

ASSEMBLING AND PRESENTING CHICAGO'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Lessons and Cautions

Christopher Koziol, Ph.D.

University of Colorado Denver
christopher.koziol@ucdenver.edu

Changing urban land values and the resulting unevenness of real estate development on a global scale have together left many significant heritage resources and associated historic urban landscapes (HULs) vulnerable to accelerated market demand, or alternatively, to neglect and abandonment. While global and transnational processes lie outside the control of heritage site managers there are notable empirical examples of attempts to make heritage a positive contributing factor to economic development. Despite such occasional efforts, heritage advocates often fail to see any pattern or precedent in their unique situations of place and circumstance. Making examples relevant to current practice requires both empirically valid examples, and a theoretical framework to distill the presence of patterns. In this article, Chicago is illustrative of the multiple and nuanced responses of heritage advocates to rapid and rapacious urban change. While some cities have weathered centuries of both incremental and catastrophic change, others, like Chicago, with a shorter history, afford a more focused view of the specific transformations of the late 20th and early 21st century city. The theoretical framework employed here derives from the recent literature on heritage valuation and valorization. Specifically, urban coalitions with participants having different material interests and ideological perspectives are shown to contribute to the development of a mythical narrative – in this limited case study, a “Chicago School of Architecture” – largely supportive of heritage conservation outcomes.

Contemporary heritage conservation efforts in Chicago can be traced to the immediate post-World War II period.¹ Typical of American cities, middle-class residential areas were being forsaken for newer suburban developments; and the central business district – the ‘Loop’ in Chicago – suffered a competitive disadvantage for continued capital investment with this outmigration of residents and jobs. Hence, regional decentralization, an influx of lower-income economic migrants to the central city, and notions of technological obsolescence led to a concerted effort by central city business and civic leaders to redevelop both the downtown and inner-city residential neighborhoods.² At the outset of the period and through the mid-1950s, there was little interest in heritage conservation in any

traditional sense of the term. What is unique to the case of Chicago is the early and still relatively uncommon recognition of the heritage value of modern architecture. Specifically, demolition threats in the 1950s to Louis Sullivan’s Garrick Theater (originally the Schiller Theatre Building) (1892-1960) and to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House (1910-present) served to focus and combine several distinct sets of cultural and economic interest groups in the historic structures of the modern era.

Architects, civic reformers, sympathetic real estate developers and incipient tourism entrepreneurs worked counter to what appeared a linear course of building demolition and subsequent site redevelopment. While the Garrick Theater was razed, a complex blend of cultural and art historical awareness, civic boosterism, and economic self-interest transformed destruction into economic development opportunities combining the adaptive use of heritage buildings, neighborhood revitalization, and cultural tourism.

Today, Chicago is widely visited and toured as a ‘capital city’ of modern architecture. This image has been willfully crafted since the 1950s. Architectural historians, and most significantly Siegfried Giedion, first established a lineage for modern architecture that both related the Chicago and Prairie schools of architecture to trends current in post-WWII architecture.³ Building on this discourse – one largely internal to architecture and architectural history – local enthusiasts from the civic and business sectors were quick to link an aspiring Second Chicago School of Architecture to what then became the First School of Chicago Architecture.⁴ So successful was this discursive effort, that by 1960, the Chicago Landmarks Commission, designated the three year old 1957 Skidmore, Owings and Merrill designed Inland Steel Building a “landmark”. Following his work at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Mies van der Rohe quickly became a designer of iconically modern private sector buildings with 860-880 Lake Shore Drive. Chicago native, Bertrand Goldberg, seduced the local power elite with his sculptural Marina City of 1963, and in Fall 2011 will be the subject of a major retrospective exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. A 1960s preservation oriented voluntary organization, the Chicago School Architecture Foundation, has grown

and transformed to become the Chicago Architecture Foundation, a tour and education oriented non-profit with fifty employees and almost 300 volunteer tour guide / docents.

While this purposeful narrative construction linking 'first' and 'second' Chicago Schools of Architecture led to profitable real estate rehabilitation and reinvestment decisions, and a robust architectural tourism industry it also established a creative tension between preservation and redevelopment. So it is that now with almost fifty years of such experience, we have the opportunity to critically explore failures, unintended consequences, and limitations in the transferability to other locales. Within the context of this article, several findings and patterns identified in the course of this city-specific research are briefly discussed. However, overall the example is used to provoke a discussion of the potential of heritage conservation given the economic demands of the contemporary global city, particularly in relation to urban coalition building and economic development.

