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## Pilsen

**Address:** Generally bounded by 16th Street on the north, Cermak Road on the south, Canal Street to the east and Western Avenue on the west.

**Date:** Primarily between 1850's and 1920's. Since Pilsen survived the Great Fire of 1871, numerous existing buildings date to the 1860's or earlier.

**Architects:** Numerous

**CHRS Rating:** Various listings including Red, Orange and Green

**National Register:** Alderman Danny Solis (25th) recently initiated an effort to list the entire neighborhood on the National Register of Historic Places, which should be completed by March, 2006. This would provide tax freezes to those who choose to invest in a major renovation of a historic building.

However, the listing of Pilsen on the National Register by itself will not stop rampant and unregulated real estate speculation from reshaping the neighborhood because the program is totally voluntary. Other previously listed National Register districts in the city, like the Sheffield National Register District in Lincoln Park, are currently being devoured by over-development.

### Overview:

Like a runaway locomotive, the University of Illinois' South Campus Expansion continues to barrel its way south and it is headed directly for one of the most historic, picturesque and dynamic neighborhoods anywhere in the Midwest. With development pressure approaching from almost every direction, the Pilsen as we currently know it may soon be lost forever.

### History:

Pilsen may have always been considered a community of modest means, but it is anything but poor. In fact, a more accurate description of Pilsen is that it has always been rich, rich in color, rich in culture, rich in spirit, and rich in the industriousness of its people. Named for the western Czech city of Pilzen by the Bohemians and Czechs who settled the area in the early 1870's, the area soon welcomed other eastern Europeans throughout the 19th and early 20th century, including Poles and Yugoslavians. Within close proximity of large factories and modest, affordable houses and flats, Pilsen became an ideal port of entry for immigrants throughout the 20th century. In the 1950's, the area became home to Mexican immigrants and is now the largest Mexican neighborhood in the Midwest. Starting in the 1960's, Pilsen also welcomed a new class of bohemians, otherwise known as artists. The conversion of old storefronts and commercial buildings near the corner of 18th Street and Halsted into affordable lofts helped turn Pilsen into a vibrant artist colony that still prospers today.

*(Continues on page 2)*

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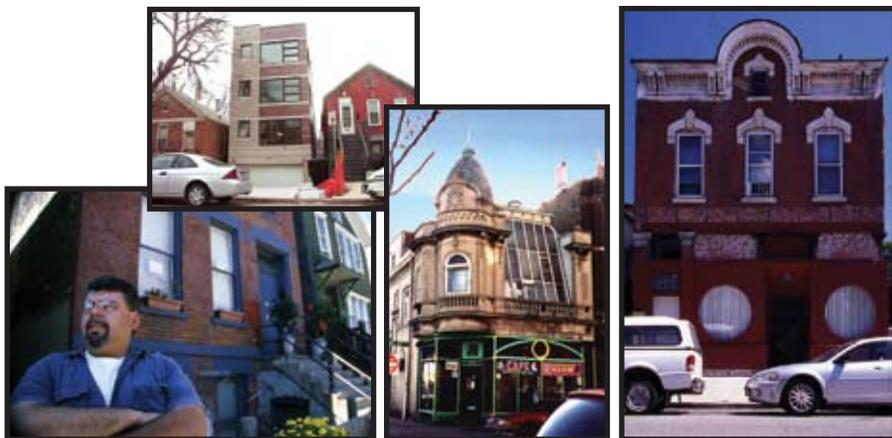
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PILSEN (Continued from previous page)

### Architecture:

Whether they are small cottages, large commercial buildings, multi-family apartments, or the numerous two and three flats typical of Chicago, the architecture of Pilsen is set apart from other Chicago neighborhoods in some very subtle ways. Skilled craftsmen who left the "old country" to settle in Chicago applied their skills to their own homes and other buildings.



