

The tale of 'Elevate Chicago' and foreclosure blight in the neighborhoods

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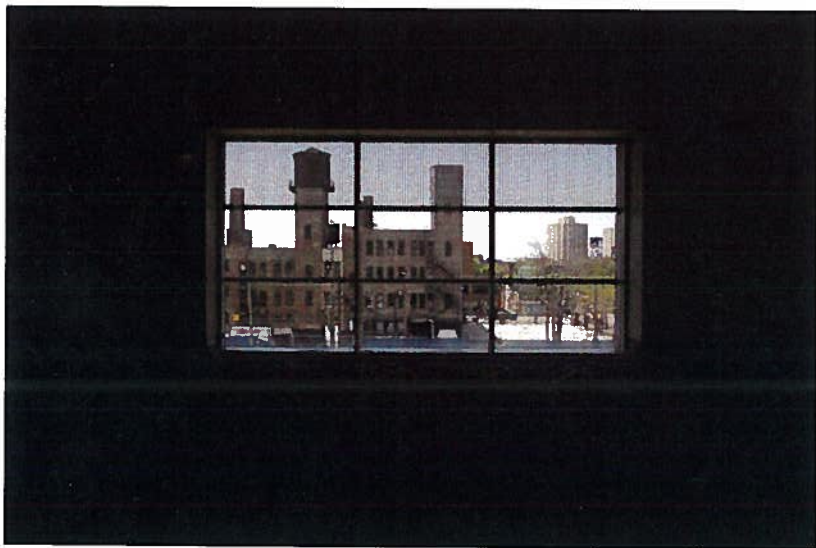


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Looking from inside of McCormick Place West across Indiana Ave to the west side of the street which is slated for a new hotel. M (Nancy Stone / May 16, 2013)

John McCarron

May 19, 2013

Thirty-six thousand one hundred and twenty-three.

That's the number of properties in Chicago listed last week in some stage of mortgage foreclosure.

This is a disaster. This is a crisis. And though you wouldn't know it from the amount of news coverage it gets, foreclosures are a big factor behind that other crisis — youth violence — that does get lots of coverage.

Drive the shattered residential blocks of a West Humboldt Park or an Austin or an Englewood and you begin to get the connection between board-ups and beat downs. Between neighborhoods that look like war zones — lined with vacant bungalows and

two-flats stripped of plumbing and wiring — and the warlike behavior of some of the young men who live there.

All of which comes to mind now that Mayor Rahm Emanuel has announced his \$1.1 billion "Elevate Chicago" plan to reinvigorate Navy Pier and expand McCormick Place with a pair of new hotels and a multipurpose sports arena.

Not that I'm opposed to Elevate Chicago. I'm for it, so long as it's funded by the businesses that will use and benefit from it — not the owners of neighborhood bungalows and two-flats that still are occupied and paying taxes.

If anything, my fellow bleeding hearts accuse me of having never seen a downtown redevelopment I didn't like. They don't understand that Chicago's downtown is the post-industrial engine that pulls the rest of the train. Without it we'd really be up a creek, like an East St. Louis or parts of south suburban Cook County.

Oh, I could quibble with some details.

DePaul University, a main tenant of the proposed arena, should have looked harder for a location within walking distance of its Lincoln Park campus. And there's still no cheap, easy and car-less way to get to Navy Pier — no bus-way connection to the West Loop train stations or water taxi connection to the Chicago River. And how about the Big Casino? If we're master-planning the city's convention and tourism future, shouldn't we identify where that little item will go, assuming the legislature gives the go-ahead?

Then again, Emanuel likely has some high cards up his sleeve. He always does. Without a doubt he has a way to stop the politically powerful Wirtz family from once again blocking public financing of an arena that will compete with its United Center. And he probably has a pretty good idea where the Big Casino will go. It's all part of an intricate plan and not all the moving parts were announced at last week's news conference.

Which gets us back to those 36,123 foreclosed properties out in the hinterlands. They're the ones that RealtyTrac, a Web-based service, listed last week as foreclosed, about-to-be-foreclosed, or just sitting there empty, for months if not years, owned by lenders who apparently don't much care about the physical blight or the social chaos they breed.

Surely that talented group of civic, business, labor and religious leaders who stood with the mayor last week to announce Elevate Chicago could come up with a second plan — a plan to clean up foreclosure blight in the neighborhoods.

It won't be as easy. Federal funding for mending the mess is a pittance compared to the bank bailouts, say, or even just the federal tax expenditure on municipal bonds for downtown projects. And instead of a focused downtown site, like west of McCormick Place, foreclosures are scattered willy-nilly across the city, each tangled in a bird's nest of liens, litigation and assorted legal leg irons.

But hey, this is Chicago. Do we not have the political clout and legislative muscle to light a fire under absentee owners? Can we not order them to fix properties within 90 days, or donate them to a public/private corporation that will, so they can be sold or rented to working families at affordable rates? Those beyond repair could be torn down and the land converted to community gardens or other useful purposes along the lines suggested by the "Green & Healthy" plan newly released by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

So go ahead, Mr. Mayor, and Elevate Chicago. Downtown's engine must be oiled. But with so many cars derailed — 36,123 to be exact — this train isn't really going anywhere until we make repairs all the way to the caboose.

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