

## Character development: South Loop strives for identity as a new neighborhood evolves

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Photographs by Michael Kardas

When Jim and Laura Munro moved into their [Central Station](#) townhome in 2002, they knew the South Loop would grow, but they weren't prepared for what happened during the next five years.

"We didn't expect this amount of inundation," Laura says. "We were attracted to the area because it was quiet and, at least when we moved here, a little off the beaten path, but at the same time, so accessible."

Indeed, the pace of development in the neighborhood directly south of the Loop has been phenomenal. Since 1990, the number of housing units in the area bounded by Congress Parkway, Lake Shore Drive, Cermak and the south branch of the Chicago River has roughly doubled, according to U.S. Census figures compiled by [Metro Chicago Information Center](#). And in 2006, the South Loop accounted for 53 percent of the 6,582 new condos that entered the downtown market, according to housing analyst [Appraisal Research Counselors](#).

The overall real estate market has softened, but the South Loop continues to outperform all other downtown neighborhoods in residential development.



“The South Loop, Chicago’s fastest growing neighborhood, continues to dominate the downtown housing market in terms of new projects and sales velocities,” says Gail Lissner, vice president of Appraisal Research Counselors, which produces “[The Downtown Chicago Residential Benchmark Report](#).”



Appraisal Research’s latest study reported that 4,123 housing units within the South Loop were in various stages of development, from presales to partially occupied — a whopping 27 percent of all the residential development activity projected for 2007 and 2008 citywide.

### **New retail**

Despite their alarm, the Munros can’t overlook the fact that the influx of new residents has finally stimulated the arrival of retail and other amenities to a population that has been eagerly awaiting them.

The new retail often takes the form of big-box stores with lots of surface parking – not the most attractive or desirable variety of urban shopping. But it’s remarkable to spend time on Roosevelt Road on a Sunday and see the number of pedestrians walking across the bridge to the [Target](#) store at Clark Street, and even as far as the [Whole Foods](#), which opened in August at the corner of Roosevelt and Canal.

If the pedestrian mentality – a willingness to walk even if there’s a car in your garage – is one gauge of urban arrival, the South Loop is well on its way. In two years – when the [Roosevelt Collection](#), with dozens of other stores and a multiplex movie theater, opens



along Roosevelt between Target and Whole Foods, the change will be even more mind-



boggling.

But Jim and Laura’s displeasure over the level of construction activity in the South Loop is one reason they supported [Ald. Bob Fioretti \(2nd\). Fioretti](#), whose ward includes much of the area north of Roosevelt Road and east of State Street, this spring defeated 14-year incumbent Madeline Haithcock. His platform wasn’t overtly anti-development but made much of refusing developer campaign contributions and promising to “protect the unique character of our neighborhoods.”

### **Defining character**

Some neighborhood groups are finding Fioretti more sympathetic to their positions than Haithcock was. “Developers should be able to develop here, but they should make more concessions for retail and schools and parks, to make the neighborhood a community, not just a high-rise heaven,” Laura Munro says.

But here’s the funny thing about Fioretti’s stance on protecting neighborhood character: the South Loop neighborhoods, by and large, have never really had much of what you would call character, at least of the conventional Chicago neighborhood variety.





In assessing Chicago's South Loop today, the comparisons with the city's West Loop are inevitable. Both are "neighborhoods" more out of convenience than anything else, each composed of several distinct and quite different quarters.

Unlike more discrete areas of the North or South sides, these central neighborhoods are difficult to assess as a whole, because each is so huge and so diverse in land usage and building stock. The South Loop and West Loop are not neighborhoods in the same sense as Hyde Park or Lincoln Square or Rogers Park. They are, nevertheless, places where people live – increasingly, lots of them – so "neighborhoods" they become. Until recently, there really was no "there" there.

Now, apparently, there is.

### **Former Gold Coast**

Like nearly every part of Chicago, the area has a rich and storied past. In the years after the [Great Chicago Fire](#), many of what we might call today movers and shakers (okay, maybe we would have called them that in the 1990s) built lavish residences along Prairie and Indiana avenues (visit the few remaining homes in the [Prairie Avenue Historic District](#) for a small taste of what these posh blocks once were like). This was the Gold Coast before today's version existed.

By the 1920s, when transportation north of the Chicago River improved markedly, the rich had left the Near South Side and their grand residences along Michigan and Indiana were replaced by commercial ventures.



