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Disney birthplace draws interest, no buyers

Northwest Side two-flat has been up for sale for year

By Ron Grossman
Tribune reporter

Not only do prophets lack honor in their native land, but some also don't do much for real estate values — at least to judge by Walt Disney's childhood home on Chicago's Northwest Side.

On the market for more than a year, it offers prospective buyers a two-flat with new windows, hardwood floors and built-in nostalgia for fans of Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse. It was built by Disney's father, a carpenter who worked on the 1893 Columbian Exposition, the world's fair that reportedly inspired Disney's theme-park ventures.

Some see the failure to sell the home, at 2156 N. Tripp Ave., as a case of good news and bad news, among them Fred Seidel.

"The city of Chicago should buy it and charge visitors for admission," said Seidel, a construction worker who grew up nearby. "I'm interested in the arts."

The upside, Seidel said, is that lacking a private buyer means it won't be knocked down for new construction. The Disney home lacks a historical landmark designation, a campaign by preservationists having stalled years ago.

Walt Disney was born Dec. 5, 1901, on the second floor of the house in the Hermosa neighborhood, then a newly developed section of Chicago and now a largely Hispanic community. He attended McKinley High School, now a primary grades facility, and took classes at the now-defunct Chicago Academy of Fine Arts.

With his brother Roy, Walt Disney went to Hollywood and, in 1923, started making the animated cartoons audiences quickly embraced as part of the moviegoing experience.

Even without a bronze plaque, the Tripp Avenue house attracts Disney buffs, reports its owner Radjo Popovic.

"Some came from Madrid to see it," Popovic said. "A camera crew from Germany took pictures."

Popovic, himself a real estate dealer, bought the building from a previous owner, Jane Southoff, who had lived there for many years and resolutely opposed landmark designation.

"She was holding the windows together with duct tape," he said. "She was an older woman living on a fixed income."

In 1991, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks proposed the Disney home for landmark designation, inaugurating the drawn-out process often involved. When a City Council committee took up the issue six years later, Southoff protested that landmark status could make her property hard to sell. Potential buyers would be scared off by the prospect of having to get the city's approval for changes to the facade.

In fact, the frame structure where Disney was born had been remodeled, but the president of the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects argued that it was nonetheless worthy because Disney was a worthy man, quoting President Dwight Eisenhower: "We shall not see his like again."

Several aldermen said a world without another Disney would be just fine with them. They alleged he had a reputation for anti-Semitism and racism.

"Walt Disney was a bigot, and I'm not going to sit here on a panel and create a historical landmark for a bigot," said Ald. Bernard Stone, 50th, just before the Committee on Historical Landmarks voted down the proposal.



It's a tough season for finding support for projects at the intersection of architecture and history: the Ernest Hemingway Foundation, unable to finance the

conversion of the author's boyhood home into a cultural center, recently sold the Oak Park property to private owners for \$525,000. Disney's home is on the market for a reduced

asking price of \$179,000. Popovic had several nibbles, but would-be owners couldn't get financing. Popovic said he's not opposed to landmark designation, should the issue be revis-



Walt Disney's birthplace, at 2156 N. Tripp Ave. on Chicago's Northwest Side, is up for sale. The two-flat, once offered on eBay for \$280,000, is now listed at \$179,000.

ited, a long-shot possibility under Chicago's landmark ordinance. An experienced landlord, he is not intimidated by landmark regulations.

"I've property in Wicker Park," Popovic said, referring to a landmark Northwest Side neighborhood. "I know about plan-

ning boards and community groups." Meanwhile, he's content to be the default owner of the birthplace of the great genius of the animated cartoon.

"It's no problem," he said. "I got good tenants."

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Gang violence erupts in Lincoln Park

One man shot, two victims run down by vehicle in 4 a.m. attack near zoo

By Erin Meyer
Tribune reporter

Not far from Lincoln Park's North Pond, where neighbors paused to watch a brood of duckslings Saturday afternoon, one man was shot and two other people were run down by a vehicle hours earlier in a suspected gang-related attack.

