OVERVIEW

This is the second time the Washington Park National Bank Building has been on our Chicago 7 Most Endangered list, first in 2018 and again this year. The massive four-story limestone and reinforced-concrete structure and its surrounding community borrows its name from the historic and much celebrated 1880s Washington Park Race Track, site of the American Derby. This racing track was once located at 61st Street and Cottage Grove Avenue. The bank building name was also in reference to the Olmsted-designed Washington Park located nearby.

Following a lengthy community engagement process conducted by the Cook County Land Bank Authority and the Metropolitan Planning Council, it was clear that the

Washington Park National Bank
Address: 6300 S. Cottage Grove
Architect: Albert Schwartz
Date: 1924
Style: Neoclassical
Neighborhood: Woodlawn
Woodlawn community wanted to see the long-vacant building restored and adaptively reused. There is an abundance of land in Woodlawn, and it is frustrating to the community and preservation advocates that decisions were made to demolish a viable historic building in favor of new construction.

HISTORY

The Washington Park National Bank Building was designed by architect Albert Schwartz in 1924 as part of an expansion and relocation of the bank to a more prominent corner site. The building’s primary facades were constructed of Bedford or Indiana limestone and included retail shops on the 63rd Street side of the building, with the bank operating from the Cottage Grove frontage.

In its early years, the Washington Park National Bank Building housed a Walgreens Drug Store, anchoring a portion of the corner storefronts on the first floor. On the upper floors of the building were a number of manufacturing and sales recruiters' offices. Advertisements in the Chicago Tribune from 1931 show the bank’s tagline at the time: “As strong as the everlasting hills.” Washington Park National Bank closed on June 8, 1931. It was reported to be reopening as Park National Bank & Trust. In 1951, the Chicago Tribune reported that “Louis Alpern, former Kentucky distiller,” bought the building for $355,000. The article noted that the building “changed hands twice in 1944 – first for $125,000 and later for $210,000.” A 1952 Chicago Tribune ad hailed the Washington Park National Bank building as “South Side's finest office building.”
The 63rd Street and Cottage Grove Avenue area contained many great entertainment venues, hotels, ballrooms and theaters or movie palaces included the Tivoli Theater, which once stood across the street from the Washington Park Bank Building. It was a prominent center of the South Side. The racial make-up of Woodlawn changed beginning in the 1940s to an African-American community, and the area continued to be a prominent location for Jazz-era clubs and all forms of entertainment and shopping, with the community flourishing into the 1960s.

In the decades that followed, the area experienced wholesale demolition and disinvestment. However, in recent years there is substantial renewed interest in the Woodlawn community, which is also reflected in its historical commercial core near the Washington Park National Bank. The Woodlawn area also had many connections to the Civil Rights Era, with the family home of Emmett Till located nearby. Also, several African-American organizations and movements were headquartered in Woodlawn well into the 1970s and 1980s.

A Structural Assessment Report of the Washington Park National Bank was completed as part of the RFP process by Probe Consulting Services in August 2018. While the report acknowledged that the building is littered with construction debris from decades of neglect, it concluded that “that the existing framing system of the building is structurally sound, intact, and still in good condition and that the building is salvageable and can be repaired to restore its full structural integrity.”

**THREAT**

Located adjacent to the 63rd Street elevated train station and terminal at Cottage Grove, The Washington Park
National Bank Building has been a prominent feature of the Woodlawn community for nearly 100 years. The Woodlawn Community Development Corporation, under the leadership of the Rev. Leon Finney, Jr., owned the property for decades. During that extended timeframe and under that ownership, no apparent general or on-going maintenance, renovation or redevelopment work was evident on the bank building. And during that time, and extending to present-day, the bank building languished, as the building has now been vacant and open to the elements for an extended time period. In addition, substantial back tax debt, estimated to be $3.7 million over the past 20 years, was cleared when the Cook County Land Bank Authority took the property in 2016.

