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THE TOLL RISES

Paths of destruction

A Tribune investigation finds 500 more potential landmarks razed, devastating the character of Chicago's neighborhoods

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One fall morning in 1996, Rev. Earline White heard the grating rumble of a bulldozer outside her home.

Looking through the sheer curtains of her front window, she was shocked to see a demolition crew tearing into the old white farmhouse across the street at 9235 S. Merrill Ave.

Not only had the farmhouse been the home of her longtime friend Helen Walker, who decades earlier had welcomed White when she was one of the first African-Americans to move into the neighborhood. It also was a relic of the community's rural past.

"You heard the noise and you saw them over there destroying it," White recalled as she sat in her living room where she and Walker often traded gossip and recipes. "I was just sick for it. That building was history."

Built in 1893, the farmhouse with the wraparound porch was the only one of its kind left in the middle-class community of Calumet Heights on Chicago's Far South Side -- a vestige of the era when pioneers cleared trees, kept cows and chickens and raised crops. It was the lone building in Calumet Heights that had been included in the 1996 Chicago Historic Resources Survey, a catalog of 17,371 of the city's most significant structures.

White said she learned much of the history of the neighborhood from Walker, whose family had lived in the home for 92 years. "She'd sit and tell me about when all this out here was nothing but farmland," White said.

But Walker moved away, the new owner didn't keep up the building and it fell into disrepair. When the city-hired bulldozer crushed Walker's old frame house to splinters, it also erased a last link between the community and its past. It left behind an empty lot that, more than six years later, remains a jarring gap among the neighborhood's homes.

"It's heartbreaking," said White, who has taken on Walker's role as an informal neighborhood historian.

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"My grandchildren could have learned so much through that home."

The surprise destruction of the farmhouse was far from an isolated incident. The Walker home was one of hundreds of structures that city officials recognized as valuable, but then tore down -- or permitted to be torn down -- anyway. A Tribune computer analysis and investigation shows that the problem, which has devastated the character of Chicago's neighborhoods, is much worse than previously known.

In a three-part series, "A Squandered Heritage," published in January, the Tribune identified 204 buildings on the Chicago Historic Resources Survey that had been destroyed, often at the behest of city officials.

The latest research has found another 500 demolished structures, bringing the total to 704, or 4 percent of the buildings on the survey. Nearly two-thirds of the historic buildings have been replaced by vacant lots and parking lots, a trend that is typical in poor districts such as the Near West Side.

The new accounting of demolitions "confirms the fears we had from the initial sampling [the Tribune] did. . . . Huge blocks of the city are disappearing without notice," said David Bahlman, president of the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, a statewide advocacy group.

"Historic buildings are a non-renewable resource," said Vincent Michael, the director of the historic preservation program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "You can't make more of them. The number can only go down. You can't get Joliet limestone anymore. It doesn't exist. The quarries got tapped out in the 1930s."

City officials defended the record of Mayor Richard M. Daley, saying his administration has designated more than half of all the individual landmarks and landmark districts in Chicago. But they acknowledged that the problem demands their attention.

"Of course it is of concern," Alicia Mazur Berg, the commissioner of the Department of Planning and Development, said of the demolitions. "It's our history. It's our community. It's the quality of materials. It's the quality of the built environment."

An unprecedented effort

The Historic Resources Survey was an unprecedented attempt to catalog the city's architectural and historical treasures. Conducted from 1983 to 1995 at a cost of more than \$1.2 million, the effort dispatched teams of architectural historians and other experts to every corner of Chicago.

Potential landmarks were rated by color code, with red symbolizing structures of national, statewide or citywide significance. Orange represented buildings of local significance. Five other color ratings -- yellow, yellow-green, green, purple and blue -- were assigned to less significant buildings.

But inclusion on the survey granted no protection. Only individual city landmarks and buildings in landmark districts are safeguarded by city law from demolition or defacement. As a result, developers -- and the city itself -- have been free to tear down the structures.

It was necessary to demolish many of the buildings, city officials reiterated, because they had fallen into disrepair and because they harbored gang members and drug dealers. Others fell to make way for newer, larger and more profitable structures.

To be sure, the razed buildings, in some cases, have been replaced by parks, community centers and handsome, well-built structures that are improvements upon buildings that had reached the end of their usable life. But those are exceptions.

On some blocks, such as those east of Wrigley Field, so many new condominium buildings have gone up that the remaining graystone two-flats no longer look like they belong.

Elsewhere, west of the United Center, once-elegant rowhouses have been punched out like a hockey player's teeth, leaving muddy plots of garbage and parked cars between the remaining structures. In other cases, such as the area near the new Cook County Hospital, entire blocks have been leveled.

