

Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church

1925 W. Thome Avenue, Chicago



Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Dan Paterno / PaternoGroup.com

OVERVIEW

The picturesque Tudor Revival style Chicago Town & Tennis Club building was designed in 1924 by renowned Chicago architect George Washington Maher and his firm, George W. Maher & Son. George Maher was a seminal figure in both the Prairie style and the Arts & Crafts style movements in Chicago and across America. His prolific and noteworthy architectural firm included Philip Brooks Maher, his son. Philip Maher was also a leading architect in his own right and had a distinguished career. Both father and son were responsible for the design of architecturally

Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church

Address: 1925 W. Thome Avenue

Architect: George W. Maher & Son, Phillip B. Maher

Date: 1924-1925

Style: Tudor Revival

Neighborhood: West Ridge



Chicago Town & Tennis Club second floor dining room, later the main sanctuary of Unity Church © Serhii Chrukky

significant buildings throughout the Chicago region and Midwest including many buildings that have received prestigious Chicago Landmark designation. It is believed that both architects contributed meaningfully to the design of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club building.

The Chicago Town & Tennis Club building is located at 1925 W. Thome Avenue in Chicago's West Ridge neighborhood. It is a beautiful, half-timbered structure with high gables, slate roof, and grand ballrooms. The building's intrinsic qualities and its remarkable flexibility of design have allowed it to be repurposed over time. Originally built as a formal tennis clubhouse building, it was repurposed as a fraternal and social club for the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks also known as the Elks Club. The building later served as a religious use as Unity Church of Chicago. Flexibility of design is often a hallmark of buildings designed by great architects with good design principals, which can be re-outfitted to accommodate a change in use or desired programs.

In 2018, the Chicago Town & Tennis Club Building and its grounds and gardens were purchased by the neighboring Misericordia for \$7.5 million. Misericordia is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting individuals with developmental disabilities and is affiliated with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago. However, instead of repurposing the building yet again, Misericordia plans to clear the site for new construction. The proposed development plan covers the entire site and requires the full demolition of the historic building, the adjoining structures, and the mature landscapes and gardens.

The Tudor Revival building is orange-rated per the Chicago Historic Resources Survey. It is located upon a serene 3.1-acre property and includes the clubhouse, several ancillary structures, and elaborate and extensive gardens with gazebos and fountains. These elements would seem to be a beautiful and natural campus extension for Misericordia in its current configuration. Several large parking lots are present which could potentially accommodate the construction of new group homes and accommodate the protection and integration of the landscapes and historic structures into Misericordia's 31-acre campus.



Main Entrance on North Elevation to the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Serhii Chrucky

Misericordia plans to construct a series of low-density, free-standing housing units to accommodate individuals with developmental disabilities. This low-density design approach requires significant acreage to accomplish the desired number of new units, and nearly the entire site is required to accommodate the number of buildings. At one point but no longer, the plans contemplated that the City of Chicago would vacate the adjacent Thome Avenue to increase the buildable site and to integrate the new site with Misericordia's main campus.

Preservation Chicago recognizes the need for Misericordia's expansion and supports its efforts to supply additional housing units for the developmentally disabled. We also believe that there are multiple win-win approaches that would simultaneously accomplish both the construction of the new housing units and the preservation of the historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club building.

While the proposed alternate options are generally practical, achievable, and financially viable, they all require collaboration, an openness to creative alternatives, and a willingness to engage in a genuine dialogue between the stakeholders which include Misericordia, the West Ridge Community, 40th Ward Alderman Andre Vasquez, the Chicago Park District, and the Chicago Department of Planning and Development's Historic Preservation Division. The desired additional housing units for individuals with developmental disabilities will be built, but the extent to which the final development plan simultaneously embraces the wider desires and wishes of the West Ridge community remains to be determined. Through creativity and collaboration, we can achieve a preservation-sensitive solution that would accomplish both priorities and save this beautiful building.



Chimney detail on the north elevation of Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Eric Allix Rogers

HISTORY

The Chicago Town & Tennis Club was designed in 1924 by the seminal Chicago architect George W. Maher and by Phillip Maher, his son and also a distinguished architect. George Maher was one of Chicago's preeminent architects and a contemporary of architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan. Many of his buildings are designated Chicago Landmarks or considered Landmark-eligible. He designed numerous notable homes in the neighborhoods of Uptown and Kenwood, and in suburban Oak Park and Kenilworth.

