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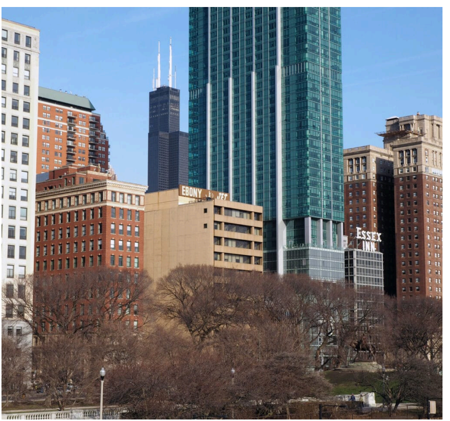
A House for the Struggle

The history of the Black press in Chicago can be traced through two pivotally important buildings.

E. JAMES WEST

APRIL 2022



The Johnson Publishing Company building at 820 South Michigan Avenue, complete with rooftop sign, photographed in 2022. [E. James West]

In June 1922, to mark the occasion of its 75th anniversary in print, the *Chicago Tribune* — the leading daily paper in the "Midwest Metropolis" — revealed plans for an architectural competition to design its new headquarters on North Michigan Avenue. The goal was both simple and extraordinarily ambitious: creation of "the most beautiful building in the modern world."[1] The Tribune Tower, a 470-foot neo-Gothic skyscraper designed by John Mead Howells and Raymond Hood, opened in July 1925. Scores of visitors besieged the building, gawking at its steel-framed and limestone-clad exterior and vying to take turns in its high-speed elevators.

In the same year, Walter Strong, the recently installed owner of the *Chicago Daily News*, launched his own efforts to develop an elegant headquarters that would rival the Tribune Tower. Completed in 1929 and occupying an entire block of West Madison Avenue adjacent to the South Branch of the Chicago River, the Art Deco Daily News Building made a similarly striking addition to the skyline: another "masterpiece of this modern age."[2] Beyond providing tangible evidence of journalistic influence, the unveiling of these grand constructions served to consolidate Chicago's emergence as the nation's "Second City," a status that, over the previous half century, had been carefully curated by the *Tribune* and the *Daily News* themselves. The buildings' designs and locations appeared to point simultaneously backwards and forwards — acknowledging Chicago's past and future status as an architectural center, business hub, and media capital.[3]

The Tribune Tower and Daily News Building provide us with architecturally distinct but functionally similar portraits of Chicago's media history as dominated by White-owned

dailies. What might we discover if we turn our gaze elsewhere? Let's walk south, across the river. Following the curve of Wacker Drive away from Lake Michigan towards the Merchandise Mart and turning left on Clark Street, we can track a parallel and in some ways more important story. Here, at addresses such as 194 and 279 South Clark, one could once find offices connected to the *Chicago Conservator*, founded in 1878 as the city's first African American newspaper.[4] Other Black print concerns quickly followed, including the *Western Appeal,* which established an office at 180 South Clark Street before moving southeast to 325 South Dearborn Street on Chicago's "Printing-House Row."[5]

Tribune Tower, photographed in 1931 [Library of Congress]; Chicago Daily News Building, photographed in 2011. [Wikimedia Commons under license CC BY 2.0]

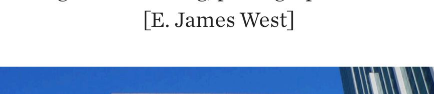
Cutting eastward on Van Buren Street, we can follow the "El" tracks past the hulking central branch of the Chicago Public Library, dedicated in October 1991 and named in honor of Harold Washington, the city's first Black mayor, to turn right on Michigan Avenue. A few blocks further, past the faded glory of the Congress Plaza Hotel, huddled next to an imposing new 56-story apartment building, stands the former headquarters of the Johnson Publishing Company, creator of iconic Black magazines such as *Ebony* and *Jet*, and at one time the largest Black-owned business in North America.[6] Let's pick up the pace — a brisk 30-minute walk gets us to 2400 South Michigan Avenue, built for the Illinois Automobile Club in a modified Spanish Mission style and purchased in the 1950s by the *Chicago Defender,* one of the nation's most influential and enduring Black newspapers.[7] Looking southwest from the building's clocktower across the Stephenson Expressway, we can spot another Black press landmark at 2548 South Federal Street. This was home to *Muhammad Speaks,* official organ of the Nation of Islam and, for a period in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the most widely circulating Black newspaper in the country.[8]

Further south lies Bronzeville, the historic center of Black Chicago. In streets around the intersection at East 31st and State, we find remnants of a once-thriving Black newspaper row — hailed in 1919 by storied journalist Carl Sandburg as a mighty "propaganda machine … that every week reaches hundreds of thousands of people of the colored race."[9] During the 1910s and 1920s, this neighborhood was home to more than a dozen Black publishing concerns, including the *Conservator,* the *Broad Ax,* the *Plaindealer,* the *Searchlight,* the *Whip,* the *Leader,* the *Advocate,* the *Favorite*, the *Half-Century,* and the *Bee*. Some of these journals occupied premises that still stand, including the second home of the *Defender* at 3435 South Indiana Avenue, where the paper was headquartered prior to its relocation to South Michigan Avenue. Publisher Robert Abbott purchased 3435 South Indiana (once a synagogue) shortly after the race riots that rocked Chicago in 1919, and upon its reopening in 1921 the site became a church of sorts for the celebration of Black print. The *Defender*'s premises and others like them were modest in comparison to the Tribune Tower and bastions of other White-owned publications. But time and again it was to the *Defender*'s Bronzeville plant, to the South Side's newspaper row, and to other Black media houses that Black readers in and beyond Chicago looked to orient their political and civic worlds.