At the heart of much of the destruction is the city's quick trigger in demolishing an abandoned building - even one with historic or architectural significance. To some critics, it is part of the same pattern as Daley's March 30 middle-of-the-night destruction of the runway at Chicago's small lakefront airport, Meigs Field.

"Just like what happened with Meigs Field -- you close your eyes, and it's gone," said Kenneth Benson, a South Side real estate investor.

The new figures on the razing of historic structures come as evidence mounts that Daley's much-heralded "demolition delay" ordinance will fail to slow the wave of teardowns.

Passed in January by the City Council, the law is designed to prevent a repeat of the fiasco that occurred last year when, with no public debate, the city's Buildings Department issued a demolition permit for the Chicago Mercantile Exchange Building, which was listed on the survey and was prized by preservationists for its well-crafted limestone exterior. Despite vociferous protests, the building is now being torn down.

The new law requires city officials to wait up to 90 days and review alternatives before issuing demolition permits for the most important buildings on the list. When it passed, preservationists predicted that the old Merc would die so that other buildings might live.

Yet of six structures that have been reviewed since January, city officials have approved the demolition of five and are expected to give the go-ahead for the destruction of the sixth. Preservationists didn't contest three of the five cases -- a garage, a two-flat and a public housing apartment building. However, they did seek to save a now-demolished Victorian six-flat at 12 E. Division St. and the structurally unsound spire of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago in Hyde Park.

After the Landmarks Division of the city's Department of Planning and Development was notified on Jan. 27 that the church sought to tear down the spire, preservationists began gearing up to lobby church leaders and raise money for a rehab. Just two weeks later, however, the Landmarks Division approved the demolition, citing the spire's dangerous condition. Though the decision was completely legal -- the law mandates a delay of up to 90 days -- the speed with which it was reached left preservationists aghast.

"They have a 100 percent failure rate," said Jonathan Fine, the president of Preservation Chicago, a city advocacy group. The new law, he said, is "not saving a thing. It's not a 90-day hold. It's 'up to' a 90-day hold. The city gave the illusion that there would be this 90-day negotiation period. It's not true. The 90 days are up to the discretion of the Landmarks Division."

Fine added: "The demolition delay ordinance hasn't saved any more buildings."

City officials said they review each potential landmark individually and that none, so far, has met the standards to become an official landmark. They were justified in acting quickly on the spire, they said, because it represented a threat to public safety.

The Tribune investigation, which began more than a year ago, documented 704 demolished buildings in 46 of the city's 77 community areas. More than 90 percent of the razings have been carried out in the last

decade. The heaviest concentration of destruction was in an arc that curves around the Loop, including the Near West Side, West Town, East Garfield Park, the Near North Side, Lincoln Park and Lake View.

Among the newly documented destroyed buildings was a Gothic church at 4247 N. Sheridan Rd., whose matching bell towers recalled the twin-towered Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, and a Prairie School apartment building at 900 W. Oakdale Ave., whose distinct horizontal lines reflected the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright.

There was, too, a Colonial Revival house at 12144 S. Eggleston Ave., the thin, classical columns of its front porch suggesting how industrial America looked back to a supposedly simpler time as a model for its houses.

These were the sorts of buildings that gave neighborhoods character and distinguished one community from another. They also provided a touchstone to earlier generations of Chicagoans, showing, for example, how stoops were built to the edge of the sidewalk in the days before automobiles. Preservationists rue the cookie-cutter buildings and vacant lots that are replacing them.

"Historically, you lose a sense of how people lived," said Michael, of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "Architecturally, you lose that patina of age -- the wear and tear of time that you can actually see on an old stone building. The problem we have with cookie-cutter buildings is that those cookies are just out of the oven. They don't have what gets added to a building over time."

A need for incentives

Many of the potential landmarks could have been saved if the city and state had provided financial incentives to encourage homeowners and real estate developers to rehabilitate the structures before they fell into disrepair.

Actually, there is such a program. But it is only for Chicago's bungalows, the squat single-family homes whose solid construction, decorative flourishes and affordability have won a new generation of devotees. Under the politically popular 3-year-old preservation program, which appeals to Daley's core middle-class constituency, the city offers thousands of dollars in incentives -- and hundreds of homeowners have taken advantage of them, rehabbing the sturdy brick homes on the city's fringes.

But homeowners and developers are nearly always on their own when it comes to preserving buildings on the city's list of potential landmarks.

