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Restoring the Legacy of a Historic Chicago Neighborhood

By ROBERT SHAROFF

CHICAGO

ABOUT 110 years ago, Prairie Avenue was one of the most storied and exclusive addresses in this city. Indeed, a guidebook published around the time of the 1893 World's Fair described it as "the most expensive street in America west of Fifth Avenue."

And not surprisingly, some parts of it were even more exclusive than others.

"On this point my mother was adamant," wrote the popular novelist (and meatpacking scion) Arthur Meeker in a memoir published in 1955 about growing up in one of the dozens of palatial mansions that once lined the street. "Although it was one of the longest arteries in the city, she always maintained that only the first six blocks, from 16th to 22nd Street, comprised 'the sunny street that held the sifted few.' "

In Mr. Meeker's day, the "sifted few" included legendary Chicago moguls like the department store baron Marshall Field; George Pullman, manufacturer of the Pullman sleeping car; and the meatpacking magnate Philip Armour.

Probably the most celebrated residence was Glessner House, a fortresslike mansion designed by the noted architect Henry Hobson Richardson for John J. Glessner, one of the founders of the International Harvester Company. The house, the object of a major preservationist battle in the 1960's, is now a museum.

The street - which is about a quarter mile south of the Loop and two streets in from Lake Shore Drive - reached its apogee in the 1890's and then began a century-long decline because of the noise and dirt from nearby railroad tracks and the simultaneous development of the Gold Coast on the city's north side.

"It's interesting how quickly it fell out of favor," said Tim Samuelson, the city's cultural historian. "The children of the older families didn't want to live there, and neither did the new wealthy families. By 1910, many of the houses had been converted to rooming houses or factories."

By the early 1970's, most of the houses had been leveled and replaced by factories and parking lots.

Then, in the late-1990's, in the midst of the downtown housing boom that has transformed many neighborhoods, the somnolent street revived. In the last decade, most of the factories have either been demolished or converted to loft condominiums.

In their place, half a dozen condo projects have been erected. In addition, the seven remaining mansions have been renovated or are in the process of being renovated into cultural, commercial and living spaces.

"The area's really filling in nicely," said James Kinney, president of Rubloff Residential Properties, a large downtown brokerage firm.

Prices are climbing. "This year, for the first time, there were more million-plus contracts south of the river than north of the river," he said. (The Chicago River, which forms the northern boundary of the Loop, is the traditional dividing line between the city's north and south sides.)

To a degree that is somewhat unusual, given how little of the original street survives, the area's history as a premier silk stocking district continues to exert a strong pull on developers, architects and residents.

"The history was half of it for me," said Joe Quiroz, a mortgage broker who recently bought a 6,000-square-foot row house in the Commonwealth, a new condominium project just south of 18th Street. "I have a lot of books on the history of Chicago and the people who used to live on Prairie Avenue," he said.

The other half, he added, was financial. "To get the same square footage on the Gold Coast," he said, "I would have to pay almost twice as much."

Oscar Tatosian, an Oriental rug importer who recently bought the historic Reid mansion down the street, says the neighborhood has a lot going for it. "When I started looking to buy," he said, "I made a list of priorities. I wanted something that was historic and architecturally interesting and also something that had reasonable parking, highway access and no or low assessments. I found all of that here."

Two current projects - which are adjacent to each other on the block south of 18th Street - demonstrate this attraction in different but compelling ways.

The first is the renovation of the historic Marshall Field Jr. mansion into six luxury condominiums. The second is the Commonwealth, which consists of 17 row houses done in a variety of styles that emulate - right down to the mansard roofs and copper bay windows - what was there a century ago.

The Field mansion has a rather notorious past. In 1905, Marshall Field Jr., son of Marshall Field, died there from a mysterious gunshot wound. One widely believed story is that he was actually shot at the

Everleigh Club, a noted brothel, and transported back to the house, where he subsequently expired.

The house became a sanitarium for alcoholics in the early 1900's and was more or less empty for many years until it was bought three years ago by the developers Robert Burk and Robert Kuker.

Dating from the 1880's and including a 24,000-square-foot Romanesque mansion plus a 6,000-square-foot coach house, the house was in ruins.

"Structurally, there wasn't much left," Mr. Burk said. "The roof had failed, the floor joists were all rotted out and a three-story bay had collapsed and fallen off the house. It was in a lot worse shape than I ever envisioned."

Since then, the team has restored the exterior and reconfigured the interior to accommodate six condos ranging in size from 2,200 square feet to 4,700 square feet. Prices range from \$870,000 to about \$2 million.

The Commonwealth, which was developed by the Rezmar Development Group of Chicago, brings the street full circle. The project broke ground two and a half years ago, and the first residents moved in last spring. All the units, which range from \$1 million to \$2.5 million, have been spoken for.

"The buildings have a very proud quality as a result of the detailing," said George Pappageorge, a principal with Pappageorge/Haymes, the architecture firm that designed the project.

Mr. Quiroz, the mortgage broker, is planning to move in with his family this fall. "I'm excited," he said. "We put about \$650,000 worth of upgrades into it. It's really going to be a showplace."

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