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AIA FEATURE

Sleeping Beauties: Chicago's Adaptive Reuse

A wave of community-focused resurrections of former neighborhood anchors seeks to heal community — and architectural — neglect.

By [PATRICK SISSON FOR AIA ARCHITECT](#)



The Pioneer Bank & Trust Building in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood is being redeveloped as a community hub and cultural center.

The Laramie State Bank Building, in Chicago's Austin neighborhood, strikes an alluring profile on the corner of Chicago and Laramie avenues. A hulking, concrete box built in 1928 with ornate exterior terra cotta, it's one of the city's rare examples of Egyptian Revival design. Architect Katherine Darnstadt, AIA—whose firm [Latent Design](#) is working on a \$37.5 million, city-supported



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adaptive reuse project seeking to re-envision the structure—says the enormity of the landmarked space, with the double-height banking hall and interior columns, makes it one of a kind.

“It communicated power, finance, and trust, announcing that, ‘Yes, we are an important place,’” Darnstadt says. “What we found interesting about the project was the idea of bringing it back to that sense as much as possible.”

That’s no easy task after decades of disinvestment in both the building and the surrounding neighborhood. After short stints as a banquet hall and other temporary reuses, the building was foreclosed on in 2012, and the Austin neighborhood has seen its population plunge nearly 20% in the past two decades following economic and social disinvestment. Darnstadt describes entering the building as exploring a cave, with so much water damage from poor maintenance that she expected a stalactite to fall from the deteriorating plaster ceiling. The excitement she feels for this project, part of a larger vision to create a “Soul City Corridor” featuring a blues museum and affordable housing, is palpable, with permitting expected to be complete by the end of the year.

“Honestly, it’s the dollars; it’s showing the city [is] investing in these areas,” Darnstadt says. “[It’s] a stark contrast to the previous administration, which focused on the central business district. Every component of it ties into a neighborhood strategy, instead of a single building reuse strategy.”

When Maurice Cox, commissioner of the city’s Department of Planning and Development, was discussing the city’s new [Invest South/West Initiative](#), he described these buildings as “sleeping beauties”: buildings on formerly active commercial corridors that loomed large in people’s minds and just needed someone to reactivate them. The initiative is a \$1.4 billion 10-neighborhood vision to find community-oriented catalyzing developments in oft-overlooked neighborhood corridors, including the Laramie State Bank Building.

The projects that Darnstadt and others have embarked on or will embark on—revitalizing the modern skeletons of once-vital community and economic infrastructure—highlight the potential of adaptive reuse not just to ring a classic building back to life but to heal a void in one of the city’s disinvested neighborhoods. Often, these projects can be completed with a speed and more economical cost that make them a key part of larger development strategies. It’s a running theme both across the nation and especially in Chicago: The resurrection of the South Side Pullman neighborhood, a worker’s village erected by railroad magnate George Mortimer Pullman, has become a national monument and magnet for millions in economic development. The continuing art and preservation work of local artist and professor R. Theaster Gates, whose [Rebuild Foundation](#) has created cultural and community hubs in the city’s Grand Crossing neighborhood, dovetails with the recent news that one of the city’s postmodern gems, the spaceship-like James R. Thompson

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Center, will be spared the wrecking ball and transformed via a \$280 million restoration into a new vital downtown destination with its soaring atrium intact.

Part of the reason Chicago has so many of these projects is the age of the building stock, especially compared with cities farther west, says architect Matt Nardella, AIA, whose firm, [Moss Design](#), recently redeveloped a bank in the city's Northwest Side. Older Chicago buildings also offer the unique potential of transit-oriented development ordinances and the city's fairly suburban zoning ordinance. In 2020, the city was leading the nation in the number of adaptive reuse housing projects that were underway.

"Many of the buildings we do adaptive reuse projects with couldn't be built as they are today," Nardella says. By utilizing adaptive reuse's potential for the Northwest Side bank redevelopment plan, which turned the triangular site into apartments and ground-level commercial space with a brewery and coffee shop, Moss Design was able to do a Flatiron-style building without having to provide the standard 20 parking spaces. "The last thing we want to see is a good building be demolished," he says.

