

Street Fighting Men

Preservation Chicago has built a reputation for waging no-holds-barred battles to save the city's notable older buildings. Critics call their tactics reckless, but that may be a measure of their effectiveness



FOR A MOMENT, as he crouched on the sidewalk in a coat and tie, wrestling a pair of scavengers for a grimy ribbon of century-old copper, it occurred to Dr. Michael Moran that this all might seem a little silly. “Like a skit or something,” Moran recalls. “Here were these grown men pulling back and forth on this thing like it was a piece of taffy.”

In fact, the contested copper sash was a section of the cornice from a three-story South Loop walkup with broad bay windows and a handsome brick façade with stone inlay, a building that had anchored the northwest corner of Cermak Road and Indiana Avenue since 1895. In recent years, the building—the Indiana Flats—had fallen on hard times and got caught in a tug-of-war between developers who wanted to replace it with a crystalline condo tower and preservationists who wanted to see the old structure landmarked and restored.

Earlier that April day last year, city officials halted a teardown of the structure, but not before the wrecking ball had knocked away part of the decorative Italianate crown, exposing luminous, untarnished copper underneath. By the time Moran happened by on his way home from the office, the scrappers had moved in. “So I jumped out of my car,” Moran

>> Fine (above left) and Moran helped residents on West Newport get this stretch of Victorian-era houses declared landmarks.

says. “I couldn’t just let them carry the stuff off.” And they didn’t—at least, not that afternoon. Clutching the cornice with one hand, Moran grabbed his cell phone with the other, and he called the First District police station. Within minutes, two cops arrived to chase the scrappers away. But when Moran drove past on his way to work the next morning, the copper was gone.

An orthopedic surgeon by trade and a historic preservationist by calling, Moran can be ferocious when it comes to saving the city’s architectural inheritance. Three years ago, he and his fellow crusader Jonathan Fine founded Preservation

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATTHEW GILSON

Chicago, an all-volunteer grassroots organization aimed at protecting historic buildings across the city. Since then, the group has earned a reputation for feisty—some have said reckless—tactics and furious persistence. “We started with a cup of coffee, and by 2001 we had a letterhead and a board of directors,” says Moran, who is Preservation Chicago’s garrulous vice president. Fine, a residential architect who does most of his work in the suburbs, serves as president.

The two met in 1999, when Fine, then head of a neighborhood group, was leading the charge to save West Town’s century-old St. Boniface Church, which archdiocese officials planned to demolish. “He read my name in the newspaper somewhere,” Fine recalls. “So he called me up and said, ‘Need any help saving that church?’ And I said, ‘Absolutely.’”

The battle for St. Boniface—featuring a candlelight vigil that drew 250 protesters—

“When you’re fighting the kind of battles we’re fighting, nice doesn’t get you far,” Fine says. “Nice doesn’t save buildings. But we seldom hit below the belt.”

ultimately saved the building. (Finding a suitable reuse, however, has proved more hairy. Despite offers from developers looking to resuscitate the long-vacant and languishing church, officials at the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago have yet to select a rehab plan.) “For us, that was a great victory,” Moran says of the effort to halt St. Boniface’s demolition. “It was kind of the beginning.”

OVER THE NEXT COUPLE OF YEARS, Fine and Moran labored, with mixed success, on behalf of a handful of threatened 19th-century townhomes and row houses near Moran’s Gold Coast home. In their first campaign under the Preservation Chicago moniker, they took on CVS Pharmacy. In 2001, the company announced plans to raze four century-old buildings on the northeast corner of State Parkway and Division Street and plant a pharmacy in their

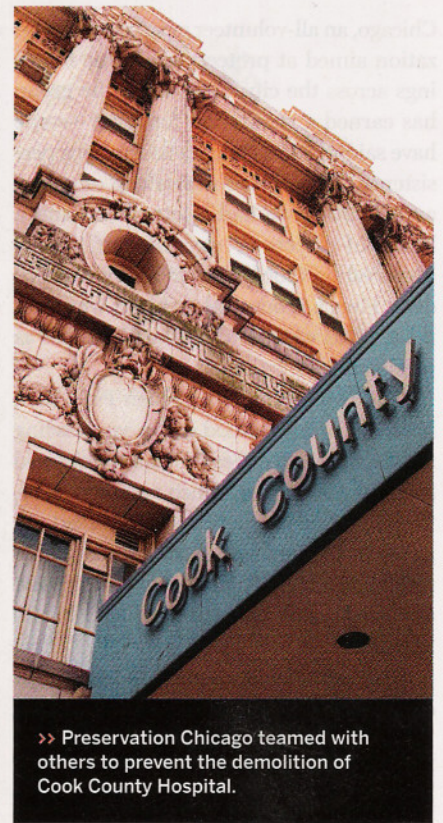
place. Fine and Moran staged a series of outdoor protests. They drafted a petition, which 2,552 residents signed, and marched to City Hall to deliver it to 42nd Ward alderman Burton Natarus. Meanwhile, another nonprofit organization, the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, also took up the cause, and by August 2002, its leaders had helped broker a compromise that would save the two buildings closest to the corner. CVS squeezed a 9,900-square-foot store inside their hollowed-out shells and flattened the other two structures to accommodate a loading dock.