Wabash and Michigan near Roosevelt Road housed numerous businesses that serviced the booming local film industry. The [Columbia Dance Center](#) at 13th Street and Michigan Avenue was originally built as the Paramount Pictures Exchange Building. The lavish



early twentieth century auto showrooms that emerged on South Michigan are protected by their inclusion in the landmarked Motor Row Historic District.

The 2400 S. Michigan Ave. building – originally the Illinois Automobile Association – wasn't built until 1936, but even by then, the glamour of the location had faded. Many of the auto manufacturers had gone belly up in the Depression, and the showroom spaces were hard to fill.

### **A slow start**

The South Loop, which included large tracts of empty railroad land, defunct manufacturing buildings and old warehouses, was a cipher for most Chicagoans, who had no reason to think about the neighborhood unless they were looking for rooms in transient hotels.

The first intrepid residents who occupied lofts in the South Loop's Printer's Row in the early 1980s had to wait nearly two decades for a grocery store within walking distance, the [Jewel](#) at State and Roosevelt. That unique pocket of lofts, carved from former printing houses and centered on Dearborn Street between Congress Parkway and Polk Street, did have a distinct character from the start – though not much else.



Cross south from Printers Row, into Dearborn Park and Dearborn Park II, and the character is suddenly suburban – townhouses and single-families clustered around communal parks and tennis courts in subdivisions that aren't quite gated but don't exactly embrace the grid.

The [Dearborn Park developments](#) were much less dense than their original champions had hoped they'd be, but along with Printers Row and other infill lofts projects, this gradual creep of residential building allowed the Central Station project to take shape in the early 1990s – and Central Station is what has given the area its critical mass.

Like [Millennium Park](#), the property – which stretches from Lake Shore Drive to Michigan Avenue and from Roosevelt Road almost to Cermak Road – is partially built on air rights belonging to the [Illinois Central Railroad](#). The city's long-range planning policy had for decades targeted this area for high-density mixed-use development and, as with Dearborn Park, those goals had to be scaled back at first, to low-rise housing.



Despite the aggressively suburban flavor of its planning, Central Station attained an urbane aura based in large part on the presence of Richie and Maggie Daley who moved into a house there with great fanfare in 1993.

### **Booming location**

The South Loop boom that has followed isn't hard to fathom if you look at the convergence of a national trend – increased demand for downtown housing – and the three most important factors in real estate (location, location, location, in case, by some remarkable circumstance, you've never heard the joke). The adjacency, particularly of Central Station's [Museum Park properties](#), to Lake Michigan and the lakefront parks, was always a huge positive. But the re-opening of Roosevelt to Lake Shore Drive and the creation of the Museum Campus gives the area an almost Gold Coast feeling.

Location was a major factor in why landscape architect Juli Ordower moved to the South Loop after living in Denver. She grew up on the North Shore and had lived in Wrigleyville and Old Town before her stint in Colorado. When she got a job with a firm whose offices are on South Michigan Avenue, the choice of a South Loop residence was a no-brainer. She has a fifteen minute walk to and from work each day, which to her, more than makes up for the convenience of “having everything right outside your door, the way you do in Wrigleyville.”



In some ways, Jim and Laura Munro are the archetypal new city dwellers, migrants who traded empty suburban nests for urban digs. Ironically, unlike Juli Ordower, they both work in the suburbs and reverse commute, but the quality of their new urban existence is ample compensation. “Being able to walk to someplace for a cheeseburger and a beer more than makes up for it,” says Jim Munro.



While a valued location is constant, what has really made the neighborhood distinctive is the sizeable number of interesting tall buildings in the area. Unfortunately, the bulk of low-rise condo and townhouse development continues, by and large, to fall flat.

### **Fresh design**

Developer [CMK Companies](#) and architects [Brininstool & Lynch](#) have had the most dramatic impact on the South Loop streetscape. If we're lucky, their strong yet elegant designs will establish a neighborhood aesthetic that other designers here might emulate.

Many of CMK's South Loop projects with Brininstool – [1845 S. Michigan Ave.](#), [1720 S. Michigan Ave.](#), [1620 S. Michigan Ave.](#) and [1440 S. Michigan Ave.](#) – are shining examples of design's simple power, literally and figuratively. Their distinctive screen-like glass and metal facades gleam in the sunlight, an effect you see best looking east from the [Red Line](#) elevated train as you approach the Chinatown stop.



Many architects will tell you that throughout the 1990s, the [Chicago Department of Planning and Development](#) more or less coerced them to design apartment buildings composed of red brick, limestone and black wrought iron, a reflection of what officials there seemed to perceive that The Boss – [Mayor Daley](#) – liked.

