In 1925, Samuel Insull, a British-born American business magnate known for his contributions to creating this country’s integrated electrical infrastructure, announced his plan to build a venue for the Chicago Civic Opera. Insull and his wife, Gladys, avid arts lovers, saw a need for a public space in which great operas could be presented. Including office space attached to the building, the construction for the project began in 1928. Requiring a large chair – sometimes referred to as “Insull’s Throne” – the Civic Opera Building opened on November 4, 1929 (just six days after the stock-market crash). Featured in the February 1930 issue of Popular Mechanics magazine, the building boasted a grand foyer, two theaters, and elegant Art Nouveau and Art Deco architecture. The past 88 years of the building’s presence along the Chicago River have brought a wide variety of performances, events, and presentations that have thrilled audiences and made history.

Top right: The start of construction on Wacker Drive in 1928.

Right: Samuel Insull was the innovator behind the creation of Chicago’s Civic Opera Building.

Far right: The different stages of the building process that was completed November 1929.
Two legends of opera in Chicago were prominently featured during the Civic Opera’s first season in its new building. The inaugural performance was one of Insull’s favorite operas, Verdi’s *Aida*, featuring Polish diva Rosa Raisa in the title role. The opening season also featured a commissioned opera by the young Hamilton Forrest entitled *Camille*. It starred Mary Garden, the Scottish-born soprano who grew up in Chicago and had been the Chicago Civic Opera’s director during the 1921/22 season, when the company was still performing at the Auditorium Theatre. Many other notable singers of the time appeared onstage at the opera house over the next 25 years, including mezzo-soprano Cyrena van Gordon, tenor Tito Schipa, and bass Alexander Kipnis.

The February 1930 issue of *Popular Mechanics* that features an article about the Civic Opera Building. Here are some drawings and photos from the issue featuring the stage, lighting, and other technological advancements of the auditorium.
The cast of Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie. From left to right: Anthony Ross as Jim O’Connor, Laurette Taylor as Amanda Wingfield, Eddie Dowling as Tom Wingfield, and Julie Hayden as Laura Wingfield. Below left: The cover for the original script of the play.

In 1944 the premiere of Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie, took place in the Civic Theatre, the smaller of the Civic Opera Building’s two auditoriums. The production starred the legendary Laurette Taylor. The Chicago Tribune offered a review by Claudia Cassidy with the headline: “Fragile Drama Holds Theater in Tight Spell.” Readers were told of a masterpiece, “a tough little play that knows people and how they tick...vividly written, and in the main superbly acted.” And as for Tennessee Williams’s casting, “He found other people, too, but ah, that Laurette Taylor!”

George Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess was performed at the opera house in 1952. After its tour in the United States, the production toured opera houses in Berlin, Milan, and Moscow – an attempt by the U. S. to improve relations with Russian and the Eastern Bloc. The production starred the budding diva Leontyne Price and William Warfield – a pairing that would later result in their marriage.

Leontyne Price and William Warfield toured throughout the U.S. and Europe portraying the protagonists of Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess.
Beginning with the inaugural season in 1954, Lyric’s performance space has been the opera-house portion of the Civic Opera building (known since 2017 as the Lyric Opera House). The Civic Opera Building has been owned by several entities over the years. In 1993 Lyric purchased the Civic Opera House, the Civic Theatre, and all backstage areas, plus administrative office space. The “Building on Greatness” capital campaign funded the purchase and massive renovations that took place "round the clock during the off-season months over a three-year period. These included the conversion of the Civic Theatre into much-needed scenery-handling, dressing-room, and rehearsal spaces; installation of a backstage truck lift and creation of two gigantic rollup doors to enable access between the opera-house stage and the new scenery-handling area; upgrades to the theater’s acoustics, carpeting, and seating; overhaul of the HVAC system; thorough cleaning of all the brass and crystal fixtures in the opera house; and meticulous hand-restenciling of all the front-of-house art-deco ceilings.

American Ballet Theatre made regular appearances at the opera house throughout the decades. Performances included the classics, among them *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*, and contemporary productions, such as Jerome Robbins’s *Fancy Free*, Paul Taylor’s *Company B*, and Twyla Tharp’s *The Brahms-Haydn Variations*. Kevin McKenzie, ABT’s artistic director since 1992, has referred to Chicago’s opera house as “one of our country’s greatest stages.”

In 1968, the Jimi Hendrix Experience was seen and heard at the opera house. Opening with a cover of The Beatles’ “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” Hendrix featured an exciting set including such hits as “Fire,” “Foxy Lady,” “The Wind Cries Mary,” and as the final song, “Purple Haze.” The performances were received poorly by the *Tribune*. “For one of those who fought and lost, who doesn’t like the albums, who finds Hendrix’s voice bothersome and harsh and the group’s sound fractured and distorted, it posed a curious question: Can destruction and creativity co-exist?”

Dottie West and Kenny Rogers were an unstoppable country music duo who quickly rose to the top of the charts.

At the time that Kenny Rogers and Dottie West appeared at the opera house in 1979, they were one of the biggest duet acts in country music, thanks largely to the album, *Every Time Two Fools Collide*. Their appearance featured music from their second album, *Classics*, including chart-topping covers such as “All I Ever Need Is You” and “Til I Can Make It on My Own.”
The last ten years have seen performances at the Civic Opera House by some of the most famous and talented performers in the world, from Izhak Perlman to Andrew Bird, Björk, and Wilco, to name a few. Many other non-performance events have taken place over the years as well. Innumerable receptions, fundraisers, weddings, and graduations have been hosted in the spaces around the building. The World Series trophy won by the Chicago Cubs in November 2016 was on display in the grand foyer for operagoers to enjoy and photograph.

The prestigious James Beard Foundation Awards Gala has been held in the foyer and theater since 2015. Known as the Oscars of the food world, the James Beard Foundation Awards honor the most talented culinary professionals with the highest honor for food and beverage achievement in United States. Established in 1990, the organization seeks to “recognize culinary professionals for excellence and achievement in their fields and…to celebrate, nurture, and honor America’s diverse culinary heritage.”

The current investment in Lyric’s antiquated stage and backstage equipment – supported by the Breaking New Ground campaign – is bringing the Lyric Opera House up to the highest modern technological, artistic, and safety standards. In the summer of 2016, the company began installing critical upgrades, including the addition of a turntable, three stage lifts, and sixteen point hoists. These improvements align Lyric more closely with its sister opera companies nationally and internationally, allowing Lyric to rent and co-produce productions and create innovative new productions that can be rented to others.

After nearly a century, the grande dame that is the Civic Opera Building still towers majestically over the Chicago River. And the Lyric Opera House continues to shine as one of the city’s preeminent cultural and architectural jewels.

Jay Gummert, Lyric’s dramaturgy intern during the second half of the 2016/17 season, is currently operations associate of Chicago Children’s Choir. He is also worship leader of Urban Village Church in Chicago’s Edgewater area and has performed extensively as a clarinetist, saxophonist, and flutist throughout Chicago.