



Medinah Temple/Tree Studios

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Medinah Temple and the Tree Studios buildings are located in the River North neighborhood of Chicago about one mile directly north of the Loop. Together the buildings occupy an entire city block, bound by Wabash Avenue on the east, State Street on the west, East Ontario Street on the north and East Ohio Street to the south. Medinah Temple, sited on the eastern half of the block, has been called one of the nation's finest examples of a Middle Eastern-style Shrine temple. It was constructed in 1912 to house a 4,200-seat auditorium for the Chicago chapter of the national Shrine fraternal organization. Tree Studios, sharing the western half of the block, was home to the oldest artist colony in America. Judge Lambert Tree built the studios to house European artists who had come to Chicago to work on the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Together, these buildings are regarded as two of the most important landmarks in River North and thanks to a dedicated and creative-thinking group of individuals these two structures still stand today.

From the early 1900's through the 1950s' both Tree Studios and Medinah Temple flourished, quickly becoming one of River North's most well know blocks. In 1910, Judge Lambert died leaving the artist colony in trust. Mrs. Lambert then sold Tree Studios to the Shriners using part of the money from the sale to construct two annexes to the 600 North State Street building. The north and south annexes built 1912-1913 in the arts and crafts style, would feature larger studios and soaring ceilings. From 1910 until 1999, the Shriners continued to run the building as an artist colony. In December of 1974, Tree Studios and the annexes were listed on the National Register of Historic Places with Chicago landmark protection being added

in 1997 to only the original State Street building. The landmark designation excluded the two wings on Tree Studios and the entirety of Medinah Temple.

In 1999, the Chicago Tribune reported that the Shriners, whose congregation had been shrinking for years, were looking to sell both Tree Studios and Medinah Temple. The exterior of both buildings had suffered from years of neglect and were in rough shape, while at the same time, the River North neighborhood had greatly gentrified and new construction projects were happening all around the area. The four-story Tree Studio and five-story Medinah Temple were dwarfed by giant high rises that had sprouted all around them. One Chicago Tribune article cited, “that the block had character, but was definitely not a head turner.” In May of 1999, the Shriners entered into a contract with developer Steven Fifield to buy both buildings for \$21 million. Fifield then released a statement detailing demolition plans for Medinah Temple in order to construct a high-rise condo building and parking lot. He also stated that the interior of Tree Studios was to be gutted in order to make the property economically viable.

Outcry was almost immediate from both the media and the preservation community. Mayor Daley Sr. released a statement in response to Mr. Fifield’s initial plans, stating that it was the intention of the city to save both buildings and that landmark protection would be sought for the entirety of the block. Steve Fifield then put forth an alternative plan for the redevelopment. This plan still called for a high-rise tower to be built at the center of the property but the facades of Medinah

Temple would be saved. Above the temple would be a 450 space parking garage with the high-rise condo tower to continue above the garage. Due to mounting pressure on the mayor and the Shriners both parties entered into a nine-month moratorium on the planned sale and redevelopment of the site. Three months into the moratorium New York based World Monuments Fund stepped into the picture and listed Medinah Temple and Tree Studios on their 100 most endangered manmade structures watch list in September of 1999. This property was one of only five American sites to be named on the 2000 list. With pressure mounting it was clear to city officials and the Shriners that an alternative development plan had to be found.

The Chicago Tribune reported in January 2000 that Albert Friedman, popularly known as the “king of River North,” had entered into negotiations with the Shriners to purchase the block after Mr. Fifield decided to withdraw his bid, citing that an agreement with city officials could not be reached. Mr. Friedman’s plans for the property were to save all exterior features of both Tree Studios and Medinah Temple including the hidden central courtyard between both buildings. The new plan for redevelopment was much closer to what city officials and preservationists had envisioned for the property and the City of Chicago sweetened the deal by offering \$17.5 million of TIF money for the project. The plan, as Mr. Fifield put forth, was to have Bloomingdale’s Home occupy Medinah Temple restoring all deteriorated elements to the façade including restoration of brickwork, art glass windows and exterior stenciling. The interior would essentially be gutted only

saving the stage area. Tree Studios would also be rehabilitated but there would be a conscious effort to save everything inside and out. Tree Studios would be redeveloped with plans for four large-scale retail spaces on the State Street façade with small business offices to be housed above. A small number of artist studios would also be renovated on the upper floors but the artist studios would no longer be live/work spaces.

In 2001, local landmark protection was added to the annexes that adjoined Tree Studios and to Medinah Temple. Now the preservationists and city officials had the landmark protection that they had sought and they also had a developer that was working on the project with similar goals. Construction on the project began in late 2001 and wrapped up with Bloomingdale's Home moving into the temple in February of 2005.

True to Mr. Friedman's word, both buildings were restored and both retained their significant architectural features. The exterior of Medinah Temple has been restored to its 1912 appearance although the interior, as planned, was not saved. Upon entering the two words that come to mind are "vanilla box." All historic features are gone and in their place are drop ceilings, can lighting and smooth white dry walled walls. The appearance is exactly what you would see upon entering any newly built retail space. Upon entering the interior of Tree Studios on the other hand, the viewer is presented with quite a different outcome. Many original wood windows with metal sash cords remain, all the original fireplaces with terra cotta tiles are in excellent shape and the staircase inside

Design Within Reach looks like it hasn't been touched in over eighty years. The glass courtyard atrium at the rear of Posh was also in excellent shape with a view of the hidden courtyard that was nothing less than spectacular.

The Tree Studios/Medinah Temple complex was a successful adaptive reuse project praised by the likes of the Chicago Tribune, World Monument Fund as well as the local preservation community. The historic elements were retained, paying homage to the building's history, but both buildings were made economically viable again by enlarging some spaces and eliminating other non-usable spaces altogether. The River North neighborhood is a very vibrant urban environment made stronger by the presence of these two buildings. As a friend once said, "I love that building, I walk past it everyday, it's one of the best features of River North."

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