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Going? Going. Gone.

Nearly one year after the city deployed its highly touted 'demolition delay' amendment to preserve Chicago's architectural legacy, the demolition machine rolls on

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Bruce Bailey gazed out the window of his Belmont Avenue antique shop. He didn't like what he saw.

For years, he'd admired the Queen Anne commercial building across the street, with its elaborate brickwork and pressed-metal cornice stamped with the year "1890." But now the graceful old building was empty, waiting to be turned to rubble. It is expected to be replaced by one of the red-brick condominium behemoths that have marched relentlessly westward from the lake along Belmont.

"We're in the canyon of condos here," said the 34-year-old Bailey. "It's the ugly face of progress."

The vulnerable Queen Anne at 2129 W. Belmont was one of the thousands of architecturally and historically significant buildings that were supposed to have a better chance at survival under a highly touted "demolition delay" amendment to the city's building code.

But nearly a year later, the ordinance has saved only one of those buildings.

While a grand, neo-Renaissance church in Woodlawn was recommended as a landmark, city officials rejected 16 others, including an 1880s West Town commercial building with rosettes carved into its lintels and an 1890s Lake View farmhouse with a turret shaped like a silo.

Those two, now gone, were among 58 new teardowns of significant buildings documented by the Tribune. That brings the total of destroyed potential landmarks discovered by the newspaper's year-and-a-half-long investigation to 762 -- enough to fill several suburban subdivisions.

Despite the ordinance, the demolition machine that has devastated Chicago's architectural heritage continues to run at full-throttle, homogenizing once-distinct neighborhoods. And it may soon claim another, far more prominent victim -- Cook County Hospital, the sumptuous but now vacant classical monument that symbolized compassionate care for the poor.

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The Cook County Board could vote to authorize its demolition Tuesday.

The reason for the continued destruction, national and local experts agree, is that the administration of Mayor Richard M. Daley and preservationists have failed to do two things:

- Set priorities for saving the thousands of architectural gems identified in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey.
- Back those priorities with sufficient legal protections and financial incentives, as planning officials promised they would do last April.

The result is a wildly arbitrary process in which one building of high quality will be lost while another of lesser significance will be preserved. The system's ad hoc nature is exacerbated by the polarized approaches of the Daley administration and preservationists. The former uses the narrowest of standards to evaluate potential landmarks while the latter employ the broadest.

Due to the lack of common ground, many buildings in the middle, like the one on Belmont -- neither easily landmarked nor easily dismissed -- are doomed.

"Big cities have made a huge mistake. They've said only landmarks are sacrosanct," says Charles Chase, executive director of San Francisco Architectural Heritage, a preservation advocacy group. "There is a varying degree, a shades-of-gray base of buildings that are worthy of preservation. They may not be held up as house museums or civic monuments, but they are buildings that contribute to and inform neighborhoods and create a quality of environment that is worthy of protection."

The Historic Resources Survey, an unprecedented cataloging of Chicago's architectural and historical treasures, was conducted by city experts between 1983 and 1995 at a cost of more than \$1.2 million. It ranked more than 17,000 significant buildings on the basis of quality -- with the highest category, red, indicating buildings of national importance, and the second-highest, orange, denoting buildings of community significance. This color-coded spectrum went down several levels to the lowest ranking, blue, which was assigned to a handful of post-1940 buildings.

But inclusion in the survey provided no protection against demolition or defacement. Indeed, the multitude of buildings in some categories -- there were nearly 10,000 rated orange -- was overwhelming, lessening their chances of survival.

"People get dulled to the numbers," Chase said. "They say: 'We can't process 17,000 buildings.'"

Vincent Michael, the director of the historic preservation program at the School of the Art Institute, added: "To me, the survey is this big rough cut. . . . The survey should include a continuing process that not only adds buildings that may have attained significance since 1940, but evaluates the existing survey buildings and ranks them."

