

Architecture

A Plan For Chicago

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

I AM writing about something this week of such importance to the quality of cities—a proposal of such far-reaching significance for the American urban heritage—that it is hard to know how to state the case. Banner headlines would be best. In short, this concerns a proposal at once overwhelmingly sensible and dramatically revolutionary that has been made by the Department of the Interior to the city of Chicago, with ramifications for every city in the country.

The proposal is contained in an understated department release and a thin blue brochure that consists largely of a rather staid recital of the history of the Chicago school of architecture and its enormous role in the development of the skyscraper—a uniquely American contribution to 20th-century art and urban life. The buildings of this heritage are currently an “endangered species,” succumbing, as we watch and write, to rising land prices, peculiarities of zoning codes and speculative investment.

In Chicago's Loop, where a dozen or so seminal structures of international fame record one of the most important chapters in the history of architecture, demolition has reached the proportions of a national tragedy. The recent crash of Adler and Sullivan's Chicago Stock Exchange Building was heard clear around the world.

Fortunately it was heard in Washington, too. Secretary Rogers C. B. Morton and the Department of the Interior have responded with a bold and brilliant plan that could change the status of the national architectural patrimony. The Federal government's remarkable proposal comes at the end of the Department's brochure, following enough lulling pedantry so that one could easily miss the point.

What Secretary Morton is asking for in Chicago is a totally new concept of conservation. It is called a National Cultural Park. This would be the urban counterpart of the present National Parks that preserve the country's natural heritage, and would be set up specifically to save its architectural heritage when it is of a quantity and scale, as in Chicago, that ranks as national in importance.

The proposal is in the form of a Federal-city partnership. The Department of the Interior would provide the initiating funds — which would have to come from Congress — to get the plan started, and would play its usual role as guide and disseminator of

information. But the Federal government would not take over ownership of the buildings, as at Independence Hall; that would be left to the city and individuals.

The city—Chicago—would have to carry out the Federal government's specific legal and economic recommendations, spelled out in thoughtful and pragmatic detail in the brochure, without which the plan would not be feasible. These recommendations are based on air rights studies by John J. Costonis, professor of law at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The results of the studies are electrifying.

Mr. Costonis has determined that the Loop's fine old skyscrapers are not money losers. They do well financially. The problem is that they are smaller, as well as older, than the new skyscrapers, and that zoning would permit much larger structures on these plots. Larger is more profitable.

The essence of the proposal, then, is to go along with the real estate system, but make it work for preservation. The scheme calls for the establishment of a “development rights bank” that would turn those unused air rights into a way to keep the buildings, rather than to destroy them. As it stands, the investor considers that he is losing money for all those profitable, unused air rights, or the underutilized portion of the permitted zoning envelope that is not filled up by the landmark building. The usual solution is demolition for new construction.

The plan is to transfer the unused development rights over landmark buildings into the “development rights bank,” which would cover a designated district. The rights would be purchased by the city with a revolving fund, banked, and then resold to developers anywhere within the district.

There would be certain restrictions as to percentage of increased height permitted, and requirements that landmark owners maintain their

buildings. But investors would not be holding the bag. Sale of air rights would be immensely profitable, and reduction of taxes for the smaller, older buildings, now stripped of their development potential, would be a natural corollary. There would be no tax loss to the city, because the large new buildings using the purchased air rights would pay proportionately more taxes. Everyone wins.

The Federal role, as proposed by Interior, is to supply the initial “seed money” grant or loan to start the revolving air rights purchase fund and carry initial administration costs. The operation would quickly become self-sustaining for the city and even highly profitable. The Secretary of the Interior already has the legal right to enter into negotiations with the city; making contracts would need additional Congressional reinforcement.

The concept is based on an air rights transfer study made originally by Mr. Costonis and Jared B. Schlaes, a Chicago realtor, under a grant from the Chicago chapter of the American Institute of Architects. A further and more detailed study has been carried out by Mr. Costonis for the National Trust for Historic Preservation with a demonstration grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The whole point is to keep the landmark buildings as economically viable, working structures within the city's normal development patterns, something that is impossible today. At present, cities simply cannot afford to buy such buildings rather than see them destroyed and, equally, cannot maintain them. There are much more critical and tragic pressures for scarce city funds.

The scheme is a brilliant, practical, progressive extension of existing zoning tools. It is a logical next step in the use of air rights zoning transfer. It requires two things: first, the backing of the city of Chicago, and then the enabling Congressional action.

To date, Chicago has taken no prizes for effort or vision. Mayor Daley and his colleagues were stunned by the hue and cry about the loss of the Stock Exchange Building and the strength of international reactions to the threat to the Chicago school. It became a political issue. The solution so far, however, has been the inevitable appointment of a committee and notorious posterior dragging. A kind of neanderthal negativism has marked statements of an administration spokesman — giving all the reasons against and none for. Certainly there are arguments pro and con the new zoning everywhere, and occasional legal tests, but the history of law is its advancement and adaptation to meet current needs and action.

The Department of the Interior's National Cultural Park proposal would start with the Loop and extend to such communities as Oak Park, Riverside and River Forest. It would provide visitor centers, exhibitions, publications and tours. “The concept of an urban park that interprets a cultural or architectural theme of national import, such as the work of the Chicago School, is unprecedented,” says Mr. Costonis. It is also an idea whose time is overdue.

Chicago, which once set precedents, now fears them. It seems to lack the character and courage that put up those great buildings in the first place.

Right now, with the best of the 19th and 20th centuries, Chicago is America's first city, architecturally. Without the work of Adler and Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Burnham and Root, Holabird and Roche, and the other names that stud architectural histories and, in decreasing numbers, mark the Loop, the city will be immeasurably reduced. So will the nation and the world, a fact made clear by the Federal interest and proposal. It is inconceivable that the plan should not go ahead. Chicago has only to respond.



Monadhock building in Chicago's Loop, part of a threatened heritage.

Making the real estate system work