The Chicago Town & Tennis Club was constructed in the Tudor Revival style during the 1920s enthusiasm in Chicago for athletic and social clubs. Specifically, it was inspired by the design of the Wimbledon Tennis Club in England and American tennis clubs such as The West Side Tennis Club at Forest Hills, Queens New York, which hosted more than 60 U.S. National Championships between 1915 and 1977. During this period, Chicago Town & Tennis Club hosted the most prestigious clay court tournament in the world. It was part of the US Professional Tennis circuit and the greatest players of the 1930s competed at championships hosted at Chicago Town & Tennis



Chimney Detail on the Chicago Town & Tennis Club © Eric Allix Rogers



Second Floor Vestibule and Social Hall of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Eric Allix Rogers



Entry and foyer of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Eric Allix Rogers

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Second Floor Social Hall/ Ballroom of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Eric Allix Rogers



Grand staircase to second floor of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Jason Marck



Partial view south elevation of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Serhii Chrucky

Club, including the legendary players Fred Perry and Don Budge. In 1938, Don Budge became the first player ever to win the Grand Slam of tennis in a single year. Originally overlooking 16 tennis courts and extensive gardens, the building served as a tennis club house until the property was sold and became an Elks Lodge. A period of vacancy followed and it was eventually transformed into Unity Church.

Unity Church of Chicago purchased the building and site in 1989. They engaged Vinci-Hamp Architects to carefully restore portions of the building in 2002. They converted the dining room into a sanctuary and other rooms into an art gallery and a social hall. Fortunately, the building retained much of its original historic character and details including its stained glass, decorative tile, and ornamental plasterwork. The exterior of the building with its high gables, half-timbering, slate roof and decorative brickwork remains highly intact, notably including the original stone carvings depicting a pair of tennis rackets. The building is orange-rated per the Chicago Historic Resources Survey which confirms its important architectural significance to the West Ridge community and the City of Chicago.

Unity Church played an important role in the history of LGBTQ rights in Chicago and Illinois. After years of efforts, on June 1, 2014, the first day that same-sex marriage became legal in Illinois, 40 same-sex couples were married or renewed their vows at Unity Church.

At one time the Unity Church congregation had about 1,500 members. However, a recent decline in membership necessitated the sale. The 3.1-acre site and building was sold to Misericordia for \$7.5 million, and the congregation was allowed to remain in the building and on the grounds until October 2019.

THREAT

On December 20, 2019, Misericordia applied for a demolition permit for the Chicago Town & Tennis Club and to move forward with their development plans. A few weeks later in early January 2020, a community meeting was

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North elevation and main entry on Thome Avenue to the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Serhii Chrukky

held by Alderman Andre Vasquez to allow Misericordia to present their plans. Because the building is orange-rated on the Chicago Historic Resources Survey, a 90-day demolition hold was placed on the permit application which was due to expire in March 2020 at which time a demolition permit could be issued. The 90-day demolition hold was extended for another 90 days through mutual agreement and will expire in mid-June 2020. As reported in the press, Misericordia does not anticipate the new units to be completed until 2021, so the rush to demolish the historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club Building is not being driven by the construction schedule.

Founded in 1921 and operated by the Sisters of Mercy, Misericordia Heart of Mercy has occupied its 31-acre campus in West Ridge since 1976 and currently houses 600 children and adults with developmental disabilities. Their wait list includes 300 families, illustrating the significant need for additional housing for individuals with developmental disabilities.

Due to the need to build additional housing, in 2018 Misericordia purchased the 3.1 acre site immediately south of their campus across Thome Avenue which includes the Chicago Town & Tennis Club, a parking lot, and extensive gardens. They propose to build 16 new group homes on the site which would house 8 to 15 residents each. The plan is to build a low-density housing cluster for approximately 150 residents. This plan includes the demolition of the beautiful and historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club and gardens.

Preservation Chicago supports Misericordia's important mission and appreciates the need for additional housing. However, we would prefer one of the alternate solutions that would both increase the housing available and prevent the demolition of an architecturally significant building that has been an important part of the West Ridge community for nearly 100 years.

To maximize the buildable site and to secure the new parcel within their existing campus perimeter security fence, Misericordia had requested that the adjacent stretches of Thome Avenue and Winchester Avenue contiguous with their main campus be vacated by the City of Chicago. However, neighbors from an adjacent building who regularly park their vehicles on these city streets vocally objected to losing their free parking, and Misericordia appears to have withdrawn this request.

