

A Common Community Goal Sparks Rehabilitation

The Elks Building in Chicago Heights



The interior of the old Elks Building in downtown Chicago Heights has been adapted for use as the Union Street Gallery & Studio. (Photo courtesy Pete Petrowski)

It's hard to imagine now, but Chicago Heights was once an industrial boomtown with a vibrant and thriving downtown area. It was the commercial center and market place for much of southern Cook and eastern Will counties. Today, amid empty lots and boarded up storefronts stands a vibrant art gallery that has breathed new life into the former home of the local Elks Club and into downtown.

In 1926 local Elks Club members (Lodge 1066) constructed a meeting house at 1527 Otto Boulevard, located two blocks east of the Dixie

Highway (Illinois Route 1) and one block south of the Lincoln Highway (U.S. 30). The Elks—officially known as the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks—chose a lot on the periphery of the bustling downtown, where space was at a premium. The *Chicago Heights Star* declared the structure “the finest and most complete club home in the city. The building has every modern convenience to make it an attractive place for members and their friends. There are two beautiful reception rooms for men and women, a lodge room and a

kitchen on the first floor. On the second floor there is a large and beautifully arranged parlor equipped with attractive furniture, including a piano and a victrola. There are card games, billiard rooms, another kitchen for smaller parties, and a hand-ball court with shower baths in connection.”

Lodge 1066 functioned as a key social center for the area for almost twenty years. Closed in 1942, the Lodge reorganized and reopened in 1955 at another location. In 1945 local merchant Charles Pressendo acquired the building and opened



The exterior of the Elks Building has been restored, and all of the ornamental terra cotta has been repaired and cleaned.

a furniture store. Pressendo remodeled the first floor exterior to include two “modern” storeroom show windows to advertise his product. Pressendo’s business thrived for many years, but as the fortunes of the downtown waned in the late 1960s and early 1970s, so did Pressendo’s. After the furniture store closed in 1978, the building sat vacant and shuttered for twenty-seven years.

By the late 1980s those buildings that still existed in downtown Chicago Heights stood largely empty, and long gone were the Chicago & Eastern Illinois (C&EI) train depot, the Carnegie Library, the Post Office, the Victoria Hotel (designed by Louis Sullivan), and most of the store and business buildings.

Just east of downtown, in the old industrial district at 1655 Union Avenue, stood the vacant 1880s vintage “Illinois Shade Cloth Building.” In 1988 the Chicago Southland

Regional Economic Development Coordinating Council, assisted by a grant from The Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, purchased and renovated it to serve as the Chicago Southland Enterprise Center, with the hope that the space would serve as a small business incubator. Seven years later, the newly formed Union Street Gallery (USG) established an arts studio and gallery in a portion of the old Shade Cloth Building. The Union Street Gallery & Studio complex was unique to the Midwest as a not-for-profit arts incubator open to all artists—emerging, mid-career, or established. For ten years, studio artists staged exhibitions of their work, hosted national juried shows, and educated local schoolchildren on the importance of the arts in the community. By 2004, when the gallery had incorporated as a not-for-profit, the studio/gallery was thriving. But a year later the Chicago Southland Enterprise Center was forced into foreclosure and everyone, including the gallery, had to vacate the building. Artists, staff, and volunteers pondered what

would become of their dream.

As they prepared to move, gallery members were approached by a Chicago Heights alderman and a local developer. Aware of the gallery’s plight, the two men proposed to renovate the former Elks Lodge as an art gallery and artist studios. The City of Chicago Heights, which had purchased the vacant building in the late 1990s, was willing to convey title to the developer, who promised to rehabilitate the building as long as a tenant was in place to ensure that his investment would be returned through rental income. City officials hoped that the renovated structure would provide an anchor for future redevelopment efforts in the downtown area. The proposal provided something for every party involved, and in August 2005 the USG formally agreed to relocate to the Elks Building upon the completion of renovation work. Meanwhile, the gallery moved to temporary space at a local shopping mall.

The Elks Building had deteriorated so badly that renovation work required a complete gutting of the interior. The development company



A furniture store opened in 1945 in the Elks Building, and proprietor Charles Pressendo modified the front façade to include display windows. Today the windows showcase the work of local artists.

consulted extensively with gallery artists for guidance on what their unique needs were. Local historic preservationists were involved to ensure that the historic exterior appearance would be protected. The exterior of the building had been little altered over time; the only significant change had been the addition of storeroom show windows for the furniture store. The renovation preserved the original façade: brickwork decorated with medallions, wide bands of locally produced terracotta beneath five second-story, floor-to-ceiling arched windows, and terracotta trim surrounding the entrance. High on the building, above the center window is a polychromatic terracotta medallion depicting an elk head along with a clock. Inscribed prominently above the entranceway is Elks B.P.O.E. 1066. The storefront windows, although installed in the 1940s, were retained and used to display gallery items. After a nearly half-million-dollar renovation, the building stood ready for occupancy.

The doors to the “new” Union Street Gallery opened on September 20, 2006, to a combination grand opening gala celebration and the Fall National Juried Art Show. Visitors saw a stunning new space. The renovation resulted in a two-story



The main floor and mezzanine levels of the gallery are used to exhibit artwork, while artist studios fill the third floor. (Photo courtesy Pete Petrouski)

open gallery space with exposed original steel I-beams above the mezzanine level and the main gallery. The mezzanine provided additional open gallery space, while artists’ studios filled the third floor.

After four years in its new building, the USG continues to carry out its mission to “foster creative expression and appreciation for the arts through diverse exhibits in a vibrant gallery space; through accessibility to open studios and a working artist collective; and through engaging classes, workshops and outreach activities which provide a positive and sustainable cultural presence in the community.” As with so many not-for-profit groups, it has been difficult to financially support this

mission in these tough economic times. Most of the USG’s support comes from individuals; corporate and foundation support is difficult to secure. Still, artists and personnel at the gallery soldier on, confident that the arts at the Old Elks Building will spark a renaissance of arts and culture, and lead to a revitalized downtown.

Pete Petrouski

Pete Petrouski is a lifelong resident of Chicago Heights, and he grew up one block east of the gallery. Retired from the Internal Revenue Service, Petrouski devotes time to the Union Street Gallery, where he is currently serving as president of the board. An ardent local preservationist, Petrouski is a member of the Chicago Heights Historic Preservation Advisory Committee.

Call for Papers

Proposals for individual papers or panels on any aspect of Illinois’ history, culture, politics, geography, literature, and archaeology are requested for the thirteenth annual Conference on Illinois History. The Conference welcomes submissions from professional and avocational historians, graduate students, and those engaged in the study of Illinois

history at libraries, historic sites, museums, and historical societies.

Proposals should include a summary of the topic and a one-page resume of the participant. The summary should specify the major primary and secondary sources used in the research. Proposals should be for

formal, footnoted papers. The deadline to submit proposals is March 10, 2011. Send proposals to: Thomas F. Schwartz, State Historian, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency 112 North Sixth Street, Springfield, IL 62701.

For additional information, phone 217-782-2118, e-mail the state historian at tom.schwartz@illinois.gov, or log onto www.IllinoisHistory.gov/conference.htm.