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What's That Building? The Forum On 43rd Street In Bronzeville

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FROM **WBEZCHICAGO**
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The Forum, a 122-year-old building at 43rd Street and Calumet Avenue, has hosted everything from an African American Elks lodge to jazz greats like Nat King Cole. It also made a cameo in a hit 1970s movie.

Jason Marck/WBEZ

Last month, The Forum in Bronzeville was entered into the National Register of Historic Places.

But the structure, once a neighborhood anchor, has been empty for decades awaiting renovation.

Built in 1897, The Forum was central to life in Bronzeville for more than 70 years. Restaurants, tailors, and jewelers occupied the storefronts, according the application for historic registry. Upstairs, arched windows surround Forum Hall, a auditorium/ballroom that hosted concerts, political meetings, dance classes, graduations and mayoral speeches.

The Forum was also the headquarters for the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks, an African American alternative to the Elks Lodge.



Painted lettering on a window identifies the office of the "Exalted Ruler" of the Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks, an African American alternative to the Elks Lodge.

Jason Marck/WBEZ

Last month's historic place designation was a win for Urban Juncture, the development firm that bought The Forum just ahead of a demolition order in 2011. But in that same month, the firm had to show up in court when a city inspection turned up numerous building violations, said Urban Juncture President Bernard Loyd.

The building was a cultural anchor in Bronzeville for decades, and that's precisely what Urban Juncture hopes to turn it back into. But renovating the derelict 30,000-square-foot building would cost \$5 to \$10 million, Loyd said.

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"This is what I've been up against for eight years: trying to keep this building together until we can bring it back," he said. "I thought it would take a few years, my goal was 2015 ... [but] we've barely started."

Here's a look at the building's bustling history and potential future.

Music and movies

The Forum was central to Chicago's jazz and blues scene during the 1900s, which grew as black Americans moved to Chicago during the Great Migration. Some of the biggest

names in jazz and blues played The Forum, including Nat King Cole, Muddy Waters and Milt Hinton. The hall had a massive hardwood dance floor — which remains one of the oldest in Chicago, according to Open House Chicago.



Famed jazz and blues musicians like Nat King Cole and Muddy Waters played on this stage.

Jason Marck/WBEZ

In 1973, around the time Forum Hall closed, the building made a cameo appearance in the Paul Newman and Robert Redford movie "The Sting." There's a scene in the movie where Redford's character runs from a Joliet police officer, who's tracked him to Red's Lounge. When Redford runs out of Red's Lounge, you see the scene was shot outside of The Forum:



YouTube

Civil rights movements

The building played a distinguished role in civil rights movements.

Here are few highlights from the building's historic register application: In 1931, a group called the Chicago Scottsboro Defense Conference met at The Forum to strategize a defense for nine young unemployed black men who had been pulled off a train in Scottsboro, Ala. and hit with false charges of raping two white women.

In February 1943, a petition drive to integrate major league baseball started at The Forum, eventually collecting 150,000 signatures.

And in June 1961, The Forum hosted some of the Freedom Riders, northern civil rights activists who tested a Supreme Court ruling that segregation on transportation was unconstitutional by riding segregated buses in the south.

A future at The Forum?

Loyd said he'd like to see Forum Hall come back as a multi-purpose venue that hosts

weddings, political meetings, music performances and other events.



Inside Forum Hall on the second floor.

Jason Marck/WBEZ

He hopes the foot traffic could reinvigorate the street level's retail spaces, such as restaurants, bars or nightclubs. But as of now, the Forum remains in a frozen state, as if waiting for the hum of activity that filled the building for decades to return.