A zoning change within a Planned Development is required to allow for the community-style housing, as the current zoning does not permit this use. The alderman has signaled his preliminary support for the zoning change.



Gardens of Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Dan Paterno / PaternoGroup.com

Preservation Chicago made initial contact with Misericordia leadership in March 2018, approximately 2 years earlier, to alert them to the building’s historic significance and orange-rating and to request consideration that the historic building be retained in their development plans. Misericordia evaluated the option of adaptive reuse for a residential use but ultimately chose to pursue demolition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing the architectural significance of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club, Preservation Chicago is advocating for an alternative that would allow both the new supportive housing to be constructed and the historic building to be preserved. To accomplish a win-win solution that achieves all stakeholder priorities, it is necessary to work in partnership and good faith with all stakeholders including Misericordia, the West Ridge Community, 40th Ward Alderman Andre Vasquez, the Chicago Park District, and the Chicago Department of Planning and Development’s Historic Preservation Division.

To this end, Preservation Chicago has been in communication with decision makers while exploring several options that could potentially yield all objectives, thus allowing all stakeholders to enjoy a positive outcome. The proposed alternate options are generally practical, achievable, and financially viable. They all require collaboration, an openness to creative alternatives, and a willingness to engage in a genuine dialogue between the stakeholders and the Chicago Department of Planning and Development’s Historic Preservation Division. The new additional housing units for individuals with developmental disabilities are a constant in every scenario. Through creativity and collaboration, we can also achieve a preservation-sensitive solution that would accomplish priorities for all stakeholders and save the Chicago Town & Tennis Club Building.

Additional time is also critical as all of these alternatives require time to be pursued and implemented. On December 20, 2019, Misericordia applied for a demolition permit for the Chicago Town & Tennis Club, which started the 90-day demolition permit delay process for the orange-rated building. This permit delay will expire in



Main Entrance on Thome Avenue of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Serhii Chrucky

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March 2020 at which time the demolition permit could have been issued. However, in the spirit of partnership and a willingness to consider an alternative solution, Misericordia has agreed to delay demolition for an additional 90 days. Fortunately, the new construction is not scheduled to begin until late 2020, so this delay does not impact the construction schedule and delivery of Misericordia's new units.

ALTERNATE 1: Misericordia's current plan anticipates approximately 150 new residents, but its waitlist includes more than 300 individuals. If the zoning change were to allow for higher-density buildings, more units could be built. By allowing a higher-density zoning on the Chicago Town & Tennis Club site and within the main Misericordia campus, Misericordia could potentially build out more than the 16 new residential group homes currently planned and serve more people in this development and potential future infill development on their campus. Higher-density new construction on the Chicago Town & Tennis Club site could be developed on the current parking lots and deliver all the desired units without requiring the land where the historic building and garden currently stand.

Misericordia's preferred housing module is reflected in their current proposed development plan. However, if granted a higher-density zoning, the design architects could explore more compact site plan layouts. Additionally, a higher-density zoning would allow for narrower streets, less on-site parking, narrower setbacks between buildings, and taller building heights.

Misericordia already has community spaces within their existing campus. However, if Misericordia desired, the historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club building could relatively easily be converted for use as a beautiful community center for the new residents and existing 600 residents living on the adjacent campus. The building is in good condition and the first floor is at grade level, but the addition of a hydraulic elevator and ramps would be necessary to make it ADA compliant. This option would only be viable for Misericordia if the development program could deliver the same number of new units and a preferred building design.

In addition to using the historic building for its own programming throughout the week, Misericordia could rent out the venue to generate additional revenues to support their nonprofit mission and operations. Following a model similar to the Greenhouse Inn Restaurant currently operated by Misericordia on their main campus which provides residents with developmental disabilities valuable work experience through restaurant employment, the historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club building could be rented out for weddings and events which could provide residents with developmental disabilities valuable work experience through event-related employment. This potential use could generate significant earned income for the non-profit and would serve to better integrate the Misericordia and West Ridge communities.

ALTERNATE 2: If Misericordia did not wish to own and operate the historic building, the portion of the site where the historic building is located could be subdivided and sold to a private, third-party developer. The millions of dollars generated from the sale of the valuable historic building would partially offset the original \$7.5 million purchase price, and this new source of funds could be used to build additional housing units.