Moran and Fine still chafe at that arrangement, especially given the alterations CVS made to the two salvaged buildings. Among other things, company officials refitted a three-story Queen Anne turret with flat brown metal panels. “CVS basically thumbed their noses at the city,” Moran says. (This past November, Planning and Development commissioner Denise Casalino sent CVS a letter demanding the turret’s restoration. A few weeks later, according to Brian Goeken, deputy commissioner of the planning department’s landmarks division, CVS officials wrote back, promising to comply.)

The CVS project isn’t the only one that has led Preservation Chicago to bump up against the older, bigger Landmarks Preservation Council. Founded in 1971, the council employs eight staffers, and its 44-person board is chaired by the prominent Chicago architect Joseph Antunovich. Membership totals 1,000 people in Chicago, 2,000 across the state. At any given time, according to its president, David Bahlman, the organization is juggling 40 to 50 preservation issues, most of them in Chicago and the suburbs.

By contrast, Preservation Chicago’s board numbers 20, and its dues-paying membership stands at a little more than 290. Fine and Moran do not get paid for their efforts, nor do the handful of other Preservation Chicago stalwarts who put in hours of work every month. “It’s hard,” Fine says. “When you think about it, two of the most grueling and rigorous programs are medicine and architecture, and Mike’s a doctor and I’m an architect. Which means neither Mike nor I understand the meaning of ‘no.’”

SIZE AND CLOUT AREN’T THE ONLY things that separate Preservation Chicago and the Landmarks Preservation Council—strategically, the two groups often follow different philosophies. When in doubt, Fine and Moran storm the gates; Bahlman and



>> Preservation Chicago teamed with others to prevent the demolition of Cook County Hospital.

his group look first for a seat at the bargaining table. “Old-time preservationists . . . were little old ladies in tennis shoes who chained themselves to the door,” Bahlman says. “We’ve been around for almost 35 years, and we’ve got other tools in our tool kit. We’re not afraid of a fight—I mean, we took [the recent remodeling of] Soldier Field to the Supreme Court—but we tend to think of a fight as a method of last resort.”

Fine and Moran make no apologies for their aggressiveness. “When you’re fighting the kind of battles we’re fighting, nice doesn’t get you far,” Fine says. “Nice doesn’t save buildings. But I don’t think we’re mean spirited. We seldom hit below the belt.”

During a three-year stint as commissioner of the city’s Department of Planning and Development (from 2001 to 2004), Alicia Berg got a good look at the tactics of Moran and Fine. “I think they are a great part of the continuum, as far as preservation in Chicago,” says Berg, who now serves as vice president of campus environment for Columbia College Chicago. “You can’t always agree to everything by consensus.”

Still, Berg says, the duo’s pugnacity sometimes grated. “Do I agree with everything they did? No,” she says. “Are they effective? Yes. Could they play nicer? Yes.”

Bahlman reckons that his organization has matured toward a different kind of ac-

tivism, one that can marshal considerable resources and bring more clout to bear. A year ago, for example, the Landmarks Preservation Council and officials of the National Trust for Historic Preservation raised \$7.5 million in eight weeks to put up a bid for the Ludwig Mies van der Rohe-designed Farnsworth House, near Plano, Illinois. Now the Landmarks Preservation Council essentially acts as property manager, staffing the house year-round with tour guides and overseers. "Preservation Chicago is a group of all volunteers, and they're very, very good at community work, at mobilizing people to picket on the sidewalk in front of a building," Bahlman says. "I think we've kind of outgrown that."

The way Fine sees it, though, somebody needs to get picketers onto the sidewalks. The Landmarks Preservation Council "wasn't getting the whole job done, for whatever reason, and a group of us wanted to do something else," Fine says. "We're out on the street. That's our vision."