In recent decades, this once-prominent intersection has experienced significant decline, and this amazing historical building has fallen into disrepair. While the Washington Park National Bank Building languished, with owners who were not able to restore the structure, other prominent buildings in the immediate area have been successfully restored and reopened – particularly the nearby Strand Hotel and the Cinderella Ballroom.

20th Ward Alderman Jeanette Taylor has expressed opposition to demolishing the Washington Park National Bank building. In an interview with the Chicago Sun-Times, Taylor said, “It’s unfair that communities on the South Side do not get to preserve historic buildings like they do on the North Side.” (Ballesteros, Chicago Sun-Times, 3/31/19)

RECOMMENDATIONS

We at Preservation Chicago, stand united with the members of the Woodlawn community, urging DL3 Realty to change its plans to demolish and destroy this building, worthy of preservation and protection, and instead focus on
Chicago 7: Washington Park National Bank

Washington Park National Bank © Eric Allix Rogers

Washington Park National Bank © Eric Allix Rogers
creative and community-forward reuse of this historic structure.

The architectural and design firm of CallisonRTKL prepared renderings for Preservation Chicago that allow for restoration of the first four floors of the historic building, along with a two-story new addition atop the building to accommodate additional square footage. This scenario reaches nearly the same leasable square footage of DL3’s design, while it retains an important part of the community’s history. The renderings indicate 69,492 square feet of gross floor area and 59,555 square feet of leasable area. If the building were to become a Chicago Landmark, it would be eligible for waiver of permit fees, a “Class L” (“Class L” stands for Landmark) tax incentive and competitive Adopt-a-Landmark funds. An experienced contractor familiar with adaptive reuse projects estimates the cost for this restoration and new construction project to be in the $15 to $18 million-dollar range.

This building is likely eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places which would also make it eligible for federal and state historic tax credits. The City of Chicago should consider a designation of the building as a Chicago Landmark, enabling access to additional incentives available.

In addition to Preservation Chicago listing the Washington Park National Bank Building on our 2018 Chicago 7 Most Endangered List, our statewide preservation partner Landmarks Illinois included the building on its 2019 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois list.

The City and the Woodlawn community need only look to the nearby Strand Hotel as a model of transforming a neglected historic building and converting it to a viable use. Holsten Development successfully converted the former Strand Hotel, located directly across the street from the Washington Park National Bank Building, into a 44-unit apartment building. In the last few years, developers have managed creative ways to make the old Chicago Main Post Office in downtown Chicago and the Old Cook County Hospital as extremely viable restoration projects. We are certain that DL3 Realty, under the leadership of Leon Walker and his team, and can reach a viable solution that does not destroy this building’s history and further diminish the Woodlawn community. Profit and progress can be had with restoration of a building – moreso than with demolition and new construction when you factor the emotional, historical and environmental impacts.

There is a sizable amount of vacant land within blocks of the Washington Park National Bank Building on both sides of 63rd Street, along with Cottage Grove Avenue and nearby streets, that would be ideal for a new construction project. This is a very impressive and historic building, and it should be adaptively reused. The people of the Woodlawn community deserve to have their history honored and protected.

We look forward to working with DL3 toward a good preservation outcome with the Washington Park National Bank Building that meets preservation standards while also being a profitable development. We also look forward to working with the Cook County Land Bank Authority going forward to ensure it implements a “Preservation First” analysis with other historic buildings which become available to them in the future.

The Woodlawn community spoke in favor of restoration and reuse. Preservation Chicago encourages DL3 Realty, under the leadership of Leon Walker, to respect the community’s perspective and wishes while employing every tool and program it can to save and reuse this incredible historic building. Such a project would become an amazing and continuing asset for the Woodlawn Community well into the future.
Chicago 7: Washington Park National Bank

Washington Park National Bank © Eric Allix Rogers

Proposed New Development for Washington Park National Bank Site © DL3 Realty
Chicago 7: Washington Park National Bank

Proposed Adaptive Reuse Alternate Development for Washington Park National Bank © CallisonRTKL Architects