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Pilgrim Baptist Church

Address:	3301 South Indiana Avenue
Date:	1890
Architects:	Adler and Sullivan
Style:	Sullivaneseque, influenced by Richardsonian Romanesque Revival
CHRS	
Rating:	Red
Landmarked:	1981
National Register:	Not Listed

Overview:

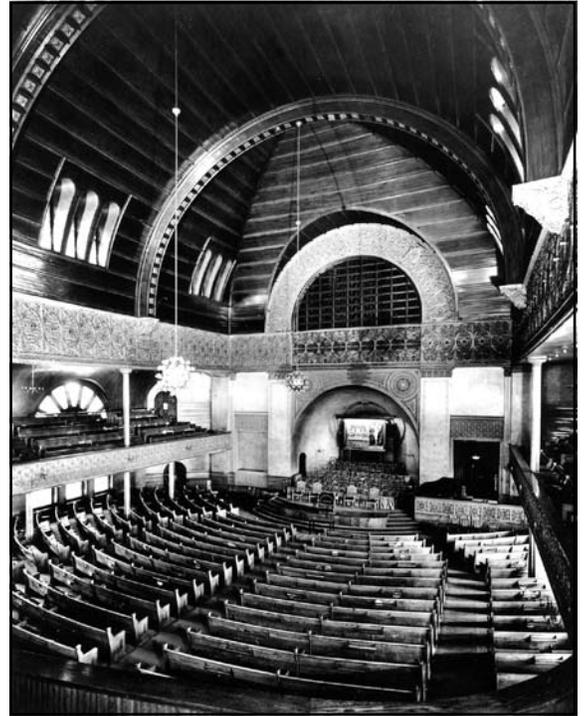
When a city loses a landmarked structure designed by two of the world's most revered and influential architects, it's a heartbreak. But when that structure also happens to have housed events so historical, they have changed the face of an entire cultural landscape, it is a tragedy. Such was the case on January 6, 2006, when fire gutted the 115-year-old Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago's storied Bronzeville neighborhood. Since then, the future of the Church has been widely debated. Could it be restored? And what about the cost of doing so – a sum that would surely be prohibitive.

History:

Originally designed as a synagogue by Louis H. Sullivan and partner Dankmar Adler, the building had a brawny, citadel demeanor that belied the splendor it housed within -- a spacious sanctuary exemplifying the Sullivan/Adler trademarks, from the horseshoe-shaped oak balcony to the intricately ornamented terracotta panels...to the soaring, half-moon ceiling that was an acoustical masterpiece. In 1922, the synagogue became the Pilgrim Baptist Church, serving as a welcoming beacon to African-Americans during the Great Migration. Bronzeville began to flourish as a business, cultural and social center for middle-class Blacks, and it was during this time, in this Church, that jazz and blues artist Thomas A. Dorsey gave rise to a new genre of music: Gospel was born.

In the '50's and '60's the neighborhood began to decline and congregation membership dwindled. The Church started showing signs of disrepair, triggering its designation as a historic Chicago landmark in 1981. But by 2002, the Bronzeville pendulum was back on the upswing with new construction and the renovating of the grand homes of the Gilded Age. Restoration started on the Church as well. And then, as workers used blowtorches to fix the building's roof, the fire broke out, leaving all in ruins except for portions of the charred limestone façade. Up in smoke went not only a cornerstone of African-American history, but the dreams of the surrounding community, which viewed the Church as the centerpiece of the neighborhood's long-awaited rebirth.

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Photos courtesy of Richard Nickel Committee

Threat:

Many have weighed in on the Church's destiny – Church officials, politicians, architects, preservationists. Some had thought it unsalvageable. But in February of 2006, a study by structural engineers of Wiss, Janney, Elstner Assoc., Inc. had shown that significant portions of Pilgrim Baptist's exterior walls appear to remain structurally sound, leading to much optimism that the Church could be restored. A local company has been hired to start the restoration, with scaffolding already being erected. But at this point, one year later after the fire, plans to move forward are going painfully slow due to lack of monies. Church officials and Alderman Dorothy Tillman (3rd Ward) are continuing to press for funding which had been promised by various foundations at the time of the fire, but has yet to materialize.

Recommendation:

Preservation Chicago is among the optimistic. In a statement to the Press and to a general gathering that included Church and City officials, preservationists and builders, Preservation Chicago has declared, "We encourage the preservation of the exterior walls and their incorporation in any future structure." We are also on record (Chicago Tribune, 2/9/06) for urging the City to monitor repairs on historic buildings more closely so that fires of this nature do not occur in the future.