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A SQUANDERED HERITAGE

Part 2: The demolition machine

The city that wrecks: Developers and the city continue to raze potential landmarks with assembly-line efficiency.

Second in a three-part series

By Patrick T. Reardon and Blair Kamin
Tribune staff reporters

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The wrecking crews began tearing into the tavern on July 3, pummeling the Bavarian gable and the ornate brickwork that had the feel of old Germany.

The tavern was part of "Schlitz Row," a mini-city of saloons, beer gardens, houses and stables that the Milwaukee brewery erected in the early 1900s to quench the thirst of workmen in the "dry" company town of Pullman, a few blocks to the east.

Architects Frommann & Jepsen adorned Schlitz Row's buildings with eclectic, often whimsical touches, such as sculpted horses' heads protruding from the stables. Preservationists dreamed that Chicago would one day include the tavern, at 11444 S. Front Ave., and the other Schlitz Row buildings in an extension of the already-protected Pullman landmark district.

Instead -- with the blessing of the local alderman who sits on the City Council's landmarks committee -- the Metra commuter rail agency razed the tavern to expand the parking lot at its heavily used Kensington/115th Street station.

Today, all that remains of the tavern is a monumental mosaic Schlitz medallion, which sits in the dimly lit Pullman Visitor Center.

"We feel bad it happened this way," said Clayton Weaver, Metra's director of technical services. Metra "absolutely" would not have razed the tavern if someone in city government had alerted the agency to its significance, he explained. No one did.

The tavern was a victim of the demolition machine that has devastated Chicago's architectural heritage, eliminating hundreds of potential landmarks with assembly-line efficiency. During the first 13 years of Richard M. Daley's administration, the machine has accelerated, razing Queen Anne homes, classically decorated banks and other architectural gems that the city's own surveyors proclaimed to be significant.

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Despite an amendment to the city's building code, which Daley asserts will protect many important structures and which the City Council is expected to approve Thursday, the demolition machine is likely to keep smashing and crushing buildings, hauling away profit as well as wreckage.

It may be slowed, city officials and preservationists agree, but it won't be stopped.

"There's a whole lot of buildings that still will come down," predicted Jim Peters, a former staffer at the city's Landmarks Division and now the planning director for the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, a statewide advocacy group.

Alicia Mazur Berg, the city's commissioner of planning and development, acknowledged as much: "We don't save all the buildings. And we don't have the resources to save them all."

The demolition machine works with the same kind of efficiency as the fabled Union Stockyards, where the goal in slaughtering cattle and pigs was to turn "everything but the squeal" into profit.

It harvests bricks from destroyed structures and ships them around the country.

It strips doomed buildings of terra cotta lions, Art Deco sunbursts and winged feline gargoyles, and sells them to salvage companies. What had been the public patrimony becomes the private treasure of wealthy individuals, displayed like trophies on walls or providing a decorative accent to a garden.

Speaking of the elegant, terra cotta facade of Rogers Park's Granada Theater, which was demolished in 1990, Mark Steinke, managing director of the Salvage One artifacts company, said: "That's scattered all over town. There was just so much there. It flooded the market."

Both the Granada and the Schlitz Row tavern were identified as potential landmarks in an exhaustive survey of the city's nearly half-million buildings performed between 1983 and 1995 at a cost of more than \$1.2 million.

The survey, conducted by the city, singled out more than 17,000 buildings as architecturally or historically significant. It identified these structures, which made up 3.5 percent of Chicago's nearly half-million buildings, by color code. A red rating indicated the strongest potential for landmark status, a blue rating the weakest.

Yet in a random tour of 23 of Chicago's 77 community areas, Tribune reporters discovered that developers and the city already have torn down more than 200 of those potential landmarks.

The total number cannot be determined because the city said it was unable to provide data that would allow the Tribune to cross-reference the buildings in the survey with demolitions.

But the effect of the razings is unmistakable: A homogenization of Chicago's once-distinct neighborhoods, as cookie-cutter drugstores replace elegant terra cotta commercial buildings and cinder-block condominium buildings supplant homes ornamented by Old World craftsmen.

That trend is exemplified by the replacement of the quaint Schlitz Row tavern by the empty expanse of a Metra parking lot.

