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A SQUANDERED HERITAGE

Part 1: The threat to neighborhoods

Research and destroy: Developers and city officials have sent to the scrap heap the very treasures they vowed to preserve

First in a three-part series

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Tribune staff reporters

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Twenty years ago, the city of Chicago launched a mission never undertaken before by any major American community.

It dispatched teams of architectural experts to examine every last one of the city's buildings -- nearly half a million.

Their charge: To inventory all the architectural jewels, some well known, most unheralded, strung along 3,676 miles of streets, then color-code them according to their aesthetic and historical value.

The survey took 12 years and cost more than \$1.2 million. In that time, the experts turned up thousands upon thousands of sparkling gems.

There was, for example, the ornate movie house that enlivened life along 47th Street near the old Chicago Stockyards; the neo-classical office building that rose majestically above the squatting storefronts of the West Side; and the Art Deco bank that graced Rogers Park with exquisitely crafted stone details, including a stylized figure of a man holding a sun.

Each of the three buildings was historically and architecturally significant, the city declared when it published the results of the survey in 1996. In time, the city said, the structures could be designated official Chicago landmarks and be protected forever from demolition or defacement.

Now they are gone.

And so are hundreds of others, a nine-month Tribune investigation has found.

Mayor Richard M. Daley and his administration have failed to back up the survey with the necessary protections, and in essence have encouraged the rampant demolition of buildings they purportedly had sought to preserve.

Hundreds of buildings have been smashed to bits, carted off to dumps, buried in the ground, the shards

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of their decoration destroyed or sold to salvagers who peddled them to art museums, restaurants and affluent homeowners.

A simple spot-check of some of the more than 17,000 buildings listed as significant by the survey, conducted by Tribune reporters driving and walking through randomly selected Chicago neighborhoods, identified more than 200 structures that have been destroyed -- often, as further investigation showed, with the knowledge and approval of the city.

The demolished structures -- Beaux-Arts commercial buildings, Chateausque rowhouses, Georgian mansions, Queen Anne taverns, Romanesque churches, Spanish Baroque theaters -- stretched from Rogers Park on the north to Roseland on the south, from the Gold Coast on the east to Austin on the west.

There were enough to fill a small town.

The demolitions have punched gaping holes in the city's poor neighborhoods while radically altering the character of more affluent ones.

They have cost taxpayers millions of dollars. They have been carried out by companies that stock mayoral and aldermanic campaign chests. And, in many cases, they have been done without permits, violating the law.

The total number of razings is assuredly much larger than those found by the Tribune reporters' random sampling -- hundreds, perhaps thousands, more. But the actual number is unknown because city officials say that they cannot put together a digital list of demolitions that would enable the Tribune to determine how many potential landmarks have been destroyed.

The record of the demolished buildings contrasts starkly with the national acclaim Daley has received for saving such high-profile gems as the clifflike wall of Michigan Avenue buildings across from Grant Park.

It also indicates that a Daley-sponsored amendment to the city's building code, trumpeted as a means to save historic buildings and expected to be approved by the City Council on Thursday, will have far less impact than city officials suggest.

The measure would delay the issuance of a demolition permit for 6,200 buildings but would not provide that protection for thousands of others on the city's survey. Even the buildings that supposedly are safeguarded are likely to remain at risk because of loopholes in the law and because some buildings are razed illegally -- without city permits.

"We have what is tantamount to stealth demolition," said David Bahlman, president of the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, a statewide advocacy group. "You can protect 11 blocks on Michigan Avenue and everybody sees it and everybody knows about it. But you can go down to 79th Street and demolish a whole block of buildings and nobody knows about it."

Erosion of character

The demolitions are eliminating affordable housing at a time when it is in short supply in Chicago and are eroding the character of the city's once-distinct communities -- Bucktown, with its workers' cottages; Bronzeville, with its mansions; Wrigleyville, with its graystones; the Near West Side, with its rowhouses.

This housing stock, together with its commercial complement, gave Chicago its cherished reputation as a city of neighborhoods.

