The picturesque Tudor-Revival Style Chicago Town & Tennis Club Building was designed in 1924 by renowned Chicago architect George Washington Maher and his firm, George W. Maher & Son. George Maher was a seminal figure in both the Prairie Style and the Arts & Crafts Style movements in Chicago and across America. His prolific and noteworthy architectural firm included Philip Brooks Maher, his son. Philip Maher was also a leading architect in his own right and had a distinguished career. Both father and son were responsible for the design of architectur-
ally significant buildings throughout the Chicago region and Midwest including many buildings that have received prestigious Chicago Landmark designation. It is believed that both architects contributed meaningfully to the design of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club building.

The Chicago Town and Tennis Club building is located at 1925 W. Thome Avenue in Chicago’s West Ridge neighborhood. It is a beautiful half-timbered structure with high gables, slate roof, and grand ballrooms. The building’s intrinsic qualities and its remarkable flexibility of design have allowed it to be repurposed over time. Originally built as a formal tennis clubhouse building, it was repurposed as a fraternal and social club for the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks or Elks Club. The building later served as a religious use as Unity Church of Chicago. Flexibility of design is often a hallmark of buildings designed by great architects with good design principals, which can be re-outfitted to accommodate a change in use or desired programs.

In 2019, the Chicago Town and Tennis Club Building and its grounds and gardens were purchased by the neighboring Misericordia for $7.5 million. Misericordia is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting individuals with developmental disabilities and is affiliated with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago. However, instead of repurposing the building yet again, perhaps to serve as a community center for their large resident population on the adjacent campus, Misericordia plans to clear the site for new construction. The proposed development plan covers the entire site and requires the full demolition of the historic building, the adjoining structures, and the mature landscapes and gardens.

The “orange-rated” Tudor-Revival building rests upon a serene 3.1-acre property and includes the clubhouse, several ancillary structures, and elaborate and extensive gardens, with gazebos and fountains which would seem to be a beautiful and natural campus extension for Misericordia in its current configuration. Several large paved surface parking lots are present which could potentially accommodate the construction of new group homes and accommodate the protection and integration of the landscapes and historic structures into Misericordia’s 31-acre campus.
Misericordia plans to construct a series of low-density, free-standing housing units to accommodate individuals with developmental disabilities. This low-density design approach requires significant acreage to accommodate the desired number of new units and nearly the entire site is required to accommodate the number of building and units. At one point but no longer, the plans contemplated that the City of Chicago would vacate the adjacent Thome Avenue to increase the buildable site and to integrate the new site with Misericordia’s main campus.

Preservation Chicago recognizes the need for Misericordia’s expansion and supports its efforts to supply additional housing units for the developmentally disabled. We also believe that there are multiple “win-win” approaches that would simultaneously accomplish both the construction of the new housing units and the preservation of the historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club building.

While the proposed alternate options are generally practical, achievable, and financially viable, they all require collaboration, an openness to creative alternatives, and a willingness to engage in a genuine dialogue between the stakeholders which include Misericordia, the West Ridge Community, 40th Ward Alderman Andre Vasquez, the Chicago Park District, and representatives from the City of Chicago Planning Department Landmarks Division. The desired additional housing units for individuals with developmental disabilities will be built, but the extent to which the final development plan simultaneously embraces the wider desires and wishes of the West Ridge community remains to be determined. Though creativity and collaboration, we can achieve a preservation-sensitive solution that would accomplish both priorities and save this beautiful building.
HISTORY

The Chicago Town & Tennis Club was designed in 1924 by the seminal Chicago architect George W. Maher, a contemporary of legendary architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan, and by Phillip Maher, his son and also a distinguished architect. George Maher was one of Chicago’s preeminent architects who also designed many homes in Kenilworth, Oak Park, Uptown and Kenwood. Many of his buildings are designated Chicago Landmarks or considered Landmark-eligible buildings.

The Tudor-Revival style building was constructed during the 1920s craze in Chicago for athletic and social clubs. Specifically, it was inspired by the design of the Wimbledon tennis club in England and American tennis clubs such as The West Side Tennis Club at Forest Hills, Queens New York, which hosted more than 60 U.S. National Championships between 1915 and 1977. Originally overlooking 16 tennis courts and extensive gardens, the building served as a club house into the 1960s when the property was sold. It served as an Elks Lodge before sitting vacant and its eventual restoration as Unity Church.
Chicago 7: Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church

Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Eric Allix Rogers

Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Jason Marck
Unity Church purchased the building and 3.1-acre property in 1989. They engaged Vinci-Hamp Architects to carefully and comprehensively restore portions of the building in 2002. They converted the dining room into a sanctuary and other rooms into an art gallery and a social hall. Fortunately, the building retained much of its original historic character and details including its stained glass, decorative tile, and ornamental plaster-work. The exterior of the building with its high gables, half-timbering, slate roof and decorative brickwork remains highly intact, notably including the original stone carvings depicting a pair of tennis rackets. The building is “orange-rated” per the Chicago Historic Resources Survey which confirms its important architectural significance to the West Ridge community and the City of Chicago.