This approach requires higher-density zoning and the design architects creating an acceptable more compact site plan with a preferred housing module focusing the new construction on the parking lot. If the parking lot site could not accommodate all the desired new units, perhaps the proceeds from the sale could be used to purchase land elsewhere along the perimeter of the main campus or be used to create additional infill housing on underutilized parcels or parking lots within the main campus.

ALTERNATE 3: Another option to consider would be for Misericordia to conduct a land swap with the Chicago Park District and the adjacent Emerson Park. Emerson Park was once part of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club grounds, so reconnecting the park land and the original historic clubhouse would be a natural choice. Misericordia could give the Chicago Town & Tennis Club building and gardens to the Chicago Park District. The Chicago Park District in exchange would give to Misericordia the equivalent amount of land from Emerson Park.

In this scenario, the Chicago Town & Tennis Club building would become the new Emerson Park Fieldhouse which would provide much-needed programming to the West Ridge community that the Chicago Park District's current modest shed building/public bathroom facility is simply too small to support. New fieldhouses often cost tens of millions of dollars, so the potential value of this first-class historic building to the Chicago Park District and West Ridge communities is significant. A public use for the Chicago Town & Tennis Club building would be an ideal outcome.



Alternate #4-A: Chicago Town & Tennis Club "Move" Option overlaid on Misericordia proposed site plan. Sketch Prepared by Preservation Chicago

This option would directly benefit Misericordia as the land swap would save the estimated \$250,000 cost of demolishing the historic building. Access to the historic clubhouse could also economically benefit the park and the Chicago Park District, as the former Chicago Town & Tennis Club building is remarkable with beautiful interior ballrooms and would be a desirable and lucrative event and wedding venue that would generate much-needed park revenues.

The Chicago Park District already runs a robust business of leasing event spaces in historic park district buildings throughout Chicago for weddings and other celebrations. It could easily add the Chicago Town & Tennis Club to its list of offerings. This would be an amenity for the wider Chicago community and could generate significant income for the Chicago Park District to support ongoing operations. Other than the need to improve ADA circulation and access to the second floor, the historic building is in good condition. This use could be quickly implemented as it has successfully hosted events and celebrations for decades as Unity Church.

The relative location of the building, park and campus present challenges to this option. The historic building is located at the northern edge of the block. Emmerson Park is a long and narrow park which runs along the southern portion of the block. Connecting Emmerson Park to the building would require significant square footage and leave the remaining bisected building site inefficient for new development.

ALTERNATE 4: Another option would be to physically move the historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club building from its current location approximately 250 feet due south across the parking lot into Emmerson Park. Initially, this idea seemed the least plausible due to cost, but after Preservation Chicago received multiple competitive bids for the cost of building moving that were much lower than expected, it might be the most compelling alternative.

Although more logistically complicated, moving the historic building into the park would provide a substantial benefit to both Misericordia and the wider West Ridge community. It would save a first-class historic building and



South Elevation of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Serhii Chucky

