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## **Saving the Grand Relics Of Chicago's Prairie Ave.**

**By ROBERT SHAROFF**

THEY are the Chicago equivalent of the Easter Island monoliths: a handful of enormous Victorian-era mansions poking up inexplicably from a late-20th-century landscape of factories and parking lots on the city's Near South Side.

A century ago, they -- and Prairie Avenue, the street where many of them are situated -- were famous. "The guidebooks called it the most expensive street west of Fifth Avenue," said Mary Alice Molloy, a local writer and architecture historian who has done extensive research on the neighborhood.

She estimates that at one time more than 20 millionaires lived on a four-block stretch of the street, including such Gilded Age tycoons as Marshall Field, the department-store magnate; George M. Pullman, creator and manufacturer of the Pullman car, and Philip Armour, the meatpacking baron.

There were dozens of houses by some of the most famous architects of the period -- Richard Morris Hunt, Henry Hobson Richardson and Daniel Burnham among them.

The most famous is Glessner House, a fortress-like mansion at the corner of Prairie Avenue and 18th Street designed by Richardson for John J. Glessner, one of the founders of the International Harvester Company.

The house, which the American Institute of Architects describes as Richardson's "finest urban residence" and "a dwelling of extraordinary distinction," is currently a museum and the centerpiece of what is essentially a tiny historic district, for the most part on the west side of Prairie Avenue between 18th and Cullerton Streets. The district was designated in the 1970's in an effort to save some of the remaining houses.

The neighborhood itself has, however, been altered almost beyond recognition. "As a district, it's bits and pieces," said James Peters, acting deputy commissioner of the city's Landmarks Commission. "The point was to try and save the little that was left."

INDEED, the 20th century has not been kind to the area. The houses started coming down in the 20's and culminated in a great orgy of destruction that reached its peak in the 50's and 60's.

Jack Simmerling, a local artist and co-author with Wayne Wolf of "Chicago Homes," a book on historic houses, remembers working on one of the wrecking crews that leveled much of the neighborhood for office buildings and warehouses during this period. "Many of the houses looked like the owners had moved out yesterday," he said. "They were in perfect condition."

Today, 14 mansions remain, nine on Prairie Avenue and the rest on nearby streets. About half are still at least partially used for residential purposes while the rest have either been converted to other uses or are vacant.

The surprise is that, after years of steady decline, the neighborhood is starting to come back as a trendy residential area. Immediately to the north is Central Station, a new town house and apartment house condominium development with architecture modeled on the turn of the century styles that predominated on Prairie Avenue. The development is the home of Mayor Richard M. Daley, who has taken an active interest in the redevelopment of the Near South Side.

To the west and east, many of the old industrial buildings are being converted to striking lofts. But even with the influx of new residential buildings, the remaining original mansions are something of an enigma.

"They're like beautiful islands amid all the factories and warehouses," said Susan Baldwin, former president of the Illinois Landmarks Preservation Council and the president of Baldwin Historic Properties, a real estate consulting firm. "And it's tough to find uses for them that will support the kind of major restoration many of them need."

Tough, but not impossible. Over the last two years, four of the mansions have changed hands and a fifth is currently up for sale. The differing fates of the four that have been sold demonstrate both the advantages and the challenges of figuring out new uses for historic buildings.

The clearest success stories are the Kimball and the Coleman-Ames mansions, side by side at 1801 and 1811 Prairie Avenue and across from the Glessner House Museum. The Kimball, a three-story turreted chateau designed by Solon S. Beman, is the more spectacular of the two. The architect is probably best known for laying out the town of Pullman, one of the first planned communities in the United States and now part of Chicago. The town contained the Pullman Palace Car Company factory and homes for its workers.

Both houses were owned for many years by the R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, a printing company that used them for offices and later donated them to the Chicago Architectural Foundation, a civic group dedicated to promoting and preserving local architecture. Since 1991, the houses, which are connected by a passageway, have served as the headquarters for the United States Soccer Federation, the governing body for the sport. The federation initially leased the houses and then last year bought them outright for \$400,000.

According to Henry Steinbrecher, secretary general of the federation, the houses have given the organization -- and the sport -- a new visibility. "The houses give us a hook and a base," he said. "Across the country, we're better known as Soccer House than as the Soccer Federation. And they're spectacular for parties and receptions."

That they are. Since acquiring the houses, the federation has spent close to \$1 million on everything from renovating the original sliding doors between rooms to refinishing the lavish carved woodwork and parquet floors. "The normal maintenance is higher than for a standard office building, but we got the houses at a very good price and there are lots of advantages," said Mr. Steinbrecher.

Among the advantages is that the Kimball house in particular has become a popular location for movies filming in the area. In the last few years, the mansion was featured prominently in the Richard Gere movie "Primal Fear" as well as a number of television shows.

ANOTHER house being renovated is the Wheeler Kohn Mansion, a 10,000-square-foot Second Empire dwelling at 2018 South Calumet Avenue, a block east of Prairie Avenue. Late last year, the house was purchased by Scott and Debra Seger, both with managerial jobs in real estate. The Segers are midway through an extensive renovation effort and plan to reopen the house as a bed-and-breakfast sometime after the first of the year. Ms. Seger

estimated that they will have invested a total of \$800,000, including the purchase price, by the time the renovation is completed.

The house -- which was built in 1870, a year before the Chicago fire -- has been through some hard times. Starting in the 1920's, it was occupied first by a publishing company and then by a butter-and-egg wholesaler. When the Segers purchased it, it had been vacant for a number of years and was scheduled for demolition. "It's basically a beautiful shell," said Scott Seger.

The facade of the house includes a two-story copper bay window, carved limestone trim and an elaborate covered front porch. The Segers are also painstakingly restoring the original cornice and installing a slate roof.

The original house had 10 bedrooms; the renovated house will have 11 and each will have its own bathroom. The bed-and-breakfast will be known as the Wheeler Mansion and rooms will go for \$200 to \$360 per night.

The fate of the last of the quartet of recently sold mansions -- the Robbins house at 2126 Prairie Avenue, designed by Mann, MacNeille & Lindeberg of Manhattan -- is more problematic. The house, a three-story Georgian Revival residence with 21 rooms, was built for Edward Robbins, a meatpacker, in 1905 and may have incorporated parts of a much older house. It was the last mansion to be built on the street.

The house's last official use was as a methadone clinic several years ago. Last year, it was purchased at auction by Theodore Nicholas, a local real estate investor who plans to build a parking lot on land he owns next door to the house. Mr. Nicholas does not rule out demolishing the house but said he has no current plans to do so. He also said he would be willing to give the house to anyone who would move it off its current site.

"The land is worth more than the house," he said. "Restoring old houses is a labor of love, but it's very costly and I don't have the stomach for it."

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