

North Pullman Historic District



photo credit: Sarah E Tietje

Overview:

Designed as the first self-sufficient industrial community in the United States, George Pullman's "model" town has survived a world-famous strike and, in the 1960's, the threat of total demolition for an industrial park. In 1972, the residential area south of 111th Street was designated a Chicago Landmark District and has been thriving ever since. However, the historic district north of 111th Street, created in 1993, is in peril.

North Pullman Historic District

Residential areas north of 111th Street

Architect: Solon S. Beman

Landscape Engineer: Nathan F. Barrett

Date: 1880-1884

History:

The Pullman District is comprised of multiple building types; row housing, factory, municipal, commercial and recreational buildings. These various building types, in both gothic and Queen Anne styles, served the design of its namesake, George M. Pullman. George Pullman was a manufacturer of luxury railroad cars and sought to build an industrial complex that would solve the ills of the working class by providing a completely controlled environment. Pullman hired architect Solon S. Beman and landscape engineer Nathan F. Barrett to help realize his plan, and through the work of these three men, the first planned industrial community was created. Built with clay from the lake and furnished with products produced in the factories, Pullman came into completion by 1884 and was heralded as "the world's most perfect town" by the Prague International Hygienic and Pharmaceutical Exposition in 1896. With open parks, markets, a library, church and theatre, and housing that provided desirable amenities like indoor plumbing, George Pullman's manufactured community was meant to be an idyllic setting for his workers. As time passed it became evident that Pullman was governed by the iron fist of its creator. George Pullman controlled what shows came to the theatre, what religion was to be practiced in the church and what books could be shelved in the library. Further, when the economic depression of 1893 hit, George Pullman decreased the workers wages, but made no compensation in the rental rates, taking the same monetary amount each month from workers making less. By 1894, unrest among the workers rose to an all-time high, ending in a high profile strike. Culminating with six deaths, burning of railway cars and the calling in of the National Guard, this unionized strike was the first instance in which the Sherman Anti-Trust Act was utilized. This strike is directly linked as a contributing element in the establishment of the national Labor Day holiday by President Cleveland in 1894.

Pullman Historic District

Since then, the Pullman District has continued to have its ups and downs. Decline in population and an increase in crime through the 1930's gave Pullman the reputation as a bad neighborhood. Later threats of wholesale demolition brought the Pullman community together via historic preservation. The district received State Landmark Status in 1969, National Landmark status in 1971 and a City of Chicago Landmark designation in 1972. The Historic Pullman Foundation was founded in 1973 and since then, preservation and restoration efforts in the district have been a slow but ongoing effort. However, the south end of the district has fared much better than the north. The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency has purchased a few buildings within Pullman, including the Hotel Florence and the factory, to aid with the preservation effort. The Pullman State Historic Site and the Historic Pullman Garden Club continue to advocate for the district, but since the area north of 111th Street gained landmark protection so much later than the south, the preservation challenges for this area are immense.



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Threat

The North Pullman Historic District, created in 1993, is suffering from massive disinvestment fueling a scenario of Demolition by Neglect. Particularly within the 10400 and 10500 blocks, many of the row houses built for the workers at the Pullman Palace Car Company stand vacant or are in the grips of foreclosure. Deterioration and desolation plague this once vibrant area, as windows are boarded and much needed repairs go ignored.

Recommendations

The lack of credit, exacerbated by the recession, has stymied redevelopment efforts in North Pullman. Because North Pullman is a designated Landmark District, more intervention by the city could help spur more redevelopment projects. Initiatives could include; city guaranteed low interest loans; the creation of additional local tax incentives for the rehabilitation of distressed historic properties; and the creation of incentives to sell distressed properties to those in the building trades who could rehab their units via "sweat-equity."