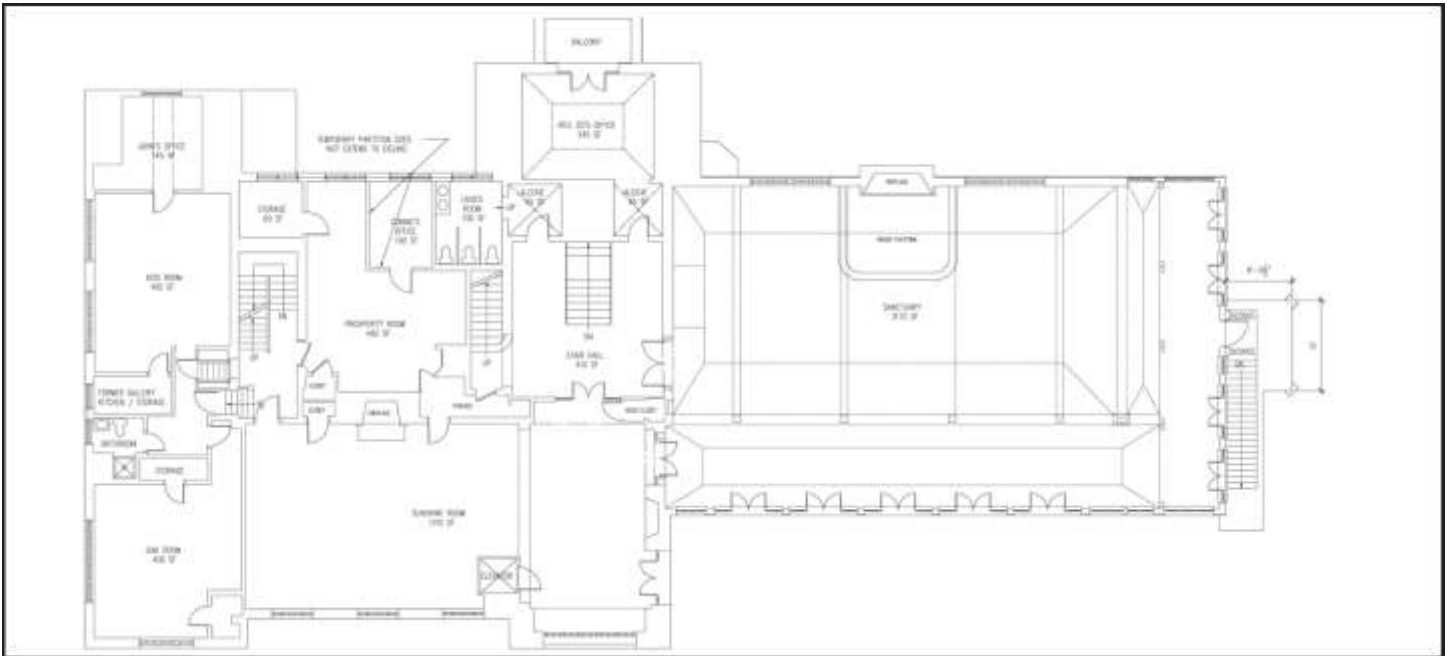
provide Misericordia with a clear site to allow more flexibility in their development site plan. Additionally, the estimated \$250,000 cost of demolition would be avoided. Perhaps these savings could be used to offset a portion of the cost to move the historic building.

Preservation Chicago has received bids from two well-established, large-scale building moving firms. Both bids are similar in size and scope. They indicate the cost to move the building 250 feet into Emerson Park to be approximately \$550,000. To prepare the foundation to receive the building would likely cost an additional \$550,000. Additional miscellaneous repairs, adding an ADA compliant elevator, and bringing the building into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act are estimated at \$400,000. So for approximately \$1.5 million, the Chicago Park District could own a historic building that would serve as a magnificent new fieldhouse.

