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A SQUANDERED HERITAGE

Part 3: The alternatives

Preserve and protect: Chicago has a national reputation for guarding marquee landmarks, but New York could teach the city a thing or two

Third in a three-part series

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NEW YORK -- Anyone who is satisfied with the way Chicago protects its historic landmarks should hitch a ride to New York City in a tractor-trailer loaded with refrigerated steer carcasses.

They'll arrive in the dead of night on the cobblestone streets of Manhattan's Gansevoort Market, where meatpackers have been plying their broad-shouldered trade along the Hudson River for more than a century.

While some Chicagoans quietly shun the "Hog Butcher for the World" label, that Carl Sandburg hung on the city, many businesses and residents in Gansevoort are loudly embracing their meatpacking past.

For more than two years, advocates have been fighting to turn this working-class neighborhood northwest of Greenwich Village into a historic district. Their arguments have caught the ear of city officials, who have begun preparing to designate the area a landmark.

As the sidewalks oozed green with cleaning fluid one recent morning, and the meatpacking plants disgorged fat and bone that would be turned into soap and fertilizer, proponents stood outside explaining the reasoning behind the proposal.

"It's an entire area composed of what I would call `everyday masterpieces,'" said Thomas Mellins, an architectural historian.

He pointed to the area's one- and two-story meat processing plants, which have metal awnings supporting a pulley system of meat hooks that bring carcasses into the plants. Other meat market buildings in the area were designed by architects who endowed them with neo-Greek sills and lintels and other stylistic flourishes. Among the architects: Boring and Tilton, the firm that designed the Immigration Station on Ellis Island.

"What you are preserving is rooted in the architecture, but it is about the place," Mellins said. "It

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represents a new level of sophistication that the preservation movement understands--place is worth preserving, too."

In Chicago, however, far too many "everyday masterpieces" are being discarded like so much gristle.

The city has a national reputation for being a vigilant protector of marquee landmarks designed by such renowned architects as Frank Lloyd Wright and Daniel Burnham. But Chicago is much less careful about safeguarding the lesser-known architectural gems, that give its neighborhoods their character.

Hundreds are gone, a Tribune investigation has discovered, even though the city, in a 12-year study it conducted that cost more than \$1.2 million, identified them as architecturally or historically important. The demolished structures--more than 200--ranged from Spanish Baroque theaters to Georgian mansions to Queen Anne taverns.

Chicago "is one of the largest cities with one of the greatest architectural traditions," said Jim Peters, a former landmarks staffer in Chicago and director of planning for the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, a statewide advocacy group.

When it comes to historic preservation, he said, the city "deserves more than what it has."

On Thursday, the Chicago City Council is expected to approve a proposal sponsored by Mayor Richard M. Daley that will place a 90-day hold on demolition permits for buildings that are rated red or orange, the two highest categories assigned by the city's color-coded survey. During those 90 days, the matter would be referred to the city's Landmarks Division, which could give the building landmark protection, effectively halting demolition. At best, though, Daley's plan will have minimal impact, not only because many structures are raised illegally, without demolition permits, but also because the proposal is full of loopholes.

As alternative approaches around the city and country show, there's much more that can be done to counter the demolition machine that is devastating Chicago's neighborhoods and is doing even more harm in cities such as Detroit. That machine is fueled by government officials who tear down structures they deem unsafe and by developers who are replacing small old ones with huge new structures that dwarf their neighbors.

The alternatives grow from a different set of assumptions than those governing the actions of officials and developers in Chicago: Everyday buildings can be as important as architectural masterpieces in defining a city's character. As U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) stated in a letter to city officials supporting the meat market as a historic district: "The remaining vestiges of this industry still permeate this eclectic neighborhood, giving it a flavor like no other."

The noise and stench

Illustrating how Chicago often fails to grasp that philosophy, officials have pushed meat markets out of gentrifying neighborhoods such as Lake View after young professionals complained about the noise of trucks and the stench that Upton Sinclair, in "The Jungle," described as "an elemental odor, raw and crude."

The same situation is playing out differently in New York's working-class Gansevoort Market neighborhood, where boutiques, galleries and fine restaurants are moving in next door to the meatpackers that have defined the area for so long. But here, instead of trying to drive the meatpackers out, many residents are working with them to protect the diverse neighborhood that Gansevoort has become.

After dark an active night life swings into action, with coarse biker bars such as Hogs & Heifers and

trendy nightclubs setting the tone for the neighborhood.

By 2 a.m., as the clubs are closing, the meatpackers take over the streets. Shipments of carcasses and boxed meat from Chicago and elsewhere come in, and the scraps are hauled out.

The 24-hour cycle is not tearing the neighborhood apart. It may be what saves it. Those seeking historic designation want to preserve everything that has evolved here.

