



The New York Life Insurance Building

Address:	39 South LaSalle Street
Date:	1894
Architect:	William Lebaron Jenney
Style:	Chicago School Skyscraper
CHRS Rating:	Orange
National Register:	Not Listed

Overview:

George Orwell said in *Animal Farm* that all animals are equal, except some animals are more equal than others. The same could be argued that in Chicago, depending on how much clout one has, some Landmarks are more equal than others. Based on some recent proposals for downtown skyscraper projects, a separate and unequal set of standards has revealed itself regarding how the Commission on Chicago Landmarks considers changes to existing Landmarked buildings and Landmark Districts. Case in point is the current redevelopment plan proposed for the New York Life Building, one of William LeBaron Jenney's seminal early skyscrapers.

History:

William LeBaron Jenney revolutionized world architecture with the development of the first skyscraper, the Home Insurance Building in Chicago in 1884. His pioneering use of the steel skeleton frame, rather than the thick heavy masonry bearing walls that were then the norm, set the standard for modern high-rise construction that is still in use today. With the demolition of the Home Insurance Building in 1931, the New York Life Building became the last remaining example of Jenney's early steel frame skyscraper construction and is the closest link with the ground-breaking technology of Jenney's Home Insurance Building. Furthermore, the role of Chicago as the "insurance broker to the West" cannot be understated, and this building serves as a key link to that history. Additionally, during the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the building, in its final stages of construction, was a marvel to millions of visitors in Chicago, and became instantly famous. The exterior and interior of the New York Life Building are amazingly intact, considering the building's age. Certain absent details, notably the cornice, could be recreated as has been done on the Marquette Building a few blocks to the east. The early Prairie-themed detailing on the building anticipates the famous Prairie School of design, which developed in Chicago in the years following.

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Current threat:

The New York Life Building is no stranger to Preservation Chicago's 7 Most Endangered list. It was first listed back in 2002 after several large redevelopment plans had been discussed for the site. Fearing that the building would be completely demolished, our advocacy helped convince the city to declare the building a Preliminary Landmark. Although Preliminary Landmark status was indeed granted at the end of 2002, the city's Planning Department immediately entered into a "tolling agreement" with the then-owner. A tolling agreement is basically a bureaucratic tool that suspends the Landmarking process in limbo until an agreement can be worked out between the city and the owner. Unfortunately, this tolling agreement, still in effect as of October of 2005, has resulted in what can only be described as an architectural mutation and evisceration of one of the most important buildings in downtown Chicago. The developer, Hamilton Partners, Inc., plans to erect a 50 story skyscraper almost completely on top of the existing building. Allowing this addition would not only gut the integrity of the steel frame, one of the building's most important elements, but would also destroy the context of the exterior by surmounting an incongruous modern building atop a classic 19th century structure.

Recommendation:

Grant the building its much-delayed Landmark Status. Then, go back to the drawing board. The New York Life Building can be easily converted into a boutique hotel or condo tower without altering Jenney's original design. Countless historic buildings including the Palmolive Building, the Carbide and Carbon Building and the Reliance Building have undergone similar makeovers in the last several years with great economic success.

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