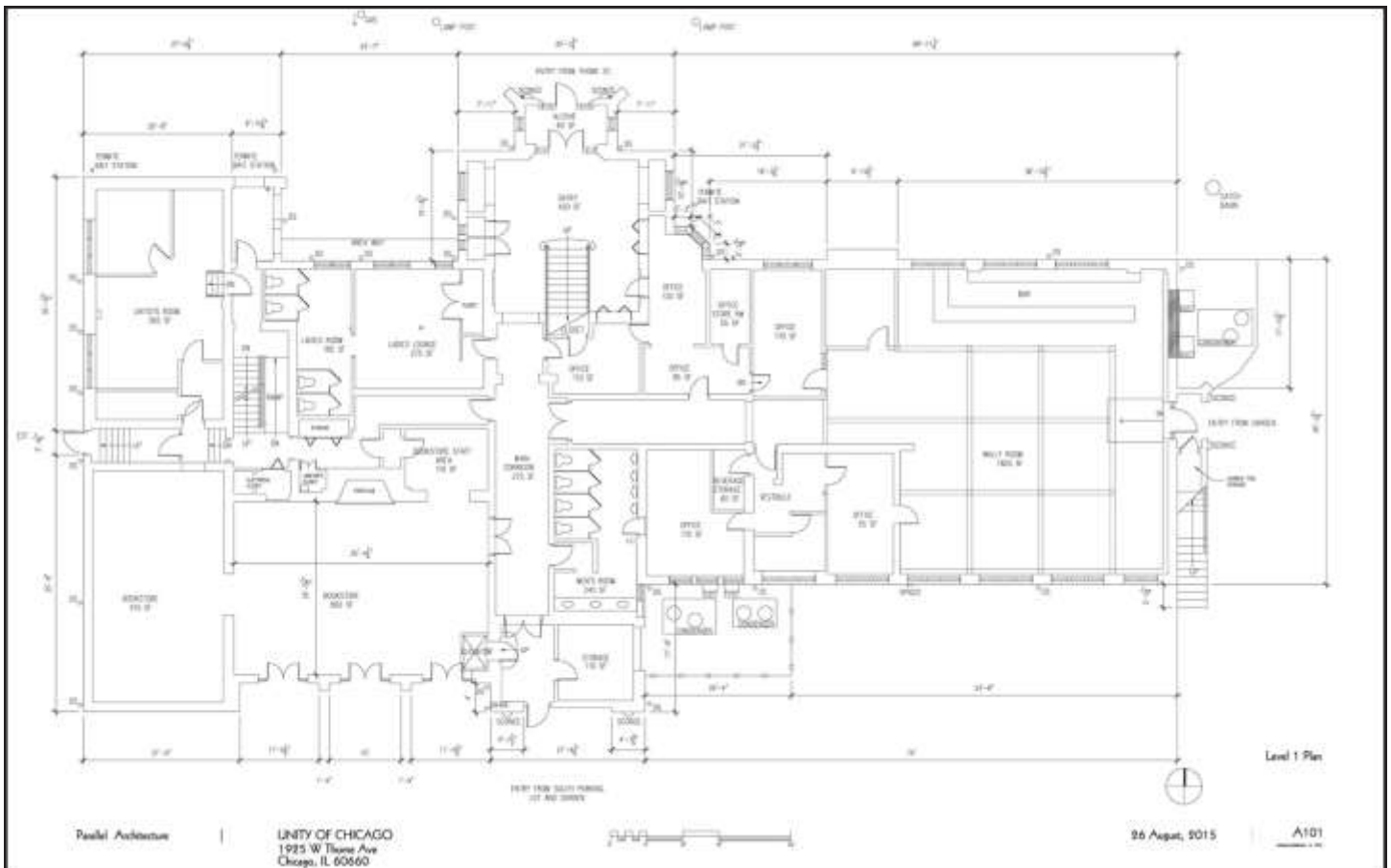
Chicago Park District fieldhouses often cost \$20 million or more to build new. If Misericordia pledged the \$250,000 of budgeted demolition funds towards costs of moving the historic building, the difference could be paid for by the Chicago Park District, TIF funding, or private philanthropy. Given this extraordinary opportunity, it is likely that the funds would be forthcoming. For perspective, the Chicago Park District is currently spending \$50 million for a new Park District Headquarters and fieldhouse in Brighton Park, \$15 million to renovate the historic Clarendon Park Fieldhouse, and \$1.5 million for improvements to the Revere Park Fieldhouse. Preservation Chicago is already working with foundations and individuals potentially interested in providing funds necessary to underwrite the cost of moving the building.

Misericordia had initially requested that the adjacent public streets of Thome Avenue and Winchester Avenue be vacated by the City of Chicago. Their campus is a gated community for the safety and comfort of their residents, and Misericordia would likely prefer to include the new site behind the fence. This request was withdrawn after neighbor objections to loss of street parking. A possible alternative could be a 1:1 swap between the City of Chicago and Misericordia. Small portions of Thome Avenue and or part of Winchester Avenue could be vacated by the City of Chicago, become part of Misericordia's property, and seamlessly connect the new building site to the main campus. In exchange for this valuable city-owned property on the northern edge of the construction site, Misericordia would donate the equivalent total square footage on the southern edge of the construction site to the Chicago Park District and Emerson Park. This would enlarge the park, protect some of the existing mature trees and lovely gardens earmarked for demolition, and provide a good site for the relocated historic Chicago Town & Tennis Club building. Preservation Chicago strongly supports the conversion of parking lots into public parks. This approach would provide a powerful win-win for both Misericordia and the West Ridge community.

Chicago 7: Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church



Second floor plans of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church (third floor plans not shown) © Parallel Architecture



First floor plans of the Chicago Town & Tennis Club / Unity Church © Parallel Architecture

Preservation Chicago recognizes the demand for Misericordia's extraordinary housing and services programs and strongly supports this noble and important work. These recommendations are intended to preserve and honor Chicago's historic built environment and Landmark-quality buildings, while simultaneously supporting the construction of new housing residential units at Misericordia's West Ridge Campus. Preservation Chicago hopes that all stakeholders will engage in a robust and fruitful conversation and that together we can find a win-win solution that meets that needs of all stakeholders.