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Chicago's Four Plus One (4+1) Mid Century, Mid Rise Apartment Buildings.

There are four major factors that differentiate a Four Plus One from a generic apartment building; the building materials, the relationship to the lot, exposed parking, and the term “Four Plus One” itself.

The four floors containing the apartment units are of wood-frame and masonry construction. They sit on a poured concrete slab which is supported by concrete pillars. The parking lot is located under the concrete slab, slightly below grade. The height of the ceiling in the parking lot is no more than seven feet above grade, a technicality of Chicago’s building code that allows the parking lot to be considered as a basement. Because the resulting structure is only considered four stories, it could be built in areas zoned R5 and higher. The bulk of the area zoned R5[1] and higher exists near the lake front within roughly one mile from Lake Shore Drive.



Four Plus Ones are built on either single or double lots. The common Chicago lot is 125 feet deep and 25 feet wide. Four Plus Ones built early on in 1961 or 1962 are often on



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single lots, while later examples and the majority of the type are built on double lots. Because Four Plus Ones were designed to be economically expedient money generators, it follows that nearly every example occupies as much of the lot as possible. This is always done in the same way. The building straddles the sides of the lot, but is set back about fifteen feet, the minimum, from the sidewalk. These buildings are squeezed into lots, fulfilling the minimum requirements of zoning and building code, while maximizing the number of units.



Sub-surface parking lots have been requirements in high-density apartment buildings since the 1920s. During this period, automobile ownership and apartment living became available and fashionable to members of the rising middle and upper classes. They hid their parking underground, at great expense. The Four Plus One takes the concept of the underground parking lot to a logical economic conclusion. The cheapest possible way to include parking without resorting to the space-wasting surface lot is to simply elevate the structure on pillars.



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Four Plus One apartments are often described as exploiting a loophole in the Chicago zoning code. It's more accurate to say that they were simply a residential building type which was allowed by the Chicago code ... until it was actively dis-allowed in 1971 a city council measure requiring that all developers provide one parking spot per dwelling unit in zones R4 and higher.



The term is “Four Plus One” is unique to Chicago. In other cities with five story apartment buildings with underground parking, it is very likely that people refer to them as “apartment buildings” or “condos,” whichever they may be. Four Plus One refers to two things; the height of the building, and a separation of functions (the parking lot). This implies that the elements of height and functionality are the ones that define the Four Plus One. As these elements are among the reasons that these buildings are so reviled, we can further deduce that “Four Plus One” is not a neutral term. It is a pejorative term that more accurately describes a period in the history of Chicago’s Lincoln Park and Lakeview neighborhoods, rather than a building type.



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Four Plus Ones were met with resistance in the form of community activism in Lincoln Park and Lakeview in the late 1960s. Many arguments were made against them, some reasonable, some being nimby[2]. Arguments against the Four Plus One into three categories; Traffic Congestion, Public Safety and Community Character.



Traffic Congestion is at the reasonable end of the spectrum. It was argued that because Four Plus Ones did not provide adequate parking for their residents, parking spilled on-street, thus greatly increasing competition for parking. There is truth to this; the 1957 zoning code required buildings zoned RM-5 and higher to provide parking for 75% of units.

On one hand, Four Plus Ones provide an elegant solution to the issue of parking. What could be simpler and more efficient than simply elevating the structure? However, Four Plus Ones are comprised of studio and one bedroom apartments, and are also very efficient when it comes to packing many of these units into a small space. These two efficiencies are incompatible if every occupant owns a car or two.



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The Public Safety concerns were straw man[3] arguments that are aesthetic concerns in disguise. The argument that Four Plus Ones are fire hazards is a particularly absurd one. The use of wood in construction does not automatically qualify the building as a fire hazard. By this logic, the entire Back of the Yards neighborhood is a fire hazard. It is more likely the case that any building with objectionable aesthetics is considered by some a 'fire hazard.'



The most common arguments against the Four Plus One dealt with Community Character, including issues such as neighborhood charm, population density, and family-friendliness. The gentrifiers were more often that not young parents looking for a good place to raise their children. Four Plus Ones cater to a market that is marginalized with an influx of single families. Young couples, single people, and the elderly were the common tenants of Four Plus Ones.

The gentrifiers, by their very presence, inadvertently created a favorable socio-economic climate to build Four Plus Ones. With increased desirability and property



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values, the two outcomes are building up or out. In areas which were already relatively high density, building higher was the only choice.

Community Character arguments, such as “these buildings replace beautiful homes and are ugly, cheap, and tawdry” are nothing more than class-based conflict veiled as aesthetic value judgments. Four Plus Ones can most commonly be found along the lakefront north from Lincoln Park to Rogers Park, and south between Hyde Park and South Shore. It is a very important and telling detail that the only resistance and complaint toward Four Plus Ones occurred in Lakeview and Lincoln Park. These areas were among the first to gentrify, and the new residents keen to preserve their investment and lifestyle through exclusion.

There are two types of Four Plus Ones, differentiated by the visibility of parking. If the parking lot is visible from the sidewalk, the more likely it is to be considered an ‘eyesore’ by the passerby. If the parking is hidden – it’s out of sight and out of mind. It is very difficult to determine why the sight of parked cars is so greatly disliked. Of course, it is a matter of aesthetics, but any deeper reasons are hard to quantify.

In contrast to the Courtyard Apartment (with its stairwells serving 3 stacked pairs of units), Four Plus One apartments use a double loaded corridor – an interior hallway with doors to units on both sides and typically with an elevator access point per level and a fire access stairway on each end. This means every unit on every floor is accessible to people who can’t use stairs but also means that corridors are airless and bland with no access to natural light.

While the outsides of Four Plus One buildings are brick and the separation between the parking level and residential floors is concrete, the only separation between units is a wood framed wall or floor. This can often result in terrible acoustic privacy between units.

[1] Chicago zoning codes explained: <http://secondcityzoning.org/zones/>

[2] 'Nimby,' a person who objects to the siting of something perceived as unpleasant or potentially dangerous in their own neighborhood, such as a landfill or hazardous waste facility, especially while raising no such objections to similar developments elsewhere.

[3] 'Straw Man,' is a common form of argument and is an informal fallacy based on giving the impression of refuting an opponent's argument, while actually refuting an argument that was not advanced by that opponent. The so-called typical argument creates the illusion of having completely refuted or defeated an opponent's proposition



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by covertly replacing it with a different proposition and then to refute or defeat that false argument instead of the original proposition.