"This is Lincoln Park," said Ann Nordell, 45, who stopped on her way home Saturday to watch the ducks waddle in the shallow water near Lincoln Park Zoo. She was astonished to learn that gang violence had spilled over into her lakefront neighborhood. "I don't believe it."

Police said the three victims — two men and one woman — had been hanging out at about 4

a.m. on a bike path near Cannon Drive and Fullerton Parkway, north of the zoo, when multiple vehicles approached. One veered over a curb striking a 25-year-old man before turning around and running down the woman, 21.

Police said someone began shooting from inside one of the vehicles as they drove away, wounding the second man, 26. All three victims were taken to area hospitals, and police had portions of the park cordoned off with yellow tape for hours.

But by Saturday afternoon there was no sign that the sprawling lakefront park had been the scene of such violence. Beachgoers dragging coolers and pushing strollers plodded along Fullerton

toward the sand while a stream of families crossed the busy road traveling to and from the zoo.

Both Thomas Welch, 38, held tight to the hands of her sons, ages 4 and 6, as they peered into water behind Notebaert Nature Museum searching for fish. The family had traveled from the Milwaukee area to visit relatives in Lincoln Park and see area attractions.

"It's so beautiful here; you have the park and the lake. We went to the zoo this morning," Thomas Welch said.

"Of course, it feels safe right now. But this is still a big city with big-city problems."

The Lincoln Park shooting occurred a little more than 24 hours after another outbreak of violence in a neighborhood normally thought immune to gang-related crime.

Early Friday morning, a 31-year-old man with gang

ties was shot downtown near Michigan Avenue and Ontario Street.

Police said the victim stepped out of his vehicle and used a metal pipe to smash the window of an SUV, then a person inside it leaned out of the window and opened fire. The man, who police described as the aggressor, suffered a gunshot wound to the abdomen and was taken to the hospital in critical condition.

Police said Saturday night no arrests had been made in connection with either incident.

As for Nordell, who likes to walk her Yorkie in the park at night, Saturday's shooting may have a lasting impression.

"I might rethink doing that," she said. "Why dance with the devil?"

Tribune reporter Peter Nicolson contributed.

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Big bang leery

Dry weather has towns careful about holiday fireworks

By Ashley Rueff and Jennifer Delgado
Tribune reporters

Most suburbs are moving forward with plans for their Fourth of July fireworks displays despite hot, dry weather that could turn a patch of tall grass into combustible tinder.

To keep their Independence Day traditions from ending with too big of a bang, however, some towns are taking extra precautions.

In southwest suburban Tinley Park, the Park District and village, which split the expense of a community fireworks display, are also splitting a \$3,700 rental fee for irrigation equipment, said John Curran, parks and recreation director. They'll use the equipment and a nearby lake to saturate the area around the fireworks launch and landing site.

"We of course want to keep that area wet so it doesn't start any fires," said Tinley Park Fire Chief Ken Dunn.

Dunn said the biggest concern is residents lighting fireworks at their homes. This year's droughtlike conditions only increase the potential for something to go wrong, he said.

The Orland Fire Protection District is stationing extra personnel and equipment for both the Orland Hills display on June 30 and Orland Park's fireworks show on July 4.

"We're certainly ripe for some fairly large brush fires and bog fires," Fire Chief Ken Brucki said. "It does put us on notice."

Less than half an inch of rain has been recorded at O'Hare International Airport since the beginning of June, said Kevin Birk, meteorologist with the National Weather Service. Normally, he said, rainfall totals would be closer to 2.5 inches by now.

The forecast calls for some showers over the weekend and a cool-down this week, but Birk said temperatures are predicted to heat up again by the following weekend and into the Fourth of July holiday.

"Overall, we're going to see a dry pattern," he said. "Any showers we do see aren't going to be enough to bring us back up to where we should be for this time of year."

In northwest suburban Park Ridge, a popular 40-minute fireworks display at Maine East High School typically draws at least 15,000 people from the area, but police and fire officials will assess dry weather and wind to see if the show can go on.

"The heat and dry conditions combined make it a lot more likely that a fire could spread," said Deputy Fire Chief Jeff Sorenson.

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