"You can't have a meat market without meat people," said Robert S. Wilkins, owner of Lamb Unlimited Inc. on Washington Street in the Gansevoort district, down the block from Hogs & Heifers.

"We were here first. But we all feed off of each other."

Wilkins is undecided whether he supports designation as a historic district. As a business owner, he's wary of any new layer of city bureaucracy.

But he knows that developers are eyeing the neighborhood for huge residential towers that would be out of character with the low-slung packing plants. And he knows that no matter how "quaint" new residents might think the meatpackers are when they move in, soon they'll get a whiff of that "elemental odor" Sinclair described.

"It would put us out of business," he said. "The presence of residential creates problems. Our industry at night has certain noises, certain odors, certain dangers. You wouldn't want children running around with all these trucks on the street."

Rather than dismissing the meat market's advocates as hopelessly nostalgic, New York officials are working closely with them.

Mary Beth Betts, director of research at the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, said the studies conducted by Mellins and other supporters of a meat market historic district have helped persuade the city to give the proposal full consideration.

"You do have a very unique sense of place there," Betts said.

"It's not about stopping change," added Jo Hamilton, co-chair of the Save Gansevoort Market group pushing designation as a historic district. "Change has been very much a part of this neighborhood."

"In the end, it's about the meatpackers," she said. "It's about the fact this is a working neighborhood. There are not trash baskets on the corners. There are not trees trying to make anything pretty. There is no pretense here. People are working. You see it. You feel it."

The effort to save such landmarks evolved quickly after the dawn of the preservation movement here, which was spurred by the destruction of New York's grandly scaled, Beaux-Arts Penn Station in 1963 and led to the creation of New York's landmarks commission in 1965. Today, the New York preservation movement is a political powerhouse, one that is every bit a match for the city's clout-heavy developers.

You could even call it a preservation machine.

The New York Landmarks Preservation Commission has jurisdiction over 79 historic districts and more than 22,000 historic properties, including buildings in historic districts and 1,109 individual landmarks. That's nearly 3 percent of all the buildings in the city.

By comparison, Chicago is very much the Second City, with 35 historic districts and more than 4,800

historic properties, including buildings in historic districts and 178 individual landmarks. That's roughly 1 percent of the city's building stock.

In other words, New York has given legal protection to the same percentage of structures that Chicago merely identified in the historic buildings survey between 1983 and 1995.

Chicago listed 17,371 buildings in the survey, including thousands that already were protected as city landmarks. The rest got no safeguards, and now, a simple spot check of 23 of the city's 77 community areas by the Tribune found more than 200 of them are gone.

More personnel

Another revealing difference: The size of New York's landmark commission staff, 48 compared with the equivalent of 10 1/2 in Chicago.

The big staff is needed to review permits for the city's sprawling array of landmarks, yet it also allows New York to undertake such ambitious efforts as the 2,000-building Upper West Side Historic District, which ranges from the clifflike wall of apartment towers along Central Park West to busy storefronts along Columbus Avenue. The district took nine years of fieldwork, meetings with residents, and other work by 15 commission staffers.

"New York seems to allocate the resources that are needed there," said Peters, of the Landmarks Preservation Council.

The impact of the New York landmarks staff is magnified because for years it has cultivated a strong working relationship with the city's Department of Buildings -- even though that department is charged with building the new rather than saving the old.

For example, if the preservation commission learns that a building it might want to protect is in danger of demolition, it informally asks officials in the buildings department to hold off until a decision can be made about its worthiness as a landmark.

That sort of cooperation has been fostered at the highest levels of city government.

"It comes from the top," said Sherida Paulsen, the immediate past chair of the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission. "A mayor or city manager has to say landmarks are important to our city."

In Chicago, by contrast, a lack of cooperation between the Buildings Department and the Landmarks Division sparked a furor last year when the billionaire Crown family asked for -- and received -- a permit to demolish the Chicago Mercantile Exchange Building at 300 W. Washington St. Preservationists were enraged that the Mercantile Exchange, which was rated orange in the Chicago survey, was given a death sentence with no debate.

The chief reason for the disparity between the two cities: New York, unlike Chicago, has a vast network of preservation activists, and they speak early and often on behalf of historic buildings, large and small.

City Hall gets the message.

"There's a really good preservation advocacy network in New York City," Paulsen said. "When I talked to the commission staff in Chicago, they said they felt there wasn't as much neighborhood interest and support in Chicago. We get phone calls from people saying, 'This work is going on -- do you know about it?'"

"It's like a spy network," Paulsen said. "But it works."

Alan Solomon, for example, has 211 Pearl St. in lower Manhattan under surveillance.

A real estate broker and amateur historian, Solomon was asked by tenants of the Pearl Street building to look into its history when they began hearing rumblings about its impending doom.