Growth and rebuilding in Chicago

In the seventy years between 1880 and 1950, the population of Chicago grew from 503,000 to 3,620,000; an increase of over 700 percent. While the rate of population growth varied it did not decline during this period. However, land values rose and declined several times. By 1933 Chicago had become the exemplar of urban economic boom and bust. Real estate economist Homer Hoyt documented the process in *One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago: The Relationship of the Growth of Chicago to the Rise of Its Land Values, 1830-1933*.⁵ The distinction between underlying land value (based not exclusively on demand but also on allowable floor area as specified in "zoning" regulations) and the value of improvements (e.g., buildings) proved a powerful motivator for attempting to maximize total value by devaluing "undersized" buildings. Ironically, this logic led to demolition even during times of weak demand (or oversupply). In this instance, temporary uses, such as single story retail shops or surface parking lots, referred to as 'taxpayers', had better net returns than larger but underutilized, and sometimes historically significant, structures. The underlying assumption in this scenario is that the temporary use could be readily replaced when demand for more intense use (presumably office space in the central business district) increased.

The period beginning with the onset of the Great Depression in the early Nineteen-thirties, and extending through and beyond World War II led to the perceived obsolescence of whole building types and the threat of demolition. Two specific types that were given expression during the boom of the First Chicago School (roughly 1875-1925 as per Condit) were the multi-functional urban block, inclusive

of a large theater space; and the elevator-served urban office building. While there are other types, these two serve the present purpose in illustrating the loss of significant structures (Schiller/Garrick Theater and Home Insurance Building), saving of comparably important ones (Auditorium Theater and Reliance Building) and the reinterpretation of these types in the post-WWII years (Marina City and Inland Steel Building). The Schiller Building, subsequently Garrick Theater (Adler and Sullivan, 1890-1892; demolished 1961), and the Auditorium Theater (Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, 1886-1890) both suffered underutilization as early as the 1930s. By late 1940s, both were largely unprofitable to their owners and likely candidates for demolition and hence the utilization of their downtown sites for other uses.



Figure 1 Schiller Building (Historic American Building Survey)

The effort to save the Garrick Theater was among the first organized preservation efforts in Chicago. Coming shortly after a public campaign to prevent the demolition of Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie School masterpiece, the Robie House (1909), in 1957, preservationists were better organized to wage another effort.⁶ However, unlike the Robie House effort, the attempt to prevent the demolition of the Garrick Theater was not successful.



Figure 2 Robie House (Historic American Buildings Survey)

Downtown land values were both higher than in residential neighborhoods like Hyde Park, where the Robie House is located; and the business owners of the Garrick were less interested in identifying compromises and alternatives than was the non-profit owner of the Robie House in 1957, the Chicago Theological Seminary. The Auditorium Theater Building was also regularly threatened with demolition, with a report that in the early 1930s, estimates were taken to demolish the building, but the cost of the demolition was more than the land was worth. The Auditorium Theatre went bankrupt and closed in 1941.⁷



Figure 3 Auditorium Theatre Building

Used as a servicemen's' recreation center during WWII and occupied by the new Roosevelt University in subsequent years, the actual 7,000 seat theater space was ultimately too large a financial burden for the university. A non-profit organization specifically organized to raise funds for the restoration and reuse of the theater space was founded in 1960, and by 1967 this part of the building had been restored.



Figure 4 Home Insurance Building (Loeb Library - Harvard University)

The pairing of the Home Insurance Building (William LeBaron Jenney, 1884; demolished 1931) and the Reliance Building, (D.H. Burnham & Co., 1895) tell a slightly different story, albeit with the same differing outcomes. Rather than being illustrative of the 1960s efforts at building preservation through civic mobilization, the demolition of the Home Insurance Building in 1931 and the reuse of the Reliance Building as a boutique hotel in 1999, are examples of calculated business decisions.



