

Chicago's East Village Neighborhood



1523 West Superior Street. Developers want to tear down this Orange-rated building.

Address: Bounded by: Division Street at the North, Grand Avenue at the South, Ashland Avenue at the East, and Damen at the West

Date: 1865-1905

Architects: Various

Style: Various: Chicago Workers' Cottages, Tenements, Romanesque and Queen Anne Flats

CHRS

Rating: Various (Orange, Yellow, Green)

Threat and Synopsis:

Imagine living in a city under siege. You start each day not knowing whose block will be hit, or if a neighbor's house will be reduced to rubble before even returning home from work. Imagine watching helplessly as, day by day, your beloved neighborhood disappears before your eyes.

This could be a description of London circa 1940. But, unfortunately, this description applies to daily life in the East Village neighborhood on Chicago's West Side.

Dating from before the Great Fire of 1871, West Town, as the greater near side was officially known, served as a port of entry for the waves of European immigrants who flooded into Chicago during the late 19th century. Many came from Germany, Poland, and Russia, crowding into the already overcrowded frame cottages, two flats, and brick tenements in the area. After World War One, large numbers of Russian Jews replaced the Germans, who were subsequently replaced by Hispanics and Polish refugees of World War II. The neighborhood began a slow decline in the 1970s as businesses closed, longtime residents fled to the suburbs, and rising crime set in.

However, starting in the late 1990s, East Village has seen explosive redevelopment. Following on the coattails of the renaissance of Wicker Park, directly to the north, developers soon learned that affordable property and unprecedented opportunity lay just to the south, in what had been the largely overlooked East Village.

Several factors have come together to drive redevelopment in the area, in some cases at a pace so torrid, there has been an almost complete replacement of existing housing stock. Neighborhood activists have been battling such insensitive development for years, but largely to no avail.

East Village's development formula is fairly straightforward. First, available vacant lots are consumed, and, when these no longer exist, smaller, less significant – and often substandard – frame cottages begin to disappear. Many longtime residents are happy to see these changes.

However, once the redevelopment wave reaches full velocity, the story changes. As redevelopment quickens, even a neighborhood's hallmark structures – the very structures that give a neighborhood its character and vitality – are up ripe for the picking.

In the case of East Village, property values have risen so dramatically, the neighborhood is now choking on its own success. The once unthinkable demolition of charmingly detailed brick cottages and two flats is now commonplace, their intact leaded windows, wooden cornices, and cast-iron railings notwithstanding. Compounding the problem of lost neighborhood character is what invariably replaces these historic and human-scaled buildings.

Developers in East Village have mastered the economics of squeezing profit from their ability to build quickly, cheaply, poorly, and tastelessly out of scale. More amazing is that they have found a willing supply of buyers for what can only be described as architectural pollution.

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Chicago's East Village Neighborhood (continued)



A Typical Street in East Village shows the over-scaled, repetitive and mundane architecture that has erased much of this neighborhood's charm and distinction. Certain blocks have eroded to the point where historic buildings are outnumbered. Others suffer from buildings built with insultingly poor materials and craftsmanship.



948 N. Winchester. The replacement's formulaic architecture does not respect existing scale, setbacks, or materials. Mature surrounding vegetation is gone.

Threat and Synopsis (continued from previous page):

East Village, like many other neighborhoods, is in the state it is today for a variety of reasons. Early attempts to downzone have failed, mainly because Chicago's antiquated zoning ordinance had no close classification for the building stock. Further, comprehensive neighborhood planning in Chicago is unheard of, the landmarks ordinance sets eligibility for protected landmark districts impossibly high, and the Department of Planning and Development seems much more interested in development than planning. The recent loss of the oldest house in the neighborhood, the 1858 Huntley House, illustrates that most often only the needs of developers are considered when planning decisions are made. A 7-unit condominium building now rises where the Huntley House once stood.

Recommendations:

For Neighborhood Preservation

- **Create** a [financial incentive](#) for renovating historic buildings, rather than tearing them down.
- **Establish** a [financial penalty](#) for demolishing a historic structure, rather than demolishing it.
- **Downzone** East Village and other similar neighborhoods to the new R-3 ½ zoning classification as soon as it becomes law.
- **Evaluate** what is left of the neighborhoods' historic resources to determine if possible landmark districts can be created, possibly non-contiguous.

For More Compatible In-Fill Development

- **Mandate** the use of [face brick](#) for all sides of residential construction in the city.
- **Consider** [citizen review panels](#) for all neighborhood construction.
- **Respect** each block's [unique characteristics](#), including building setbacks, massing, and distinctive features. Repetition suburbanizes.
- **Outlaw** "patio pits" that face public rights of way. Outlaw overhanging balconies that face or intrude upon a public right of way.