But now, that distinctiveness is being devastated by an unlikely combination of tear-down trends that are wreaking havoc nationwide -- one that is replacing small homes with massive new ones in wealthy suburbs such as Hinsdale and affluent neighborhoods such as Lake View, the other that is erasing dilapidated houses in places such as Detroit and Chicago's West Side, turning entire blocks into vast prairies.

"They're two different dynamics, but they're equally devastating to a neighborhood," said Adrian Scott Fine, a senior program officer for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, who recently completed a study of tear-downs in more than 100 communities nationwide.

"It's the homogenization of urban America," added Royce Yeater, the director of the Trust's Chicago-based Midwest office. "All cities look alike."

Preservationists and other experts contend that the Daley administration is operating a two-track policy, saving high-profile buildings to polish downtown's image for tourists and conventioners, but doing little to preserve the humble two-flats and the grand Queen Annes, the sacred churches and the bawdy taverns, that once were the stuff of everyday life.

"The Loop is the heart and the neighborhoods are the muscle. But we're letting the neighborhoods atrophy," said Jonathan Fine, president of Preservation Chicago, a fledging activist group. (He is no relation to Adrian Scott Fine of the National Trust.)

In Daley's defense . . .

Defending Daley's record, Alicia Mazur Berg, commissioner of the city's Planning and Development Department, gave Tribune reporters a list of 12 landmark buildings and districts approved in 2002.

All but four, however, were downtown or in gentrifying neighborhoods.

"You have to do a sort of triage," she said. "We can't be everywhere."

Nonetheless, Berg acknowledged that she was chagrined at the hundreds of lost buildings from the survey.

"We're talking about the basic community character of Chicago," she said. "There's always this tension between new development and preserving the old."

Other officials argued that the buildings torn down by the city were in danger of falling down or provided havens for gangs and drug dealers. "We don't demolish for the sake of demolition," said Buildings Department Commissioner John A. Roberson.

But Lydia Mohead lives in a once-decrepit Queen Anne rowhouse at 3920 S. Prairie Ave., which was listed on the historic buildings survey and was recently rehabbed by a private developer. Mohead, 32, credits the rehab for much more than putting a roof over her head.

"This building had been abandoned for a long time," she said. "Residents on both sides were battling rats because of it. When [the developer] came in and rehabbed the building, the battle was over. It was a functional property again."

This case, experts say, shows that many decrepit buildings can -- and should -- be saved, even if their destruction appears inevitable.

"Buildings that might to the inexperienced eye be beyond redemption are, in fact, quite often rehabbed

at a reasonable cost," said Yeater of the National Trust.

Among other findings of the Tribune's investigation:

- Since Daley became mayor in 1989, the pace of destruction has accelerated rapidly, reflecting the city's building boom and Daley's preference for quickly tearing down structures deemed to be structurally unsound or havens for criminals. Of the more than 200 demolitions identified by the Tribune, the city was able to provide demolition permit dates for 164. Only nine of those permits were issued during the tenure of former mayors Harold Washington and Eugene Sawyer. The rest were authorized under Daley.
- Many buildings in Chicago are razed illegally, with wrecking crews failing to obtain demolition permits. Of the 200-plus demolished potential landmarks identified by the Tribune, one of every five was destroyed with no permit, according to Buildings Department records. Kristen Cabanban, a spokeswoman for the department, said, "If there's no permit, then more than likely someone demolished it without the city's knowledge."
- The city's demolition programs are money losers for Chicago taxpayers. Under the programs, the city places liens on the demolished properties, hoping to recoup razing costs (an estimated \$5,000 to \$8,000 per home, and much more for buildings) from landlords who allow their properties to deteriorate. But from 1997 to the end of last November, the city placed liens totaling more than \$44 million on properties it tore down, but collected just over \$14 million, according to figures provided by the city's Department of Law.
- As part of the historic buildings survey, researchers mapped out more than 30 proposed landmark districts that would protect large clusters of buildings, defending the character of these neighborhoods from drastic change. But the public was never told about many of the proposed districts, sources said. Planning officials feared that too many neighborhood groups would push for their areas to be turned into districts, overwhelming the city's tiny landmarks staff, sources said. While some of the proposed districts, such as Wicker Park, have been realized, the cohesiveness of others, such as a proposed Warren-Washington-Oakley district on the Near West Side, has been dramatically undercut by demolitions.
- The Chicago tradition of winning influence through campaign contributions extends to both real estate developers and demolition companies donating thousands of dollars to city aldermen, who have enormous say over what gets built -- or torn down -- in their wards. There's nothing illegal in that, of course. Indeed, it's the normal way of doing business in Chicago. JDL Development Corp., for example, gave \$4,500 over a three-year period to the campaign fund of Ald. Burton Natarus (42nd). Natarus supported the developer's plan to tear down a trio of attached single-family rowhouses for a new Gold Coast high-rise in the 1100 block of North Dearborn Street, saying it would create upscale homes that enrich the tax rolls. Campaign records for aldermen in rapidly developing wards show dozens of such donations from individuals and firms connected with the building industry.
- Chicago has fewer landmarks per capita than comparable cities with vibrant downtowns and a rich assortment of old buildings. New York has not quite three times Chicago's population, 8 million versus 2.9 million. Yet it has more than six times as many individual landmark buildings -- 1,109 versus Chicago's 178. Even San Francisco, with just under 800,000 residents, has 228 individual landmarks, 50 more than Chicago.

Berg portrays the city's Landmarks Division as an aggressive advocate for Chicago's past, citing last year's landmark designations of Union Station and the former Sears, Roebuck and Co. Administration Building at 3333 W. Arthington St., once the office headquarters of the nation's largest mail-order and merchandise company.

But preservationists counter that the Landmarks Division, a part of the planning department, is devoting most of its energy to downtown and gentrifying neighborhoods, while allowing scores of significant buildings in outlying areas to be consigned to the scrapheap without a fight.

"They need to get out of downtown more often," said Fine, of Preservation Chicago.

Before the survey began, Chicago already had hundreds of buildings that were protected as individual landmarks or as parts of landmark districts. But a new idea was growing out of the public's reaction against the sterility of modern architecture -- and out of the political reality, which arose during the 1979-83 administration of former Mayor Jane Byrne, that neighborhoods demanded attention from City Hall: There might be architectural jewels around the corner or down the block.

So with financial help from the federal and state governments, as well as grants from private foundations, Chicago decided to look for landmarks in each of its 77 official community areas. One day in 1983, a team of three landmarks staffers packed into a cramped Chevrolet Chevette and began a "windshield" survey of Ald. Bernard Stone's North Side 50th Ward.

Teamwork at work

The team marked up maps of the areas they drove past, with the surveyor in the back seat taking down information from the spotters in the front. The spotters rated the buildings they were seeing by color code -- the hotter the color, the higher the level of historic interest. Structures of citywide, state or national significance, like the mighty Auditorium Building, were rated red. Buildings of community significance were rated orange. And so forth, on down to the lowliest color in this spectrum, blue, which was assigned to a handful of post-1940 buildings. (Most structures built after 1940 were thought to be too recent to be evaluated for architectural or historical significance and, though physically inspected by the expert surveyors, were not included in any landmarking recommendations.)

After more than a decade of research, the material was published in 1996 as the Chicago Historic Resources Survey -- a 2-inch-thick report that listed 17,371 properties, or about 3.5 percent of Chicago's nearly half a million buildings.

The effort included some structures already listed in a less-detailed statewide architectural survey conducted by the Illinois Department of Conservation from 1970 to 1975, but it found thousands of new ones.

"The survey is one of the best deeds we've done for Chicago. Not only will it give us an extensive catalog of our city's housing stock, it also will save some of our overlooked neighborhoods," was the gushing comment at the time from Stone, the former chairman of the City Council's landmarks committee.

That was the theory.

But in the six years since the city published the survey, its Buildings Department has routinely ignored the list, issuing demolition permits for scores of potential landmarks without notifying the Landmarks Division.