Figure 5 Reliance Building (photo by J. Crocker)

The sixty-seven year span between the demolition of one and the reuse of the other is illustrative of the continuity of the pressures of urban land economics and the development of a conservation ethic supported by changed public perception and public policy tools. The Home Insurance Building was one of the first victims of the economic downturn of the 1930s, before the significance of this building was appreciated, and subsequently canonized by Giedion, Condit, and others. As the presumptive and touted first example of the steel-framed curtain wall, the building was given stature as much through its loss as through its design pedigree. The absence of the Home Insurance Building during the period of the preservationist awakening of the 1960s served as a negative example, and hence what must be avoided. However, the task of saving a building of almost equal acclaim, the Reliance Building, proved difficult in the context of the *laissez-faire* economics of American real estate. For years, an unwilling building owner thwarted efforts by both civic supporters and municipal government officials to rehabilitate the building.⁸ This recalcitrance proved beneficial in that despite the years of uncertainty and marginal economic performance forestalled demolition until an agreement between the owner and the City of Chicago could be reached in the mid-1990s. These cases, both the successful preservation efforts, and

their respective counter examples, provide background to another, and equally important dimension of preservation advocacy. While the Auditorium Theatre demonstrates the role of non-governmental and non-profit organizations and the Reliance Building demonstrates governmental action working in consort with private investors, they can be viewed even more productively in light of the ideological underpinnings that motivated these efforts.

Why the Second 'Chicago School' matters for the First

Bruce Graham of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's 1957 Inland Steel Building and Bertrand Goldberg's 1963 Marina City were not only two important milestones in promoting downtown development in a time of suburbanization and potential urban decline, but also new buildings that indirectly served the cause of preservation.



Figure 6 Goldberg Presenting Marina City concept model (Goldberg Archives)

They did this in that each was the work of an architect highly conscious of the legacy of 'the Chicago School,' and also unabashedly willing to exploit that legacy by claiming its lineage. Goldberg's Marina City was as audacious as the Auditorium in its day. Like that earlier building, Marina City combined multiple functions. Residential towers, an office block, and a sculpturally free-form theater, sat atop a plinth housing both automobile garage and marina on the river.



Figure 7 Inland Steel Building (Historic American Buildings Survey)

The Inland Steel Building, harkens back in plan, cladding and siting to earlier Chicago School buildings, most directly to the Reliance Building. These latter day Chicago School buildings were important contributors to downtown revitalization and to civic architectural awareness. The benefit of this to preservation, whether intentional or not, was that Chicago School architecture was gaining prominence in the public eye, and among government officials, by means more immediate than through the treatises of architectural historians.

Significant to this effort, was the founding of a non-profit organization, the *Chicago School of Architecture Foundation (CSAF)*, established in 1966. Architects and brothers, Harry and Ben Weese, who had been central to the Schiller Building and Auditorium Theater preservation campaigns, associated with other like-minded individuals to purchase and restore Henry Hobson Richardson's Glessner House (1887).



Figure 8 Glessner House (Cornell University Library)

Like the precursor preservation projects the CSAF began its fund-raising and public awareness around a specific building, but unlike those efforts, the ultimate mission of the CSAF was to develop awareness and stewardship of the totality of the Chicago School legacy.⁹ This resulted in two important innovations that helped move architecture into the public consciousness: walking tours and gallery exhibits. While somewhat commonplace today, these two elements each helped propel a specific narrative of the development of modern architecture.



Figure 9 Chicago Architecture Foundation tour boat (photo by CAF)

Today the Chicago Architecture Foundation (CAF) annually offers 8,900 tour departures of 85 distinct tour itineraries (Walking, bus, boat, bicycle, Segway and train), with an attendance of 246,000. These tours are led by 420 trained volunteer docents, and supported by an additional 165 volunteers. The group maintains a gift shop, offices, and permanent and rotating exhibits on the ground floor of D.H. Burnham and Co.'s Railway Exchange Building. The CAF has an operating budget of \$10.65 million.

Why the 'Chicago School' matters urbanistically even for those who don't care about big 'A' architecture

While the narrative of the importance of Chicago commercial architecture has helped generate and sustain a significant contributor to tourism (and civic pride) in Chicago, the buildings supporting this phenomenon are still largely income producing real estate holdings. Some important buildings such as the Monadnock (Burnham & Root 1891; Holabird & Roche 1893) and Inland Steel have retained their original small tenant office uses, or as residential apartments as in the Marina City towers. Others such as the Reliance Building and the former office block of Marina City are now boutique hotels. Both the theater spaces of the Auditorium and Marina City are still used for performances, but their nature and operators have changed over time. Interestingly, the majority of the space in the Auditorium Building is used for neither of its original uses commercial offices or a hotel despite such uses being developed elsewhere in the downtown. The Auditorium Building (with the exception of the theatre) has become home to a type of institution representing a prominent class of building occupants in the Chicago downtown. Colleges and universities have found affordable and flexible space in many buildings, both significant and minor. Roosevelt University occupies the Auditorium Building and the Gage block (which includes parts by Sullivan and by Holabird and Roche); Robert Morris University is housed in Jenney's Second Leiter Building (1889), a former department store;



