Preservation Chicago Unveils the 2012 Chicago 7 Most Threatened...

Prentice Hospital, 333 E. Superior Street

Overview:
Prentice Women’s Hospital was groundbreaking for its cutting-edge cantilevered concrete design, advanced engineering and its progressive plan for the organization of medical departments and services. Merely 37 years old, this amazing masterwork is threatened with demolition. Prentice, designed by Chicago architect Bertrand Goldberg and completed in 1975, returns to Preservation Chicago’s 7 Most Threatened list again this year. In 2010, Preservation Chicago and Landmarks Illinois formed the Save Prentice Coalition. The Chicago Chapter of the AIA, docomomo, and The National Trust for Historic Preservation quickly joined the effort. Since the coalition was formed, much progress has been made to inform the public about the importance of its preservation. In addition, Prentice was named one of the National Trust’s 11 Most Endangered buildings of 2011. Although a robust nation-wide advocacy campaign continues, which has turned the tide of public opinion to a more favorable view of preservation, Northwestern University still has not committed to preserving and repurposing the building. Because of that, Preservation Chicago felt that Prentice warranted being relisted for 2012 in order to keep the pressure on Northwestern University.

Prentice Hospital
333 E. Superior
Architect: Bertrand Goldberg
Date: 1974-75
Style: Modern
Significance:
Goldberg trained at Harvard and studied, for a time, at the German Bauhaus under the direction of architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. When Goldberg returned to Chicago in 1933, he shaped the Miesian philosophy he had acquired there to suit his own principles, resulting in a uniquely original design philosophy. Rather than steel and glass, he adopted concrete as his medium; its plasticity the ideal material to realize his vision. Goldberg opined that there were no right angles in nature and strove to create a more organic architecture thus gravitating to more circular forms. The pinnacle of that philosophy was achieved at Prentice Women’s Hospital.

Unlike his other previous projects, Goldberg was finally able to jettison all exterior supports, creating a hospital tower that was fully cantilevered 45 feet over its base. The base of Prentice is a conventional box consisting of traditional steel post and beam construction. However, atop this structure sits the seven-story quatrefoil, or four-lobed, bed tower. The central core of the tower pierces through the horizontal base. This concrete core supports these upper stories of cantilevered hospital rooms, allowing the entire bed tower to be column free. This also allows the lower structure to remain completely free of interior columns and was intended to facilitate the concept of universal space.

According to Geoffrey Goldberg, architect and son of Bertrand Goldberg, “you will not find the structural solution to Prentice, which is an exterior shell cantilevered off a core, anywhere else in the world and Prentice was the only one in which this was achieved.” Ironically, Goldberg even envisioned that Prentice would become obsolete and anticipated that day by designing a space that was as flexible as possible to adapt to a different use, which would therefore preserve the building. The tower that cantilevers above the base was achieved by the employment of massive arches, which transfer the load diagonally back to the central core, rather than vertically down to the ground. Moreover, the exterior concrete shell is load bearing, in direct contrast to the typical glass curtain wall that was virtually mandated by the modernist idiom at mid-century.

For Prentice, Goldberg’s unique quatrefoil plan was intended to provide a much higher standard of care by creating small floor plates that facilitated interaction between the staff and patients. Each floor was laid out with a central nursing station between four circular patient wings or “lobes.” Each maternity floor also featured nurseries, bringing mothers closer to their babies. Centralizing services for the medical needs for women, obstetrics and gynecology was representative of a new approach for women’s health.

Threat:
The primary tenant, Prentice Women’s Hospital, relocated to a new facility in 2007, leaving the bed tower portion of the building empty. The last remaining tenant, The Stone Psychiatric Institute (located in the building’s base), relocated to a new facility in September of 2011, at which time control of the property reverted from Northwestern Hospital to Northwestern University. University officials have made it known for years that they plan to demolish the building for the construction of a new research/laboratory facility. Since Prentice has no local landmark protection, demolition is a “matter of right” for the university. It is only public pressure that has allowed the building to continue to stand until now.