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LANDMARKED, LOVED AND SOLD

Creating And Selling Unique Living Spaces
Out Of History's Mysteries

by Erin Brereton

Older buildings don't have it easy if they hope to become landmarks. First, they must be spotted by local citizens or members of the Chicago landmark committee; that's followed by an application process, inspection, review, scrutinization and more.

But, if they cross that rubicon, the buildings come out on the other side an officially landmarked property—current and future owners can't ever change their exterior without first getting approval; they have become a part of the city's architectural history and, perhaps most importantly, their value likely just shot through the roof.

"You're preserving a piece of architecture that represents a period in time," says Connie Buscemi, spokesperson for the Chicago Department of Planning and Development. "It speaks to the development of the city and is preserved for future generations."

To become landmarked, a property has to have some kind of significance to a particular architectural period or time in the city. The Department of Planning and Development staff makes recommendations to the Commission on Chicago



Landmarks; twice a year, the public may as well.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects or entire districts be designated as Chicago landmarks. More than 250 landmarks have been designated by the council.

To prevent destruction of historical buildings, the landmark commission reviews each structure on the demolition list, “to make sure it’s not significant,” Buscemi says.

URBAN RENEWAL

Many of the historical structures in Chicago are well known to developers, real estate agents and buyers as well; the Marshall Field Jr. Mansion at 1919 S. Prairie Avenue was vacant for more than three decades before developer Bob Burke bought the property about three years ago.



Marshall Field Jr. Mansion

“[An older building] can be a benefit if it’s unique and has something in its character that makes it a landmark,” Burke says. “If it’s just [a building] in a [historically landmarked] area, it can be detrimental because you’re limited as to what you can do with building. If you’re building in a landmark district in Wicker Park, new houses must mimic the look of Wicker Park houses that are older. [That’s why] an enormous amount of buildings are renovated—it’s a problem to start from scratch.”

When it comes to painstaking renovation, Burke should know. He’s spent the last few years repairing the Marshall Field Jr. home.

“It was unbelievable,” says Burke. “You couldn’t even walk in it. The building had been pilfered—everything from the fireplace mantles to the trim was stolen, but you can get a feel for the grandeur as to how they lived.”



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—Bob Burke, Developer

Retuning the building to its original glory involved shipping in specially cut stone from Madison, Wis.; replacing portions of the exterior, particularly a sandstone that had deteriorated over the years; and getting landmark committee approval on the colors used.

“We’re a little different than other developers—we employ our own contractors, J. Roberts and Co. masonry,” Burke says. “We built almost a whole house inside of it [which] supported it while renovating.”

The total finished building is 30,000 square feet, containing six 2-bedroom/2 1/2-bath to 3-bedroom/3 1/2-bath condo units ranging from 2,400 to 4,500 square feet. Unit ceilings range up to 13 feet; windows are as high as nine feet, and the building contains 13 of the structure’s original fireplaces. Market prices range from the high \$800s to \$1.8 million.

The renovation makes for an interesting story, but it’s also a key sales point for the structure.

“In order to sell a historical property, I had to learn what it takes to renovate a historical property,” says Carolyn Milligan, director of sales, UrbanStreet Realty, the company handling the building’s sales. “You need to know the history of the property—the details of who built it, who’s lived in it, how it has changed hands over the years, and the effect of those transitions on the actual property itself are meaningful to some buyers. Many buyers considering a property such as the Marshall Field Jr. Mansion are talking to us because they have a personal interest in the structure and the indelible mark it and the Prairie Avenue Historical District made upon Chicago and national architecture.”

But selling such a unique property in such a booming area as the Prairie Avenue District requires some original ideas. “From a marketing perspective, the mansion is a bit of rare animal,” Milligan says. “We are targeted to a premium segment buyer who is looking for a one-of-a-kind space. The simple architectural beauty and grandeur of the mansion gave us a great opportunity to market our property in an outstanding way. For example, as a holiday promotion we had custom gingerbread house replicas of the mansion made and delivered to top brokerages in the Chicago area. People were astonished at the beauty of the structure; this was definitely what we wanted to communicate.”