"The building was in very bad shape," said the local alderman, Anthony Beale (9th). "It wasn't occupied. It was basically a huge eyesore in the community. No one was interested in preserving the building."

Of 'quality and rare design'

Despite Beale's assertion, city surveyors characterized the tavern as "one of the three most attractive and

intact saloon buildings remaining among Schlitz Row." They rated the saloon orange, the second highest category after red, for the quality and rarity of its design. Years later, the building remained structurally sound, despite its scruffy appearance, preservationists said.

Even with its orange rating, however, the tavern would have stood little chance of survival under Daley's proposed amendment.

That measure would put a 90-day hold on the issuance of a demolition permit for a building rated red or orange. Yet a 90-day waiting period only would have delayed the tavern's execution, given the lack of support it garnered from the city's Landmarks Division, which is part of Berg's Department of Planning and Development.

"We definitely did our due diligence as far as the research," Beale said. The city's Landmarks Division looked at the building, he said. "Landmarks OK'd this -- they said, 'Let it go.'"

Brian Goeken, the deputy planning commissioner who runs the Landmarks Division, said he remembers talking to Beale, but he could not recall the substance of the conversation.

The destruction of the Schlitz Row tavern and the other 200-plus buildings discovered by Tribune reporters shows how government fuels the demolition machine in two ways -- one, it opens the door for developers to tear down potential landmarks; the other, it uses the bulldozer as a tool of urban planning, public safety and law enforcement.

"It's always about money," Berg said. "It's either about too much money in some neighborhoods and you have tear-downs. Or there's not enough money."

Americans may want to save the past, but they're in love with the new. They may enjoy driving by old, small homes, but they want to live in big new ones. The average size of the new American house has grown from 1,000 square feet in 1950 to 1,500 square feet in 1970 to 2,260 square feet in 2001, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

While this tear-down trend is strongly associated with affluent suburbs such as Hinsdale and Winnetka, it also is radically altering the character of such gentrifying neighborhoods as Wicker Park and West Town. There, huge new condominiums loom above old workers' cottages. Dumpsters filled to the brim with plaster and wood studs are a common sight.

What's unseen, however, are the gears and widgets that make the demolition machine roll over these neighborhoods -- and the money that lubricates it all. Look at the campaign contribution records of Daley and Chicago's aldermen, and you find the names of architects, construction companies, contractors, developers, drywallers, engineers, lawyers, pipe fitters, real estate agents, unions and wreckers -- all of whom stand to get a piece of the action when old buildings are razed and new ones erected.

The donations add up

For example, Walsh Construction Co. of Illinois, whose owners have close ties to the Daley administration and family, gave at least \$24,000 since 1999 to Daley and to nine aldermanic candidates and ward campaign chests.

During the same period, GF Structures, whose owner has political ties to the Daley family going back three generations, gave at least \$11,000 to six aldermanic candidates and ward organizations. The firm, which is known for reaping lucrative city contracts for erecting faux wrought-iron fencing, also does demolition work.

Talk to one of the executives of the demolition companies, and you learn that a tear-down of the average Chicago house takes a day or two and generates about 100 tons of material -- wood, brick and concrete.

The bricks are stacked, sold and reused throughout the country. Hardwood floors, banisters, stained-glass windows, fancy shutters, wrought-iron fences and other features are salvaged and sold to dealers, the original building's owners or homeowners.

"You have to minimize your trips to the dump," said Bill Beaman, vice president of American Demolition Corp. in Elgin, which has taken down homes in Chicago. "If you don't incorporate salvage and resaleable items, the costs go up and they [the customers] are less likely to demolish the building."

But the demolition machine isn't restricted to affluent neighborhoods; it is trampling poor ones, too, as public officials in Chicago and around the nation attempt to quickly solve intractable problems of poverty and crime by razing entire blocks of aging housing.

That practice, which has left streets in Detroit with less than a quarter of their buildings standing, has been one of Daley's major policy tools, clearing vast stretches in neighborhoods such as Woodlawn, Englewood and the Near West Side.

In some cases, residents welcome the demolitions. The Walgreens or McDonald's that preservationists deride as characterless architecture are praised for bringing new amenities to long-ignored communities. The razings, too, are a tool of law enforcement and public safety.

