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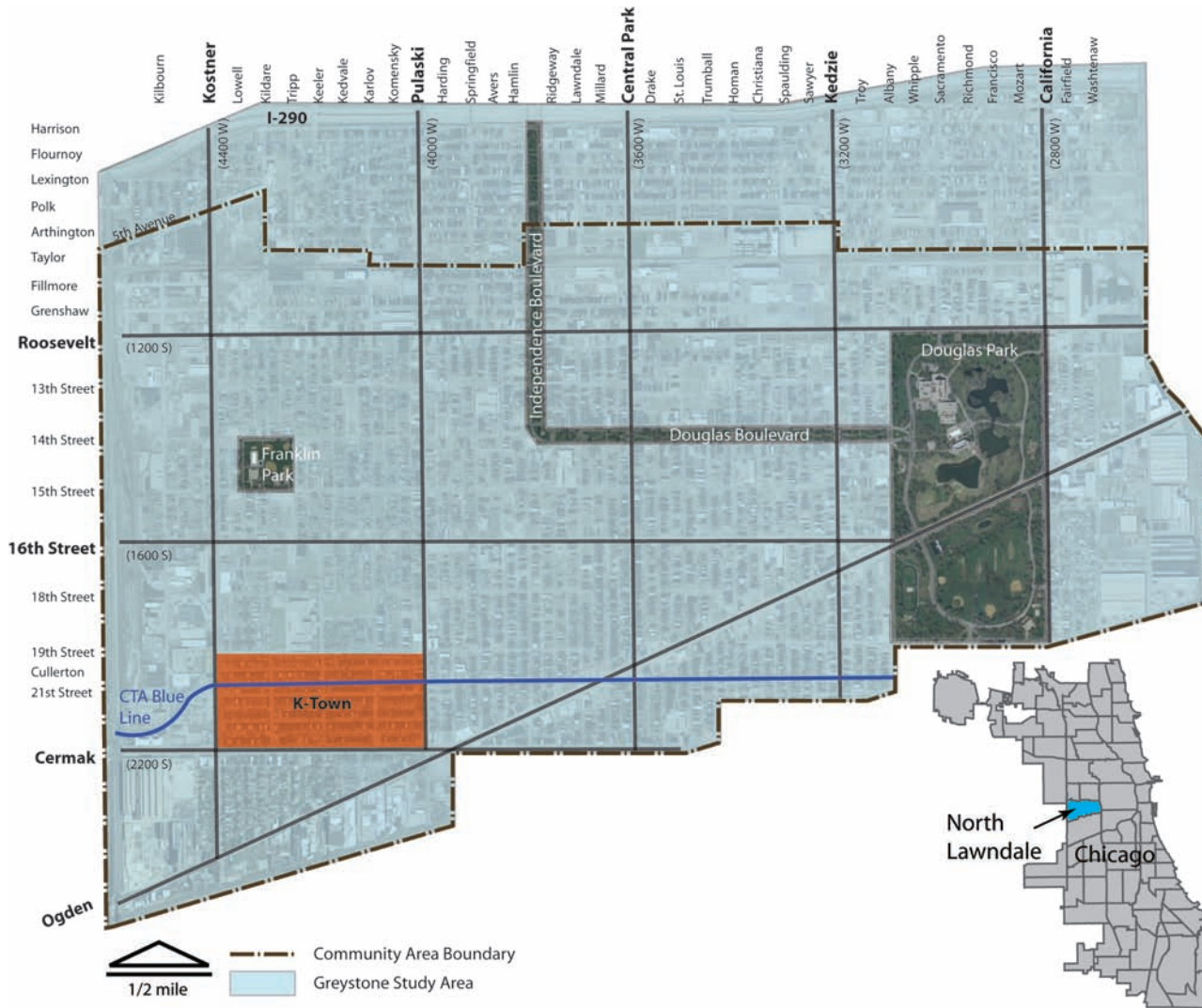
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The Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative

City Design Center, University of Illinois at Chicago



Residential neighborhoods near the core of aging industrial cities of America’s northeast and Midwest have presented a particularly knotty set of problems to even the most imaginative architects, civic-minded preservationists, and city planners.

