Prairie Management & Development purchased the former Spiegel warehouse at 1200 West 35th Street in Bridgeport. The five-acre site extends from 35th Street on the south to 33rd Place on the north, bordered by Racine Avenue to the east and the South Branch of the Chicago River to the west.

The massive 500,000-square-foot structure, originally built in 1911, began its life as a warehouse and manufacturing facility for Albert Pick & Co., a major supplier to restaurants and hotels. Designed by noted architect A. S. Alschuler in the Classical Revival style, the building underwent major expansions in 1922 and 1928. After serving as a manufacturing hub for decades, Spiegel Catalog occupied the space until 1978, when it was sold to Goodwill Industries. Manufacturing and warehousing continued under various tenants until Prairie Management's acquisition.

More on Albert Pick & Co.: <https://www.madeinchicagomuseum.com/single-post/albert-pick/>

Transformation into the Bridgeport Art Center

While preserving the building's historic industrial integrity, Prairie Management undertook an extensive renovation program—replacing the roof and boilers, installing new elevators, resurfacing parking lots, and completing a two-year sandblasting and tuck-pointing project. Original architectural details such as skylights, wood plank flooring, and heavy timber posts and beams were carefully restored, while salvaged steel plates were creatively repurposed as stall doors in restrooms.

Today, the building operates as the Bridgeport Art Center (BAC)—a thriving creative campus that hosts more than 120 artists, a Fashion Design Center, and three dedicated galleries presenting eight rotating exhibitions annually. Two premier event spaces—the 18,000-square-foot Skyline Loft and the 16,000-square-foot Sculpture Garden & Event Space—anchor the site. The latter features granite pavers that mirror the original rail siding

of the historic train shed and an ever-changing display of large-scale sculptures from the Chicago Sculpture Exhibition and BAC's permanent collection.

Tenants and Creative Community

The Bridgeport Art Center is home to over 300 tenants, more than a third of whom are artists working across a wide range of disciplines including ceramics, painting, sculpture, fiber arts, and fashion design. The diverse mix also includes architects, engineers, therapists, media producers, importers, makerspaces, yoga studios, and culinary ventures.

Notable tenants include:

- Chicago Maritime Museum
- Project Onward
- Shared Floor Ceramics
- East Bank Storage
- BASE Community Café

Full tenant directory: <https://www.bridgeportart.com/tenant-directory/>

Artistic Growth and Community Engagement

Artists began moving into the building more than a decade ago, drawn by its affordable studios, accessibility, and Bridgeport's reputation as an emerging creative neighborhood. As this community flourished, the complex was officially renamed the Bridgeport Art Center. The BAC continues to nurture artistic excellence through curated exhibitions, open studios, and its annual art competition offering \$3,000 in prizes to artists living within 100 miles of Chicago.

Bridgeport Fashion Design Center

The Fashion Design Center provides affordable workspace for approximately 40 designers. Conceived in response to a Cultural Center study identifying a need for collaborative environments for emerging designers, the Center offers studios ranging from 180 to 5,000 square feet, each with Wi-Fi, heat/air conditioning, electricity, and 24-hour secure access with free parking. A shared cutting area with a large central table fosters collaboration and idea exchange among resident designers.

Sculpture Garden

This unique indoor-outdoor event and exhibition space occupies the former rail spur and train shed along Racine Avenue. The inaugural exhibition, curated by celebrated sculptor Terry Karpowicz, featured works by 20 members of Chicago Sculpture International. The original brick arches of the train shed now serve as visual frames for the sculptures, while additional pieces are displayed along the ivy-covered easement extending the full length of the building.

Shared Floor Ceramics

Shared Floor Ceramics combines education and workspace within a 2,000-square-foot instructional area equipped with pottery wheels, hand-building tools, and a glazing room. The kiln room—ingeniously integrated into three of the building's former elevator shafts—

houses both electric and gas kilns and a clay mixer. In addition to private studios, the space offers classes for artists of all levels.

Event Spaces

The crown jewels of the Bridgeport Art Center are its two spectacular event venues:

The Skyline Loft – This breathtaking 18,000-square-foot loft features panoramic views of the Chicago skyline and the South Branch of the Chicago River. It accommodates up to 1,000 seated guests beneath a ceiling of expansive skylights. Past events include galas and fundraisers hosted by the Chicago Architecture Foundation, Friends of the River, the Italian Chamber of Commerce, and Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s Christmas Party, as well as private celebrations such as weddings and receptions.

The Sculpture Garden & Event Space – Located on the first floor, this 12,000-square-foot venue features floor-to-ceiling windows, covered outdoor seating, and repurposed granite pavers. Two 12-foot French doors open onto the Sculpture Garden, where guests are greeted by four sculptures created by internationally acclaimed artist Virginio Ferrari.

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