The Invest South/West projects underscore just how powerful the past can be, and how potent the narrative of rebirth can become. Juan Moreno, AIA, whose firm, JGMA, will be part of an Invest South/West project in the Humboldt Park neighborhood—the \$53.9 million overhaul of the Pioneer Bank & Trust building into a community hub and cultural center—says these vacant structures stand as vivid reminders of both financial abandonment and neglect.

"What I've found with adaptive reuse, especially for communities of color, is that these buildings have generations of memories," he says. "When they sit empty, it's like an open wound. Oftentimes, especially in these working-class neighborhoods, I run into families that have worked on the construction of the buildings. When we bring them back to life, there's an inherent joy. History is a great launching pad for contemporary work."

Larry Kearns, FAIA, of Chicago's [Wheeler Kearns Architects](#), helped redesign the Community Bank of Lawndale, a 1982 structure that was the first Black-owned bank in the neighborhood. The bank is now a headquarters for the North Lawndale Employment Network, which operates a number of social enterprises and job training programs. He sees rescuing these stranded assets as vital to larger missions of community empowerment. Once the headquarters of Sears, which left in 1972 for the city's Loop business district, the neighborhood has suffered through disinvestment and has been "crippled" by vacant lots, says Kearns. The reopening of the building last September helped provide a new gathering space and employment center.



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Along with the challenges to fundraising, and the right vision, for such significant overhauls, there are also the design difficulties of converting grand structures built in an era with very different ideas of space. Moreno's vision for the Pioneer Bank, including rows of vibrant vertical louvers, a signature element of JGMA's work, preserves the interior core of the bank and reimagns the soaring banking hall as a vibrant marketplace to showcase the entrepreneurship and energy of local Latinx entrepreneurs.

Dealing with these big volumes causes inherently challenging layouts, says Darnstadt. The reuse plan involves turning the banking hall footprint of the Laramie Bank building into a multiuse space with a cafe and museum and turning the upper-floor banker's hall into a shared office and coworking space. Providing these spaces will make a place for the kinds of supportive services small businesses need to thrive and grow.

"Why should you bank outside of your neighborhood?" she says. "It's about bringing financial institutions back to the corridors, so the dollars invested there stay in the corridors."

Moreno's work on the Pioneer Bank, which involves not only retrofitting the interior of the building but also incorporating a vacant lot alongside it, will contain an array of typologies and community assets, including affordable housing, a new public library, and even a future office for JGMA. There's the sense not just that these parts will play off each other and magnify their impact but also that they will help showcase the rich diversity of the neighborhood, once a Scandinavian enclave that became a Puerto Rican stronghold and now contains a vibrant, diverse Latinx populace.

"It's all meant to feel part of one," says Moreno, whose firm's work includes other reuse projects, including the transformation of a big box store into a prep school. "It's so refreshing with this initiative that design excellence needs to play a role. For the city to recognize design's power in a process for uplifting and healing, that's cool. It's not just about bringing any developer in to do marginal work. It has to be catalytic."

Other ongoing or in-process adaptive reuse plans focus on providing more job resources to the community. On the city's Southwest Side, Blue Tin Productions, an immigrant- and women-led clothing collective, is crowdfunding \$2 million to build a new community center and manufacturing site, to be called 63rd House. By reusing an 11,250-square-foot post office and turning it into a center for sustainable manufacturing and an array of neighborhood services, the collective seeks to create a building and business model that can be replicated across the globe.

Architects from renowned Chicago-based firm [Studio Gang](#) have focused on two design pillars in their work on Blue Tin Productions: the concept of micro-urbanism—the idea that small interventions having a multiplier effect across

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the surrounding neighborhood—and rethinking what a work site looks like, favoring a light-filled, airy interior that stands in stark contrast to the dark, dank factory and warehouse space.

Darnstadt sees her work on the Laramie project as an integral part of her practice, now and in the future. Boombox, her pop-up retail project, sited a mobile storefront along this corridor, and she sees herself working in the neighborhood for decades to come. It's a reflection of the power of re-energizing landmarks and how a thoughtful redesign can create a reverse domino effect, restoring activity along the corridor instead of slowly removing the vibrancy from the block.

"It feels like a nice arc of the story, to hear the work community groups have focused on for decades is coming to fruition," she said. "We'll see new buildings, new trees, and new life, everything this neighborhood should have had if it was given the same priority as others."

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