North Lawndale, a three-square-mile neighborhood on the near west side of Chicago, is a textbook case. With a population that is 94 percent African American and earns a median income of just \$18,000 a year, it is full of grand but crumbling residential architecture, threadbare shops along

its main streets, few amenities or services, and a crime rate that has long daunted incoming investors and preservationists. Decades of abandonment and deterioration have left many of the once neat rows of greystone buildings pockmarked by ugly gaps, like missing teeth. And as with many neighborhoods suffering the effects of disinvestment, residents often viewed prospective developers as money-hungry carpetbaggers. In their turn, developers regarded local residents as little more than squatters and obstructionists. For years, little changed.

But in 2006, neighborhood residents, university architects, philanthropists, community organizers, and city planners united around a simple but surprisingly powerful

Above: Map of North Lawndale and the greystone study area.

The Facade



concept that has sparked a visible revival in North Lawndale. Today, demolition has been halted, developers, preservationists, and local property owners are in harmony, refurbishments have accelerated, and the neighborhood is on a path not commonly taken in urban redevelopment projects: renewal without gentrification.

The Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative, as this movement is collectively known, is an affiliation of half a dozen Chicago civic and academic organizations, including Neighborhood Housing Services of North Lawndale, the University of Illinois at Chicago's City Design Center, the City of Chicago Department of Housing, the Civic Committee, and not least, a variety of community-based organizations. But it also consists of two remarkable volumes of research: the first, "The Chicago Greystone in Historic North Lawndale," published in 2006; and a second, "The Chicago Greystone: A User's Guide for Renovating and Maintaining Your Home" (2008). Together, the two volumes and the Greystone Initiative represent the state of the art in community development and in renewal of urban neighborhoods. They provide data, history, and a commu-

nity-led strategy that can provide a model to be emulated not just in the Midwest but also around the country.

The first volume is a collection of essays, written by historians, preservationists, architects, and North Lawndale residents, aimed at a general reading public. The various chapters capture vividly the dynamic history of the neighborhood, and make a strong case for using pride of place as a tool to unite depressed communities around rehabilitation. The second volume addresses homeowners, prospective homeowners, and rehabbers in a meticulously detailed guide to the care and restoration of greystones, providing a wealth of technical guidance and instruction equally well suited to a serious audience of architects and engineers.

The EDRA/*Places* Awards jurors were impressed with the Greystone Initiative on multiple levels. "They are trying to empower people to preserve," wrote one. Another applauded the project's emphasis on providing

Above: Explanatory drawing of a restored greystone facade.

Inset: Cover of "The Chicago Greystone in Historic North Lawndale."

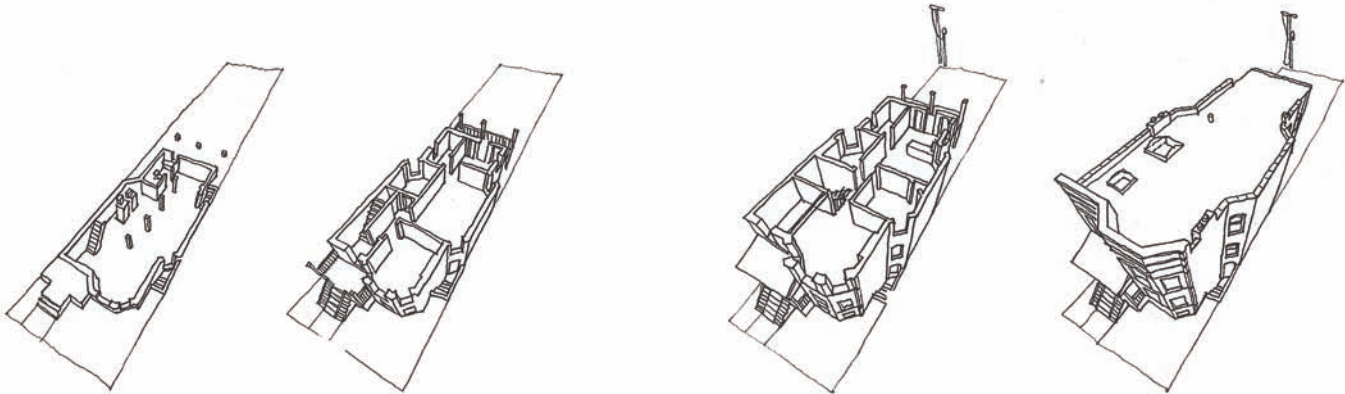
“historic preservation with guidelines for a community that never had these kind of guidelines.” A third remarked that the project “says something about diversity in a way. It is those kinds of communities that never had the attention of historical preservationists. It breaks through in that area.”