Chicago officials have "never formalized a process for saving historically significant structures. Otherwise, [the survey] is a completely meaningless list," said Michael Silver, a Chicago architect and developer who received a preservation award last year from the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.

The destruction of potential landmarks has been carried out block by block, lot by lot, with little of the picketing, protests and other drama that attended the notorious 1972 demolition of Louis Sullivan's Chicago Stock Exchange Building in the Loop. Yet collectively, in the space of less than a decade, the demolitions have transformed entire neighborhoods.

The causes of this trend, and its impact, can be seen in the saga of one of the 500 lost potential landmarks identified by the Tribune's latest research -- 3532 N. Fremont St., a handsome brick two-flat that stood two blocks east of Wrigley Field in the now-trendy Lake View neighborhood.

Built in 1906, with a delicately trimmed wood porch and a flamboyant Queen Anne pinnacle, the two-flat was among hundreds of new homes built in an area that had been dominated in the late 1800s by small celery farms. It was listed in the survey as green. A photograph of the building taken in the 1970s shows a typical scene from the then-working class neighborhood -- Hispanic children playing on the

front steps of the well-maintained home. It would be another decade before young white professionals would move into the neighborhood and dub it "Wrigleyville."

In the early 1990s, as the yuppie influx continued, Forrest Claypool, now a Cook County commissioner, bought the two-flat for about \$250,000, along with his then-wife Laura Sova and her sister. They rented out the building's apartments to working-class tenants.

In 1995, Sova, by then the sole owner, sold the building to Margaret Gallagher, a building materials saleswoman, for \$302,500, city records show. "It was nice to make \$50,000 on something in two years," Sova said.

Around that time, small-scale developers discovered a way to exploit the city's 1957 zoning law, which aimed to maximize population density along the lakefront.

The developers found they could tear down aging apartment buildings and put up much bigger condominium buildings that appealed to young buyers because they were less expensive than free-standing homes and offered more room and amenities than older apartments. They also enabled the builders to rack up six-figure profits in less than a year.

Old buildings on Fremont began falling like dominoes. Eventually, they surrounded Gallagher's two-flat. "There were three huge buildings and my little two-flat in the middle," she said.

Following a trend

Last May, records show, Gallagher sold the two-flat to Robert Rugai, the son of Ald. Ginger Rugai (19th), for \$675,000, a profit of \$372,500.

"I didn't feel as guilty because . . . since I bought the building in 1995, there must have been 10 that were sold before me," Gallagher said. "I was following the trend."

A demolition machine smashed the delicate porch of the two-flat last year and broke apart its brick facade. It took just a day to reduce a building that had stood for nearly a century to a pile of rubble.

Because land values had risen so high, Rugai had to build four condominium units, not three, to make a profit. His actions were governed by what developers and those in real estate call "the Rule of Three": A teardown will pay off if a developer can sell new construction for three times what he paid for the property.

Rugai didn't attain the \$2 million in sales that would have satisfied "the Rule of Three," but he came close, real estate sources familiar with the deal say.

The developer this year sold three units in the building and is expected to complete the sale of the fourth unit within 30 days, these sources say. The total sale value of about \$1.7 million will be enough to make Rugai a profit of roughly \$150,000 to \$200,000, figuring in construction, brokerage and demolition costs, the sources estimate.

Rugai declined to return repeated telephone calls from the Tribune.

The case shows how the pressure of rising land prices makes the teardown trend like a runaway train -- extremely difficult to stop once it picks up steam. The outcome enriches individual investors and reinvigorates city neighborhoods even as it strips blocks of the old buildings that gave them charm in the first place.

Instead of solidly built graystones or brick homes with handcrafted decoration, passersby see the same

towering, red-brick condos, with their featureless fronts and cinderblock sidewalls.

"Look at 'em," exclaimed Sean Geoghegan, a DePaul University senior who was standing on the porch of his parents' home at 3543 N. Fremont. "They're all the same. They build 'em the same. It's the cheapest way to build 'em."

"It's out of character," said Tom Tunney, the newly elected alderman in the 44th Ward, which included the destroyed house on Fremont.

The financial calculus that brought the building down was repeated over and over, in gentrifying neighborhoods such as West Town, Lincoln Park, Lake View and Logan Square.

Trading 19 old for 18 new

In Lake View, the community area that includes the Fremont block, 19 buildings on the survey were demolished and 18 have been replaced -- nearly all by new condominium buildings. East of Halsted Street and toward the lakefront, the new structures rise as tall as six stories, dwarfing nearby Victorian storefronts and frame houses.

The teardown trend is sure to spread, even though city officials are proposing zoning reforms that in some areas would limit the number of condo units on a typical lot to two. That move, they predict, will reduce the "development pressure" on historic buildings and encourage developers to rehab them.

