

Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative®: Preservation in the Service of Community Revitalization

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Over the past several years, architecture, architecture history, planning, and graphic design faculty and graduate students affiliated with the University of Illinois's City Design Center have provided architectural and design research support for Chicago's Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative®¹. Originating in a grassroots effort by a group of North Lawndale residents, the Initiative realizes the opportunity that is inherent in historic preservation to focus on community-building and revitalization. Coupled with revealing the rich history and culture of Chicago's African-American west side, the Initiative's intent is to build upon the community's unique architectural character to guide North Lawndale's future growth and continued vitality.

The physical manifestations of North Lawndale's history are evident in the monumental buildings along its expansive Douglas Boulevard and its industrial buildings, for instance its Sears complex. But it is the Greystone, the single family, 2-, 3- and 6-flat residential buildings, that is the iconic structure in this community. Charles Leeks, Executive Director of the National Housing Services Chicago, North Lawndale office and one of the Initiative's proponents explains:

"As I kept noticing the Greystone on practically every block in North Lawndale, it became clear to me that there was something special in the neighborhood. Coupled with all the other architectural treasures of the neighborhood, it seemed the story of the Greystones was a much more compelling story than the mid-1980's Chicago Tribune series depicting North Lawndale as an "American Millstone."²

Historic preservation has proven to be a useful approach to community revitalization in such



Figure 1. Row of Chicago's North Lawndale greystones.

places as Pittsburgh's Manchester neighborhood, Atlanta's Auburn neighborhood, the Argenta neighborhood of North Little Rock, Denver's Curtis Park, Washington DC's Shaw neighborhood, San Antonio's Lavaca neighborhood, and in Chicago's Bronzeville. Preservation of these older neighborhoods not only contributes a sense of history, it provides homes for families of diverse incomes, particularly families in need of affordable housing. Interestingly, in a HUD-commissioned national analysis of neighborhoods that maintained ethnic and racial diversity, the vast majority are either on the National Register Historic Districts,

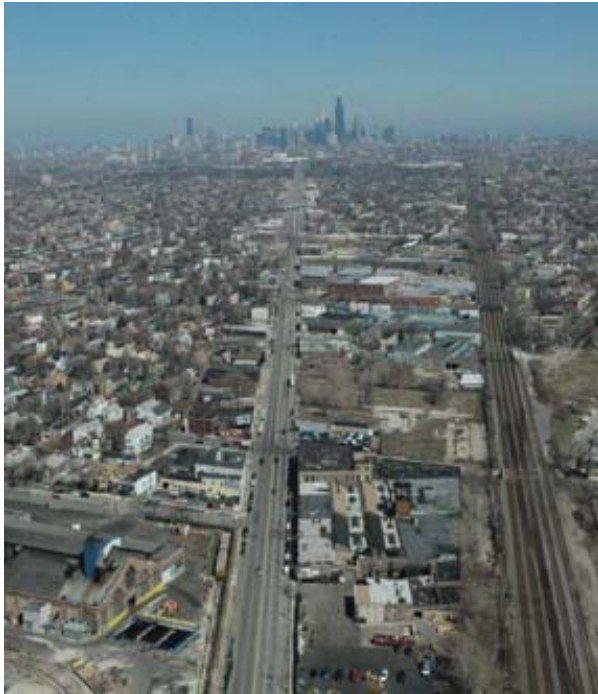


Figure 2. Aerial view of North Lawndale looking east.

are considered a local historic district, or had a concentration of historic structures, or all three.³

North Lawndale, although one of the lowest income neighborhoods in Chicago, presents a significant opportunity for community revitalization through preservation. At the heart of the Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative® is a desire to support the current neighborhood's residents as key participants and beneficiaries of North Lawndale's revitalization by reclaiming and celebrating North Lawndale's unique heritage. The Initiative is also an affordable housing preservation program that encourages improvements and enhancements to North Lawndale's Greystones through an array of financing tools, grants, and technical resources. Through the Initiative, North Lawndale residents build their assets as homeowners, enhance their economic stability, and support the economic health and vitality of the neighborhood.