Unity Church played an important role in the history of LGBTQ rights in Chicago and Illinois. After years of efforts, on June 1, 2014, the first day that same-sex marriage became legal in Illinois, 40 same-sex couples were married or renewed their vows at Unity Church.

At one time the congregation at Unity Chicago had about 1,500 members; however, dwindling recent numbers prompted the sale to Misericordia. The 3.1-acre site and building was sold to Misericordia for $7.5 million, and the congregation was allowed to remain in the building and on the grounds until October 2019.

**THREAT**

On December 20, 2019, Misericordia began to move forward with their development and applied for a demolition permit for the Chicago Town & Tennis Club. A few weeks later in early January, 2020, a community meeting was held by Alderman Andre Vasquez to allow Misericordia to present their plans. Because the building is “orange-rated” on the Chicago Historic Resources Survey (CHRS), a 90-day demolition hold was placed on the permit application which is due to expire in March 2020 at which time the demolition permit could be issued. As reported in the press, Misericordia does not anticipate the new units to be completed until 2021, so the rush to demolish the historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club Building is not being driven by the construction schedule. In the spirit of partnership, Misericordia has agreed to delay demolition for 90 additional days.
Founded in 1921 and operated by the Sisters of Mercy, Misericordia Heart of Mercy, has occupied its campus in West Ridge since 1976 and currently houses 600 children and adults with developmental disabilities on its 31-acre campus. Their wait list includes 300 families which illustrates the significant need for additional housing for individuals with developmental disabilities.

Due to the need to build additional housing, in 2018 Misericordia purchased 3.1 acres immediately south of their campus across Thome Avenue which includes the Chicago Town & Tennis Club, a parking lot, and extensive gardens. They propose to build 16 new group homes on the site which would house 8 to 15 residents each. The plan is to build a low-density housing cluster for approximately 150 residents. This plan includes the demolition of the beautiful Chicago Town & Tennis Club and gardens.

Preservation Chicago supports Misericordia’s important work and appreciates the need for more housing. However we would prefer to see implemented one of the alternate solutions that would both increase the housing available and prevent the demolition of this beautiful building that has been an important part of the West Ridge community for nearly 100 years.

To maximize the buildable site and to enclose the new site within their campus perimeter security fence for the safety and wellbeing of their residents, Misericordia had requested that the adjacent stretches of Thome Avenue and Winchester Avenue contiguous with their main campus be vacated by the City of Chicago. However, neighbors from an adjacent building who regularly park on these city streets vocally objected to losing their free parking, and Misericordia appears to have withdrawn this request.

A zoning change/Planned Development is required to allow for the community-style housing, as the current zoning does not permit this use. The alderman has signaled his support for the zoning change.

Preservation Chicago made initial contact with Misericordia leadership approximately 18 months ago to request that the historic building be retained in their development plans. Misericordia considered the option of adaptive reuse for a residential use but ultimately chose not to pursue this option and instead chose to advance with dem
RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing the architectural significance of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club, Preservation Chicago is advocating for an alternative that would allow both the new supportive housing to be constructed and the historic building to be preserved. To accomplish a “win-win” solution that accomplishes all stakeholder priorities, it’s necessary to work in partnership and good faith with all stakeholders including Misericordia, the West Ridge Community, 40th Ward Alderman Andre Vasquez, the Chicago Park District, and representatives from the City of Chicago Planning Department Landmarks Division.

To this end, Preservation Chicago has been in communication with stakeholders while exploring several options that could potentially yield all objectives, thus allowing all stakeholders to enjoy a positive outcome. The proposed alternate options are generally practical, achievable, and financially viable. They all require collaboration, an openness to creative alternatives, and a willingness to engage in a genuine dialogue between the stakeholders and the Chicago Planning Department Landmarks Division. The new additional housing units for individuals with developmental disabilities are a constant in every scenario. Through creativity and collaboration, we can also achieve a preservation-sensitive solution that would accomplish both priorities and save the Chicago Town & Tennis Club Building.