From its origins in the late 19th century, Chicago's Black press helped to write new landscapes of urban life into existence. In turn, the built spaces occupied by these businesses provided tangible evidence of the city's significance as a particularly *Black*

media capital, making material the power of Black periodicals to shape the place that African American sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, in their pathbreaking study of 1945, named the “Black Metropolis.” Just as publications such as the *Defender, Ebony,* and *Muhammad Speaks* pushed back against racist characterizations in the mainstream press, to function instead as arbiters of Black pride and racial uplift and to advance the economic and political interests of their readers, so too did their buildings exemplify Black cultural and economic achievements, broadcasting to passersby their “own loud protest.”[10]

Chicago Bee Building, photographed in 2022.
[E. James West]



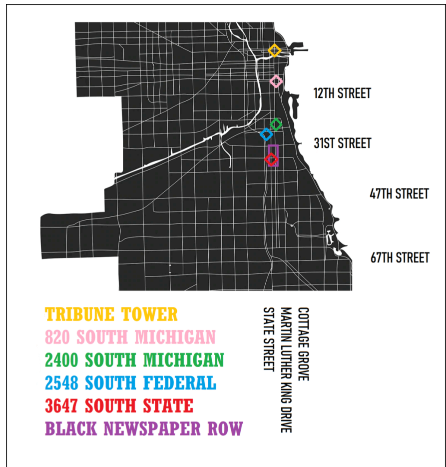
The Johnson Publishing Company building at 820 South Michigan Avenue, photographed in 2022. [E. James West]

It is nevertheless true that, as these journals’ influence declined, the fates met by their brick-and-mortar sites helped to lay out competing stories about the decline of Black media in general and Chicago’s Black press in particular. Such stories feed into broader debates around the “death” of American print media writ large. In the aftermath of the Tribune Tower’s conversion into luxury condominiums, *NewCity* president Brian Hieggelke declared that “nothing is more emblematic of the *Tribune*’s misfortune” than the sale of its iconic tower.[11] Yet for Chicago’s Black press and its buildings, other stories merit our attention too: stories about the complex intersections of Black enterprise, urban renewal, and racial politics; about nostalgia, neighborhood demographics, and Black flight and displacement; about inequities that continue to govern class and caste in one of America’s most segregated cities.[12]

In what follows, I trace this history through two pivotally important Black media sites — the home of the *Chicago Bee*, completed in 1931 at 3647 State Street, and the headquarters of the Johnson Publishing Company at 820 South Michigan Avenue, unveiled to the public some 40 years later. The Art Deco pizzazz of Z. Erol Smith’s Bee Building is, from a design perspective, utterly unlike the Miesian sleekness of the JPC offices, the brainchild of pioneering Black architect John Moutoussamy. But both structures were designed in their heydays to be imposing manifestations of the presses they housed and the constituencies those presses served and helped to create. Both were

architectural archives as well as containers of print archives. In this, they represented an irreplaceably analogue form of civic presence and journalistic embeddedness in community. In distinct yet complementary ways, these buildings made manifest the tangible power of the Black press as a "voice for the race." They established geo-markers for the emergence and prosperity of the Black Metropolis.[13]

In more recent decades, both structures have gone through tragic devolutions and have been repurposed. In the process, important artifacts and cultural histories were preserved, and others lost. These developments have, in different ways, fed ongoing anxieties about the future of the Black press as an institution. More specifically, the enduring appeal of these buildings reflects nostalgia for a time when Black journalists and publications were geographically rooted in and connected to the publics they represented. The racial, technological, and geographic dispersals engendered by newsroom integration, shrinking advertising and circulation revenues, and impacts of the digital revolution have seen these connections weaken and, in some situations, vanish altogether.



Sites of the Tribune Tower at 435 North Michigan Avenue, the Johnson Publishing Company at 820 South Michigan Avenue, the Defender Building at 2400 South Michigan Avenue, the home of *Muhammad Speaks* at 2548 South Federal Street, and the *Chicago Bee* at 3647 South State Street, along with the Black "Newspaper Row" on the South Side of Chicago. [E. James West]

Such concerns have been enforced by, and cannot be separated from, broader challenges that have assailed poor and working-class Black Chicagoans since the mid-20th century. From this perspective, the abandonment of the Bee Building during the 1980s registered the hollowing out of Bronzeville tout court, with neighborhood population dropping from a peak of around 200,000 in 1950 to just 66,549 by 1990, and unemployment rates spiraling to more than 50 percent.[14] Since the turn of the 21st century — a period that has seen the sale of Johnson Publishing's Michigan Avenue headquarters (in 2010), and of its most famous publications, *Ebony* and *Jet* (in 2016) — median wages for Black workers in the Chicago metropolitan area fell seventeen percent. Today, 820 South Michigan Avenue is an upscale residential tower, while 40 percent of Black Chicagoans between the ages of 20 and 24 are out of work, compared with just seven percent of White Chicagoans of comparable age.[15]

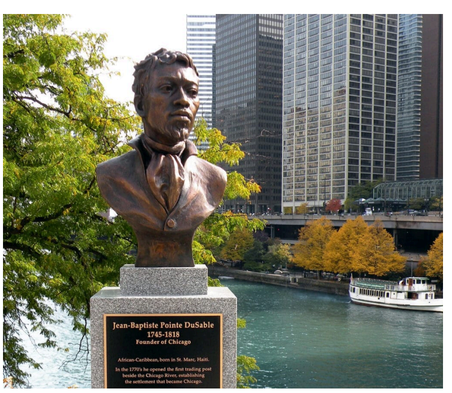
As the functions of the Bee Building and the Johnson Publishing building continue to change, even as the publications they once housed continue to decline or to fade from memory, it can be difficult to think of these spaces as anything other than sites of erasure. Yet this is also a story about rebirth and the continued importance of brick-and-mortar locations in the cultural economy of media. The lives and afterlives of these architectures, and the social, literary, and material histories they have contained, reaffirm the sites' centrality as archives of Black culture. And, as such, they remain entry-points into an ongoing conversation about race and place in the modern American city.