The crucial issue of how to separate the wheat from the chaff is certain to come to the fore now that Cook County Board President John Stroger, a prominent Daley ally, has signaled he will proceed with his plan to tear down the 89-year-old Cook County Hospital at 1835 W. Harrison St. Last Wednesday, Cook County planning officials rejected two proposals from private developers to rehabilitate the hospital and said the County Board should decide at their meeting Tuesday whether to raze it.

Under the demolition delay ordinance, city officials are required to put a hold of up to 90 days on the issuance of a demolition permit for a building rated red or orange in the survey. Because the hospital is rated orange, Daley will have to take a stand on its future. So far, the mayor has studiously avoided any public comment.

A different story

In the face of criticism from preservationists, city officials paint a very different picture, saying that the city's Commission on Chicago Landmarks has conferred landmark status on 24 structures and two districts this year -- more than in any other year of the commission's 35-year history. Those designations ranged from the Elks National Memorial Building at 2750 N. Lakeview Ave. to a group of 12 firehouse buildings scattered throughout the city.

In addition, city officials say, they used the demolition delay ordinance to stop the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago from razing the elegantly monumental St. Gelasius Church at 6401 S. Woodlawn Ave. The neo-Renaissance church, with its 120-foot bell tower, was to be torn down to become a vacant lot. Instead, the building has been recommended for city landmark status, a move the Archdiocese is expected to challenge in court.

"Thanks to our hold on the demolition of historically significant buildings, the city was able to take the time to explore options other than the wrecking ball," trumpeted Alicia Mazur Berg, commissioner of the Department of Planning and Development.

But for all the headlines generated by this one case, her department has approved the demolition of 16 other orange-rated buildings, 10 of which already have come down. (One of the six remaining buildings, a graystone at 3816 N. Fremont St., is likely to have its front saved as part of a deal that will allow a developer to build an addition to it, officials said.)

Preservationists didn't fight for all of the buildings, but they rue the loss of others, such as a Queen Anne two-flat in Lincoln Park that was torn down to make way for a supersize home that will cover two city lots. What really irks them, though, is the loss of such buildings for uninspired, overmuscled designs.

"This is architectural pollution," said Jonathan Fine, president of Preservation Chicago, a city advocacy group. "Just as we used to pollute our water and our air, we are now polluting our cities with bad architecture."

Ultimately, though, environmentalists learned they had to pick their battles. In Chicago, preservationists don't want to take part in the setting of priorities, such as rating the oranges on a scale of A, B, C. By highlighting some buildings, they fear, they would consign others to the graveyard.

"If you give As, Bs and Cs within the orange-rated buildings, you can pretty much write off all the Bs and Cs," said David Bahlman, president of the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, a statewide advocacy group. "The implication would be that it's OK to demolish those two-thirds. You'd be playing into the hands of the developers. You basically have to choose between your children if you do that."

City's standards

On the other side of the divide is Brian Goeken, the head of the Landmarks Division of the Department of Planning and Development. In contrast to the broad net cast by Bahlman and his allies, Goeken says the division has rejected 16 out of 17 orange-rated buildings that have come before him because of the city's stiff standards.

"The main thing is they don't meet the landmark criteria," he said.

In addition to buildings rejected by the landmarks division, the 58 new demolitions documented by the Tribune included lesser-rated buildings from the survey and orange-rated structures that received demolition permits before the ordinance went into effect in January. Nearly all were torn down this year.

The vast majority of the 762 demolitions documented by the newspaper have occurred since Daley

became mayor in 1989.

Without a consensus of what should be saved, decisions are made on an ad hoc basis, as seen in the contrast between two potential landmarks only two miles apart.

After neighbors learned in September that a developer intended to tear down the Queen Anne three-flat at 823 W. Newport Ave., with its rounded window bays, they mobilized with the help of Preservation Chicago.

They signed petitions urging that their entire block -- a rare intact stretch of handsome graystones and brick three-flats near Wrigley Field -- be made a landmark district. They put posters in their windows. They met with Ald. Tom Tunney (44th), who arranged a land swap: In exchange for a second property, the developer who wanted to demolish the Queen Anne would trade the building to another developer who would rehab it.

