

David Bahlman, who fought to save significant Illinois buildings, dies

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Bob Goldsborough



David Bahlman, director of the Landmarks Illinois preservation organization, applauds Aug. 5, 2003, at a meeting about the preservation of the Berwyn National Bank building. (Margo Cohn/for the Chicago Tribune)

David Bahlman led the Landmarks Illinois preservation organization from 1999 until 2008, during a period when the Chicago-based nonprofit advocacy group won battles to save prominent structures including Cook County Hospital and Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House.

Bahlman won plaudits for doubling the group's size and raising its public profile.

"He was indefatigable," said Jim Peters, who succeeded Bahlman as Landmarks' CEO. "He had more energy and more commitment than anyone I'd ever worked with in the field of preservation, so when we worked on a project together, we'd strategize together, and follow

up, and he didn't give up — he was very strategic and not one of those preservationists screaming at the barricades. He knew how to work with folks and find solutions that ended up working.”

Bahlman, 78, died of leukemia on Nov. 13 at his Lexington, North Carolina, home, said his longtime partner, Howard Klosterman. He previously lived in Hyde Park and Lake Forest.

David Arthur Bahlman was born in Mishawaka, Indiana, and grew up in Ohio. He received bachelor's and master's degrees in art history from Ohio State University and then took doctoral courses in architectural history at the University of Pennsylvania before returning to Ohio State, where he taught art history from 1976 until 1979.

In 1981, Bahlman moved to New York City to work at Lincoln Center, then became director of public relations for the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1984, he became the executive director of the Society of Architectural Historians, then based in Philadelphia.

In 1993, Bahlman was named executive director of San Francisco Heritage, a nonprofit charged with preserving and enhancing that city's architectural and cultural identity.

Bahlman was hired as Landmarks Illinois' executive director in 1999, and two years later his title was upgraded to president. One of his first battles was against plans to raze the cavernous, Beaux Arts-style former Cook County Hospital building. County leaders eventually were persuaded to save the building, and after a lengthy delay, the long-vacant building has been transformed into a mixed-use development containing hotels, retail space, medical office space and a food hall.

“He had the ability to change people's minds with a careful argument and a carefully prepared agenda, while being respectful of what the other side was thinking,” said former Landmarks Illinois Chairman Joe Antunovich. “Saving the old Cook County Hospital — prior to the Farnsworth House — was one of his finest achievements, and the end result is just gorgeous. If we'd lost that building, it would have been tragic.”

Bahlman found less success in promoting an alternative plan for Soldier Field drawn by veteran architect Arthur S. Takeuchi that would have lowered a new football field about 55 feet. That plan, which would have had less of a visual impact on the stadium's Doric colonnades, ultimately was rejected by the stadium's owner, the Chicago Park District.

Another fight involved the South Loop's Platt Luggage building, which was designed by architect Howard Van Doren Shaw and almost entirely demolished in 2000 by its owner, the Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority. Bahlman was a strong public advocate for saving the four-story red brick building. Ultimately, one facade of the building was removed and relocated.

“It’s a sad day and a victory for pessimists,” Bahlman told the Tribune in 2000 upon its demolition. “If you can’t protect a Howard Van Doren Shaw building in this town, I don’t know what you can protect.”

Perhaps Bahlman’s greatest preservation victory involved the one-story Farnsworth House, van der Rohe’s masterpiece of 20th century modernism that was built on a sylvan riverfront site 58 miles southwest of Chicago. Facing a budget crisis, state officials declined to step in, and with no landmark protections, the Farnsworth House came up for sale at auction.

Working with the Friends of the Farnsworth House advocacy group and the late Sara Lee Corp. Chairman John Bryan, Bahlman teamed up with the National Trust for Historic Preservation on a major fundraising campaign to raise the funds to buy the house. A last-minute surge of financial support allowed the group to buy the Farnsworth House for \$7.5 million at what the Tribune reported was “a tension-filled auction” in New York City.

“David was devoted to preservation, and he had it all — he could work with donors, he could work with politicians, he could work with just neighborhood community people who wanted to save a historic structure in their neighborhood, and he worked very well with the Driehaus Foundation and Richard Driehaus,” said Lynn Osmond, the former president and CEO of the Chicago Architecture Foundation.

Bahlman also increased the size and budget of the group.

“He brought Landmarks (Illinois) from a small, mid-sized organization to a level where it was on the verge of becoming big and important, and of course the main thing he’ll be known for is the Farnsworth House,” said Shelley Gorson, a former Landmarks Illinois board chair.

Bahlman told the Tribune in 2002 that he felt inspired by the “psychic rush that I get from architecture that has an aura of genius” and by “the feeling that one gets when you can work with people and make stuff happen (to save historic buildings).”

He acknowledged that preservation efforts inherently yield more losses than victories.

“The process of preservation gives me a kick when I’m successful at it, and that’s about 10 percent of the time,” he quipped.

After retiring from Landmarks in 2008, Bahlman moved to Suffield, Connecticut, where he took a job with the state of Connecticut as the state historic preservation officer and then as the state’s director of culture. He retired again in 2012.

Bahlman enjoyed collecting antique furniture and decorative arts, as well as regularly buying and selling luxury automobiles. He also frequently bought and restored historic homes.

In addition to Klosterman, Bahlman is survived by a brother, Steven.

A private memorial service in Chicago is being planned.

Goldsborough is a freelance reporter.

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