A Modernist Bit for South State

The 20th-century case studies of the Bee Building and Johnson Publishing headquarters (and their 21st-century afterlives) can — and should — be situated within a longer history of Chicago's Black Press and its architectures. Although the *Chicago Bee* and Johnson Publishing's magazines were unique manifestations of Black modernism, respectability, and cultural mores, they were inspired by Black periodicals that came before them; these earlier publications, too, "gave voice to a people who were voiceless."[16]

The design and construction of the Bee Building and the Johnson Publishing headquarters spoke to exquisitely specific moments in Black cultural and economic history, but each building maintained and expanded explicit connections between Black advancement and the built environment. At the opening of 820 South Michigan in 1972, *Ebony* senior editor Lerone Bennett, Jr. contended that the company's "gleaming new building" and the houses of predecessors were "linked in time and spirit."[17] In the lavish photo feature published to celebrate its state-of-the-art offices, *Ebony* editors noted that "the building is the first one built by blacks in Chicago's bustling downtown Loop area since the city's black founder, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, constructed a log-walled fur trading post beside the Chicago River in 1784."[18]

Not quite a century after du Sable built his trading post, editors of the *Chicago Conservator,* founded in 1878 as the city's first Black paper, understood the importance of establishing a physical office.[19] Beyond offering "some protection from the outside world," a space of one's own helped to substantiate the role of Black periodicals, merging "physical space and metaphysical mission."[20] The *Appeal* celebrated its move into a "new and elegant" office in 1888 as evidence of its growing significance; a few months later, editors proudly announced that circulation had reached 1,500, positioning the weekly *Appeal* as the city's dominant Black paper.[21] Such modest numbers were in keeping with the size of the total local Black community, estimated to be around 15,000 in 1890. These demographics meant that early Black publications, like the city's first generations of Black residents, were able to integrate themselves into central Chicago with some success.[22] However, White backlash against an influx of Black migrants from the South — manifested viscerally through the riots in the "Red Summer" of 1919 — meant that Black Chicagoans were increasingly confined to segregated neighborhoods. In 1910, none of Chicago's Black population lived in census tracts that were more than 75 percent Black. By 1930, around two-thirds of the African American population — now numbering 230,000 — dwelt in tracts that tallied as more than 90 percent Black.[23] The overwhelming majority of these were contained in a thin strip of land stretching south from South 26th Street and bordered by State Street to the west and Cottage Grove Avenue to the east.



Statue honoring Jean-Baptiste Pointe DuSable (1745-1818), founder of the city of Chicago, beside the Chicago River on North Michigan Avenue, photographed in 2009. [Courtesy John W. Iwanski via Flickr under license CC BY-NC 2.0]

As the readership moved, so did its publications — from along the Clark-and-Dearborn corridor to the burgeoning Black Metropolis. In his report on the 1919 riots, Sandburg highlighted development of the Black "newspaper row" along South State Street and adjacent thoroughfares, where the "dean of the weekly newspaper group" was the *Defender*.[24] As a measure of race pride and business prowess, the *Defender*'s move to South Indiana Avenue concretized the remarkable rise of publisher Robert Abbott as one of the nation's first Black millionaires, and confirmed his paper's standing as the nation's leading Black news outlet. Concurrently, the *Defender* building symbolized exciting possibilities for a vibrant city within a city, "boasting its own cultural and economic institutions, its own business, professional and political leadership, and its own intellectual and artistic elite."[25]

Other Black publications likewise looked to architecture to express cultural power, civic pride, and urbanity. Chief among these were the *Half-Century* and the *Chicago Bee,* both funded by cosmetics entrepreneur Anthony Overton. Born in Louisiana shortly before the end of the Civil War, Overton developed his cosmetics business in Kansas City before relocating to Chicago before the outbreak of World War I.[26] By 1915, the Overton Hygienic Company was capitalized at more than a quarter million dollars, and Overton had begun to diversify his holdings, establishing the *Half-Century* magazine in 1916. With Abbott and Jesse Binga, a realtor who founded the city's first privately owned Black bank, Overton formed a triumvirate of Black entrepreneurs who left their marks on the landscape, both physical and cultural, of the Black Metropolis. Abbott celebrated the *Defender*'s new offices and Binga boasted of owning "more footage on State Street … than any other man in the city." Overton, too, sought to create a monument to his business acumen.[27]

THE OVERTON BUILDING

Photo by Woodard

The "Overton Building," located at 3621 South State Street, might be considered a modest monument to the business genius of its owner, Anthony Overton. Housed within this modern, spacious four-story office structure are The Overton Hygienic Manufacturing Company, who distribute their toilet preparations the world over; The Victory Life Insurance Company, an old-line reserve institution, and The Douglass National Bank. The bank is named after Frederick Douglass, the great Negro statesman and emancipator and is the first financial institution of a national nature operated by Negroes in the United States. Of these three institutions Anthony Overton is President.