The National Housing Services, Chicago Department of Housing and UIC City Design Center collaborated to provide informational and financial resources and tools to launch and support the Initiative. City Design Center affiliated faculty and graduate students participated in the earliest planning sessions with representatives of North



Figure 3. Learning from North Lawndale exhibit, Chicago Architecture Foundation

Lawndale community development organizations, local foundations and state and federal preservation agencies; researched the historic fabric and particularly its greystone residential structures; interviewed residents, both old timers and new that are investing in renovating their homes; and researched, collected historic images, and created the exhibit, "Learning from North Lawndale," targeted to a Chicago metro-area audience at the Chicago Architecture Foundation.

Again with our community partners and governmental collaborators, faculty and students researched, wrote, edited, designed, and published two guidebooks: the first, *The Chicago Greystone in Historic Lawndale*, that presents the history of the greystone type of residential building, a brief history of the neighborhood and the Initiative, and reflections on the unique character of North Lawndale;⁴ and the second volume currently in production, *Historic Chicago Greystone: A User's Guide for Renovating and Maintaining Your Home*, to acquaint the reader with 'how to' inspect, evaluate, maintain, and restore a greystone residential building.⁵

Most currently, to underscore the opportunities for

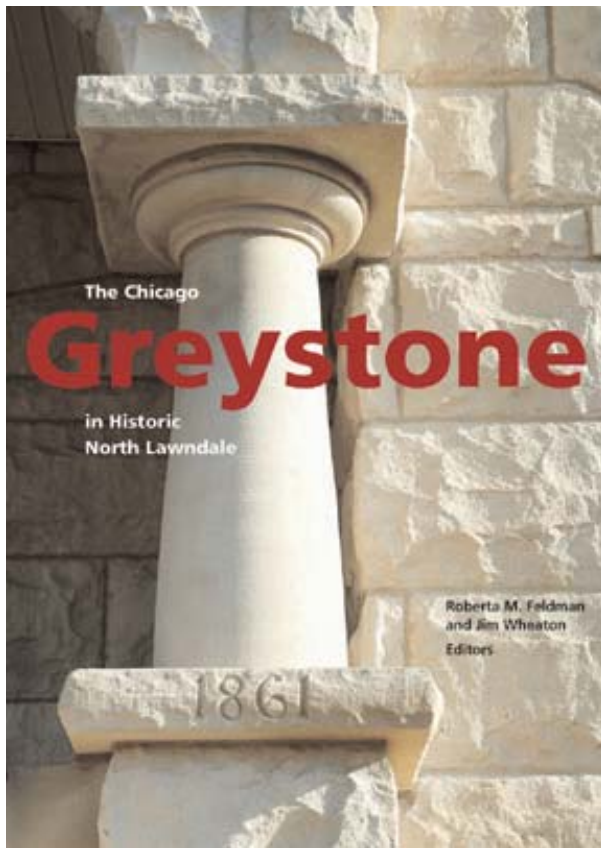


Figure 4. Cover of *The Chicago Greystone in Historic Lawndale*.

rehabilitation of these historic structures for contemporary living, architecture graduate students supervised by UIC School of Architecture faculty designed the renovation of a model two-flat greystone in the North Lawndale that currently is under construction. They reorganized the layout of a convoluted plan that had been rehabbed from the historic plan to create an open, flexible layout, provide more natural lighting and views, and increase the size of one of the two apartments by duplexing down into the lower level.

The front façade will be repaired and the front and back porches rebuilt. The center also is conducting a longitudinal evaluation of the Initiative to assess its impact on North Lawndale's housing rehabilitation and neighborhood revitalization.

After the initial launch in North Lawndale, the Initiative will expand to other communities within the city's "Greystone Belt," and to greystone owners throughout the City. As part of this expan-

