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OPINION

CHICAGO'S FUTURE CAN'T FORGET ITS PAST

BY MARIANNE SARAH KELLER,
ELLIOT ROSENFELD
AND JOSEPH HOLLWAYS JR.

Every brick and street corner in Chicago carries the stories of those who built this city from the ground up. Chicago has never been afraid of reinvention. From the ashes of the Great Fire to the rise of the skyline, this city has rebuilt itself with grit and ambition. But in our rush to modernize—through glittering towers, billion-dollar developments, and tech-driven “solutions”—we risk forgetting the very foundation that made Chicago more than a dot on a map: its history, its neighborhoods, and the people who shaped them.

Too often, progress has been sold as a trade-off. A new stadium, but fewer affordable homes. A luxury high-rise, but another corner store closed. These deals come wrapped in the language of “revitalization,” yet for many longtime residents, they feel like quiet evictions. You can’t revitalize what you push out.

The heart of this city doesn’t live in boardrooms or investment forecasts—it beats in the row houses of Back of the Yards, the mom-and-pop diners in Little Village, and the cultural institutions that grew from community struggle, not corporate sponsorship. If we let those pieces vanish, what will we be left with? A skyline that photographs well.

Preserving our past is not an obstacle to growth; it’s the blueprint for meaningful development. Invest in historic buildings instead of flattening them. Fund neighborhood arts programs alongside business districts. Create policies that protect working families before courting the next megaproject. Progress and preservation are not enemies—they are partners.

If Chicago is to keep its soul, it must remember that its future isn’t just built, but it is also inherited. And if we fail to honor what came before, no amount of steel or glass will ever make this city feel whole again. ■



THE NAVY PIER

JACOB STECKMANN The Chicago Sentinel

Construction crews prepare the historic Navy Pier for its largest transformation yet, blending modern design with cherished landmarks to create a vibrant, accessible waterfront for all Chicagoans.

City Greenlights Bold Overhaul of Navy Pier

Officials promise transformation without losing Chicago’s historic waterfront

BY MARIANNE SARAH KELLER,
ELLIOT ROSENFELD
AND JOSEPH HOLLWAYS JR.

Chicago’s most iconic lakefront destination is poised for the largest transformation in its history, after the City Council voted late Tuesday to approve a \$1.2 billion overhaul of Navy Pier. The ambitious plan promises to modernize public spaces, expand cultural programming, and introduce new green areas while preserving the historic character that has made the landmark a civic treasure for more than a century.

“This isn’t about the oldest fu-

ture of Chicago while respecting its past,” Mayor Laura Kendrick said, flanked by planning officials. “Navy Pier will remain a space for families, for artists, for small businesses—accessible and alive for everyone, not just tourists.”

The approved blueprint includes a redesign of the pier’s aging infrastructure, new performance venues for local arts organizations, and a sweeping river-to-lake pedestrian connection aimed at stitching together downtown with the waterfront. Planners have pledged to protect the pier’s century-old structures, including the most historic Grand

Ballroom, while also introducing sustainable construction and expanded transit access.

For longtime residents, the announcement is both thrilling and bittersweet. “I remember when my father used to take me here for fireworks,” said Harold Benton, 68, of Bronzeville. “If they can keep that magic alive while fixing the place up, then maybe this city still knows how to take care of its own.”

Residents and lovers of the city, think the announcement is both thrilling and bittersweet. What happens next will redefine how the city meets its shoreline. ■

CULTURE

The Murals that Speak Louder than other Campaign Slogans

BY SHAWN PRICE,
CLAIRE MARIE ROWTLIGHT

Walk down any Chicago street, and the walls tell a story no billboard ever could. From Pilsen to Rogers Park, murals rise like bold declarations, painted by hands that know the neighborhoods they honor. They remember our struggles, celebrate our victories, and refuse to be quieted by the fleeting noise of election season.

Campaign slogans promise change; murals show it happening. They give voice to the undocumented, the working class, the artists who refuse to leave. Every brushstroke is a reminder that power can come from color and concrete, not just ballots and speeches.

City leaders would be wise to see them not as background scenery but as civic landmarks. When developers threaten to paint over these works, they aren’t just erasing art—they’re silencing communities. Murals are history textbooks on brick, memorials in spray paint, dreams drawn where everyone can see them.