"Such a booklet ought to be a source of inspiration to other members of our group."—A. L. Jackson, The Chicago Defender.

Overton Hygienic Building as pictured in John Taitt, *Souvenir of Negro Progress: Chicago, 1779-1925* (Chicago: Du Saible Association, 1925). [The New York Public Library Digital Collections, in the public domain]

The Defender Building, 1925. as pictured in John Taitt, *Souvenir of Negro Progress: Chicago, 1779-1925* (Chicago: Du Saible Association, 1925). [The New York Public Library Digital Collections, in the public domain]

Illinois Automobile Club Showroom in the Motor Row Historic District in Chicago (1936), home of the *Chicago Defender* starting in 1958. Photographed in 2013. [Wikimedia Commons under license CC BY-SA 2.0]

The *Defender*'s sensationalistic editorial tone and eye-catching headlines exerted populist appeal. Overton's publications catered to more middle-class notions of Black taste and respectability, and he wanted his properties to express a similar gentility. The Overton Hygienic Building, a striking red-brick-and-terracotta structure at 3619 South State Street, was finished in 1922 to serve as headquarters for the *Half-Century* and a raft of other Overton enterprises that included the Douglass National Bank, a rival to the Binga Bank. Several years later, the monthly *Half-Century* was replaced by the *Bee,* a weekly newspaper that Overton envisioned as a more direct competitor to the *Defender.* The format of Overton's new publication was different than that of its predecessor, but like the *Half Century* ("A Colored Magazine for the Home and the Home Maker"), the *Bee*'s commitment to "good, wholesome and authentic news" offered to its audience a similarly cosmopolitan yet carefully constructed vision of Black modernity.[28]

The *Bee*'s success prompted Overton to announce plans for the construction of a second building, a few yards south of his existing State Street site. In October 1929, the *Tribune* printed an architectural rendering of the *Bee*'s new home, reporting that contracts worth an estimated $200,000 had been awarded for a "modernistic bit for South State."[29] The

façade of 3647 State Street would be a dazzling array of terracotta tiles, with splashes of glossy black and gold on the first floor complementing pale green panels on the upper floors, all accented by insets featuring Art Deco embellishments; gear-like motifs hinted “at the mechanical printing press inside.” The designs were created by the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company, one of the nation’s leading manufacturers, demonstrating the scale of Overton’s plans and the price he was willing to pay to reconcile his editorial and architectural ambitions. The intricate tilework, striking color scheme, and tasteful monumentality worked to cultivate “an impression of affluence and high style.”[30]

All this provided a compelling visual affirmation of the newspaper’s upmarket philosophy — an architectural announcement that media historian Aurora Wallace has described as “a more permanent version of the ‘Who We Are’ statements” made by any fledgling print concern. The edifice instantiated the paper’s five-plank editorial platform, which included goals such as the “massing of Negro capital, wealth and resources” and an emphasis on increased educational attainment and political participation.[32] In an interview with the *Tribune*, Overton’s architect Z. Erol Smith emphasized the *Bee*’s policy “to print only news which is fit to read”; the design’s crisp lines and elegant motifs reflected the broadsheet’s reputation as “a clean newspaper that can go into any home.”[33] Stories in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and other Black newspapers linked the building to the paper’s reputation as “a wonderful, busy and progressive institution” in what has been described as a “golden decade” of Black business development.[34]

Former “Back To Africa” Head Is Murdered

SUNDAY CHICAGO BEE — A BETTER PAPER AT LESS COST — 5 CENTS

SUPREME COURT ENDS RAILROAD JIM CROW

PORTERS WIN $500,000 IN PAY INCREASES

Decision Of Major Importance

NAACP PICKET DEFENSE INDUSTRY PLANT

IGNORES SOUTH SOCIAL ISSUE IN DECISION

Ruling Of Major Significance

‘BACK TO AFRICA’ OFFICER IS SLAIN

JUBILANT

MITCHELL SAYS HE,S HAPPY; PREFERS TO FIGHT CASE ALONE

WINNER

Demand Probe In Death Of Harlem Dancer

Colored Hostesses To Be Stationed At Illinois Camp

The Chicago Sunday Bee

WILL FILL ORDERS PROMPTLY FOR ANY

BOOKS ABOUT NEGROES

(IN PRINT), AT THE PUBLISHERS RETAIL PRICE-POSTAGE PAID

THIS MONTH'S OFFERING

Title	Price	Title	Price
Native Son by RICHARD WRIGHT	$ 2.50	12 Million Black Voices by RICHARD WRIGHT	3.00
The Negro In Our History by CARTER WOODSON	4.25	God's Trombone by J. W. JOHNSON	2.50
The Negro Handbook by FLORENCE MURRAY	3.50	American Unity and Asia by PEARL BUCK	1.25
Sharecroppers All by DeA. REID and ARTHUR ROPER	3.00	A Time For Greatness by HERBERT AGAR	2.50
The Lost Zoo by COUNTEE CULLEN	2.50	Slave Insurrection In U. S., 1800-1865 by JOSEPH C. CARROLL	2.00
The Biology of the Negro by JULIAN HERMAN LEWIS, Ph. D., M. D.	5.00	The Child's Story of the Negro by JANE D. SHACKLEFORD	1.25
Books of Negro Spirituals by JAMES WELDON JOHNSON	3.00	Blood On The Forge by WILLIAM ATTAWAY	2.00
Complete Poems by PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR	3.00	Negroes In Brazil by DONALD PEARSON	4.50
Marian Anderson by KOSTI VEHAMEN	2.50	Railroad to Freedom by HILDEGARDE HOYT SMITH	

SUNDAY CHICAGO BEE

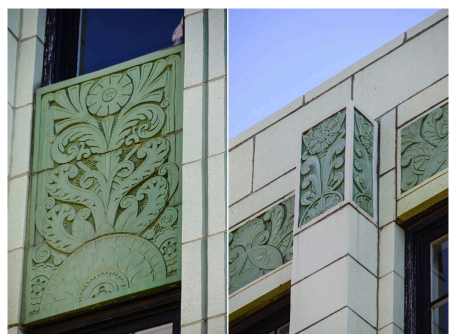
BOOK DEPT.