While the practice was fully in accord with Chicago law, it came under intense criticism last March after the Buildings Department gave a demolition permit to a real estate company controlled by the billionaire Crown family, owners of the orange-rated Chicago Mercantile Exchange Building at 300 W. Washington St. The company, CC Industries Inc., wants to erect an office building on the site.

Known as the "Butter and Egg" building, the Mercantile Exchange has an Indiana limestone exterior decorated with sculptures of pioneers, oxen, hens and baskets of eggs. They symbolize its role as the

spot where farmers' products once were funneled to the nation's consumers. Today, the structure is caged in demolition scaffolding.

Recalling the protests that preceded the razing of Louis Sullivan's Chicago Stock Exchange Building in 1972, members of Preservation Chicago held five rallies -- some spiced with guerrilla street theater -- to urge that the building be spared. At one rally, referring to Lester Crown, the patriarch of the Crown family, the protesters carried signs that read: "Lester Crown -- Don't Tear It Down."

The dawning of an amendment

Stung by the criticism, Daley and Planning Commissioner Berg, a former landmarks division staffer, announced a proposed amendment to the city building code in December. It would require city officials to put a 90-day hold on the issuance of a demolition permit for a building rated red or orange in the color-coded survey. The ordinance would cover about 6,200 buildings.

Jack Guthman, a lawyer who represents developers, was quick to find fault with the proposal.

"This will have a very serious dampening effect on the value of real estate," he said. "It will be very hard to get someone to buy a building among the 6,200 buildings affected. Their value will be seriously diminished because of the risk that it might become a landmark.

"It's not a signal that Chicago should be giving in terms of being development-friendly."

Yet, when aldermen from the Buildings and Landmarks committees met last Thursday to rubber stamp Daley's amendment before sending it to the City Council, no representative of the city's powerful developer community testified in protest. That was particularly noteworthy, given the tendency of Chicago developers to criticize -- and seek to blunt -- any proposal that would limit their efforts to make money in real estate.

The record of past demolitions suggests one reason for their lack of concern -- the Daley administration's failure to protect potential landmarks in the neighborhoods may telegraph that the amendment is unlikely to have much impact.

In the Tribune survey, which covered 23 of the city's 77 official community areas, reporters found 206 buildings that were identified by the surveyors as significant but were later destroyed.

Shifting emphasis

The location of the demolished structures indicates that the front line of the battle to preserve historic buildings has shifted from downtown, where it was in the 1960s and 1970s, to the neighborhoods. Walking the entire Loop, the reporters determined that only seven buildings listed in the survey had been destroyed -- far fewer than the 37 demolished on the Near West Side alone.

Once, such buildings graced Chicago's neighborhoods with Old World craftsmanship, like fleurs-de-lis and spiraled columns evoking Spain's Alhambra. They had New World touches, too, like the Baroque terra cotta facade of the now-demolished State Theater at 5816-34 W. Madison St., which was studded with light bulb sockets to light up the sky over Madison.

Today, many of the potential landmarks have been replaced by cheaply built condominium buildings, by the cookie-cutter structures of chain stores, or by vacant lots, leaving entire stretches of the South and West Sides empty.

A symbol of the destruction, ironically, is the still-standing arch leading to the former site of the Chicago Stockyards.

There are no stockyards behind it.

"It's like a Roman arch left in Rome after Rome is gone," said David Garrard Lowe, the author of "Lost Chicago," a 1975 book that chronicles the city's capricious treatment of its architectural treasures.

Private developers tore down many structures, but the city razed scores of others, either through court-ordered demolitions or through a "fast-track" demolition program that eliminates buildings the city deems structurally unsound or havens for criminals.

"Property owners have simply walked away from them," said Roberson, the Buildings Department commissioner. "They don't care that the building poses a hazard to my mother or my grandmother. I don't think that it's right for community folks, our elderly and our children, to live in communities where people have walked away from the buildings."