North Lawndale

Like the Greystone Initiative, North Lawndale’s story is interwoven with the peculiar dynamics of race and urban economics. In Chicago, for instance, where the industrial boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

of the city’s wood-frame housing stock—new construction favored the more modern materials of stone and brick. Between 1890 and 1920, some 3,500 greystones were erected, creating some of the city’s most beautiful neighborhoods. In no part of the city were more built than in North Lawndale, which was home to 87,000 residents by 1950.

As long as large employers such as Sears and International Harvester remained in Chicago (in 1910, IH alone employed 17,000 people in the region), the west side thrived. The greystone building, with its handsome limestone facade (frequently decorated with gargoyles



sprouted scores of new factories and manufacturing plants, a parallel residential boom arose to shelter the growing populations of immigrant shopkeepers, workers, and their young families. In the aftermath of the Great Fire of 1871, which consumed 17,000 buildings—including one-third

and ornaments by the skilled stonemasons of the day), became a symbol of the material success of Chicago’s middle and working classes. But in the 1960s, as the city’s manufacturing and industrial base began to erode, these neighborhoods began a slow, painful economic slide. The destruction that accompanied the 1968 riots pushed North Lawndale over the edge, into a protracted era of disinvestment. The neighborhood’s mostly Jewish immigrant population moved north and was replaced by African Americans

Above: Typical layout of rooms and the siting of a greystone building on a North Lawndale lot.

Sample Juror Comments—Historic Greystone Initiative

Leanne Rivlin: There are one or two research projects that are strong. This one in particular. I taught methods over the years and I could assign something like that to students.

Susan Szenasy: I love that one. It’s so smart. Teaching how to restore and giving...

Jane Weinzapfel: Which is a fixer upper vs. which is...

Susan Szenasy: And the drawings are beautiful.

Dennis Frenchman: The drawings were really clever.

Susan Szenasy: And the historic stuff was very good. It’s a beautiful book. I love those buildings. They are just unbelievable.

Jane Weinzapfel: But there is even more . . .

Dennis Frenchman: They are trying to empower people to preserve.

Susan Szenasy: And to understand where they are, which is such an incredible place. And the supporting