3655 South State St. — Chicago, Illinois

Front page of the Sunday *Chicago Bee*, May 4, 1941 [Library of Congress]; “Book Dept.” page in the Sunday *Chicago Bee*, December 5, 1943 [Library of Congress].

Chicago Bee Building, photographed for the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office, 1985. [National Archives Catalogue]

Decorative detail on the facade of the Chicago Bee Building (Bee Branch, Chicago Public Library), photographed in 2013. [Courtesy Eric Allix Rogers via Flickr, under license CC BY-NC-ND 2.0]



Decorative detail on the facade of the Chicago Bee Building (Bee Branch, Chicago Public Library), photographed in 2013. [Courtesy Eric Allix Rogers via Flickr, under license CC BY-NC-ND 2.0]

A Poem in Marble and Glass

Forty years later, the performative function of Chicago's Black press buildings as concretizations of Black capital and community pride would be dramatically realized for the age of Black Power through the new Johnson Publishing headquarters at 820 South Michigan Avenue. Since the establishment of its first magazine, *Negro Digest,* in 1942, the company had cemented its status as the nation's largest and most commercially successful Black publishing enterprise.[35] *Ebony* and *Jet,* its flagship outlets, were staples for millions of African American readers and thousands more across the Black diaspora. Publisher John H. Johnson, who had moved to Chicago from rural Arkansas during the Depression, had been the first Black publisher to crack the color line in corporate advertising, attracting accounts that included Pepsi-Cola and Lucky Strike.

The revenues this generated allowed him to assemble an unparalleled roster of Black journalistic talent.[36] In the late 1940s, when Johnson was seeking to acquire his company's previous headquarters, the building's White proprietor had refused to sell to a Black business, forcing Johnson to disguise himself as a janitor to inspect the property before buying it in trust.[37] This time, there would be no kowtowing. The company's new location would be an unapologetic celebration of Black cultural and economic capacity — a testament to both the continuing importance of Chicago's Black press and the gains made by African Americans during the decades after World War II.

To facilitate his ambitions, Johnson turned to John Moutoussamy, a young Black designer and civic leader described by architectural historian ElDante Winston as "the Godfather of black architects in Chicago."[38] Moutoussamy had studied at the Illinois Institute of Technology and was a disciple of Mies van der Rohe — who, following his flight from Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, had transformed IIT into one of the foremost architecture programs in the U.S. After graduating in 1948, Moutoussamy worked for two Chicago-based firms, Schmidt, Garden, and Erickson, and PACE Associates, before joining Dubin, Dubin, and Black, one of the city's leading architectural concerns. There, he quickly made partner, becoming the first Black architect to achieve this standing at a major practice.[39]

Johnson Publishing Company headquarters at 820 S. Michigan Avenue in Chicago, designed by John Moutoussamy, 1973. [Via Wikimedia Commons, in the public domain]

Tasked with creating a showpiece for John H. Johnson, Moutoussamy designed an imposing eleven-story, 110,000-square-foot structure, its façade dominated by two slender columns stretching from ground level to top floor. The planar form projects onto the avenue, creating an illusion of increased size, and hence grandeur, while cantilevered floor slabs allowed Moutoussamy to avoid placing load-bearing walls directly next to neighboring structures — handy in the future if JPC should wish to expand to adjacent buildings.[40]

Early in the design process, Johnson declared that he wanted an abundance of marble, "so that the building would express permanence and would have character without flamboyance."[41] Eventually, client and architect agreed on the "robust, dimensional beauty of walnut Travertine" to encase the concrete exterior. Liberal use of window space, Johnson explained, reflected his company's "openness to truth, openness to light, openness to all the currents swirling in all the black communities of this land."[42] The "ladder" created by the paired exterior columns led the eye to an enormous rooftop sign displaying the names *Ebony* and *Jet* flanking the JPC logo, as if consolidating Johnson's belief that Black freedom would be fostered through an embrace of consumer capitalism. Moutoussamy later described the design, somewhat equivocally, as being "like a big advertisement. That's what [Johnson's] in — advertising."[43]

Johnson Publishing Company, tenth-floor employees' dining area, 1972. [Courtesy Georges Estate, photograph by Alexandre Georges]

Johnson Publishing Company, sixth-floor reception area, 1972. [[Courtesy Georges Estate, photograph by Alexandre Georges]

If the building's exterior was striking, its interior was extraordinary. To achieve his goal of sponsoring "one of the city's most spectacular showplaces," Johnson enlisted Arthur Elrod, a White designer based in Palm Springs, whose space-age interiors had earned him a reputation as "design king of the desert."[44] Elrod had earlier been commissioned by Johnson and his wife Eunice to remodel their apartment in The Carlyle, a luxury condominium development on Chicago's Gold Coast. Aided by an open checkbook at 820 South Michigan Avenue, Elrod and his team curated "$8 million worth of Black pride."[45] A riotous mix of colors, textures, and patterns complemented the eclectic and distinctly modern content of Johnson's periodicals, embracing the glossy consumerism of *Ebony* and the quotidian busyness of *Jet*, as well as the diasporic politics of *Negro Digest,* renamed *Black World* and revived in 1970 as one of the nation's most incisive journals of Black literature and art.[46]