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Cornices and pediments in Pilsen often look back to Eastern Europe for their architectural inspiration. Mansard roofs abound, having survived longer in Pilsen than in other parts of the city. Other survivors include crooked little cottages, some so tired that they literally lean on their next door neighbor for support. Many beautiful and imposing churches, including St. Paul's and St. Adelbert's by renowned church architect Henry J. Schlacks, are visual landmarks. Eighteenth Street is a treasure trove of commercial Victorian architecture and includes Thalia Hall, a designated city Landmark. Pilsen's 19th Century persona, however, has been overlain by a Mexican American sensibility, expressed in the numerous murals, mosaics, and pastel painted cottages on every block.

### Pilsen Today:

Taking a stroll down any street attests to the viability of a neighborhood that must be preserved, in its entirety, at all costs. The simple act of turning a corner can reveal a mural exploding from the side of a building. A garage door becomes an artist's canvas, telling the story of a community and its people to anyone who passes by. In a neighborhood starved for green space, the street becomes a ball field and chairs hastily borrowed from the kitchen table instantly transform the sidewalk into a welcoming front porch. The instinct to place flowerpots on a windowsill, on the front steps, or on any other horizontal surface seldom goes unfulfilled. Fences are not fences, but art galleries and, what would be an ordinary sidewalk sale in any other Chicago neighborhood, in Pilsen becomes an outdoor Bazaar. Pushcarts selling ices and other delectable Mexican treats ply the streets or are found strategically parked on busy corners, and a constant chorus of children's voices underscores it all. Even the faded and peeling paint lends an aura of charming realness in a city whose current administration favors newness and suburban sterility.

### Threat:

To get an idea of what Pilsen may look like in five years, a short drive north may provide some answers. The East Village neighborhood began an intense debate over its future about 10 years ago when rampant speculative redevelopment began to transform its historic but run down streets. Today, on some blocks, almost every building has been demolished and replaced with luxury housing.

It is inevitable that all neighborhoods change and grow. The critical question for Pilsen today is how it is going to manage that change. Difficult issues like tear-downs, out of scale development, rezoning, loss of local businesses, historic preservation, affordable housing, and gentrification are never easy to solve. But, perhaps some of the following ideas can help facilitate the discussion within the community.

(Continues on page 3)

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**RECOMMENDATIONS:****Comprehensive Master Plan:**

Pilsen should create a community driven master plan for the entire neighborhood so planning goals can be anticipated and implemented over the next 20 years. The plan could be broken into sections that address individual issues for differing geographical areas, then quilted together to form the master plan.

**Create a City of Chicago Landmark District** for all of historic 18th Street. Preservation of the existing buildings would prevent large national retail chains from assembling and demolishing multiple properties for new, larger stores. Preservation of smaller commercial spaces along 18th Street would also help to retain Pilsen's existing mom and pop businesses. Preservation of small storefronts create economic incubators, which allow new businesses of modest means to be able to get a toe-hold in the neighborhood. This designation would prevent the demolition of the distinctive buildings that give 18th Street its character and ensure that any new buildings would be architecturally compatible with the existing streetscape.

**Install Banner Signs** throughout the entire Pilsen National Register District. These banners touting the historic district will send a psychological message that the area's historic homes and commercial buildings are worthy of preservation and should not be torn down.

**Neighborhood Workshops** should be held often in order to explain the benefits of renovating a historic home in a National Register District. Separate developer workshops should also be held regularly in order to encourage renovation, rather than demolition. Property tax freeze benefits and other developer incentives need to be stressed.

**Create Micro-Incentives** for home owners who cannot afford to spend money on a major renovation, but who can do minor repairs or renovations. How about a free appliance if a cornice is sympathetically repaired or a property tax break for historic window repairs or replacement?