Chicago has always been a city of walls that speak, and those voices should be protected, funded, and celebrated. Because when the paint dries, the walls keep talking—long after the posters peel away. If you want to know what Chicago believes, you don’t need a poll. You just need to look up. And if you listen closely, you might hear the roar of a city that has never stopped telling its story, one mural at a time.

MORE ON PAGE 24

New Transit Connect South and West

City officials unveil a comprehensive strategy to improve public transportation and reduce commute times for underserved neighborhoods in the city and suburbs. **PAGE 10**

Hidden Gems: Chicago’s Best Underrated Local Restaurants

A culinary tour spotlighting the family-run eateries, but also and secret spots beloved by longtime residents. Combined by our team of food editors. **PAGE 25**

From Factories to Startups: The Rise of Chicago’s Tech Hubs

Former industrial spaces are transforming into vibrant new centers for innovation and old entrepreneurship for the city and suburbs of the city. **PAGE 15**

The Art of Resilience: Community Murals Inspire Change

Local artists use vibrant public art to reflect Chicago’s history and fuel social movements. Discover our editor’s pick in this weekly column. **PAGE 31**

WIND'S THIRD ALBUM IS A LOVE LETTER TO CHICAGO

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Chicago's Historic Theaters Are Staging a Dazzling Revival Across the City

*From Uptown to Hyde Park, beloved
cultural landmarks are lighting up again*

BY RENEE MARSHALL
AND DAVID CHRISTOPHER GLORY

For decades, Chicago's historic theaters stood as quiet monuments to the city's golden age of performance. Some became forgotten relics, their ornate facades hidden beneath decades of grime; others shuttered entirely, waiting

for an audience that never came. Now, thanks to a wave of restoration projects and investment in the arts, these landmarks are stepping back into the spotlight.

The Uptown Theatre, once the crown jewel of Chicago's entertainment scene, has been closed for over 40 years. Today, scaffolding climbs its exterior as crews

painstakingly restore its Spanish Baroque details. "This isn't just a renovation," says project director Alicia Mendes. "It's a resurrection." When it reopens next year, the venue will host everything from indie films to major concerts, welcoming a new generation into its storied halls. Classic theaters and I need one line.

In Hyde Park, Harper Theater has already seen a remarkable transformation. Once teetering on the edge of permanent closure, it now boasts state-of-the-art sound and projection systems while retaining its 1915 charm. "We wanted to honor the building's history while giving it new life," says theater manager Theo Lark. "Our audiences feel like they're stepping back in time, but with better popcorn."

City officials are embracing these revivals as more than cultural wins—they're economic catalysts. Restored theaters drive foot traffic to local restaurants and shops, especially in neighborhoods like Rogers Park, where the century-old New 400 Theater has become a hub for film festivals and community events. "It's not just about preserving history," explains Alderman Maria Ruiz. "It's about using that history to build a stronger future."

But the revival isn't without challenges. Rising maintenance costs and funding gaps threaten smaller venues that lack the name recognition of their grander counterparts. Grassroots organizations have stepped up, launching crowdfunding campaigns and volunteer-driven restoration efforts to keep these neighborhood treasures alive.

For Chicagoans, the movement is about more than bricks and mortar. It's about identity. "When you sit in these theaters, you're connected to everyone who came before you," says Mendes. "You're part of the city's story."

Even as restoration continues, theaters are embracing modern innovation. The Music Box Theatre, known for its classic screenings, is experimentin. As the lights rise once again on Chicago's historic stages, one thing is clear: the show isn't going on.

This resurgence has also sparked unexpected collaborations. Independent filmmakers are partnering with neighborhood theaters for exclusive premieres, while schools are arranging field trips to give students a firsthand look at the city's cultural legacy. "It's about access," says Lark. "These theaters shouldn't feel like distant landmarks. They should feel like part of this."

Even as restoration continues, theaters are embracing modern innovation. The Music Box Theatre, known for its classic screenings, is experimenting with live podcast tapings and virtual reality film nights, blending nostalgia with forward-thinking.

"This is a renaissance," Ruiz insists. "And like any true renaissance, it belongs to everyone—from first-time visitors to lifelong patrons." If these efforts succeed, Chicago won't simply reclaim its theatrical past. It will proves. ■

LIGHTS UP ON CHICAGO STREETS

*New drama series
captures city's grit, charm,
and unfiltered soul.*

BY JOHNNY CLANTON

Local crews and extras have been hired, fueling excitement in the community. With its premiere set for next spring, the show promises to deliver the city as it's rarely even truly seen.

