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Reuse study released for threatened hospital building

April 22, 2011, Chicago, Ill.—Landmarks Illinois, the state's leading voice for historic preservation, has issued a report that shows how the nearly-vacant former Prentice Women's Hospital building can be reused, rather than demolished.

The building's owner, Northwestern University, recently announced plans to raze the clover leaf-shaped structure later this year, when its last occupant is relocated. The 36-year-old concrete-and-glass building, which was designed by influential architect Bertrand Goldberg, is considered to be one of Chicago's most distinctive architectural designs from the 1970s.

"We believe this study demonstrates how viable this landmark-quality building is for several types of new uses," said Jim Peters, president of Landmarks Illinois, a nonprofit advocacy organization. "We also think that retention of the building—rather than demolition—would be a more sustainable approach to redevelopment, while also addressing the concerns of nearby residents about the growing 'canyonization' of the Streeterville neighborhood."

The reuse study was prepared with the assistance of three Chicago architecture firms who have broad experience in new design and adaptive use projects. The main conclusions of the reuse study are:

- The existing open-floor plans make the building highly flexible for several possible new uses, due to its innovative structural engineering, which minimized interior columns.
- Each of the proposed reuses—research labs, offices, and medical-related housing—would cost less than comparable new construction and have been indentified as needs for the university.

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Landmarks Illinois reuse study for Prentice Women's Hospital—page two

- The building's flat-slab structural system, as well as its floor-to-floor heights, would be adequate and conducive to an exposed utilities system for contemporary research lab design.
- The building's imposing dark-glass base could be dramatically improved with a new, translucent glass curtain wall and the removal of a non-original fifth-floor addition.
- A new "green roof" atop the building's base could provide open space for building occupants, while greatly improving the roof's appearance for those in surrounding buildings.
- Retention of the building and its distinctive curved facades would provide visual relief for the Streeterville neighborhood, which is increasingly dominated by dense streetscapes and boxlike high-rises.
- Building reuse would prevent 23,700 tons of debris waste and retention of existing building materials ("embodied energy") would promote environmental sustainability.

Prentice Hospital recently was listed—for the third consecutive year—as one of Landmarks Illinois' "10 Most Endangered Historic Places." The building is one of the city's most significant examples of architect Bertrand Goldberg's noted "organic" designs, which are distinguished by curving facades and oval windows. The building's modern design concepts, which also featured a groundbreaking structural system, brought it national and international recognition following its opening in 1975.

The building was constructed to house the Chicago Maternity Hospital and the Northwestern Institute of Psychiatry. In 2007, the women's hospital was relocated to a new structure, leaving only one tenant in the building's base. Northwestern University is scheduled to take control of the building when the last tenant leaves in September.

"The purpose of our efforts behind this reuse plan is to show how viable the existing building is and how it can be saved and integrated into Northwestern University's Streeterville campus," said Peters.

The reuse plan was partially funded by a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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Landmarks Illinois is the state's leading voice for historic preservation. Since its founding in 1971, the statewide organization has gone on to save countless architectural and historic treasures throughout Illinois. Landmarks Illinois' mission today focuses on saving buildings, facilitating preservation, and educating the public through innovative programs and promotion.

For more information, visit www.Landmarks.org.