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CITYSCAPES

A DAILY CHICAGO JOURNAL ABOUT THE BUILDINGS AND URBAN SPACES THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES

BY BLAIR KAMIN

October 08, 2009

With Chicago's Olympic bid dead, it's a whole new ballgame--Reese landmarks must be spared

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It made little sense, when Chicago was vying to host the 2016 Summer Olympics, to tear down all but one of the historic buildings at the prospective Olympic Village. It makes even less sense now that the city's Olympic bid has failed.

Memo to Mayor Richard Daley: Call off the bulldozers now -- or you will be committing an act of cultural vandalism that will undo whatever public relations points Chicago scored before Friday's debacle in Copenhagen.

The threatened buildings were co-planned and co-designed by Walter Gropius, one of the 20th century's most influential architects and the founder of the Bauhaus design school in pre-World War II Germany. Their rectilinear forms and crisply projecting sunshades did more than transplant the signature Bauhaus style to the South Side of Chicago. With them came the Bauhaus' almost-naive faith that new designs would lead to better living -- and better healing.

"MORE LIKE A HOTEL THAN A HOSPITAL," reads the caption on the back of an old photograph in the Tribune's files (above) about the hospital's 1957 Friend Convalescent Hospital, which Gropius helped design. "Through a dynamic program of rehabilitation of patients, hospital officials hope to cut time each patient spends in the hospital, and reduce bills by 20 to 25 percent."

In Chicago, a city that takes enormous pride in its architecture, you would think that a legacy like this would be celebrated. You would think that city officials would find a way to incorporate at least some of the Gropius buildings into the complex of apartments and condominiums planned for the site. But you would be wrong.



The Gropius buildings are among 28 structures on the former Michael Reese Hospital campus that the city, which is buying the 37-acre property for \$91 million, is still preparing to tear down.

Only the hospital's main building, a 1907 Prairie Style structure, will be spared. In the wake of the Olympic decision, city officials are unwavering in their determination to unleash the bulldozers on everything else Reese (including the Kaplan pavilion, at left).

"Nothing has changed since Friday. We're still doing all of the preparation for an eventual demolition there," said Molly Sullivan, a spokeswoman for the city's Department of Community Development.

In reality, much has changed:

--The rigid guidelines that drove the Olympic Village plan no longer apply.

In the spirit of fairness, athletes are supposed to have comparable accommodations. That's ideal for sport, but terrible for making good cities. The planned Olympic Village consisted of 21 nearly identical residential buildings, each about 12 stories high. They would have lined up like glass tombstones along South Lake Shore Drive.

Without Olympic-induced height limits, developers can build taller structures, which will let them achieve the same density while still leaving room for some the Gropius buildings. Chicago should not lock itself into a plan that meets Olympic specifications when it is not going to host the Olympics.



--The immediate need for the Olympic Village has vanished.

With the village plan an instant relic, there is no development concept for the Reese site. Nor has the city



picked any developers for the property. Even some developers are saying that the city's condo glut means it could be several years before there is a demand for a project the size of the Reese property.

A developer responding to a future city request for proposals could suggest adapting the buildings (like the Kaplan pavilion, left, and the psychiatric and psychosomatic institute, in background) to any number of uses -- offices, a health clinic, shops, a charter high school. So why rush in and tear down the Gropius buildings now?

--The Gropius buildings stand a good chance of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. That would provide developers a powerful financial incentive to save them.

The Illinois Historic Sites Advisory Council will consider a nomination of the former Reese campus for the National Register on Dec. 4. If the idea is eventually approved by federal officials, developers who come up with historically sensitive rehab plans for the Reese buildings will be eligible for millions of dollars in federal tax credits.

The Reese case is the latest skirmish in an ongoing conflict that has sprung up nationwide. With their early sheen gone, modern buildings from the 1950s and 1960s are tough to love and therefore vulnerable. They do not seduce us with easy-on-the-eyes decoration. Their appeal, like their architecture, is abstract.

But good buildings like these -- and the Reese buildings are good buildings; some won architectural awards -- tell the story of who we were and how our visions shaped the world.

To destroy them would be to operate on the foolish premise that wiping the slate clean and starting over is the best way to make cities. Experience shows, instead, that cities work best when they mix and match buildings of different uses from different eras. A lively jumble is invariably preferable to bland uniformity.



The Reese buildings remain structurally sound and easily could be adapted to new uses, according to preservationists who've been through them in recent months. That will only happen, though, if Daley realizes that he has a significant cultural resource on his hands -- before he sends in the wrecking crews.

POSTSCRIPT: Graham Balkany, who heads the Gropius in Chicago Coalition, sent out the following message to supporters today:

"Tomorrow, Friday, Alderman Preckwinkle and members of Chicago's Department of Community Development will be holding a closed-door, critical meeting concerning the future of Michael Reese Hospital.