But not all neighborhoods will be protected when the new zoning map is drawn up. Developers are certain to flock to the ones where they can keep building the three- and four-flat condos.

"Developers are like ants. If you put the cover on the Bundt cake on the picnic table, they'll just move to the potato salad," said Silver, the architect and developer.

"There's no fighting it," said Sean Conlon, a partner at the Chicago-based real estate firm Century 21 Sussex & Reilly, which represented Rugai at 3532 N. Fremont. "A lot of these guys are entrepreneurs. They will find new places to build."

While rising neighborhood fortunes doomed the home on Fremont, it was poverty, neglect and a lack of civic imagination that led to the city-directed destruction of three once-elegant Queen Anne rowhouses on California Avenue, in the East Garfield Park neighborhood about a mile west of the United Center.

The three were among five rowhouses at 16-24 S. California Ave. that were built in 1883 and rated orange on the city's survey.

German-born architect William Strippelman, who served as a draftsman for Union Gen. George Thomas during the Civil War, designed the cluster of two-story homes with a single limestone facade. The row featured projecting bay windows, terra cotta trim and pressed metal cornices with a triangular feature, called a pediment, originally found on Greek temples.

Strippelman was a member of an informal fraternity of top-notch neighborhood architects. While not in the class of their more famous contemporaries, such as Louis Sullivan, Strippelman and his colleagues were instrumental in giving shape to the rapidly growing city during the boom years of the 1880s.

"They are architects who did a lot of high-end neighborhood work," Chicago architectural historian Tim Samuelson said. "These are the architects who really built the neighborhoods."

But as waves of immigrants poured into East Garfield Park -- the Irish in the 1920s, the Italians in the '30s and African-Americans in the '50s and '60s -- the quality of its housing stock declined and the

neighborhood eventually became mired in poverty.

Like many poor Chicago communities, it was afflicted with an epidemic of abandoned buildings as owners, unable or unwilling to pay to maintain their structures, simply left them to the elements and vandals. That's what happened at 18, 22 and 24 S. California, according to neighbors and Buildings Department records.

All three of the rowhouses had been left vacant and open to the elements, and two had suffered fire damage, according to department spokeswoman Breelyn Pete. There also was the problem of crime.

"They used to sell drugs out there 24 hours a day," said Peter Gritzanis, a developer who was rehabilitating a 114-year-old apartment building and coach house across California from the Strippelman homes.

James Reed, 69, who lives in one of the remaining rowhouses, said, "It was wide open. Anybody could be in there and come out and rob you."

In May 1996, the city moved against 24 S. California. Using its fast-track demolition program that allows officials to bypass court proceedings and raze a structure deemed unsafe or a haven for criminal activity, the city sent a wrecking crew that quickly crushed to dust the limestone, terra cotta, wood and plaster of the structure.

Nearly four years later, in February 2000, another city-hired demolition company was at the site, ripping down the rowhouses at 18 and 22 S. California.

Where there had once been a unified row of townhomes, now just two of the rowhouses, 16 and 20 S. California, are left. They stand like islands in a sea of muddy vacant lots. Their limestone facades have jagged edges, looking as if a giant's hand had reached down and ripped the missing buildings out.

"It's as if you tore down 60 percent of a building. What you have left looks incomplete," said Michael, of the School of the Art Institute. "Until someone does fill in those spaces, it conveys decay."

Desolate scenes such as the one on California Avenue can be found on parcels throughout Chicago that once held architectural treasures.

Among the 500 demolished buildings tracked in the latest Tribune investigation, 37 are parking lots, and 286 are vacant lots where garbage collects, weeds bloom in profusion and beaten-up autos rust away. The pattern is typical in the poorer neighborhoods away from the lakefront.

In East Garfield Park, new structures have gone up on only two of the 44 parcels where buildings on the city survey once stood. In North Lawndale, none of 19 lost potential landmarks has been replaced by a new structure, and, in Englewood, none of 18.

In the community called the Near West Side, 26 new buildings have gone up on sites where potential landmarks once stood. But there are 120 other sites that remain empty lots or parking lots.

Neighborhood groups say the swath of destruction amounts to a new form of the urban renewal programs of the 1960s, which wiped out entire neighborhoods to make way for expressways and public housing. At the time, African-Americans bitterly referred to urban renewal as "Negro removal."

"It's a very bad trend," said LaDonna Redmond, president of the Institute for Community Resource Development, a West Side group. "It leaves space in the community for gentrification to occur cheaply."