EVEN WITHIN PRESERVATION CHICAGO, a kind of division of aggression has

emerged. Stretched thin between his patients, his ten-year-old daughter, his new wife, and his preservation work, Moran is the impulsive one, by turns theatrical or confrontational. Slightly more staid, Fine often tries to smooth the feathers he and Moran ruffle. "Jonathan is definitely the good cop," Moran says. "Sometimes, you know, you catch more flies with honey. But that's not to shortchange his fighting spirit, because he has plenty of that."

Jacqueline Leavy counts the strong personalities of Fine and Moran as among Preservation Chicago's strengths. "They rock," says Leavy, who, as executive director of the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group, has worked with Preservation Chicago on a few neighborhood projects. "Their unique approach is to make historic preservation a lively, engaging, grassroots activity. . . . These two guys are about a movement. And they're effective because they bring their own personalities to bear."

But Jack Guthman, a lawyer who often represents building owners and developers, argues that the preservation movement has lost its sense of perspective. His most direct

run-in with Preservation Chicago came a couple of years ago when Fine and Moran were battling to save a 19th-century house in the 900 block of North Paulina Street from demolition. Guthman represented the developer, who wanted to build townhomes on the site; eventually the developer won. "In Chicago, we've gotten away from landmarking the best," Guthman argues. "Preservation Chicago and the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois are comfortable with landmarking mediocrity. The mantra seems to be, 'If it's old, it ought to be saved.'"

Guthman claims "nostalgia is being landmarked, not quality," and he sees a particular danger in preservationists' growing fondness for landmarking whole districts at once. "It's a recipe for disaster for a city," he says. "If you're landmarking large areas of the city, then you will not have new development. . . . Cities are either going to develop, or they're going to atrophy. If we'd had this broad-brush landmarking 50 years ago or 70 years ago, many of the buildings that are here now would not have been built."

What's more, Guthman says, "Preservation Chicago plays fast and loose with the

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>> Despite staging noisy protests, Preservation Chicago could not save the 1927 Mercantile Exchange building.

economic interests of others. They're not balanced—they have no concern or consideration for other people's property rights."

He acknowledges that many Chicago buildings are worthy of landmark status. "Preservationists wince when I say I'm a preservationist, too. But I am. I think there's a real set of buildings that should be saved. . . . Chicago is a city of great architecture, [but] you don't get great architecture if you freeze a city in time."

IN TRYING TO SAVE CHICAGO BUILDINGS, both Preservation Chicago and the Landmarks Preservation Council—as well as neighborhood organizations and other interested parties—usually have to appeal to the city's Commission on Chicago Landmarks. Assisted by staffers from the Department of Planning and Development, the landmarks commission consists of nine rotating mayoral appointees. (Currently, Museum of Science and Industry president David Mosena chairs the body, and Michelle Obama, wife of U.S. senator Barack Obama, is among the commissioners.) The commission makes recommendations to the City Council for protected landmark status. During monthly public meetings, landmarks commissioners weigh the rights of building owners against the interests of the public, the feasibility of restoring

a historic building against the architectural significance of the site. Structures bearing a seal of approval from the landmarks commission often earn protection from the City Council. "You have to work within the system," Moran says. "You have to understand who makes the decisions."

Sometimes, though, the system can be porous. Such was the case with the Chicago Mercantile Exchange building, a massive 1927 skyscraper with giant arched windows and limestone panels depicting farm animals in relief. "That one really stung," Moran says. "We went all out for the Merc."

The problem was, they got a late start. The building's owners, the Crown family, had already secured a demolition permit before Preservation Chicago—or city landmarks officials—realized plans existed to knock down the structure, at Washington and Franklin streets. "It just fell through the

In Chicago, "nostalgia is being landmarked, not quality," says one critic of Preservation Chicago. "The mantra seems to be, 'If it's old, it ought to be saved.'"

cracks, like hundreds of other buildings," Moran says. "There were huge cracks in the city's system."

Nevertheless, Preservation Chicago gave the Crowns a fight. The group organized five lunchtime protests at the foot of the building. Friends, volunteers, and passing office workers enlisted by Moran took turns hoisting signs. For the final rally, Moran called museums and antique car clubs until he found someone willing to rent a few 1920s cars. Women dressed as flappers and men in fedoras danced the Charleston while protesters held aloft three-foot-high signs that spelled, 'Save the Mercantile Exchange Building.' The spectacle stretched across three lanes of Washington, and afterward, the crowd marched to City Hall to demand an audience with Mayor Richard Daley. The effort gained substantial public sympathy, and Preservation Chicago kept up the clamor for the better part of a year. But the Mercantile Exchange building came down in 2003. "We

just kept picking and picking," Fine recalls. "That was a fight. We fought and lost, but we won, too. Psychologically we won."