John A. Roberson, the city's Buildings Department commissioner, said the razings eliminate buildings that harbor criminals and pose danger to neighbors.

"Sometimes, with abandoned and vacant buildings, you may have homeless people who go in there and decide to start a fire," he said. If the building erupts in flames, he added, "all the other properties are at risk."

But preservationists argue that the demolitions are the equivalent of doing surgery with a sledgehammer instead of a scalpel.

"While such policies purport to stabilize the neighborhood from social ills, it reminds me of the old Vietnam policy of destroying the village to save it," said Royce Yeater, the Midwest director of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "It's the other tear-down story, and in that case, public policy is not just a benign or ineffective agent, but the perpetrator."

Reliving the 1960s

The trend echoes what happened in the 1960s, when urban renewal programs and the construction of the Interstate highway system laid waste to huge swaths of downtown and inner-city neighborhoods.

"People were appalled. Not only were these neighborhoods and buildings destroyed, but public funds were being used to destroy them," said Richard Moe, the president of the National Trust.

In response, the federal government passed legislation requiring officials to review plans that would use federal funds to tear down historically significant structures.

Now, however, local government money is funding the demolition of potential landmarks. And protection from the demolition machine varies widely between neighborhoods, often depending on the economic status of the community.

In the historic buildings survey, researchers showed a strong tendency to label structures in poor and

minority neighborhoods with the lesser green color, while they were much more generous in handing out red and orange ratings to buildings in white, affluent areas.

The proposed amendment is likely to widen that gap because it only protects orange and red buildings.

This disparity is evident in the way the city has handled two similar enclaves of distinctive homes developed around 1900 by Samuel Eberly Gross, once characterized as "the high priest of home ownership in Chicago."

In an affluent area a few blocks north of Wrigley Field, the city in 1971 gave landmark status to a block-long street called Alta Vista Terrace, which is lined with rowhouses that look as though they were lifted straight out of London. Gross developed the block in 1904. Today, Alta Vista remains picture perfect, like something out of a Hollywood back lot.

Some win, some lose

But west of the United Center, amid vacant lots and burned-out buildings, another distinctive block of rowhouses erected by Gross in 1887 has received no such protection.

These rowhouses, a series of Queen Annes whose unique dormers, bays and other details endowed each house with an individual identity, are on the 2900 block of West Monroe Street. And they are apparently off the radar screen of the city's Landmarks Division, even though they were rated orange on the city's survey.

Two of the rowhouses already have been destroyed.

"The city's priorities are obviously slanted more to the North Side than to the South and West Sides," said Jonathan Fine, the president of Preservation Chicago, an advocacy group. Along with large gaps in city law and its enforcement, the demolition machine ensures that hundreds more architectural treasures will be lost despite Daley's amendment.

The mayor introduced his amendment in December in response to the public outcry over plans by the billionaire Crown family to demolish the orange-rated Chicago Mercantile Exchange Building at 300 W. Washington St.

But the amendment seems aimed more at protecting Daley from future storms of criticism than guarding the vast majority of significant buildings from destruction:

- Buildings Department records reveal that many wreckers never obtain demolition permits, which means that city officials are -- and will continue to be -- unaware of the loss of many orange-rated buildings, especially those in outlying neighborhoods. Of the 200-plus demolished potential landmarks identified by the Tribune, there was no permit on file for one of every five.

"What do you do then?" said Yeater, of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "You can't make 'em put it back up."

- A legal loophole in the proposed amendment means that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of orange-rated buildings will remain at risk, despite the city's trumpeting that the amendment will grant new protection to roughly 6,000 orange buildings.

The loophole states that the amendment will not apply to permit applications "for the demolition of any building or structure if demolition is necessary to remedy conditions imminently dangerous to life, health or property."

"Huge loophole," Yeater said. "Clearly the city has the option to consider anything a public nuisance when it wants to and that gives them a lot of latitude."

The loophole will allow the city's razing efforts, which consist of both court-ordered demolitions and the Buildings Department's fast-track demolition program, to proceed virtually unchecked. Since 1993, the fast-track initiative has destroyed 7,000 structures the department deemed structurally unsound or havens for criminals.

Among the 200-plus destroyed potential landmarks identified by the Tribune were at least 68 buildings taken down by the city through court order or fast-track demolition. Of that group, 42 buildings, or 61 percent, were rated orange.