Additional time is also critical as all of these alternatives require time to be pursued and implemented. On December 20, 2019, Misericordia applied for a demolition permit for the Chicago Town & Tennis Club, which started the 90-day demolition permit delay process for the “orange-rated” building. This hold will expire in March 2020 at which time the demolition permit could be issued. However, in the spirit of partnership and an earnest desire to see an alternative solution, Misericordia has agreed to delay demolition for an additional 90 days. Fortunately,
the new construction is not scheduled to begin until late 2020, so this delay does not impact the construction schedule and delivery of Misericordia’s new units.

Alternate 1: Misericordia’s current plan anticipates 150 new units, but its waitlist has more than 300 individuals. If the zoning change were to allow for higher-density buildings, more new units could be built. By allowing a higher-density zoning both on the 3.1-acre Chicago Town & Tennis Club site and within the main 31-acre Misericordia campus, Misericordia could potentially build out more than the 150 units currently planned and serve more people in this development and potential future infill development on their campus. Higher-density new construction on the Chicago Town & Tennis Club site could be focused on the parking lot and deliver all the required units without requiring the land where the historic building and garden currently stand.

The currently proposed development plan represents Misericordia’s preferred housing module. However, if granted a higher-density zoning, the design architects could explore more compact site plan layouts. Additionally, a higher-density zoning would allow for narrower streets, less on-site parking, narrower setbacks between buildings, taller building heights, etc.

Misericordia already has community spaces within their existing campus. However, if Misericordia wished, the historic building could relatively easily be converted for use as a beautiful community center for the new residents and existing 600 residents living on the adjacent campus. The building is in good condition and the first floor is at grade level, but the addition of a hydraulic elevator and ramps would be necessary to make it ADA compliant. This option would only be viable for Misericordia if the development program could deliver the same number of new units and a preferred building design.

In addition to using the historic building for its own programming throughout the week, Misericordia could host
weddings and celebrations on weekends to generate additional revenues to support their nonprofit mission and operations. Following a model similar to the Greenhouse Inn Restaurant currently operated by Misericordia on their main campus which provides residents with developmental disabilities valuable work experience though restaurant employment, the historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club building could be used to host weddings and provide residents with developmental disabilities valuable work experience though event-related employment. This potential use could generate significant earned income for the non-profit and would serve to better integrate the Misericordia and West Ridge communities.

Alternate 2: If Misericordia did not wish to own and operate the historic building, the portion of the 3.1-acre site where the historic building is located could be subdivided and sold to a private developer. The millions of dollars generated from the sale of the valuable historic building would partially offset the original $7.5 million purchase price and this new source of funds could be used to build additional housing units.

This approach requires higher-density zoning and the design architects creating an acceptable more compact site plan with a preferred housing module focusing the new construction on the parking lot. If the parking lot site could not accommodate all the desired new units, perhaps the proceeds from the sale could be used to purchase land elsewhere along the perimeter of the main campus or be used to create additional infill housing on underutilized parcels or parking lots within the main campus.

Alternate 3: Another option to consider would be for Misericordia to conduct a land swap with the Chicago Park District and the adjacent Emmerson Park. Emmerson Park was once part of the Chicago Town and Tennis Club grounds, so reconnecting the park land and the original historic clubhouse would be a natural choice. Misericordia could give the Chicago Town and Tennis Club/Unity Church building and gardens to the Chicago Park District. The Chicago Park District in exchange would give to Misericordia the equivalent amount of land from Emmerson Park.

In this scenario, the Chicago Town and Tennis Club Building would become the new Emmerson Park Fieldhouse which would provide much needed programing to the West Ridge community that the Chicago Park District’s current modest shed building is simply too small to support. New park district fieldhouses often cost tens of millions of dollars, so the potential value of the historic building to the Chicago Park District and West Ridge communities is significant. A public use for the Chicago Town and Tennis Club building would be an ideal outcome.

This option would directly benefit Misericordia as the land swap would save the estimated $250,000 cost of demolishing the historic building. Access to the historic clubhouse could also economically benefit the park and the Chicago Park District, as the former Chicago Town and Tennis Club building has remarkable interior ballrooms and would be a desirable and lucrative event and wedding venue that would generate much-needed park revenues.

The Chicago Park District already runs a robust business of renting out event spaces in historic park district building throughout Chicago for weddings and other celebrations. It could easily add the Chicago Town and Tennis Club to its list of offerings. This would be an amenity for the wider Chicago community and one which generates significant income for the Chicago Park District to support ongoing operations. Other than the need to provide elevator ADA access to the second floor, the historic building is in good condition. This use could be quickly implemented as it has been successfully hosting events and celebrations for decades as Unity Church.

