

St. Boniface Church



Photo: Andy Marfia

Overview:

Closed by the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1990, the historic St. Boniface church has sat vacant and deteriorating for almost 19 years. Plans by the archdiocese to demolish the structure were quashed in 1999 by community activists, who proposed using the church as a branch library. Although numerous proposals have been put forth since, the most interest has come from a group of Egyptian Coptic Christians, who have been trying to purchase the property directly from the archdiocese for almost three years.

St. Boniface Church

Noble and Chestnut Street

Architect: Henry J. Schlacks

Date: 1904

Threat:

A recent RFP (Request For development Proposals) issued by the archdiocese failed to result in a purchase agreement between the Coptics and the archdiocese. As of this writing, the Coptics are still interested in acquiring the property for restoration and reuse as a house of Christian worship, but negotiations have stalled. If a preservation solution is not found in the next month, 2009 may be the last for St. Boniface. The archdiocese applied for a demolition permit on December 5, 2008. Because the church is Orange Rated in the Chicago Historic Resource Survey, demolition will be delayed until early March of 2009. Unfortunately, after that date, the city will have no legal right to prevent its demolition.

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History:

Having apprenticed at the famed architecture firm of Adler and Sullivan (where Frank Lloyd Wright was also employed at the time), architect Henry J. Schlacks subsequently started his own practice, where he concentrated mainly on churches, schools and other religious buildings. After several grand accomplishments, Schlacks rightfully earned the sobriquet “the master of Catholic church architecture in Chicago.” St. Boniface is a stellar example as to why. With its four soaring bell towers visible for miles around, and its intricately designed stone columns and detailed carvings throughout, the church has stood as a majestic focal point of Eckhart Park for over 100 years.

Although the current church was built in 1904, St. Boniface was originally established for German immigrants on the same site in 1865. Only six years later, St. Boniface found itself playing an integral role in one of Chicago’s watershed moments in history, providing meals and housing for the masses that were displaced after The Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The historical changes of the ethnic makeup of the congregation mirror the same transitions that are the very history of the West Town neighborhood. St. Boniface and its history are significant enough to have been cited in numerous texts, including *American Congregations* by James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, *Ethnic Chicago: A Multicultural Portrait*, by Melvin G. Holli and Peter d’A Jones, and *The Annals of St. Boniface Parish 1862-1926* by F.W. Kalvelage just to name a few.



Photo: Carey Primeau

Recommendation:

Preservation Chicago recommends that the City of Chicago landmark the church. Except for the stained glass that was removed by the archdiocese, St. Boniface has undergone very little alteration over the past century. Because of this integrity, as well as its preeminent architect, significant architecture, and the fact that it is very much a critical part of Chicago’s heritage, St. Boniface Church meets more than the required number of criteria to become a Chicago Landmark. Landmarking is the only thing that will protect this architectural masterpiece from demolition until a viable preservation solution can be negotiated.