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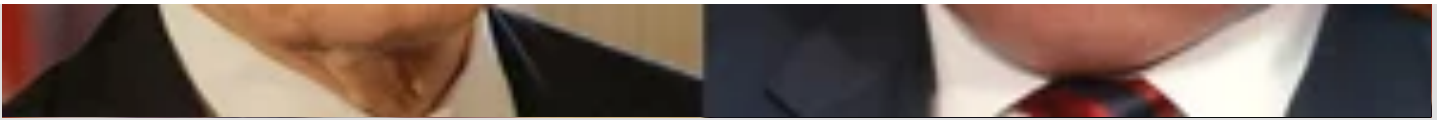
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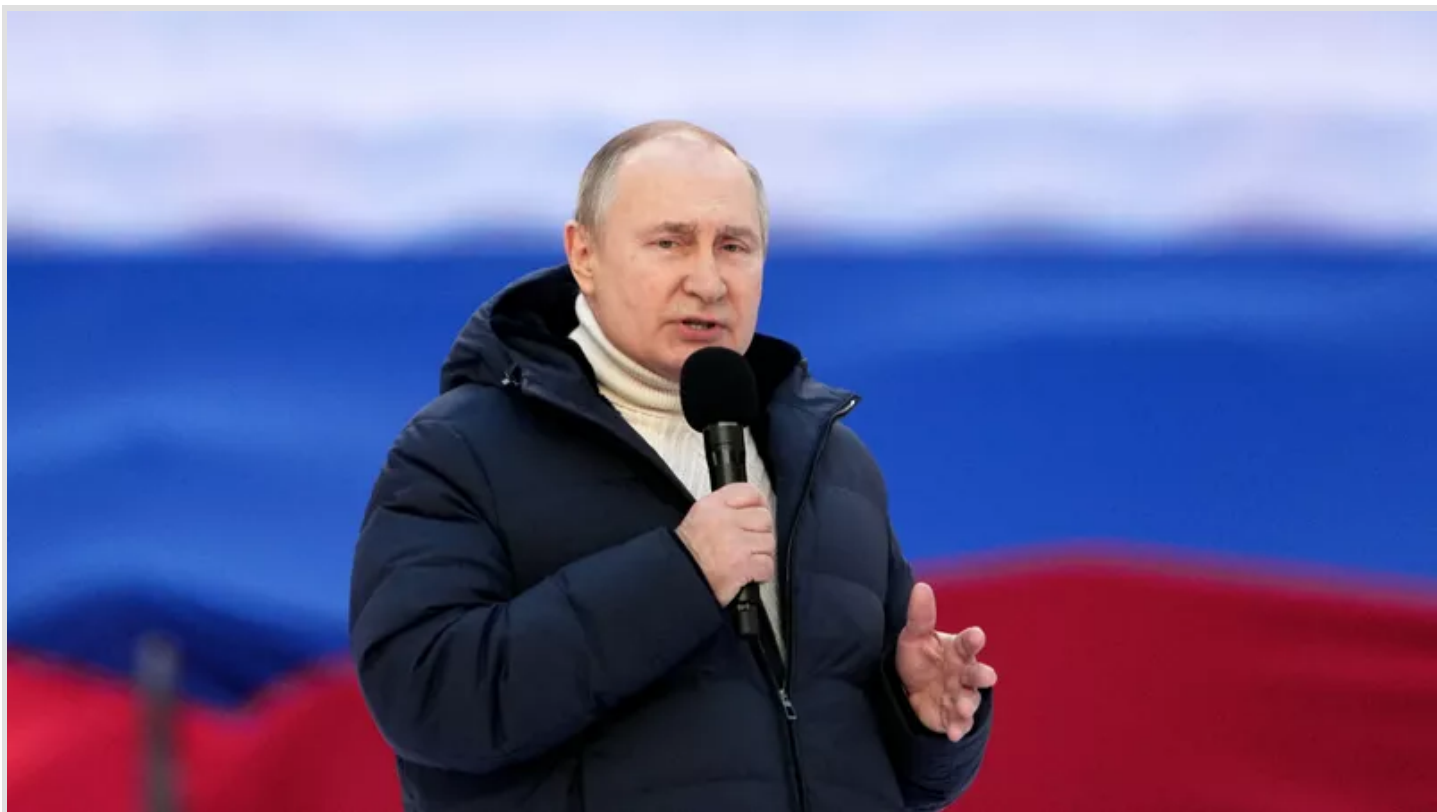
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