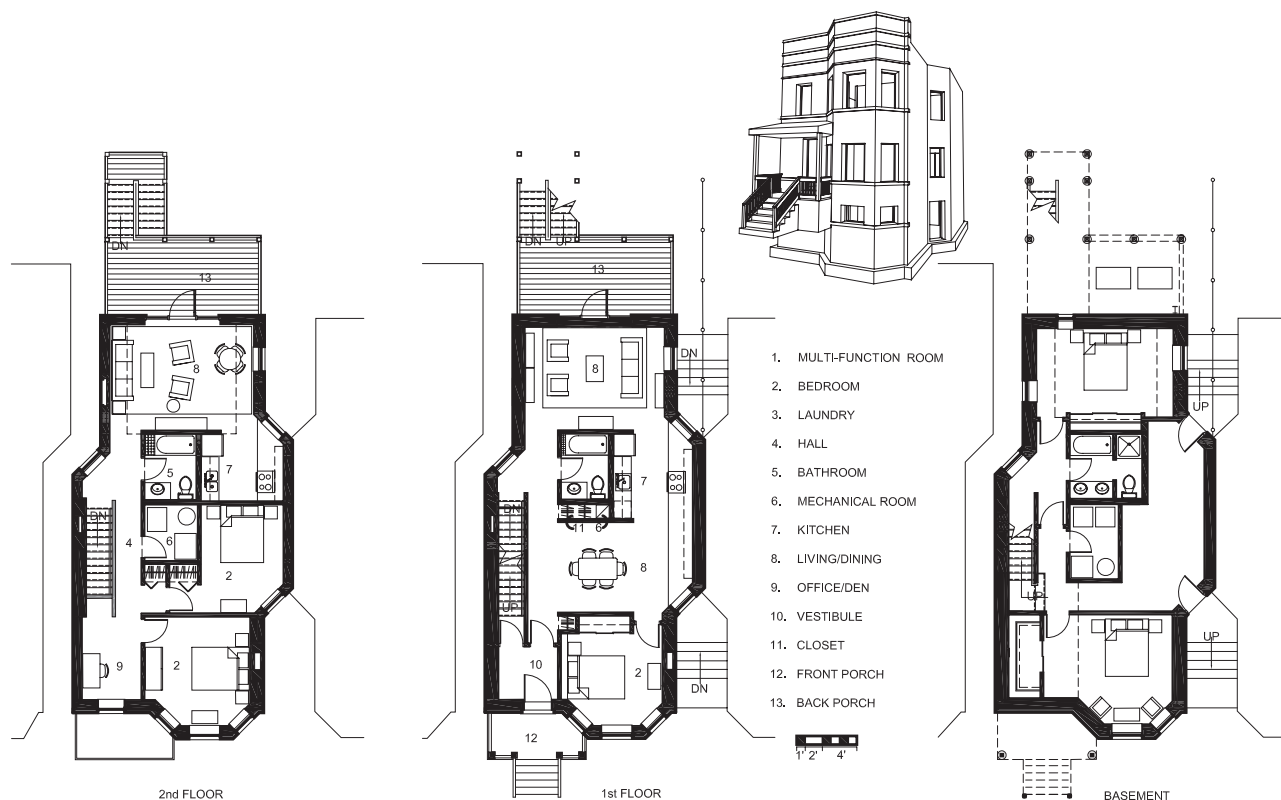
evidence is so beautifully documented.

Jane Weinzapfel: It’s just like the Arc: it gives a new way of thinking about things that can travel in several scales.

Susan Szenasy: And it uses architecture in a really positive, beautiful way.

Fritz Steiner: It is just really accomplished research and extraordinarily thorough and well put-together.

Susan Szenasy: Extremely useful.



⊕ CORE SCHEME: ACCEPTED AS PROPOSAL

who were migrating from the rural south in large numbers.

The catalyst for the Greystone Initiative was Charles Leeks, the director of Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS), a thirty-five-year-old Chicago nonprofit that provides education and resources to help urban residents buy and maintain homes. Leeks, a native of Savannah, Georgia, studied political science at the University of Michigan and came to Chicago to attend the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), where he wrote his dissertation on North Lawndale.

“We try to figure out how to make neighborhoods more livable,” says Leeks. “My approach is that the tool we can use to stimulate reinvestment is housing.”

So, despite negative newspaper stories about the neigh-

Above: Plans and elevation perspective for a two-unit greystone renovation in North Lawndale. The model scheme, now built, includes the conversion of previously unused basement space. Design by Landon Bone Baker in collaboration with the City Design Center.

Fritz Steiner: The connection between research and practice is clear. In terms of more conventional research it's fully formed.

