Unity Hall, 3140 S. Indiana Avenue

Overview:
Standing as an important monument to Chicago’s rich African-American heritage, as well as an official Chicago Landmark (designated in 1998), Unity Hall is threatened with demolition by neglect. Originally constructed as the Lakeside Club, a Jewish social club, the building later played an important role in Chicago’s black political and social history as Unity Hall. Though it has survived to the present with few alterations, the building is now vacant and threatened with demolition.

History:
First constructed as Unity Hall, a Jewish social organization in 1887, the building was designed by local architect Laban B. Dixon, who also designed many nearby residences. An excellent example of 1880s Queen Anne architecture, the building housed a large assembly hall in the rear as well as small clubrooms. After the area underwent demographic changes, Alderman Oscar DePriest (Chicago’s first African-American alderman and the first northern African-American elected to the United States House of Representatives) established the Peoples Movement Club and moved it into the Lakeside Club building in 1917, renaming it Unity Hall. The building also served for years as the headquarters of prominent Democratic political leader William Dawson before becoming a church after World War II. In 1998, it was designated a Chicago Landmark as part of the thematic Black Metropolis District which included several other buildings important to the history of the African-American experience in Chicago and the Great Migration.
Threat:
As a designated city landmark, Unity Hall cannot be demolished. However, the scourge of deferred maintenance and exposure to the elements could effectively cause its demolition by neglect. The building’s current owner, a small church congregation, has not occupied the structure in over a year due to code violations and the building is currently in receivership. The city has attempted to pressure the owners to address these current health and public safety violations in housing court. The building has been for sale, but attempts to close on the sale have not come to fruition. Interested buyers with the resources to stabilize and rehabilitate Unity Hall are encouraged to make an offer.