Embarrassed by the loss of the Merc, the City Council passed an ordinance delaying the release of demolition permits for Chicago's most important but unprotected historic buildings for up to 90 days—giving the landmarks commission the chance to file a last-minute recommendation for protection. Once the delay goes into effect, information about the building goes up on a city Web site (accessible through the Department of Planning and Development homepage on the city's site: www.cityofchicago.org), so preservationists, too, can mobilize an emergency campaign.

During the battle over the Merc, the Landmarks Preservation Council stayed above the fray while Preservation Chicago protested, but the two groups worked together several years ago to save Cook County Hospital, which had been supplanted by the \$551-million Stroger Hospital right behind it. Reasoning that the new state-of-the-art infirmary would need a little breathing room, county officials decided to sow a park on the site of the old hospital, at Harrison and Wood streets.

For almost a year, Preservation Chicago campaigned against Cook County Hospital's demolition, holding protests, circulating petitions, challenging Cook County Board president John Stroger at public meetings. The demonstrations climaxed with a windswept rally on April 16, 2003, at which the author Studs Terkel served as headliner. Cook County Hospital "represented the city at its finest and most humane," Terkel declared, looking not unlike the weathered edifice behind him. "It must be retained."

Meanwhile, the Landmarks Preservation Council released an alternative plan that would use the old hospital. Its board chair, Joseph Antunovich, supplied thoughtful sketches that showed the building converted to doctors' offices, a wellness center, and living quarters for nursing students and medical residents. Bahlman recruited other would-be developers to submit proposals, too. The National Trust named Cook County Hospital one of the country's most at-risk landmarks. Stroger blinked. "That was one major instance where having two groups in town was very good," Bahlman says. "Preservation Chicago really hammered hard at that project, and we worked on getting a solution. We play different roles depending on the case." He says the old

hospital's reuse looks more and more likely.

"Once we started the battle, [the Landmarks Preservation Council] had the resources to carry it across the finish line," Fine says. "That was a Herculean battle; that was a battle bigger than any one group."

LATELY, PRESERVATION CHICAGO HAS been looking to summon local support for community historic districts. "What separates us from the original flock of preservationists is that we have moved beyond the Loop and advocated in the neighborhoods," says Fine. "A lot of neighborhood architecture is forgotten. You go downtown, and of course the Louis Sullivan should be saved, and of course the Frank Lloyd Wright should be saved. But what about the neighborhood churches and row houses and storefronts? We have been accused of being carpetbaggers, but we will not take on a fight unless we have community support."

Last year, Seth Guterman, an emergency room physician and recent convert to historic preservation, came begging for help. With coaching from Fine and Moran,

Guterman and his neighbors averted a demolition order and secured landmark designation for a two-block stretch of Victorian-era houses on West Newport Avenue. Locals had discovered that a developer meant to level an 1890s three-flat at 823 West Newport. "Literally, Mike Moran and Jonathan Fine are the caped crusaders for saving architectural landmarks in Chicago," says Guterman.

In East Village, Preservation Chicago volunteers rolled up their sleeves with First Ward alderman Manuel Flores to develop a neighborhood master plan that would shore up protection for historic districts. In early January their efforts paid off when the landmarks commission approved a recommendation that a large part of the neighborhood be protected as a landmark district. At press time, the proposal was awaiting final approval from City Council.

"Here in East Village we're dealing with a community that's really one of the treasures Chicago has," Flores says. "Jonathan is a community person, and Mike, too. They're sincerely concerned for the preservation of good quality building stock, not for the sake

of just being a preservationist, but for making sure Chicago does not lose its history."

Fine and Moran have also been working in Logan Square, Hyde Park, Sheffield, and Lake View. They believe too much history has already been lost. "Chicago's architectural renaissance is over," Fine says. "I think that's one thing we fail to realize. It lasted from 1871 to about 1930, and it's quite disturbing to watch that renaissance be replaced by mediocrity. Chicago is looking less and less like Chicago and more and more like Anytown, U.S.A. There's good stuff going up in the Loop, but it's the neighborhoods that suffer most. Poor neighborhoods are suffering from fast-track demolition, and rich neighborhoods are choking on their own success."

The South Loop, where the Indiana Flats building was finally, lawfully, demolished—cornice and all—is an example of neighborhood degradation, according to Fine. "People are tearing down two-flats to build three-flats, and tearing down three-flats to build high-rises," he says. "Developers are getting away with murder. . . . The good news is, the city is finally starting to get it." ■

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