"Since the IOC Vote against Chicago less than one week ago, the public response concerning our cause has been truly phenomenal. We've made a large number of new friends, have gained supporters, and a tremendous number of important figures in the media and architectural community have come out in

favor of a sensitive adaptive repositioning of the Michael Reese Campus as a rejuvenated part of Chicago's South Side.

"Nevertheless, we truly need Alderman Toni Preckwinkle's support moving forward. We are asking you to take a few moments of your time today to write the Alderman a strong but polite message. Please request that she step forward for saving the Gropius buildings at Michael Reese Hospital. The wrecking ball needs to be called off immediately, before this amazing opportunity for Chicago is squandered forever."

The alderman's email is: tpreckwinkle@cityofchicago.org

SECOND POSTSCRIPT: Here is the text of a letter from Chicago architect Dirk Lohan letter to Ald. Toni Preckwinkle:

Dear Ms. Preckwinkle:

As Blair Kamin's article in today's Tribune eloquently points out, the reasons for an immediate clearance has disappeared and the City should take the time to reconsider the planning of that site with a view of incorporating at least some of the wonderful Gropius buildings. Walter Gropius was one of the leaders of 20th century architecture and design and these are the only buildings which he worked on in Chicago, thus, they represent a unique addition to Chicago's architectural/cultural heritage.

Walter Gropius and my grandfather, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, knew each other very well dating back to the beginning of the 20th century when they worked together in Berlin. Gropius was the founder of the famous Bauhaus School of Design and Mies was its last Director. Both immigrated before World War II to America; Gropius to head Harvard Graduate School of Design and Mies to become the Director of the Architectural School at the Illinois Institute of Technology. They maintained their collegial relationship through their life and I remember Mies giving a reception in honor of Gropius' 80th birthday here in Chicago.

It would amount to an incredible travesty to tear down all of these important and still very useful buildings. Surely we in Chicago can come up with a new plan for the Michael Reese site that incorporates some of these buildings.

Please help Chicago avoid another debacle by speaking out in favor of the preservation of the Gropius Buildings.

Dirk Lohan

Posted at 06:38:31 AM in Historic Preservation

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This is a no-brainer now. The City of Chicago needs to prove we are a "World Class City" rather than spouting rhetoric about our worldwide importance while demolishing the important Gropius legacy. Great article Blair!

Posted by: Brad Suster | October 08, 2009 at 07:35 AM

It seems like the fix is in for the buildings' demolition.

The city may let them just sit - and rot - and then come up with the claim that the structures are unsafe and merit being bulldozed.

Secure them and preserve them Mr. Mayor-man.

Posted by: designslinger | October 08, 2009 at 07:54 AM

However by keeping them the complex remains isolated from the city grid. Maybe we should encourage parcel by parcel development in this city - sell the land off piece by piece after putting the street grid back together so individuals can build their own buildings and develop a natural streetscape. The era of the broad stroke or mega project has produced countless disasters to our city and a lot of them are found nearby Reece - public housing, Lake Meadows, IIT come to mind. Is it any wonder this area of the city is less desirable than the North Side where the city texture is largely intact and spared from the big ideas? The city may actually make some money selling off the land.

Posted by: marko | October 08, 2009 at 09:54 AM

I will not lie, I have never been a major fan of this style of modernism. It's just boring. I do understand the historical aspect and the reasoning for those who want to save the buildings, but I also don't think that all of them need saving. This is a chance to reinstall the city street grid and to make an entirely new neighborhood. I've always had a problem when buildings like these standing side-by-side. I suppose that's one reason why I think Lake Meadows and Illinois Center are dull, as well as many of the buildings on the IIT campus.

As I continue to read your article this paragraph really stands out "Without Olympic-induced height limits, developers can build taller structures, which will let them achieve the same density while still leaving room for some of the Gropius buildings. Chicago should not lock itself into a plan that meets Olympic specifications when it is not going to host the Olympics." I can 100% agree with you on this. The repetitive design of the proposed village was monotonous and uninspiring. Developers now have a chance to truly be bold and visionary (not that I'll hold my breath). Height and density are 2 things I'd truly like to see, as well as great architecture.

It's true that there is a condo glut in the city, but is there a rental glut? Is there an affordable housing glut? I think that developers need to become more visionary. Also seeing as we're speaking of 28 acres, this means that we can have a consortium of developers tackle the property over time.

I suppose that with some of the current Reese buildings you could have an instant school, library or community center.

Ok Mr. Kamin, you've convinced me, to a point. We should save some of the buildings, but not all. We now also have an opportunity to extend the Chicago skyline further south, allowing this portion of the "lakefront" to be developed as a neighborhood. No "tower in the park" mentality here.

Posted by: Butler V Adams | October 08, 2009 at 11:11 AM

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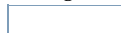
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