The building was saved even though it wasn't rated orange. It was labeled green, a lesser category on the Historic Resources Survey. That meant it wasn't covered by the demolition delay ordinance.

"It's a happy ending to a kind of Perils of Pauline scenario," said David Sikon, a longtime resident. "We kind of see ourselves as an example to other blocks that shows what an effective alderman can do coupled with a persistent community."

By contrast, in Lincoln Park, an effort by Preservation Chicago to save a gable-fronted two-flat with Gothic and Queen Anne details at 2028 N. Mohawk St. fizzled for lack of interest.

Neighbors were split about whether to save the orange-rated building. Some hoped to preserve it by designating the block as a landmark district. Others feared the move would halt the stratospheric escalation of property values that has occurred as developers have torn down buildings to make way for larger and more profitable homes.

Deirdre Sokol, who lives at 2031 N. Mohawk, said one friend of hers was badgered mercilessly by a developer: "He pounded her. 'I'll give you \$1.1 million, \$1.2 million, \$1.3 million.' It's this whole indecent proposal."

On the 2000 block of Mohawk, at least a third of the buildings have been replaced. That was the reason Goeken gave last summer, at a meeting hosted by Ald. Vi Daley (43rd), for rejecting the proposed district.

Shortsighted rejection

Michael Moran, vice president of Preservation Chicago, contended that Goeken's quick rejection of the district was shortsighted. "If you go to a dentist missing some of your teeth, he doesn't say, 'Why bother? Let's pull them all.'"

To be sure, some orange-rated buildings are too far gone to save, such as the once grand, 117-year-old Victorian home at 5168 S. Michigan Ave. Though it retains its fanciful turret, it looks like something out of a gothic novel, with broken windows and rickety front steps. A request to demolish the structure is pending.

If the old Victorian is at one end of the spectrum, St. Gelasius is at the other -- a building that stands out by virtue of its size, good exterior condition and indisputable architectural quality. It's a monument with a capital "M."

Somewhere in the middle are thousands of everyday structures -- three-flats, taverns, cottages, triangle-

shaped commercial buildings. They give their neighborhoods character. But they're unlikely to become individual landmarks under the city's strict criteria.

To give such buildings a fighting chance, local and national preservationists say, city officials should put some legal and financial muscle toward saving more potential landmarks.

For example, Preservation Chicago suggests that the city create a penalty for razing survey buildings in the form of higher fees for demolition permits, modeled on the Daley administration's new, higher-cost city stickers for SUVs.

The organization also suggests that survey buildings be identified in real estate multiple listings, so potential buyers would know the significance of the structure and the possibility that they might face community opposition to a tear-down.

Others say the survey itself needs to be refined, particularly because some of its research is now 20 years old.

"No survey is ever done," Michael said, citing modern buildings that may have been overlooked in the 1980s. "Our perspective on things changes constantly."

Buildings on the survey, experts say, could be prioritized on the basis of various themes, such as well-known architects, Chicago history and building types like the city's new firehouse district.

The key, they say, is to establish some priorities and make the system as predictable as possible for preservationists and developers.

"If you cast the net too wide and too far, you begin to frustrate and stymie both sides of the issue," Chase said.

City officials say more potential landmarks will be saved in the future because a massive rezoning of Chicago, due to begin early next year, will reduce the incentive for developers to tear down small old buildings and replace them with large new ones. They also cite a housing program, begun in January, that aims to salvage apartment buildings and homes that are sliding toward demolition.

Yet, experts say, the city's landmarks commission is hampered by its small staff -- about a dozen, or one-fourth the size of New York City's.

Paul Byard, director of the historic preservation program at Columbia University in New York, said that the lack of staffing is "a political expression of 'We'll protect 'em, but not very much.'"

Tribune staff writer Darnell Little contributed to this story

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