Each floor was individually themed, with bespoke palettes and patterns chosen to reflect the tasks and responsibilities of employees in given departments. Visitors entered an expansive two-story lobby also surfaced in walnut travertine and featuring banks of red sofas, with walls "of solid bronze over-suspended with Mozambique, a beautifully grained wood cut in Africa especially for the Johnson Building."[47] Other standouts included the seventh floor, home to the editorial offices of *Ebony* and *Black World,* with its distinctive leopard-print carpets and rich brown leather wall coverings, and a tenth-floor canteen in mauve, tangerine, and yellow, where employees and guests could enjoy one-dollar soul-food lunches. Next door to the cafeteria, psychedelic orange-and-brown swirls decorated the test kitchen, described by the *Tribune* as "arguably the most distinctive test kitchen ever created."[48]

The top level was Johnson's private fiefdom — a sprawling executive suite with a huge office, multiple reception rooms, a conference room, and a dining room, as well as a bedroom, bathroom-sauna, and private gymnasium. Boasting artwork by luminaries such as Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, and Jacob Lawrence, and extravagant flourishes such as herringbone patterned walls of hand-stitched Hermes leather and zebra-wood furniture accented with alligator skin, the space was (as *Ebony* proudly announced) "the ultimate in interior design."[49]

John H. Johnson's personal suite on the eleventh floor, 820 South Michigan Avenue, 1972. [Courtesy Georges Estate, photograph by Alexandre Georges]

John H. Johnson's executive bathroom (with sauna) on the eleventh floor, 820 South Michigan Avenue, 1972. [Courtesy Georges Estate, photograph by Alexandre Georges]

Johnson Publishing Co.

...ters

...city's most spectacular showplaces. It is the new corporate headquarters of Johnson Publishing Co., Inc., publishers of EBONY, Jet, Black Stars and Black World.

Located on Michigan Avenue, Chicago's most important business thoroughfare, the $8 million Johnson Building overlooks Grant Park and commands a two-mile view of the skyscrapers, museums and pleasure boat marinas along the Lake Michigan shoreline. The building has 11 floors of individually decorated private offices and work areas; employe and guest dining facilities; a reception floor which can handle more than 1,000 persons for company affairs; boat-shaped, glass-walled conference rooms; a theater where movie previews can be held for editors; Picturephones in top management offices and a penthouse Executive Suite which interestingly melds ancient

New headquarters building (left) of Johnson Publishing Co., Inc., houses editorial and business offices of EBONY, Jet, Black Stars and Black World magazines and the JPC Book Division. The 11-story steel, concrete and marble structure on Michigan Avenue in the Chicago Loop (downtown business district) affords a spectacular view of city's Grant Park and Lake Michigan shoreline. Above, lobby receptionist Theresa Legg uses building's extensive Picturephone system to announce visitors to EBONY editorial floor. At right, groups wait in lobby for appointments. Lobby features custom-built furniture, specially designed carpeting over Travertine floor, and 18½-foot walls of bronze and Mozambique wood.

EBONY MAGAZINE'S NEW HOME

JPC SPECIAL PHOTO FEATURE

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SLIDESHOW "Ebony Magazine's New Home," special feature in *Ebony*, September 1972. All images in this slideshow come from this issue. [Harold C. Broderick/Arthur Elrod Associates, Inc. Collection, Courtesy Palm Springs Art Museum]

For Johnson, these amenities, complemented by a corporate collection of more than 150 paintings and sculptures by Black artists, produced “a really bold, positive statement about the company’s commitment to the black people it serves.”[50] At the building’s public opening in 1972, the publisher was even more effusive, describing 820 South Michigan Avenue as “a poem in marble and glass which symbolizes our unshakeable faith that the struggles of our forefathers were not in vain.”[51] For JPC staffer Eric Easter, the company’s home evinced “its own loud protest — a visual pronouncement that black America had arrived in all its striving, outrageous, hip and fashionable glory.”[52]

Cultural historian Maurice Berger has described the space as “a daring social statement” and “an important showcase for black cultural expression”; for artist David Hartt, the décor was a “clear and exuberant expression of black taste, resolutely modern, colorful, and complex.”[53] And what of readers? Visitors were enraptured, applauding the offices as evidence of “what our race can do when we really set our minds to do it.” The Godfather of Soul himself, James Brown, described 820 South Michigan Avenue as “the baddest [building] I have ever seen.”[54]

Decline

As unalike as these built spaces and their publications were, the Bee Building at 3647 South State Street and the Johnson Publishing Company headquarters at 820 South Michigan Avenue each made manifest a bold present and a bright future for the Black press in Chicago. Both buildings in their times reinforced the city’s significance as a Black media hub and “the undisputed business capital of Black America.”[55] Both were championed as emblems of Black cultural capacity to “succeed against the odds.”

