

Chicago Sun-Times LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Stop the Michael Reese demolition

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Exactly 20 years ago, virtually an entire city block in the heart of Chicago's Loop -- the now-famous "Block 37" between Daley Center Plaza and the former Marshall Field's department store -- was torn down. Only one building was spared: a ComEd electrical substation. Most of the 15 demolished buildings dated from the late 19th or early 20th century. Six were classified as architecturally significant, including the McCarthy Building, a post-Chicago Fire of 1871 structure that had been a "protected" Chicago Landmark.

The goal of this clearance effort, which cost the city \$40 million in 1989 dollars, was to pave the way for a new mixed-use, private development, featuring two office towers and a five-story retail mall. As most longtime observers know, this development never took place. Instead, "Block 37," as it was identified on city maps, has ended up largely vacant for two decades.

In the next month or so, several new buildings finally will open on Block 37. The lessons of this once-bungled effort serve as a reminder to public officials and planners not to tear down useful structures until a well-financed redevelopment project is firmly in place.

Apparently, though, this lesson still hasn't been learned.

On the city's Near South Side, demolition contractors hired by the city, at a cost of \$20 million, are hard at work razing more than two dozen buildings that once composed Michael Reese Hospital. Just two structures will be spared, at least temporarily. Eight of the modernist-style buildings from the 1950s and '60s have been identified as the work of Walter Gropius, the founder of the famed Bauhaus architecture school. They are the only Gropius-related buildings in Illinois -- and they make up 20 percent of his entire U.S. portfolio. Several other buildings, also by reputable designers, appear to be good candidates for adaptive use. Yet the demolition continues. Why?

The 37-acre site was purchased earlier this year by the city, at a cost of \$80 million, in hopes it would be redeveloped as the Chicago 2016 Olympic Village. Those plans obviously did not come to pass. And, unless the economy makes a drastic turnaround, redevelopment of the Reese site in the near future seems quite uncertain.

But instead of considering ways to stabilize and reuse the surviving buildings -- or offer them to potential developers for adaptive use -- the city's Public Building Commission is busy tearing them down.

Will we look back in 20 years and wring our hands about our rush to demolish these significant buildings? Will we wonder whether they could have been rehabilitated for charter schools, residential uses or medical offices? Or will we simply see a large vacant tract of land still empty after 20 years?

There's still time, Mayor Daley. Please stop the wholesale demolition of the Reese Hospital campus.

Jim Peters, president Landmarks Illinois