

Interiors: The Chicago Theological Seminary Building



photo credit: David Schalliol



Overview:

The University of Chicago recently purchased the Chicago Theological Seminary campus and intends to renovate the three buildings into the Milton Friedman Institute for Research in Economics. However, serious concerns have been raised by the planned destruction of these important interior elements, as well as to the ultimate fate of the entire Woodlawn Avenue historic corridor.

There are three buildings in the group -- the small Hilton Chapel, a dormitory to the east, and the main building to the west, which includes the architecturally significant Lawson Tower.

History:

The buildings were designed by Herbert Riddle and built between 1923 and 1928. Riddle was the architect for Mather Tower in the Loop, as well as many buildings in New York. He lived in Hyde Park at 5626 S. Woodlawn in a house he designed and built in 1912.

Historic Stained Glass

The main building was designed with 28 major neo-Gothic art glass windows from the famed Willet Stained Glass Studio. This was Willet's most significant commission in Chicago. Lorado Taft said, "They are the finest I have seen in America, and come nearer to the splendor of Chartres than I had ever hoped to see in this part of the world." The windows, all displaying Christian iconography, were perfectly integrated into the building, from both inside and out, that the whole was a unified, living work of art. Seventeen of the windows have already been removed by the University. Serious, irreparable damage has been done to the cultural, historic, and aesthetic value of the building and of the removed windows. The eleven most important windows, which include depictions of the twelve New Testament apostles, the nine Old Testament prophets, and the Tree of Jesse, remain in place; but the University intends to remove them as "inappropriate" to the building's new use by the Milton Friedman Institute.

Chicago Theological Society
5757 S. University Avenue
Architect: Herbert Riddle,
Riddle & Riddle
Date: 1923-28

Significant Interior Spaces

There are six important interior spaces, all in the main building: Hilton Memorial Chapel, Clarence Sydney Funk Cloisters, Graham Taylor Hall, the Library, West Lobby and Stair Tower, and Lawson Tower (with entrance room). The Hilton Chapel is called a “tiny gem” in the AIA Guide to Chicago. Although the loss of all the Hilton Chapel’s art glass windows has compromised its integrity, it still features outstanding neo-Gothic vaulting, ceramic tile work, and carpentry. The Cloisters and the Taylor Chapel are even more magnificent. All the interior spaces include important embedded art work and finishes that are expressive of the Chicago Theological Seminary’s religious heritage. It is unclear how much of this will be removed and lost as “inappropriate.” The University has hired Ann Beha Architects of Boston to plan and design the renovation.

Woodlawn Avenue Corridor

With the occupation of the CTS buildings, the University of Chicago campus continues to move steadily eastward into the residential portion of Hyde Park. The 5700 block of Woodlawn Avenue is one of the most important historic residential blocks in Chicago. This large group of remarkable buildings serves as the graceful transition between the campus and the community. These buildings tell the story of how Hyde Park came to be what it is -- a neighborhood of great beauty, surprising diversity and intense creativity. Fifteen of the original residential buildings remain, including the landmarked Robie House by Frank Lloyd Wright and twelve “Orange-rated” houses. Only four of the houses are privately owned and the rest are institutional, but it still retains the appearance of a residential street. However, eight of the buildings on the block are currently for sale or have recently changed hands, and all will be put to new institutional uses. As the 5700 block of Woodlawn evolves from residential to institutional, there is currently no protection against demolition or disfigurement, except Robie House. Nor is there an agreed upon community planning process to manage the inevitable changes coming to Woodlawn Avenue. The re-purposing of the Chicago Theological Seminary buildings by the University of Chicago is part of a larger current of change that could quickly compromise the historic Woodlawn Avenue corridor.

Recommendations:

Preserve all of the remaining historic elements of the Chicago Theological Seminary. Create a Historic Landmark District for the 5700 block of Woodlawn.

Take Action

- Write or call the President of the University of Chicago (Robert Zimmer, rzimmer@uchicago.edu, 773-702-8002) and encourage him to preserve the remaining eleven major historic stained glass windows and the significant interiors of the former CTS buildings.
- Contact Alderman Leslie Hairston: Ward Office: 2325 E. 71st Street, Chicago, IL 60649, phone: 773-324-5555, e-mail: lhairston@cityofchicago.org.
- Go to: www.CTSthreatened.org



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