The very intensity of these associations, however, meant that the downsizing and then closure of the presses left their buildings orphaned; when media buildings remain, but media enterprises fail, it is hard not to reflect on distances between form and function. For the Bee Building, these distances emerged quickly, accelerated by the devastation of the Depression. Indeed, by the early 1930s, many Black Chicagoans saw the building less as proof of ongoing racial achievement than as a relic of Black Chicago’s “golden decade.”[56] The project left Anthony Overton financially vulnerable, and he was forced to sell the Overton Hygienic Building and move his remaining enterprises into 3647 State the year after its completion. The *Chicago Bee* ceased publication around the time of Overton’s death in 1946. Under the leadership of his son, Everett, and his grandson, Anthony Overton III, the company continued to produce cosmetics and retained control of the Bee Building. However, by the 1960s, Overton Hygienic was a shell of its former self, and it dissolved its holdings in 1983.[57] The bulk of the *Bee*’s print archives had already been lost; Black journalist Enoch Waters reports in his memoir that, after Overton’s death, a large chunk of the newspaper’s files were sold as waste paper. By the mid-1980s, the Bee Building was derelict, with its beautiful terracotta being scavenged by thieves.[58]

Covers of *Ebony* (February 1949) [The New York Public Library Digital Collections, in the public domain] and *Jet* (June 18, 1953) featuring model Sara Lou Harris. [The New York Public Library Digital Collections, in the public domain]

By contrast, the Johnson Publishing Company was at its height in the first decades of its tenure at 820 South Michigan Avenue. In 1984, the company was ranked as number one on *Black Enterprise*'s list of the Top 100 Black businesses in the country, displacing Motown Industries.[59] Annual sales surged from around $23 million in 1973 to more than $300 million by 1995; average monthly circulation for *Ebony* increased by around one million over the same period.[60] The steady stream of Black celebrities, politicians, and dignitaries who made their way into and out of 820 South Michigan Avenue included the Staple Singers, who dropped in following an international tour to hold forth on "the plight of Blacks in South Africa." Sidney Poitier took time to sign autographs for "the girls in the subscription department." The Jackson Five brought family and friends for luncheons in the tenth-floor canteen. After his solo career took off, Michael Jackson continued to visit, although "he would always have a disguise and you would never know until he left."[61]

The place was equally popular among less famous sightseers — *Ebony* estimated that, by its second anniversary, 820 South Michigan Avenue had been called on by 200,000 tourists, who "'oo'ed and ah'ed' at the coordinated colors and the designer selected office furniture," marveled at Johnson's executive suite (on the special occasions when they were allowed to enter), and enjoyed the work of Elizabeth Catlett, Loïs Mailou Jones, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Charles White, and other leading Black artists.[62]

As years passed, however, the nonpareil interiors gradually appeared less a vibrant manifestation of cutting-edge Black culture than a time capsule preserving a certain moment in postwar history. Johnson's refusal to update the décor paralleled his laissez-faire approach to the digital revolution, reluctance to inject new blood into an aging editorial team, and dogmatic (even authoritarian) approach to corporate management.[63] Disgruntled employees' descriptions of their boss as an "overseer" and Johnson Publishing as a "plantation" reinforced the image of a brand less concerned with the future than the past.[64] By the late 1990s, cracks had begun to appear on travertine façade, and the company was on shaky economic ground.[65] When Johnson died in 2005, JPC was forced to take a lien on its offices. Five years later, the building was operating at little more than fifty percent capacity, and in 2019 its silent hallways made a sad backdrop to the firm's declaration of bankruptcy.[66]

Columbia College, brochure for the Johnson Legacy Project, 2012. [Courtesy E. James West]

From the vantage point of the mid-1980s and the early 21st century respectively, the fates of the Bee building and the Johnson Publishing headquarters appear almost inevitable. Once proud markers of the rich history of Black publishing in Chicago, they were now "decaying relic[s]" being picked clean, whether by individual vandals or "the buzzards of urban progress."[67] In an era of legacy journalism's decay, the parallel decline of media buildings seems almost too obvious, a lede that writes itself. But this is not the end of the story.

Rebirth

In the case of the Bee Building, positive change has been wrought through community insistence on the site's importance to debates around neighborhood renewal, urban inequality, and African American history. This chapter began in earnest in 1984, when the Commission on Chicago Landmarks announced plans to recommend protection for a section of State Street at the heart of the Black Metropolis.[68] The previous year, the Overton Hygienic Company had closed the doors to the Bee Building for the last time. But the Commission listed it as one of nine historic structures worthy of landmark designation as the "Black Metropolis-Bronzeville District," which now stretches from East 31st to East 39th Streets and from the Dan Ryan Expressway to Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive. Other protected sites included the Overton Hygienic Building, the *Defender*'s former plant on Indiana Avenue, and the Jordan Building, a three-story store and apartment building at East 36th and State. Landmarking alone was not enough to prevent the ongoing theft of exterior brickwork at the Jordan Building, however, and in 1986, it collapsed. Local activists pushed to ensure that the Bee Building would survive, and in 1989, the city purchased the property.[69]

The Bee Branch of the Chicago Public Library, photographed 2013. [Courtesy Eric Allix Rogers via Flickr, under license CC BY-NC-ND 2.0]

First floor of the Bee Branch, Chicago Public Library, 2022. [E. James West]

Initial plans to redevelop the building were thwarted by political intransigence.[70] Finally, in late 1994, the city committed to converting the Bee Building into a branch library. The following year, the *Tribune* reported that the renovation had "created a focal point for residents interested in the history of Bronzeville," and the long-awaited reopening in 1996 was greeted enthusiastically.[71] The redevelopment provided a much-needed community space and, for the library, constituted a major upgrade — the previous branch site had been a group of converted apartments in an East 24th Street housing project.