However, this option’s challenges are due to the relative location of the building, park and campus. Emmerson Park is a long and narrow park which runs along the southern portion of the block. The historic building is located at the northern edge of the block centered between two parking lots. Connecting Emmerson Park to the building would require significant square footage and leave the remaining bisected building site inefficient for new development.

While neighbors strongly desire Emmerson Park to have a large and beautiful fieldhouse, Emmerson Park is a small and narrow Chicago public park. The idea of trading a significant portion of the existing park space, even to accommodate a beautiful field house, would likely garner a mixed reaction from the community.

Alternate 4: Another option would be to physically move the historic Chicago Town and Tennis Club building
Chicago 7: Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church
from its current location approximately 250 feet due south across the parking lot into Emmerson Park. Initially, this idea seemed the least plausible due to cost, but after Preservation Chicago received competitive multiple competitive bids for the cost of building moving that were much lower than expected, it might be the most compelling alternative.

Although more logistically complicated, moving the historic building into the park would provide a substantial benefit to both Misericordia and the wider West Ridge community. It would save the historic building and provide Misericordia with a clear site to allow more flexibility in their development site plan. Additionally, the estimated $250,000 cost of demolition would be avoided. Perhaps these saving could be used to offset a portion of the cost to move the historic building.

Preservation Chicago has received bids from two well-established, large-scale building moving firms. Both bids are similar in size and scope. They suggest the cost to move the building into Emmerson Park to be approximately $550,000, which is only marginally more expensive than the cost to demolish the building. To prepare the foundation to receive the building would likely cost an additional $550,000. So for approximately $1.1 million, the Chicago Park District could own a historic building that would serve as their new field house.

Park district field houses often cost well over $10 million to build new. If Misericordia pledged the $250,000 of budgeted demolition funds towards costs of moving the historic building, the difference could be paid for by the Chicago Park District, TIF, or private philanthropy. Given this extraordinary opportunity, it’s likely that the funds would be forthcoming. For perspective, the Chicago Park District is currently spending $14.8 million to renovate historic Clarendon Park Community Center and $1.5 million in TIF funding to update the Revere Park Field House. Preservation Chicago is already working to secure the necessary funding.

One challenge with this plan to move the historic building into Emmerson Park is that Emmerson Park is physically a narrow park at only 125 feet. The location in the park where the historic building could be relocated would reduce the already limited green space and impact a lovely, mature meadow with winding paths and mature trees. However, if Emmerson Park was slightly widened, the historic building could be oriented along Winchester Avenue with minimal negative impact to the current greenspace.

Misericordia had initially requested that the adjacent public streets of Thome Avenue and Winchester Avenue be vacated by the City of Chicago. Their campus is a gated community for the safety and comfort of their residents.
and would like to include the new site behind the fence. This request was withdrawn after neighbor objections. A possible alternative could be a 1:1 swap between the City of Chicago and Misericordia. Small portions of Thome Avenue and or part of Winchester Avenue could be vacated by the City of Chicago, become part of Misericordia’s property, and seamlessly connect the new building site to the main campus. In exchange for this valuable city-owned property on the northern edge of the construction site, Misericordia would donate the equivalent total square footage on the southern edge of the construction site to the Chicago Park District and Emmerson Park. This would enlarge the park, protect some of the existing mature trees and lovely gardens earmarked for demolition, and provide a good site for the relocated historic Chicago Town and Tennis Club Building. This approach would provide a powerful win-win for both Misericordia and the West Ridge community.

Neighbors in an adjacent building have voiced concern over losing access to free street parking. The current public street right-of-way covers 1.5 acres. Some modest loss in street parking will not have a material impact on parking. Additionally, the possibility of a limited conversion of a city-owned vehicular street into city-owned park green space could provide greater flexibility in the ultimate configuration of Emmerson Park to accommodate the move of the historic building. In general, Preservation Chicago strongly supports the conversion of parking lots into public parks.

Preservation Chicago recognizes the demand for Misericordia's extraordinary housing and services programs and strongly supports this noble and important work. These recommendations are intended to preserve and honor Chicago's historic built environment and Landmark-quality buildings, while simultaneously supporting the construction of new housing residential units for the developmentally disabled at Misericordia's West Ridge Campus.

We hope that all stakeholders will engage in a robust and fruitful conversation and that together we can find a win-win solution that meets that needs of all stakeholders.