Figure 10 Carson, Pirie & Scott Building
(Loeb Library - Harvard University)

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago is a tenant in the adaptive reuse of Sullivan's Carson, Pirie & Scott Store (1899) and the owner of the Chicago Building (1904, Holabird & Roche) and several other late nineteenth and early twentieth century office and retail store properties. DePaul University has reused the former Goldblatt's Department Store (A.M. Rothschild Building, 1912, Holabird & Roche). Columbia College owns over a dozen historic buildings. In all, Chicago's Loop is "the largest college town in Illinois," with more than 65,000 students attending classes at institutions that together occupy nearly 8 million total gross square feet (743,000 Square meters) of Loop real estate. Fourteen institutions spent more than \$420 million on renovation and new building construction in the Loop from 2004 to 2009, creating 5,000 jobs. The City of Chicago has estimated that these Loop higher education institutions spend more than \$857 million on goods and services annually, generating \$2.1 billion in direct and indirect economic activity that creates 15,000 jobs. So while higher education institutions have benefited from the availability of otherwise underutilized historic buildings, they have also contributed to the economic revival and continued economic well-being of the downtown.

Conclusion

Chicago surely became a "capital city of modern architecture" because it has expertly validated and documented buildings of heritage significance. However, the way the specific configuration of preservation in the context of rapacious capitalist development came about is quite complex. This article has attempted to demonstrate several aspects contributing to the pattern of the whole. First, commercial real estate in Chicago was and continues to be driven by the ability to distinguish between land value and the present income value of a specific building on that property. Hence, investment decisions, including those that might include demolition, occur largely outside the bounds heritage professional consider as most relevant. Second, Chicago has a history not just of architecturally significant building, but a history and memory of urban change, including the loss of architecturally important buildings. Third, Chicago architects, for all their modernist bravado, have been among the most historically informed and conservation-minded citizens in the city. Fourth, preservation advocacy has evolved into a model for ongoing architectural celebration and resulting heritage tourism as evidenced by the success of the Chicago Architecture Foundation. Fifth, alongside ideologically supported advocacy efforts are the unexpected twists of local real estate markets as exemplified by the growth of space demand by institutions of higher education. While this short article, does not draw all the specifics of this empirical reality together, I have attempted to portray the ways in which heritage conservation, and specifically Historic Urban Landscapes, demands expertise beyond that held by conventional heritage site managers alone.

Notes

-
- ¹ Bluestone, Daniel. "Preservation and Renewal in Post-World War II Chicago." *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-) 47.4 (1994): 210-223.
- ² Teaford, Jon C. *The Metropolitan Revolution: The Rise of Post-Urban America*. Columbia University Press, 2006.
- ³ Giedion, Siegfried. *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, 5th Revised and Enlarged Edition. Fifth Revised and Enlarged Edition. Harvard University Press, 1977.
- ⁴ Condit, Carl W. *The Chicago School of Architecture A History of Commercial and Public Building in the Chicago Area, 1875-1925*. 1st ed. University of Chicago Press, 1964.
- ⁵ Hoyt, Homer, and Harry A. Millis. *One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago: The Relationship of the Growth of Chicago to the Rise of Its Land Values, 1830-1933*. Beard Books, 2000.
- ⁶ Smith, "How the Robie House was Saved," *Frank Lloyd Wright Quarterly*, pp. 4-19, vol. 19, no. 4 (Fall, 2008).
- ⁷ "Auditorium Theatre :: AUDITORIUM HISTORY." <http://auditoriumtheatre.org/wb/pages/home/education/chicagos-landmark-stage/auditorium-history.php> Web. 16 Jan. 2012.
- ⁸ Pridmore, Jay, and Hedrich Blessing. *The Reliance Building: a building book from the Chicago Architecture Foundation*. Pomegranate, 2003.
- ⁹ The Chicago School Architecture Foundation was renamed the Chicago Architecture Foundation in the early 1970s.