Perhaps more significantly, the building's adaptation and reuse positioned it as "a cornerstone of Bronzeville's revitalization," and helped to catalyze the purchase and redevelopment of other Black landmarks, including the Overton Hygienic Building, within the historic district.[72] This new life as a branch library marked a continuation of the *Bee*'s editorial emphasis on educational attainment, and rearticulated the paper's role as a "busy and progressive institution" for a modern constituency.[73] Such links were reaffirmed in 2018, after the Bee branch underwent a second multimillion dollar renovation, including the full restoration of exterior brick and tilework. Third Ward Alderman Pat Dowell, who joined the Chicago Public Library Commissioner and other officials at the ribbon-cutting ceremony, described the Bee Branch as "a community anchor."[74]

When Johnson Publishing concluded the sale of 820 South Michigan Avenue to Columbia College Chicago in 2010, it appeared that its headquarters might be heading for a similar transformation. Columbia announced the "Johnson Legacy Project," an ambitious initiative centered on redevelopment of the building to serve as the college's main library. Renamed the as John H. and Eunice W. Johnson Center, 820 Michigan was intended to become the centerpiece of a $20 million legacy campaign that would establish scholarships in journalism, entrepreneurship, marketing, and fashion, and preserve key facets of the structure's interior and exterior designs.[75] However, Columbia quickly ran into financial and logistical difficulties, and the property stood vacant for weeks, then months, then years. Aside from security guards and caretakers, one of the few people to enter during this period was photographer Barbara Karant; working often in freezing conditions by the light of her mobile phone, Karant catalogued the interiors for her series *820 Ebony/Jet*.[76]

Advertisement by 3L Living for studio apartment at 820 South Michigan Avenue, 2019. [Courtesy E. James West]

In 2015, Johnson Publishing announced that the entirety of its photographic archive was on the auction block, and the following year *Ebony* and *Jet* were sold to a Texas-based private equity firm.[77] In 2017, Columbia College cut their losses, and 820 South Michigan Avenue was purchased by a developer, 3l Real Estate, who set about converting the site for residential use. When this renovation was completed, onlookers who had known the JPC showplace were distraught. The extraordinary interiors were gone, replaced by dozens of indistinguishable apartments. It was a literal and metaphorical whitewashing of Black design and business history that paralleled the company's own disintegration.[78] As of this writing, the cheapest unit listed is a 400-square-foot studio for rent at $1,399 per month, in a city where the median income for African American households hovers around $30,000, compared to a median White household income of more than $70,000.[79]

Yet this is not the end of the story either. Galvanized by the failure of Columbia's Johnson Legacy Project, local preservationists pushed for 820 South Michigan Avenue to be protected, and a formal landmark recommendation was adopted by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in October 2017. The interiors were not included in the designation, although exterior features such as the rooftop sign were preserved. Artists, archivists, and collectors rushed into the gap to save parts of the décor. Chief among them was Theaster Gates of the Rebuild Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to combining art and urban redevelopment. Gates' close relationship with Johnson Publishing executive Linda Johnson-Rice helped to secure donation of the corporate library and a diverse range of objects, including much of the furniture from her father's penthouse offices. The Johnson Publishing library is now permanently installed at Stony Island Arts Bank, a once-abandoned community bank that Gates bought from the city of Chicago for $1 in 2012, and transformed into a premier Black arts and archival space.

Barbara Karant, *Floor 3 #6*, from the series *820 Ebony/Jet*, 2013. [Courtesy Barbara Karant]

Barbara Karant, *Floor 10 #9*, from the series *820 Ebony/Jet*, 2013. [Courtesy Barbara Karant]

Other entities stepped in to rescue parts of the interior, among them Landmarks Illinois, a nonprofit historic-preservation organization that brokered donation of the test kitchen to the Museum of Food and Drink in Brooklyn, where it is presently taking center stage in an exhibition titled "African/American: Making the Nation's Table."[80] The future of Johnson Publishing's photographic archive, a vast collection spanning more than four million prints, slides, and negatives, was secured by a nonprofit consortium including the Ford Foundation, the Getty Research Institute, and the Smithsonian, who purchased the material in 2019 and promptly announced plans to make "the most significant collection illustrating African American life in the 20th century" accessible to the general public.[81] The following year, sale of the company's art collection shattered expectations. A seven-panel photo-text piece by the celebrated artist Carrie Mae Weems (*Untitled*, 1996), a meditation on the Great Migration that had been commissioned by the City of Chicago, sold for double the auction house's estimate. This edition of *Untitled* was one of three; in a small irony, one edition remains in Chicago — on display in the Bee Branch of Chicago Public Library.[82]

In the absence of a coherent print archive for the *Bee,* its renovated building endures as a living record of its editorial ambitions. As fragments of the former Johnson Publishing headquarters are dispersed to new locations across the United States, they serve as reminders of the company's extraordinary reach and longevity. At the same time, the struggles over landmarking and preservation of these two buildings demonstrate their continued, and continually shifting, significance to local Black communities that have undergone their own patterns of dispersal and reconstruction. Through their lives and afterlives, in guises old and new, Chicago's Black media buildings continue to shape interactions between race and place. As potent symbols of Black progress and as powerful reminders of dreams both deferred and reconfigured, they afford us insight into the complex relationships between media production, Black enterprise, and racial politics in the making and remaking of the modern American city.

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EDITORS' NOTE

This essay is adapted from *A House for the Struggle: The Black Press and the Built Environment in Chicago*, forthcoming from University of Illinois Press. It appears here courtesy of the author and the publisher.

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