Dennis Frenchman: Having spent a life in historic preservation, I have seen hundreds of these studies, and this may be the best.

Jane Weinzapfel: I think the Greystone is one we are all very comfortable with. It's memorable.

Susan Szenasy: I think we like it because not only is it beautiful, not only is it historic preservation, but historic preservation with guidelines for a community

that never had these kind of guidelines.

Dennis Frenchman: It energizes people who live there.

Jane Weinzapfel: It's empowering. It's a metaphor for transformation.

Leanne Rivlin: The research that backs this is strong research, and I think that's the most important thing.

Susan Szenasy: For this section it is. And it is very strong in all those ways, and in a way it says something about diversity. It is those kind of communities that never had the attention of historical preservationists. It breaks through in that area.

Leanne Rivlin: I think we also have to say on behalf of research, it has to have excellent background.

Interestingly, our program has a mix of students with a clinical social-science background and others who have architectural backgrounds and planning backgrounds. And they learn methods together because methods have certain inherent qualities. So it's not just wanting to do [research] and including it [in design and planning work]. You have to learn about it in order to do it well. I think what we see in [Greystone] is an expertise in doing research.

borhood and a weak sense of ownership among the residents, Leeks saw something different, something full of possibility, that would mobilize the residents and connect the neighborhood to its own past and future.

“There were an awful lot of assets here that people didn’t see as assets,” he explained in an interview. “The things you hear about are chronically poor, social disinvestment. But I was willing to look a little deeper. I drove around and saw all the assets the neighborhood has.”

Those assets were, of course, in addition to the physical environment of more than 1,200 greystones with intricately carved facades and fine woodwork, a remarkably rich history. North Lawndale was once home to Golda Meir, the former prime minister of Israel. Martin Luther King chose it as a place to stay when he led a civil rights march in Chicago. It was also home to great musical artists, including Benny Goodman and Dinah Washington.

Says Leeks, who now owns and resides in a handsome greystone in North Lawndale: “The neighborhood became much more interesting to me because I saw the narrative of the neighborhood as layered.”

A chief impediment to change, as he saw it, was the perception held by both outsiders and locals that North Lawndale is simply not a healthy place. “It was tough for many people to feel positive about this neighborhood,” he says. “People look at it physically and they come to believe it is an unattractive, unhealthful place, and they don’t want to be here.”

But Leeks’s experience observing Savannah build an attractive identity around its rich lode of antebellum housing stock and witnessing Chicago’s bungalow restoration campaign gave him templates which he believed would work in North Lawndale. Says Leeks: “The city’s bungalow initiative challenged people’s thinking about those buildings. So I said I want the same thing to happen for greystones. Let’s celebrate it.”

Leeks began identifying like-minded people from the neighborhood, and held his first focus groups in a local community center. The first few meetings, in 2004, drew a smattering of interested property owners and community-minded individuals from business organizations: the North Lawndale Christian Development Corporation and the North Lawndale Business and Local Development Corporation. Among the nascent group’s findings was that there was a sense of urgency to their work: over



Above: North Lawndale greystone neighborhoods have a rich history which can be used to leverage community change.

the years, between six and seven hundred greystones had been demolished owing to neglect or abandonment, and dozens of others were in marginal condition. Dangerously neglected structures would be razed by the city.

Out of those many meetings, one clear idea rose to the top: research for and creation of a book that would enlighten and inform the public and the media about North Lawndale’s history. From those first meetings, the Initiative sprang.

Beginnings

An early partner in the Greystone Initiative was Professor Roberta Feldman, a founding co-director of the City Design Center at the UIC College of Architecture and the Arts, who attended one of the first meetings and was promptly hooked. Feldman, who holds a Ph.D. in environmental psychology, became a co-editor of the first volume of research.

“What fascinated me,” she explained as she sat in her office at the center, “was the opportunity to create a neighborhood identity or find things in the neighborhood to create an identity both for the marketplace to rebrand a neighborhood, and to create a new or more positive public identity for the people who live there. Charles Leeks emphasized how important it is for residents themselves

to come to some greater understanding of just how historically and culturally important their neighborhood has been. That fosters a greater pride of place, especially in an area that has experienced so much abandonment.”