But preservationists compare the destruction to the logging practice of clear-cutting the side of a mountain, saying it repeats the mistakes of the discredited urban renewal programs of the 1950s and 1960s, which leveled entire neighborhoods to make way for highways and public housing.

"I call that urban planning by subtraction," said Fine, of Preservation Chicago. "We have gangs in buildings so we get rid of buildings. They're turning the South Side back into the prairie."

A bland mix

While the demolitions have razed well-known individual structures, such as the Lexington Hotel at 2135 S. Michigan Ave., best known as the headquarters from which Al Capone ran his bootlegging and vice rackets during Prohibition, their most devastating impact has been on the character of the city's neighborhoods. Though the damage differs from ward to ward, preservationists say, the overall effect is the same: It's as if once-distinct parts of Chicago had been thrown into a blender and whipped into a bland mix.

Go to 1731-41 W. Howard St. at the northernmost edge of Chicago. Once, an Art Deco savings bank stood there, distinguished, as a city surveyor wrote, by the craftsmanship of its many stone details. There were stylized stone figures at each corner just below the roof edge, such as a man kneeling and holding his head.

Now, there's a nondescript, two-story retail building, part of the Gateway Centre shopping center, whose dominant feature is its sprawling parking lot.

About a mile to the south, at 6425-41 N. Sheridan Rd., where there once was the Spanish Baroque grandeur of the Granada Theater, including an ornate facade of glazed terra cotta, now passersby see the concrete walls of Granada Centre, a looming residential and commercial complex that borrows the name, but not the elegance, of its predecessor. The Granada Theater was demolished in 1990.

"When you're dealing with the gateway to the city, to pull major buildings with architectural details away and to replace them with 'taxpayers' [buildings whose sole positive feature is that they generate tax revenues] takes the edge off the city," said Vincent Michael, the director of the historic preservation program at the School of the Art Institute.

"It makes it less Rogers Park. It makes it: 'Am I still in Evanston? [Or] in Arlington Heights?'"

Drive down Washington and Warren Boulevards from the Loop to Oak Park, where the buildings used to tell the story of middle-class Chicago like the rings of a tree.

Close in, there were the Italianate rowhouses that sprang up in the 1880s. Further out, near Garfield Park, were the Queen Anne homes that were fashionable in the 1890s and early 1900s. And at the city's edge, near the Oak Park border, there were the American Four-Squares that had their heyday from 1900 to 1930, reflecting the city's new fascination with the bungalow.

"These corridors are the public face of the city," Michael said. "It's a marvelous cross section of styles by which you can read the time period the neighborhood grew up in."

But the corridors today are pocked with gaps left by razings and are even more disfigured by entire blocks turned into vacant lots. Many of the lost buildings were identified by city surveyors as architecturally significant.

"Have we really improved things when you have a vacant lot with parked cars and mattresses [lying on the ground]?" asked Jim Peters, the director of planning for the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, as he looked out over the devastation.

Save and rehab

It would have been better, Peters said, to brick up the buildings and save them for rehabbing. That way, new buildings could more easily reflect the distinct flavor of the neighborhood and wouldn't resemble bland, suburban-style homes, as do most of the new residences being built in the area.

"We're not going to rebuild gargoyles. We're not going to have ornamental details. We're going to have cinder blocks," he said.

Go to Bronzeville, where between the 1870s and 1890s, wealthy Chicagoans built mansions and fine apartment houses along King Drive, then known as Grand Boulevard.

These were castles for the newly rich -- French Gothic Revival mansions topped by fleurs-de-lis, mansard roofs and turrets that rose like castle towers into the sky; and Romanesque graystones that mixed imposing rough-cut stone and delicate floral ornament.

Grand Boulevard retained its grandeur well into the 1920s, after middle-class blacks moved into the area and created the vibrant African-American city within a city known as the Black Metropolis or Bronzeville.

"It was a grand boulevard," said Timuel Black, a retired college professor and a neighborhood activist. "It became the stroll or the swagger strip of the newly arrived African-Americans."