Berg dismissed claims that the city is destroying neighborhoods to make way for gentrification. Its goal

in tearing down decrepit buildings is not to drive people out, but to foster community resurgence, she said, explaining that the housing market ultimately determines the changing character of neighborhoods.

"It's part of the yin and yang of the city's rebirth," she said. "I think it's good for the city."

Indeed, some residents prefer demolition. Rosa Pugh, 83, who has lived at 16 S. California for 52 years, was glad to see the Strippelman rowhouse next to her home come down.

"It had to go because it was an abandoned building," she said.

Yet her well-maintained home, with its new front porch and its recent tuckpointing, is evidence that the dilapidation and abandonment that led to the razing of the three rowhouses had been far from inevitable.

Indeed, just across the street, renovation is proving handsomely profitable.

Gritzanis, one of the first developers to move into the area, paid \$25,000 for his red-brick apartment building and coach house in 1996. He did an extensive renovation of the two structures, putting in marble kitchen floors and expensive sink fixtures. A recent appraisal, he said, indicated they are now worth \$395,000.

Pointing to such success stories, preservationists say that East Garfield Park and similar neighborhoods are at a crossroads: The housing renaissance that's washing over them could help save historic buildings -- or it could lead to a repeat of the unbridled development that happened in Lake View and other gentrifying communities.

"We see this as kind of a mixed blessing," said Royce Yeater, the director of the Chicago-based Midwest office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "A certain amount of new housing and new development in those areas is good. But when the neighborhood gets hot, then it starts to accelerate gentrification, and drive out people and cause the demolition of properties that are rehabbable." Soaring land values, he said, tend to encourage people to erect bigger homes that are out of character with the neighborhood -- exactly what happened in the 3500 block of North Fremont.

On the Far South Side, Calumet Heights has neither the poverty of East Garfield Park nor the gentrification of Lake View. It is a solidly middle-class neighborhood that includes Pill Hill, a community of affluent doctors and other professionals. Abandoned buildings are rare, and vacant lots rarer.

Seven years ago, when the 113-year-old farmhouse at 9235 S. Merrill Ave. was vandalized, damaged and left vacant, Rev. Earline White and other neighbors wanted to save it. But their pleas to city officials to board up the building came to nothing.

For most of its existence, the farmhouse had been the home of the Langner family, recalled Rudolph Langner, 83, who now lives in Florida.

But, by the early 1990s, Langner said, his sister, Helen Walker, a widow in her 80s who was sharing the home with an older half sister, was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. So he and his wife moved the two women to Florida, where Walker later died.

For \$10,000, a real buy

After dumping old furniture and nearly a century's accumulation of possessions into a huge metal trash container in front, the Langners sold the building to Silas Swope, a salesman who was beginning to dabble in real estate. The cost, according to county records: \$10,000.

Swope, who now lives in a painstakingly restored graystone on Martin Luther King Drive that is listed on the Historic Resources Survey, said he fell in love with the farmhouse as soon as he saw it. "I was going down the street, and it caught my eye: `Oh, this is nice!'" Swope said. "I liked the stature [of the building]. It was like something out of a western movie."

Swope planned to restore the home -- that is, until he learned that it would cost him as much as \$60,000 to do so. Then, he lost interest, and let it sit for months without visiting the site.

Unfortunately for the farmhouse, neighborhood residents, who picked through the garbage container after the Langners left, found money -- hundreds of dollars, according to White -- hidden among the junk. This, she said, apparently prompted thieves to pull a truck up to the rear of the building and go through the empty home, stripping it of anything valuable.

Then, one morning, the neighbors looked out to see water flowing out of the home's front door, seemingly from broken pipes on the second floor or an open faucet. The water appeared to have been running for several days and to have caused widespread damage to the home, White said.

So, White, a former social worker for the city and now pastor of the Second Corinthians Church of Christ at 7909-13 S. Wood St., got on the phone to the Buildings Department, telling them to get someone out to turn off the water. "Me and the neighbors, we wanted it boarded up because we wanted it preserved," White said.

But one morning, White and other community residents looked out to see a demolition crew, working from the rear of the farmhouse, grinding the frame structure -- and an irreplaceable remnant of the neighborhood's history -- to dust.

Swope, who was living elsewhere on the South Side, knew nothing about it.

"I received no indication they were going to tear it down," he said. "They said they left me a note on the property itself."

But the first Swope knew of the destruction was when he drove past the address to check on his investment.

"I went by, and, all of a sudden, I looked and it was gone!" Swope said. "I was kind of shocked, and I was kind of moved by it. I said, `Oh, what happened to my home?'"

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