“We weren't interested in doing that,” says Brininstool, suggesting that his firm's design for Platinum Tower, at Van Buren and Des Plaines streets, just east of the Dan Ryan, was a watershed in relations between architects and the city, although he says, “they really put us through the wringer on that one.”



Stylishness has been key to making Brininstool's designs marketable, but they're equally about substance, economy and utility. Economics have forced Brininstool to innovate with alternative window wall systems and pre-cast construction techniques, and also helped shape the shallow, slab-like forms many of the buildings have taken, which seem particularly appropriate for the broad north-south avenues of the South Loop.

In each case, the constraints imposed actually helped, influencing design solutions that make handsome additions to the street wall, but also creating a tough standard for other projects to meet.



Which is not to say a lot of them aren't giving it the old college try.

While the earliest tall buildings on the Museum Park property, nearly all designed by architects [Pappageorge / Haymes](#), are bland and colorless, the firm's latest offerings are considerably more pleasing. [One Museum Park](#), particularly, looks like it will come out a winner.

## **Dense development**

As the South Loop struggles to define itself, some inevitable arguments have erupted. What exactly should developers be allowed, or encouraged, to build? But debates over the shape of development have been mild here compared to those in some other neighborhoods, which is astonishing, given the sheer amount of building underway.

The mini-protest that occurred last year demanding that [Terrapin Development](#) change the design of its 28-story Printers Row high-rise had more to do with parochial interests than with opposition to high-rises in general, or to Terrapin's contemporary design in particular. A smattering of residents from Folio Square, which sits adjacent to Terrapin's [Burnham Pointe](#) high-rise site, at 701 S. Clark St., set up a Web site and staged an anemic street protest before the project went forward and construction began.



Most South Loop residents on some level appreciate the fact that this is one neighborhood that needs more people in order to draw more stuff – restaurants, retail, movie theaters.

Developer [Keith Giles](#), a principal in [Kargil Development](#) acknowledged in a recent video debate sponsored by [New Homes Magazine's](#) affiliated Web site, [YoChicago.com](#), that the walk from his latest high-rise project, at 18th Street and Prairie Avenue, to Jerry Kleiner's new restaurant, [Room 21](#), 2110 S. Wabash Ave., can be a lonesome trek. But he says, that's changing.

“It's not a high-traffic pedestrian area...It's not dangerous, but it's desolate,” Giles says. “But there are projects going up on those vacant sites. So maybe today on that particular strip on South Wabash, you might feel a little uncomfortable, but in three years, when two of those buildings are built, there will be six times as many people there.”

### **A “new” neighborhood**

The fact that this is a “new” neighborhood has helped keep contention to a minimum despite the enormous growth. There were few residents to displace here, so the neighborhood avoided usual debate over gentrification. The South Loop has been solidly middle class and racially integrated from its earliest days as an emerging residential location, escaping the typical pattern of Chicago neighborhoods. Residents consistently bring this up as a point of pride and a prime reason they live there.

In fact, as a neighborhood character emerges, this identity as a successfully integrated middle class enclave might be the salient feature South Loop life.

The physical character is harder to peg since this is a diverse and still very much evolving neighborhood. What will the place look like when the cranes that seem to be perched on every block disappear and the towers now underway are finished? What sort of streetscape will be created on blocks where hundreds of new homes are being added?





One project that has stirred some controversy is [Lucien Lagrange's X/O](#) project for [Kargil development](#), 1712 S. Prairie Ave., directly across the street from the landmark [Glessner House](#). Despite the fact that it already has received a go-ahead from the city's Powers That Be, it has continued to face resistance from the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance.

The group's beef doesn't seem to be so much with the height or density of the project as with its unconventional – and frankly, very exciting – hyper-modern design. The glassy development includes a 44-story north tower and a 34-story south tower that slope toward and away from each other in a pairing Lagrange has compared to figures dancing. Only a few landmark homes remain in this enclave, but some vocal neighbors have complained that the ultra-contemporary towers ignore the context of their historic neighborhood.

In 1889, neighbors along Prairie Avenue might have said the same thing about the revolutionary design the great Boston architect [H. H. Richardson](#) conceived for the Glessners, whose former house is now a museum. More than a century later we can say it's a good thing there was no neighborhood group to stop them from building what we now consider a masterpiece.

That doesn't mean X/O will necessarily stand in the same category, but if the South Loop is going to continue its transformation and eventually develop into a place that actually has "character," the possibility is worth more than a passing thought.