He discovered that it was built in 1832 by William Colgate -- founder of the Colgate-Palmolive soap company. The five-story Greek Revival structure at one time was a prominent building in the city's wholesale dry goods district. It became one of the few buildings of its kind to survive a devastating 1835 fire in New York.

But the building is not designated a landmark, and so had no official protection under New York law.

Last month, according to Solomon, a developer got a permit to demolish the building to make way for an apartment tower.

When Solomon learned of those plans, he contacted a citywide preservation group, which contacted the developer and the Landmarks Preservation Commission -- setting in motion a chain of events that is common in New York.

Now, city officials are negotiating with the developer to see how the building can be preserved. Since those talks are under way, officials would not comment on the case, or even confirm whether a demolition permit had been issued. Although the building's fate is still uncertain, past experience in New York suggests that its chances for survival are good.

"I'm a lay person awakened to the value of preservation," Solomon said. "What it means to the city, and how we make decisions about what to keep and not to keep and what we will pass on to other generations."

This individual activism is backed by a panoply of institutions, from neighborhood groups to community councils to citywide organizations such as the Municipal Arts Society, which has spun off an advocacy group for historic districts and another group that raises money for historic preservation.

The New York Landmarks Conservancy, a 30-year-old private non-profit group, provides about \$1 million per year in low-interests loans and another \$800,000 to \$1 million in grants that help building owners with the upkeep of landmark buildings. And the conservancy provides technical assistance.

Preserving in poor neighborhoods

Some historic districts are in the poorer neighborhoods of Harlem and Brooklyn, where owners often have trouble getting bank loans needed to maintain their buildings. Typically, homeowners are eligible for loans of between \$40,000 and \$100,000 from the conservancy. Businesses and cultural groups also are eligible.

"A lot of it is for roof repairs," said Peg Breen, president of the conservancy. "Masonry repairs. Shoring up a foundation."

No similar group has arisen to help finance historic preservation in Chicago.

While New York illustrates one path of preservation for Chicago, Detroit embodies the opposite route. It is a city where, on many blocks, there are more vacant lots than buildings. This should come as no surprise. The city's automotive industry has shaped a mind-set that old is bad and new is good, so historic preservation has taken a back seat to demolition.

"This is the city of the annual new model," said William Worden, director of the city advisory board that reviews historic buildings.

For decades, as its white population fled to the suburbs and left acres of vacant buildings behind, Detroit bulldozed thousands of those structures, including some that might have wound up on the National Register of Historic Places.

Demolition is so much a part of the city's culture that in 2001, when he was running for mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick pledged to knock down 5,000 abandoned and dangerous buildings in his first year in office. After he was elected, he found there wasn't enough money in the budget to fuel such a ravenous demolition machine.

Even so, Detroit spent \$8.5 million last year knocking down 1,995 dangerous buildings. On one street that Worden's department surveyed, officials found that 90 percent of the houses were gone.

Some neighborhoods are so devastated that officials simply write them off. They search these areas for potential National Register structures -- not so much in hope of placing them on the coveted list, but to ensure that such buildings aren't there. The reason: Areas without them can be bulldozed more quickly.

There are alternatives to the demolition machine, however -- some of them already being practiced in Chicago.

One example is in the South Side ward of Ald. Toni Preckwinkle (4th), which is dotted with graystones, red brick rowhouses and Queen Annes. But in the 1980s, it was on its way to becoming another Detroit.

Under the previous alderman, Tim Evans, the city was razing the ward's old buildings rather than saving them. "We have a wonderful community that had been nibbled away over the years," Preckwinkle said.

Now the ward contains three landmark districts -- two of which are unusual because they are not composed of entire blocks of historic structures, but rather are made up of clusters of buildings over a large area.

As an option to tearing down the neighborhood and starting with a blank slate, the buildings in the landmark districts act as a model for new construction. Developers fill in the gaps between them.

"Here's my favorite in-fill housing," Preckwinkle said as she pulled up to two new three-flats at 4510 and 4512 S. Greenwood Ave., both mirror images of a neighboring 110-year-old Gothic Revival three-flat at 4514 S. Greenwood, with its domed turrets, balcony and columns.

There is much that the city could be doing instead of razing old buildings. Preckwinkle said the city should have a program that bricks up abandoned buildings, the equivalent of mothballing them for future use. That can be expensive and involves the problem of officials having to monitor and maintain the buildings.

Another alternative to rampant demolition can be found in the Near Northwest Side enclave of Ukrainian Village, where residents banded together after mammoth new apartment buildings began eroding the character of their community. That character was exemplified by tidy brick cottages and two-flats, with small but carefully maintained front gardens.

