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Chicago Shelter Cottages - After the Fire of 1871 -

If you spot one of these miniature houses on the Near North Side, you might think someone installed a mother-in-law suite in a one-car garage – a very long time ago. It's actually much more interesting than that.



After the Great Fire of 1871, the city was in ruins. Nearly 100,000 people lost their homes. Tens of thousands of people left the city; others were taken in by friends. The fire had struck in early October, and winter was coming.



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The Chicago Relief and Aid Society stepped in to provide kits – plans and materials – so people could build their own shelter cottages (aka: fire relief shelter or fire relief cottages), as they were called. They came in two sizes; both were tiny, small (\$100) and smaller (\$75). The kits contained pre-cut lumber, windows, a door, a chimney and a flexible room partition offering a modicum of privacy. The 12-by-16-foot model was for those with families of three or fewer; the 16-by-20-foot version was for everyone else.

More than 5,200 of the cottages were built in the month following October 18, 1871. They didn't last long, as people moved on to more permanent housing. Today, only a few remain; no one knows how many, as they have been built around and covered with other materials.



This one is located at 216 W Menomonee St, in the Old Town neighborhood of Chicago.

Estimate Value: \$712K

2 bedroom, 1 bath, 780 square feet, 2,800 square feet lot,



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Property Taxes: \$9,555.20 (2010)

[ARTICLE]

With its cheerful yellow clapboard facade and white picket fence, the little house on Menomonee Street seems a bit lost among the imposing stone buildings and brick townhouses that surround it, as if it were dropped into the Old Town section of the city from another place and time. “How cute!” passers-by often remark, even if they’re alone. There’s just something about it that makes people stop and smile.



So it isn't surprising that David Hawkanson immediately knew which house his real estate agent was talking about when she suggested the reasonably priced but somewhat impractical one-bedroom cottage. This was in early 2007, and he was in a bit of a pickle, still living in an extended-stay condominium a few years into his tenure as executive director of the Steppenwolf Theater Company. People were starting to talk.



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“One of the trustees suggested it would be good for my reputation if I actually put down roots,” said Mr. Hawkanson, 67.

So he decided to take it as a sign when he learned that the curious little house that drew him to Old Town in the first place was suddenly on the market. “Something in my gut told me, ‘This is just what you want right now!’ ” he said.



The idea of living smaller and owning less was so exhilarating, he bought the 780-square-foot house that afternoon and then rushed home to make a list of the things he could not live without. It was a bit like eloping after a boozy first date, for there was so much he didn't know about the house and its origins. He certainly had no idea about the extent of its celebrity, which made living there, as a previous owner had observed, “like living in a fishbowl.”



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That would all come later, long after he realized that the large Robert Kelly painting on his must-keep list would not fit on a single interior wall.

Although the house is an anomaly today, back in the fall of 1871 thousands of others exactly like it were being slapped together in the aftermath of the Great Chicago Fire that had burned for two days that October, claiming about 300 lives and leaving a third of the city's 300,000 residents homeless.



Known as fire relief, or shelter, cottages, they came in two sizes — small (\$100) and smaller (\$75) — in kits that contained pre-cut lumber, windows, a door, a chimney and a flexible room partition offering a modicum of privacy. The 12-by-16-foot model was for those with families of three or fewer; the 16-by-20-foot version was for everyone else.

The idea behind the kits, which were distributed, often for free, by the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, was to get the city back on its feet as quickly as possible. By mid-



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November, some 5,200 cottages had gone up; by the following May, 3,000 more had been built.

“The whole idea of framing mass numbers of buildings quickly using dimensional lumber, that’s a development that happened in the 19th century,” said John Russick, director of curatorial affairs for the Chicago History Museum. “Immediately, they were building the wooden city again using the resources at hand.”



But it wasn’t long before city leaders realized they were repeating an earlier mistake, he said, and new building codes soon outlawed clapboard construction downtown. Old Town was still a bit of a rural outpost, and the ban on wood did not take effect there until 1874, the year Mr. Hawkanson’s house was recorded as having been built.

Historians and neighborhood preservation advocates are convinced that a number of these cottages are still around, but most of them have been obscured by renovations or



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have become unrecognizable over time. Mr. Hawkanson's and another a few blocks away, in a backyard on Sedgwick Street, are the only two thought to look remotely as they did in the years following the fire. And "David's is the supreme-o one," said Diane Gonzalez, a neighbor and architectural tour guide.



Given how many of its owners have wanted to alter or demolish the house, it's remarkable that it still exists, let alone resembles its original self. Credit goes to those like Ms. Gonzalez and Shirley Baugher, an Old Town historian and author, who fought for landmark protection for the neighborhood; now street-facing facades of structures deemed historically significant cannot be substantially changed without approval from the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.

Ms. Gonzalez, for one, was thrilled to learn that Mr. Hawkanson was single and had no children because, she reasoned, that meant he would not want to alter the home's appearance or size, as others have tried (and failed) to do. At one point, Ms. Baugher



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said, an owner sought permission to connect the house to the detached garage and add an extra story, putting a sign in the window that read, “This is not a landmark.”

Even so, there are a number of changes that have been made in the years since a Mr. Hambrock built the house using the larger of the two kits, Ms. Baugher wrote in “At Home in Our Old Town: Every House Has a Story.” A kitchen was added in 1900; a bathroom and garage extension in 1930; and a bay window later that century.





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Jens Bogehegn, who sold the house to Mr. Hawkanson in early 2007, gut-renovated it in 2002, creating an open living area and combining two tiny bedrooms. (With a second child on the way, he and his wife thought they had no choice but to sell.) And during the renovation, he said, he often had to wriggle through the crawl space, where the pungent smell of burned wood remains unmistakable.



Although Mr. Hawkanson had been cautioned about it, one fine day during his first spring here, he absent-mindedly ventured out in his skivvies to retrieve the morning paper, just as a tour guide was recounting the story of the “cute little house.”

The guide finished with a dramatic flourish about how the “shanty kit” cost only \$100 in materials all those years ago. Then, inspired by Mr. Hawkanson’s appearance, he added: “And this guy just paid in the mid-six figures!”



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That was Mr. Hawkanson's introduction to the tours that snake by the house at the most inopportune moments — and sometimes through it. Once, he said, he had been working in the garden out back and walked in to find a family of tourists sitting at his dining table eating their bag lunches. He had left the door open and they had mistaken the house for a public venue.



Although he is in the entertainment world, Mr. Hawkanson feigns shyness. This friendly house, his 12th in 20 years, he said, does much of the work for him. "You sit on the front deck, reading or having a drink," he said, "and you talk to people as they walk by. It's so Midwestern." (He can say that; he grew up in Duluth, Minn., and Pittsburgh.)

He has even managed to cultivate a philosophical attitude about the constant stream of tourists. "You come to understand when you get a property like this," he said, "that you are not the owner, just the steward."



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Still, that hasn't stopped him from establishing some boundaries. Now the tour companies respect his privacy by standing across the street. And most of the time, they also resist the urge to announce what he paid for the house.



"I threatened to get out the garden hose," he said. It seems to have worked.

{A version of this article appeared in print on August 6, 2014, of the New York Home & Garden edition with the headline: Treating His House Like a Museum, by Sandy Keenan.}