

CHICAGO ARCHITECTURE CENTER

EXPLORING THE ISSUE:

SAVING NEIGHBORHOOD TREASURES

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of civic anchors to neighborhood life is without debate. Unique local culture and heritage is that much harder to access when physical pieces go missing. From historic movie theaters and houses of worship to the defining architecture of main street, many once-proud buildings sit dormant or underutilized awaiting a visionary—or merely viable—new use.

For local communities, there is great potential in harnessing these assets as economic and cultural engines. Though at times preservation tools and redevelopment strategies are not well aligned. The problem posed by the rapidly growing inventory of [vacant Catholic churches](#), spun off by a downsizing Archdiocese, perfectly illustrates this. When communities and preservationists justly demand landmark protections for threatened churches they seldom hope for a condo conversion, but in the absence of major subsidy the prospects for creative redevelopment narrow to high-rent uses. It is difficult to save all houses of worship for their stately designs alone when the space constraints and upkeep are so prohibitive.

The gridlock that comes when preservation goals don't suit a developer's balance sheet is all too common, but we can also model sustainable approaches on key wins each year across the city. In this paper, we compare three types of neighborhood treasures and a range of preservation outcomes.



St. Adalbert Roman Catholic Church in Pilsen, subject of an ongoing preservation campaign. Photo by Eric Allix Rogers



Ramova Theater redevelopment in Bridgeport.

A DEEPER LOOK

Historic Homes

Perhaps the most straightforward of preservation opportunities are those pieces of the residential fabric instilled with deep cultural significance. This doesn't mean they are automatic wins. Far from it. Every community has stories of iconic residences successfully rehabbed and stories of others piled high on the scrap heap of history. They don't all make headlines. A key differentiator is the willingness of private owners to act as stewards, and the resources they are able to access. A right-sized vision is critical; some properties may well support a house museum or new community use, while others are best kept as residences.

One historic property currently threatened with demolition is Chicago's last surviving [Phyllis Wheatley settlement home](#) in the Washington Park neighborhood. Phyllis Wheatley Homes, named for America's first published Black author, formed a national network of supportive housing that boomed during the early 20th Century's Great Migration, with resources for social and professional advancement for Black women and girls. This particular location was among the most prominent, serving the community from the 1920s to the 1970s, when it reverted to private ownership. The structure is 125 years old and has suffered from deferred maintenance and water infiltration. In late 2021 the Chicago Architectural Club issued a [call for posters](#) imagining a future use for the Wheatley Home, and Preservation Chicago and others continue to advocate for a preservation solution and the funds to at least stabilize the structure.

For inspiration, look no further than the campaigns to save the Muddy Waters and Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley Houses in North Kenwood and Woodlawn, respectively. Years of advocacy resulted in the 2021 [landmarking of both properties](#). Each has committed owners with practical rehabilitation plans. Local non-profit Blacks-in-Green bought and will restore the Till-Mobley Home as a museum in remembrance of Till's lynching, the Civil Rights Movement it helped spark and stories of the Great Migration. And Muddy Waters' great-granddaughter Chandra Cooper endeavors to capture the spirit of the bluesman's "open door hospitality" for traveling musicians; alongside a showcase of memorabilia, the new museum will include a jam space and an

3



A call for reuse ideas for the Phyllis Wheatley Home at 5128 S. Michigan Ave. Chicago Architectural Club.

Theaters

Practically every Chicago neighborhood has a grand old movie house, or did at one point. Many date to the 1910s and 1920s at the point of transition from vaudeville to moving pictures. Outside of affluent areas and the Loop, where many movie palaces have been reinstated as concert and live theater stages, patterns of disinvestment have taken a toll on theaters across the city. This is a clear marker of inequity. It's also a hard puzzle to solve—many communities cannot easily support a 2,000-seat standalone venue when the rituals of cultural consumption itself have changed.