The carnage "has been genuinely frustrating," said Timothy Wittman, who was the first field coordinator for the survey and now teaches historic preservation at the School of the Art Institute. "It's not a surprise that city departments are not talking to each other. It's all about turf and who gets to decide what's most important."

- The proposed amendment offers no protection to 4 out of every 10 buildings on the survey -- nearly 7,000 structures. They are in the lesser categories of yellow, yellow-green and green.

Among those unprotected buildings: the 4,000-plus structures that are rated green, the color code that denotes that part of a building's original exterior has been altered. Though the city surveyors often cited green buildings as key parts of potential landmark districts, these structures will remain vulnerable.

Berg acknowledged that the absence of protection for these buildings also represented an indirect danger to orange-rated structures.

The reason: Many orange buildings are unlikely to become landmarks unless they are included in a landmark district and that's unlikely unless there's a critical mass of green buildings nearby.

- The amendment promises to dramatically increase the Landmarks Division's workload, forcing staffers to go into the field and do new research when a red or orange building is threatened with demolition. But it provides the tiny agency with no additional manpower or funds.

The Landmarks Division has just two preservation researchers, though city officials expect that number to rise to three when a vacant research position is filled. In contrast, New York City, which has not quite three times Chicago's population, has five times as many preservation researchers -- 11.

Berg said that workers from her department's neighborhoods division will be asked to help enforce the ordinance. "We're a team," she said.

Preservationists say that isn't enough manpower. "The best written ordinance is useless if it cannot be enforced," said Fine, of Preservation Chicago.

Absentee landlord factor

Comparing the effect of the proposed amendment on downtown structures such as the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, and its parallel impact on potential neighborhood landmarks, Peters, of the Landmarks Preservation of Illinois, said:

"This is great for the high-visibility projects -- the Old Mercs, but there's still going to be that issue of buildings that have been let go a long time, where there are absentee landlords, slum landlords. By the time a demolition permit is asked for, the building is too far gone."

Typifying that problem: the saga of 4008 W. Madison St., an eight-story bank and office building erected in the 1920s and designed by Daniel Burnham Jr., son of the famous Chicago architect and planner, and a distinguished figure in his own right.

The city tore it down last year, at a cost of more than \$500,000, even though a developer had a plan to turn it into senior housing or a single-room occupancy hotel.

Originally known as the National Bank of Commerce, the classically inspired 4008 W. Madison was far more sober than Burnham's jazzy Carbide & Carbon skyscraper at 230 N. Michigan Ave., but it still impressed city surveyors.

They praised its "elaborately carved monumental facade," which included the sculpted face of a roaring lion, and called it the most imposing structure on the block. They rated the building orange.

But 4008 W. Madison gradually deteriorated as the doctors and other tenants who filled its upper floors moved out.

"There were violations upon violations," said Ald. Ed Smith (28th), in whose ward the building was located. "Broken windows. It just looked terrible." Local businesses complained about the building and urged Smith to get rid of it, he said.

"We worked for years trying to find someone to get into the building," Smith added. But "we couldn't find anyone with enough money to put it back together. The building ended up in court and once it gets in the courts, you're basically dead unless people are standing there with a bag of money to deal with it."

After Cook County Circuit Court Judge Sebastian Patti granted the city's request to demolish the building on March 14, tubes of scaffolding were erected around 4008 W. Madison, trapping the roaring lion in a cage of steel.

The scaffolding stunned developer Brad Suster, president of Barnes Real Estate in Chicago. He sent a letter to Alicia Mazur Berg, the city's planning and development commissioner, informing her of his plan to convert the building into a senior housing or a single-room occupancy hotel while retaining its landmark features.

He urged her to halt the demolition and sent copies of his letter to others, including Daley and the mayor's deputy chief of staff for planning and design, Lee Bey.

Suster's reasons for opposing the tear-down: Because the building was located in the middle of a block, it would not be attractive to big corporate retailers who prefer corner sites. Outstanding liens would deter other investors. The large vacant lot that would result from the building's demolition would offset the city's Madison Street beautification program. And it could be years before the property might return to the city's tax rolls.

No one from the city intervened.