Standing in front of a massive eight-flat at 2140 W. Haddon Ave., longtime resident George Matwyszyn said: "This totally disrupts the neighborhood character of our village here. . . . You probably had a bungalow there before."

Matwyszyn was a leader in the yearlong effort to have a portion of the community designated a

landmark. Nearly a dozen coffees were held block by block to sell the idea to residents. At least 20 people were at each coffee, and no opposition was raised, clearing the way for Ald. Ted Matlak (32nd) to embrace the idea.

"We felt it was the only way to preserve our neighborhood from the construction companies and developers," Matwyshyn said.

The effort was crowned with success on Dec. 4 when the City Council designated much of the northern part of Ukrainian Village as a landmark. Local preservationists are now trying to have another large section of the area given landmark designation.

To be sure, landmark districts are not universally loved. Many property owners oppose the districts because they have to get permission from bureaucrats for even minor alterations to the exteriors of their homes and businesses.

But property values for homes in historic districts typically are higher than those for comparable homes outside the districts, a recent study in New York by the city's Independent Budget Office showed.

Boosting economic growth

And in some commercial districts that have been given landmark status, designation has helped trigger economic growth.

Perhaps New York's best known example is SoHo, with its classic cast-iron architecture. In the 30 years since it was designated a historic district, SoHo has morphed from a den of artists to quirky little stores, then to boutiques and then fancier stores.

"It still has the beautiful 19th Century architecture," said Simeon Bankoff, the director of the Historic Districts Council, a coalition of 125 preservation groups. "It is a good thing. We saved that place. And today it is vibrant. On the other hand, you have the big "g" word -- gentrification."

Landmark designation was even more directly responsible for the economic explosion of Manhattan's Ladies' Mile, about 150 buildings stretching from 16th Street to 23rd Street between 6th Avenue and Broadway. The district consists mainly of 19th Century commercial buildings, including the city's first department stores.

By the 1970s and 1980s, many were vacant or underused. Residents began pushing for a historic district, arguing that the commercial buildings should be preserved before they were demolished or altered too significantly. Historic designation came in 1989.

Today, the buildings of Ladies' Mile are filled with tenants, like a Barnes and Noble and home furnishing stores, that were perfectly suited to the cavernous spaces of the former department stores.

"It seemed kind of rundown before," Bankoff said. "Now, it doesn't at all. It's bright and vibrant, with a lot of economic activity that was spurred by making it a historic district."

What about Chicago?

Can Chicago replicate such turnarounds?

If the city broadened its commitment to historic preservation, would it see more of the successes that New York has routinely accomplished?

In Chicago, the controversy over the Mercantile Exchange Building led to Daley's proposal for a 90-day

delay on demolition permits for certain structures listed in the city's color-coded survey. But the question is whether Chicago will use that measure as a jumping-off point to craft a more meaningful package of reforms.

"We know that this isn't going to stop the demolition of all orange-rated buildings, but it will give us our day in court," said Jonathan Fine, the president of Preservation Chicago, an advocacy group.

"Our work is not done. It's just beginning."

The place to start is to recognize that Chicago has entered a new era of landmark preservation.

Preservationists long ago won the battle to save high-style masterpieces like Wright's Robie House or Burnham's Reliance Building.

Now the most important challenge is to safeguard the "everyday masterpieces" that lend the city's neighborhoods their distinctiveness.

While Daley's amendment is likely to protect the mayor from future political embarrassments, such as the Mercantile Exchange, the real issue is: How many potential landmarks will it protect?

Are city officials ready to let the amendment be the start of a discussion on what else needs to be done -- or will they use it to close the door on debate about the direction of landmark preservation in Chicago?

The questions don't stop at City Hall -- they're also directed at Chicago's nearly 2.9 million residents.

Are they willing to enlist in a "spy network" that watches over all corners of the city, not just those in the spotlight? Would the wealthier ones pony up to create a loan fund for landmarks? Would they organize coffees and lobby to protect their neighborhood gems, as their fellow Chicagoans in Ukrainian Village did?

Real estate agents and developers sell Ukrainian Village to outsiders because of its character, Matwyshyn said as he walked through the neighborhood. But the tendency to tear down old structures and replace them with overlarge new ones damages that character.

"They're destroying what they came here for," he said. "The people are coming here because it's a neighborhood. It's not a transient hotel. You don't roll in and roll out."

He paused at a tall, incredibly thin four-story building at 2033 W. Iowa St., newly built and looming over nearby two-flats. "My daughter calls it the 'Pencil Building,'" he said.

Such ungainly structures are extracting a toll on neighborhoods, residents and all of Chicago.

"We lose something in the transition that has no monetary value," Matwyshyn said.

"And, once it's lost, it's lost."

Tribune reporter Nathan Bierma contributed to this story.

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