The more successful redevelopments integrate adjoining apartments and restaurants as revenue generators—in fact, some theater operated this way from the start. They also bring strategies for programming a theater with diverse entertainment or community uses, amplifying the local economic impact.

The redevelopment of Bridgeport's [Ramova Theater](#) exemplifies this approach. This stable neighborhood has benefitted from ethnic diversification and population growth, yet still has scratchy commercial strips. For more than 35 years, The Ramova, built as a sister theater to Lakeview's Music Box, was the most conspicuous vacancy on Halsted Street. Armed with tax increment financing and construction loans, new owner Tyler Nevius and partner Baum Revision embarked on a \$28 million transformation of the theater and a half-block of commercial frontage. There will be a modern revamp of the old Ramova Grill plus new a brewery and tap room. The theater itself will reopen in late 2022 with a 1,600-seat main stage and separate 200-seat venue at the balcony level, drawing a nighttime crowd to spend in the neighborhood.

North Lawndale's [Central Park Theater](#) offers a contrasting tale. The first theater from cinema moguls Balaban & Katz and architects Rapp & Rapp has not sat entirely vacant, but it has suffered deferred maintenance. House of Prayer, Church of God in Christ has held services at the property since the early 1970s while keeping the handsome red brick movie palace standing—a harder balancing act in recent years. A new coalition of non-profits has come to the church's aid with a plan to renovate the theater as a multi-use performance space and cultural hub with the church retaining an ownership stake. This restoration committee is attempting to secure landmark designation and leverage financing for the estimated \$25 million redevelopment. As with other high-profile rescue efforts—the Uptown, Avalon Regal, and Congress theaters among them—it's a game of wait and see.



Fabric of Main Street

No less integral to local identity are the many distinctive commercial buildings that help contribute to a sense of place in our neighborhoods. With architectural variety, they combat the relentlessness of Chicago's grid and the blandness of the modern strip mall. These are buildings large and small, ornate and streamlined. All too often, innovative retail designs have been treated as throwaways by government officials and private developers (as was the case with Edgewater's Woodruff Arcade) or have simply languished without tenancy (like the Walter Burley Griffin-designed Cornell Store & Flats in Greater Grand Crossing).

Examples to the contrary are as architecturally diverse as the original 1920s Goldblatt Brothers department store near Chicago and Ashland, a terra cotta treasure by Alfred Alshuler, architect of the London Guarantee Building; and a 1938 art deco Sears at Six Corners in Portage Park. The vacant Goldblatt's was landmarked in 1998 and adaptively reused as a Chicago Public Library branch and city department offices, while the Portage Park Sears building is [in the process](#) of being retrofitted as a six-story apartment and retail structure that will continue to anchor a prominent intersection.



Central Park Theater awaits restoration (top). Photo courtesy of House of Prayer Church of God in Christ, Tom Harris. The former Goldblatt's Department Store (bottom), 1615 W. Chicago Ave.

Conclusion

Not everything can be saved or should be saved, but often times neighborhood treasures are integral to local economies and identity—the silent contributors. Where money and vision and appetite for risk all align, great things can happen. Look around and take stock of this endangered fabric representing a mix of eras, and the CAC will continue to highlight shining examples.

Sources:

[Roman Catholic Churches - 2021 Most Endangered](#). Preservation Chicago, March 4, 2021
[Threatened: Phyllis Wheatley Home](#). Preservation Chicago, February 28, 2021
[Call for Posters: Save Chicago's Last Phyllis Wheatley Home](#). Fall 2021
[Till and Waters Homes Among 'Adopt-a-Landmark' Grant Finalists](#). Block Club Chicago, November 23, 2021
[Bridgeport's Ramova Theater is on its Way Back](#). [Chicago Tribune](#), December 1, 2021
[Push to Rehab Historic Theater is Gaining Traction](#). [Crain's Chicago Business](#), November 10, 2021
[Six Corners Sears Redevelopments Gets Full City Council Approval](#). Block Club Chicago, September 14, 2021