

Getting up to speed
Historic Motor Row accelerates residential boom

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Henry Ford got there first. A fleet of other carmakers soon followed in his tracks: Buick, Hudson, Cadillac, Locomobile, Hudson, Marmon and Pierce-Arrow, to name a few.

All built elegant showrooms along a stretch of Michigan Avenue and nearby arteries that became known as Motor Row.

The innovative Ford established his presence on the row in 1905, three years before the automaker's iconic black Model T rolled off the assembly line.

Today, Chicago's Motor Row remains unique. And unlike other cities, where such districts were leveled when dealers exited for the suburbs, Chicago's row is still mostly intact.

It is seeing a resurgence of new residential and commercial development that promises to revitalize the area while maintaining its historic structures and ambience.

Nowadays, the appearance of suburban auto malls too often is marked by architectural sameness. In the early 1900s, however, the buildings in Motor Row were designed by a roster of well-known architects including Holabird & Roche, Alfred Alschuler, Christian Eckstorm, Philip Maher and Albert Kahn.

"Some of the best pre-World War I architects in Chicago designed buildings down there," said David Bahlman, president of the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois.

Carmakers felt the district was worthy of fine architecture, according to Bahlman, "because the companies wanted elegant venues to display and sell their cars. These [the motor rows in Chicago and other cities] were the first monumental signs of the significance of the auto industry."

Although the district fell into decline after World War II, Bahlman and others have hopes for a bright future.

"It's going to be an incredibly vibrant area. It's ready to pop," Bahlman said.

The area "is different even from what it was just two years ago. It just keeps growing and growing. It's like the Energizer Bunny," said Tony Torres, president of the Lyonhart Group, which has turned a former Locomobile showroom into 33 loft condominiums at 18th Street and Michigan Avenue.

The red brick, three-story building has eight units for sale including a one-bedroom for \$224,700 and a two-bedroom, two-bath unit for \$333,7000.

"Our buyers like the unique layouts of the units. And we were able to retain the character of the building," Torres said.

Proximity to the lake, to downtown and the smaller scale of Motor Row were factors that drew Candice Krill, a nurse in her 50s, to depart a condo in a downtown skyscraper.

She purchased a duplex, one-bedroom loft in the Locomobile building a year ago. She likes the less hectic mood of the building and neighborhood.

"I wanted to get away from the congestion," she said. "Here, I have access to all the things I had downtown--the expressways and the lakeshore. But it's more manageable."

Krill said she likes the neighborhood's historic aura and often takes walks on Prairie Avenue to see the mansions there, part of a city historic district. Her unit also is within a few minutes walk of Chinatown.

At one time, as many as 116 different makes of automobiles were being sold on Chicago's Motor Row. The buildings housed a range of businesses selling auto-related products and services.

Even today, it is easy to spot some of the architectural details that were crucial to selling shiny new cars, such as large windows, emblems of car brands and functional tile floors.

They are seen in numerous locations in the district, which extends roughly from the 1400 through the 2500 block of South Michigan and from the 2200 to 3500 blocks on Indiana Avenue. Portions also are on Wabash Avenue and nearby streets.

The area's revival is due, in part, to the expansion of McCormick Place.

"I think the convention center is going to be the magnet that will draw people down there," Bahlman said. "If conventioners have an hour to spend, they can walk to a street that looks like Old Chicago."

To complement the look of many of the low-level brick buildings, the city is planning to add streetscaping in the area from Roosevelt Avenue south.

The addition of planters, hanging baskets and decorative street lighting will make it more appealing to tourists and residents alike, said Bonnie Sanchez-Carlson, executive director of the Near South Planning Board.

"We want to bring it back to look like olden days, to reflect the time when it was a Motor Row," she said.

At 1620 S. Michigan Avenue, another new development is a 249-unit, 12-story building planned by CMK Development.

Construction has just begun, but only 26 units remain for sale, said Scott Hoskins, managing broker for CMK Realty which is doing sales and marketing for the building.

Units start at \$239,900 for a one-bedroom unit with den, and at \$299,900 for two bedrooms with two bathrooms.

Hoskins said this is the fourth project the company has done in the South Loop.

Sales are under way nearby at Hilliard Homes, a former public housing complex at 2030 S. Street. It was converted by Holsten Real Estate Development Corp. to mixed-income apartments.

The four-building complex was developed in the mid-1960s by the Chicago Housing Authority. Thanks to its design by famed architect Bertrand Goldberg, it was named to the National Register of Historic Places.

Developers like Holsten and Hoskins trumpet not only the area's historic architecture, but its wealth of amenities.

"It has proximity to the lake, to downtown, to public transportation and expressways, and to parks. And it's still an affordable neighborhood," Hoskins said.

Meanwhile, Dubin Residential is preparing to build 62 townhouses and 60 condominiums in a vacant manufacturing building on Wabash Avenue between 23rd and 24th Streets. The three- and four-story townhomes will be priced from the high \$300,000s to the mid \$400,000s. The condos will range from the low to the high \$200,000s. Sales start this summer.

Another relic of the early auto industry, the Buick Building on South Michigan Avenue, will be preserved as part of a new 25-story residential development by Sedgwick Property Development Corp.

It closed recently on property at 1458-68 S. Michigan Ave., where the new building will consist of 215 units. The Buick Building is adjacent to the planned high-rise.

Sanchez-Carlson said the city is considering various options for providing additional parking including surface lots and parking garages.

"This is going to be the city's next fabulous district," she said.