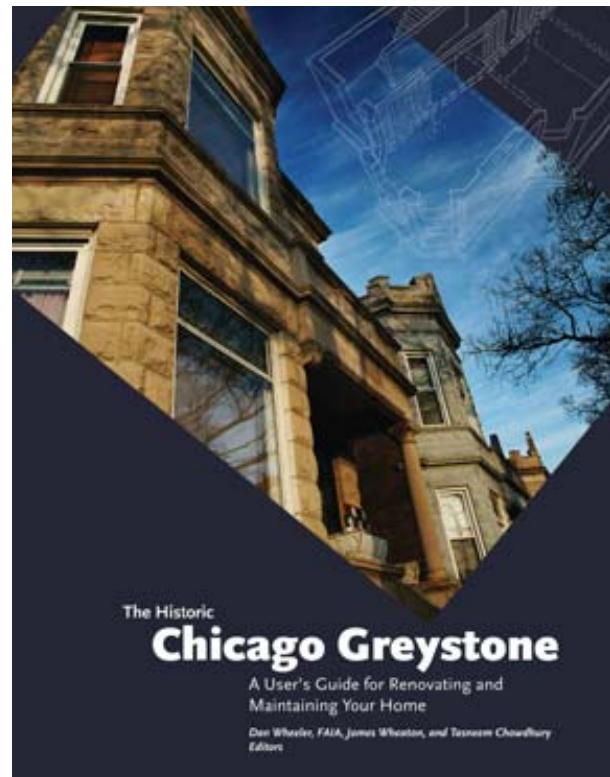


Figure 5. Cover of *The Historic Chicago Greystone: A User's Guide for Renovating and Maintaining your Home*.

sion, the two guidebooks are being distributed by University of Chicago Press to assist in broader dissemination.

Approximately ten faculty and thirty graduate students contributed to the Initiative in seminars, studios, and as research assistants at the Center. Students participated as part of interdisciplinary teams working with community-based clients and governmental agencies on a long-lasting community design program that extended beyond a single project. Students learned a wide array of skills: historical, typological, and materials research, historic preservation and rehabilitation, and affordable housing design. It is noteworthy that students were given considerable responsibility for these projects, most often with faculty providing only 'light-handed' guidance. For instance, students authored articles in the guidebooks and engaged fully in the design decision-making and site supervision of the model home project.

The Greystone Initiative has provided a unique

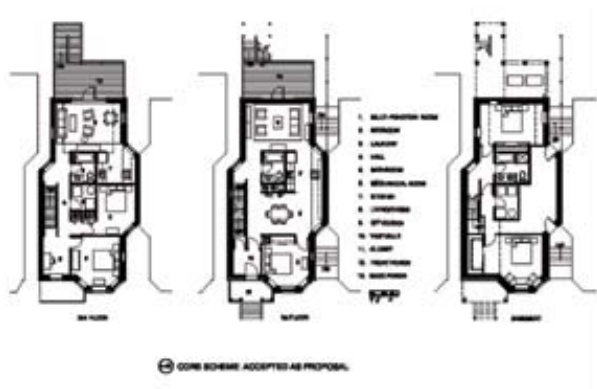


Figure 6. Plans for renovation of model greystone 2-flat.

opportunity for students to make linkages among theory, practice, and social interests. They worked in a context that respected and practiced collaboration. Perhaps most importantly, students learned to value design as a civic praxis.



Figure 7. Diagram of historic greystone belt in Chicago.

ENDNOTES

1. In addition to the author, Roberta M. Feldman, the following UIC faculty contributed to the City Design Center’s contribution to the Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative®: David Brown, Tom Forman, Sharon Haar, Pete Landon and Dan Wheeler from the School of Architecture, Bob Brueggmann from Art History, Brent Ryan from Urban Planning and Public Policy, and Susanne Schnell, visiting faculty member at the City Design Center.
2. Charles Leek, “If North Lawndale’s greystones could talk: what stories they would tell...” in *The Greystone in Historic North Lawndale*, ed. Roberta M. Feldman & Jim Wheaton (Chicago: UIC City Design Center, 2006. Distributed by the University of Chicago Press.), 25.
3. Cited in Royce Yeater, “Historic preservation: it works for community!” in *The Greystone in Historic North Lawndale*, ed. Roberta M. Feldman & Jim Wheaton (Chicago: UIC City Design Center, 2006. Distributed by the University of Chicago Press.), 53-59.
4. Roberta M. Feldman & Jim Wheaton, eds. *The Greystone in Historic North Lawndale* (Chicago: UIC City Design Center, 2006. Distributed by the University of Chicago Press.), 25.
5. Dan Wheeler, Jim Wheaton & Tasneem Chowdhury, eds. *The Care and Maintenance of the Historic Chicago Greystone* (Chicago: UIC City Design Center, forthcoming. Distributed by the University of Chicago Press.)