

Designer, groups hope to preserve Winnetka's Fell building

Developer, though, plans to tear it down

By Deborah Horan | Chicago Tribune reporter
10:00 PM CDT, August 26, 2008

Walter Sobel hopes his spacious Winnetka building survives the wrecking ball.

In the 1960s, the award-winning architect designed the single-story store on Lincoln Avenue to house the Fell Co. clothing store using reinforced concrete that could withstand the weight of additional floors. He figured future generations might want to expand skyward—and he was right.

A local developer who bought the Fell store last year has drawn up a blueprint for a four-story building of shops and condominiums. But the plan doesn't include preserving Sobel's original store. Instead, it calls for two levels of underground parking that would likely require demolition of the building, village officials said.

That prospect has galvanized Sobel, preservationists including Landmarks Illinois, and the Spertus Museum into action. They want to see the 17,000-square-foot building remain among the small shops that line the commercial center. The Plan Commission is scheduled to discuss the matter Wednesday.

"I hope to have a convincing alternative, which is not to tear it down and to take advantage of the fact that it was designed for additional stories," Sobel said.

New Trier Partners, the developer, did not immediately return phone calls. But Mike Klein, one of the founders, didn't mention preserving any part of Sobel's building during previous meetings with village committees, according to meeting minutes.

Instead he focused on the height and aesthetics of what he said would ultimately be a 40,000-square-foot building, and told concerned residents the design would respect the town's character.

The few Winnetka residents who spoke at the meetings focused on the planned building's height, its distance from the street, even the planned

garbage pickup—but none mentioned preservation, according to the minutes.

Brian Norkus, assistant director of community development, said Winnetka's preservation ordinance is "self-selecting," which means only the owner of a building is eligible to nominate it for preservation as a historic landmark. It is unlikely New Trier Partners will nominate the building for preservation, and it is unclear whether Sobel's 1968 design would even qualify if it were nominated, Norkus said.

Lisa DiChiera, advocacy director at Landmarks Illinois, which seeks to preserve architecture in the state, said her organization plans to lobby the Village Council to keep the original building, particularly because the structure was designed to handle more floors.

"It really is quite a pleasing building and a type that is fast disappearing, especially from suburban main streets," DiChiera said.

Landmarks Illinois sent a letter to [Winnetka](#) in support of preserving the building, she said. Not only is the design unusual, but the materials Sobel used would be costly to replicate today, she said.

"Just from a green perspective, it really would be good to use the existing building," DiChiera said.

Sobel's design won awards in 1970 from the Institute of Store Planners and the National Association of Store Fixture Manufacturers. Sobel, who began his architecture career in the 1920s, made a name for himself designing other Fell stores, as well as office buildings and courthouses across America, and in [Puerto Rico](#) and the American Virgin Islands. He also built several Jewish temples, including the Beth Emeth Free Synagogue in [Evanston](#).

Sobel said he contacted the developers and village officials to try to persuade them to preserve his building, but the conversations had been "inconclusive."

He plans to plead his case at the Plan Commission meeting at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday in Village Hall, 510 Green Bay Rd.

"Tearing down the building will be difficult and costly," he said. "I want to communicate that in a friendly way."

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