Today, the vacant lots on King look like gaps in a row of teeth, with the harsh industrial structure of the elevated tracks plainly visible through the holes in the once-solid wall of mansions. The lots along several street corners have no buildings, so the row of structures is simply sheared off, like the stump of an amputated human limb.

Speaking of the elegant, century-old buildings that have been lost along King Drive, Black said that those buildings embodied "the early history of both black and white Chicago."

Their destruction is particularly important to African-Americans who have lost much that was evidence of past successes. "When one ignores [the need to save important buildings], it's easy for others to say you have no history," Black said.

Go to the former sites of buildings that served as icons of neighborhood commercial districts -- the Woodfield and Old Orchard shopping centers of their day.

Among them: a 1920s Back of the Yards movie house designed by Rapp & Rapp, the architects of the Chicago Theatre, at 1616-24 W. 47th St. Called the Peoples Theater and distinctive for its Art Moderne and Classical details, it was a smaller version of the more elaborate downtown movie palace, featuring a whimsical, triple-arched facade that formed a gateway to the fantasy world inside. It was destroyed in 2001. A Walgreens is rising on the site.

Another loss: An eight-story classical bank and office building with a monumental, carved facade designed by D.H. Burnham Jr., son of the famous architect and planner Daniel Burnham, and located near the corner of Madison Street and Pulaski Road. It was torn down last summer. The site is now a vacant lot.

Far-reaching impact

The impact of the demolitions extends beyond the loss of buildings.

"We want to keep life on the street. You can't do that with a vacant lot. We need to have businesses, houses, people in the yard, children playing on the sidewalks, people visiting each other, people going in and out of businesses -- all of this," said Perry Duis, a historian at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"There's a snowball effect when people see other people out on the street. They will perceive it as being safe, and they will want to live there, spend money there. But when you depopulate neighborhoods by tearing down big swaths of housing, you tend to kill the areas that are near it."

To be sure, even the most ardent preservationists recognize that not all potential landmarks should be saved. Sometimes, they agree, new hospitals should be built to replace old ones or new community centers should rise where derelict housing once stood.

"If you're a person who has lived next to an abandoned building for three or four years, and you've got drug users and prostitutes next door, you're not thinking, 'Preserve this building.' You're thinking about getting the building down," said Mary Steward, executive director of the Mid-South Planning and Development Commission.

But she acknowledges that the destruction of many derelict buildings has turned out to be short-sighted. That point is underscored by the turnaround of the rowhouse at 3920 S. Prairie Ave., which was rated orange on the survey and is located in Bronzeville.

For more than 10 years, the building stood like an open sore in the middle of nine rowhouses on the west side of the street, sandwiched between four sibling red brick rowhouses and four majestic graystones.

"To say it was in bad shape is a very large understatement," said developer Brad Suster, a board member of Preservation Chicago. "There were giant openings in the roof. Water had gone in for years. The place had decayed on the inside. All the floors were destroyed because water had been leaking for such a long time. . . . [It needed] a complete gutting and rehabbing."

Suster put a new roof on the home, installed new heating, plumbing and electrical systems, added new drywall and wood floors, and restored the portico over the front porch.

In April 2000, Lydia Mohead moved in with her six children from Harvey to the five-bedroom home with the aid of a federal housing voucher.

Mohead works as a baby-sitter and types handwritten papers for students of local small colleges. The rebirth of the rowhouse, she said, brought an end to the rats and drug deals in the home that plagued the neighborhood.

"We have our knuckleheads, but . . . when they come down on this end of the street, there's an automatic respect, even the way they talk -- if they're using profanity, they stop or cross the street. They know it's a sense of pride. Some things won't be tolerated," Mohead said.

Suster, who said he's making a profit on the rehab, added: "Especially in the Bronzeville neighborhood, there's such a depth of history in those buildings. The thing that makes our city so rich is its architectural heritage. A lot of the new construction being built . . . doesn't seem to give people a sense of home. It could be in any suburb or any state. It doesn't really say Chicago."

Tribune reporters Nathan Bierma and Jeff Long contributed to this story

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