**Create a Charitable Corporation** whose mission is to give grants to lower-income owners of historic properties who want to renovate, but do not have the funds to meet the Secretary of the Interior Standards for historic renovations. Furthermore, this corporation could also train Pilsen residents in restoration techniques. The lost art of tin and copper smithing, masonry repair, and stone carving could become emerging professions in Pilsen, with a built-in market demand created by eager property owners wanting to take advantage of the property tax freeze. Furthermore, new local businesses could be created, like historic wood window repair and restoration, which would quickly become specialized in the restoration of Pilsen's indigenous architecture. The preservation of Pilsen needs to be looked at as an economic catalyst for the whole neighborhood. Future entrepreneurial opportunities should not be underestimated or overlooked.

**Downzoning** can help stem the tide of over-development in Pilsen. Blocks of two and three flats that fear a wave of tear-downs should consider the **RT-3.5** zoning classification. Blocks that contain cottages and smaller houses should consider downzoning to the **RS-3** zoning classification.

**Create a New Zoning Classification:**

Preservation Chicago proposes the creation of a new zoning classification called Renovation Zoning, or **RZ**. This classification should be used only on blocks that have been ruled out for city Landmark protection, but still contain a high degree of older homes worthy of preservation. This new classification would allow existing property

*(Continues on page 4)*

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owners who want to renovate their properties the option of using the FAR (Floor Area Ratio\*) of the next highest zoning classification as of right. However, developers who wanted to demolish and build new would be restricted to using the FAR of the existing zoning classification. The idea is to reward renovation and preservation, and to discourage demolition. Please view the Preservation Chicago web site for more information on this new proposal: [www.preservationchicago.org](http://www.preservationchicago.org).

*\*FAR is the relationship between the area of a lot and the total square footage that the zoning allows to be constructed.*

#### **Architectural Design Contest:**

While many buildings in Pilsen have outlived their useful life and will certainly need to be replaced, recent construction projects have been disappointing. In a unique and historic environment like Pilsen, it is important that any replacement architecture compliment and enhance the existing character, not detract from it. Unfortunately, if current development trends continue, Pilsen will be marred by the same bland, banal and mediocre architecture that has despoiled other historic neighborhoods like East Village and Lakeview.

Preservation Chicago recommends a design contest that will spark the development of new architectural prototypes that relate specifically to the character, scale, and materials that are indigenous to Pilsen. Perhaps even a pattern book could emerge to inspire developers and their architects to create more interesting designs. Preference and incentives could be given to builders who opt to follow Pilsen's new construction guidelines or purchase the designated prototype designs from the winning architects. Once created, these new ideas could be exported to other neighborhoods of similar vintage or could inspire those neighborhoods to create their own guidelines.

#### **Selective Landmarking:**

Selective use of the Chicago Landmarks Ordinance should be considered to ensure the preservation of Pilsen's most important and beautiful buildings. Selected blocks with the highest concentrations of contiguous historic homes should also be surveyed as future landmark districts. However, it should be emphasized that homeowners should decide for themselves if the creation of a Landmark District is the best way to preserve the historic character of their neighborhood.

#### **Adopt an Historic Community Program:**

Local architectural firms should be encouraged to offer pro-bono or discounted architecture services to lower income owner's of historic homes who want to remodel in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior Standards, but cannot otherwise afford the design fees.

#### **Demolition Ordinance:**

An ordinance introduced by Alderman Billy Ocasio (26th) should be passed in to law immediately. The ordinance requires an alderman's signature on every demolition permit before a building can be demolished. This would provide both accountability and responsibility at the ward level. Aldermen would now have fair warning if an otherwise useful building in his or her ward is planned for removal, and no longer could an alderman claim ignorance when an important neighborhood building suddenly disappears in his or her ward.

#### **Partnering With Other Groups:**

Preservation Chicago remains committed to partnering with other NFP's, chambers of commerce, elected officials, arts organizations, religious and/or educational institutions, open space advocates, or any other local stakeholders to help facilitate mutually beneficial solutions to development issues that may threaten the future of Pilsen. ■

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