Chicago is once again stepping into the spotlight as the backdrop for Steel & Smoke, a new drama series filming across the city this summer. The show, created by

Emmy-winner Lena Torres, follows a former firefighter turned private investigator navigating Chicago's shadowy alleys and bustling neighborhoods. Filming locations range from the historic Bronzeville blocks to the Riverwalk, showcasing both the city's iconic skyline and its lesser-seen corners. "Chicago isn't just scenery—it's a character," Torres says.

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For Chicagoans, the movement is about more than bricks and mortar. It's about identity. "When you sit in these theaters, you're connected to everyone who came before you," says Mendes. "You're part of the city's story."

As the lights rise once again on Chicago's historic stages, one thing is clear: the show isn't just going on, it's only getting bigger.

Audiences are already feeling the impact. Advance ticket sales for upcoming shows at the Uptown Theatre have surpassed projections, with performances by local orchestras and national touring acts generating unprecedented buzz. "It's proof that Chicagoans are hungry for these spaces," says cultural historian Bernard Lee. "They're not just venues—they're anchors for community memory."

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"This is a renaissance," Ruiz insists. "And like any true renaissance, it belongs to everyone—from first-time visitors to lifelong patrons." If these efforts succeed, Chicago won't simply reclaim its theatrical past. It will prove, once again, that its stages can inspire new dreams while honoring all the old ones. ■



THE QUIET BRILLIANCE OF ANNE SMITH

BY PATTY J. WHITE
ILLUSTRATION A. CLAIRE

In a modern studio tucked above a bakery in Logan Square, painter Anne Smith is redefining how Chicago sees its own neighborhoods. Her canvases, rich with layered textures and vibrant hues, capture not just the architecture of the city but its unspoken rhythms—the hum of trains, the sway of alleyway trees, and the quiet resilience of its people.

Smith is originally from Ohio, but moved to Chicago when was just 2 years old. She, began sketching on brown paper bags while helping in her family's store. "I've always painted the world I know," she says. After graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she turned her focus toward community-centered art, hosting free workshops for local youth. Her latest series, "Skyline in Fragments," blends realism and abstraction, transforming familiar streets into dreamlike tapestries. "Chicago isn't perfect," Smith says, "but it's alive—and I want my work to show that."

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Courtesy of Freepik

STRING RISE: THE LOVED CHICAGO BAND IS TOURING THE US

BY SHAWN PRINCE

On a sun-faded brick wall in Pilsen, bold splashes of cobalt and crimson tell the story of a city in motion. They're the work of Claire Reyes, a 28-year-old muralist whose pieces have become rallying cries painted in public view. For Reyes, murals are not decoration—they're declarations.

"I grew up walking past walls that talked to me," Reyes says, standing in front of her latest project, a towering mural that blends images of factory workers, jazz musicians, and neighborhood activists. "I wanted to add my own voice to that conversation."

"IT'S GREAT TO SEE PEOPLE RESONATE WITH OUR MUSIC."

Raised in Little Village, Reyes started painting at 15, sketching designs in notebooks during class and later translating them onto abandoned storefronts. Her early work caught the attention of community groups, who commissioned her to create pieces that spoke to local struggles: immigration, housing, and education. Today, her murals stretch across the city, from the viaducts of Bridgeport to the alleys of Logan Square, each one blending vivid realism with symbolic flourishes that demand a second look.

"Every wall is an open book," Reyes says, brushing dust off

her hands. "Chicago writes its story. I just help color it in."

But Reyes insists her art isn't just about beauty—it's about presence. "Campaign slogans disappear," she says. "Paint stays."

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Now, Reyes leads a youth arts program that teaches teens to turn their frustrations into public works. For her, it's proof that murals are more than paint—they're tools for memory, protest, and pride. Raised in Little Village, Reyes started painting at 15, sketching designs in notebooks during class and later translating them onto abandoned storefronts. Her early work caught the attention of community groups, who commissioned her to create pieces that spoke to local struggles: immigration, housing, and education. Today, her murals stretch across the city, from the viaducts of Bridgeport to the alleys of Logan Square, each one blending vivid realism with symbolic flourishes that demand a second look.

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Art & Culture



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