Furthermore, explains Feldman, that concept can support other ideas that can be built out like spokes on a wheel: well-defined pride of place illuminates something attractive to potential buyers; it attracts preservationists who seldom venture into depressed urban neighborhoods; it appeals to city housing officials, who connect to a strand of civic pride; and it provides a practical answer to one of the most vexing problems presently faced by Chicago and other big cities: what to do with low-income residents.

Now in the midst of what it grandly calls the “Plan for Transformation,” the city of Chicago has, since 2002, been flattening its old public-housing projects and rehousing their sixty thousand residents in new mixed-income units throughout the city, and in Section 8, rent subsidized apartments. But the Plan for Transformation has been subject to much criticism from housing advocates because there are fewer replacement units than there are former public-housing tenants.

The underlying theory of the plan is that concentrations of poor are bad for neighborhoods and bad for the poor themselves. Distributing them among mixed-income populations should produce better outcomes. But in practice, many former residents have wound up in Section 8 housing, in clusters of poverty no better than the projects they left.

Feldman believes that the Greystone Initiative is a smart, economical housing policy alternative, in that it takes “an amazing housing stock, better than anything we could build now within the financial constraints of the time, and renovates it at a cost much lower than building new. So it offers sustainability of built resources, as well as sustainability of a community with a rich history.”

The greystone building is an ideal resource in this capacity, not only because of the romanticized image of elegant urban dwelling that it conjures, but also from a practical perspective: it can accommodate one family, two families, or three. This flexibility is quite an asset from an affordable-housing perspective, because it allows owners without large reserves of cash to rent out floors of the buildings to help offset their costs. And from a diversity standpoint, the Greystone Initiative is quite uncommon. Says Leeks: “We have an opportunity to create a robust, diverse, mixed-income community.” At the heart of the Initiative, as Leeks and Feldman saw it, was restoring North Lawndale while preserving its heritage, and without pricing-out its residents.

Development

Under Feldman, UIC’s City Design Center deployed researchers to develop baseline data on North Lawndale, including an inventory and assessment of the neighborhood’s greystone stock, as well as demographic, social, and economic data, and a community-image survey. The Initiative became formally operational when NHS hired a Greystone program coordinator in September 2006. That month, NHS held a press conference to announce the Initiative, and a month later Chicago’s Mayor, Richard M. Daley, participated in a press conference to publicly launch the project.

In the Initiative’s first year, the City of Chicago pledged \$1 million in Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds to provide grants to greystone owners, and the Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) committed \$335,000 in grant funds. NHS was granted the power to distribute much of the money. Additional money has followed, although the collapse of the housing market is making new funds tougher to acquire. The City Design Center will evaluate the program’s effect during its first five years.

The second research volume, entitled, “A User’s Guide for Renovating and Maintaining Your Home” details in wonderfully clear language and easy-to-understand technical drawings how to diagnose, repair, and care for a greystone, from the foundation footings all the way up to the parapets. The volume provides a wealth of information including how-to instructions on building assessment, restoration, renovation, maintenance of the limestone facing, and even updates on latest Chicago building codes. This research, presented in a masterly way, will appeal to a broad range of greystone fans, from gut-jobbers all the way to weekend tinkerers.

Perhaps most important to the future of preservation in declining neighborhoods, the Greystone Initiative is driven by the community, not by outside developers. Among the portraits in the research volumes are those of Lorean and Gerald Earles, a couple who have done more for neighborhood beautification than just about anyone. Also featured is Michelle Parkinson, a young teacher who bought in North Lawndale because of its reasonable prices. One juror pointed out that the power of the Greystone Initiative is that it makes “the connection between research and practice clear.”

—*David E. Thigpen*

All images courtesy of the City Design Center.