"Brad Suster brought it to our attention," said Goeken, of the Landmarks Division. "It was a court-ordered demolition. At that point, we don't have say-so in it. He needed to go to the judge and petition to be a receiver.

"It's not our call at that point."

But even when city officials do act on behalf of orange-rated buildings, they often find themselves thwarted by the demolition machine -- in this case, the city's own laws and customs, as the ongoing controversy surrounding a historic Bronzeville church shows.

The current pastor, the Rev. Leon Perry, wants to tear down the 114-year-old, red sandstone Metropolitan Community Church at 4100 S. King Drive, a significant location in African-American history.

At the church, A. Philip Randolph organized the Pullman porters, and other historic figures delivered speeches, including NAACP co-founder and author W.E.B. DuBois and journalist Ida B. Wells. Historians often refer to the time that noted educator Mary McLeod Bethune brought First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to the church.

Perry, who declined to be interviewed, would replace the church with a modern structure.

"How do you tear that history down?" said Timuel Black, 84, a community activist and former school teacher, who has lived in the Bronzeville area since arriving with his family from Alabama in 1919.

Proposing a deal

One of Daley's top aides apparently agreed.

In August, Perry produced a letter from the city in which Bey proposed a deal by which the church would get a vacant, city-owned lot at 40th Street and Michigan Avenue. In exchange, the church would turn its building over to the city, which would seek landmark status and a new owner.

The deal went nowhere.

Perry and others said it collapsed because it did not have the backing of Ald. Dorothy Tillman (3rd). Tillman did not return telephone calls.

The case illustrates the enormous power that Chicago's aldermen wield over what gets built or demolished in their wards.

It also shows the lasting influence of an amendment to the city code, passed in the 1980s, which permits churches and other religious institutions to be declared landmarks only with their consent. Chicago is free to landmark all other structures without the owner's consent.

Lawyer and local power broker Jack Guthman engineered that measure to head off possible landmark status for Fourth Presbyterian Church at 866 N. Michigan Ave.

"It came to me . . . that there was a 1st Amendment issue here," Guthman recalled. A church structure itself, he explained, "was an expression of the religion and it would be inappropriate for the city to have a role in any kind of changes to a church structure."

Since the passage of the measure, Chicago has conferred individual landmark status on just three churches.

The city's list of the more than 30 red-rated buildings that have not been given landmark protection includes several churches, such as the Madonna della Strada Chapel at 6525 N. Sheridan Rd., an Art Moderne design, and the former First Congregational Church of Austin at 5701 W. Midway Pkwy., a Prairie School structure.

Berg said her department is looking into the possibility of revising the provision, in part because of the Metropolitan Community Church case.

Aldermen fight the machine

Not every alderman is a fan of razing. Some even stand in front of the demolition machine.

"I think the city's fast-track demolition program is not a good idea," said Ald. Toni Preckwinkle (4th). "I have told them repeatedly, 'I don't want you to fast-track buildings in my ward.'"

Driving through her South Side ward, Preckwinkle pointed with pride at old and formerly abandoned structures that have been rehabilitated and given new life.

"Here's a beautiful old courtyard building," she said, as she headed north on Drexel. "There are half a dozen of these scattered in North Kenwood-Oakland."

"Once you tear down a beautiful old building, it may be a long time before you can build anything to replace it," Preckwinkle said.

"And you can't rebuild it to the standard of the old one. They're all plaster and lathe. They're limestone and brick. They're beautiful old buildings, built to a standard we don't build to anymore."

The hundreds of buildings in the ward's landmark districts provide continuity with the past but also act as a model for new construction, Preckwinkle said.

Landmark designation, she said, "set the standard for what was going to come. It showed we were going to rebuild the community to a higher standard. The community made it clear they wanted to preserve the buildings."

It is an attitude that seems to be spreading, even to the stretch of Schlitz Row where Metra tore down the tavern last summer.

Preservationists have warned Metra that another Schlitz Row tavern, this one at 11400 S. Front Ave., sits just north of the parking lot that once was home to the demolished saloon.

Their implication was clear: Hands off.

"Now that we know that second building is significant, we have no plans for it," the agency's Weaver said.

"Now that we know it's on the list, we won't touch it."

Tribune reporters Nathan Bierma and Jeff Long contributed to this story

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