

News

Black Chicago Fights to Save Historic EBONY Building from Developers

By Erick Johnson (Chicago Crusader/
NNPA Member)

Downtown Chicago is set to explode with construction. In the next several years, the city that gave birth to the skyscraper will have a new look. A new generation of glitzy skyscrapers will sprout up all over the city, dramatically altering its famous skyline with bold new designs and soaring to greater heights.

The most fertile ground for the newest crop of high-rises is on South Michigan Ave., where, in the last several years, powerful developers have been harvesting plans to capitalize on one of the wealthiest residential districts in the city.

After intense meetings with residents and historic preservation officials, developers are moving forward with ambitious and jaw-dropping plans to plant mega-size buildings that would transform a relatively quiet residential district into a bustling neighborhood full of retail shops and post-new condominiums.

For developers, it's a race to the top in a battle to build the biggest and best skyscraper as large as the ego of a high-powered business mogul.

Sitting amidst these dreams is a small, but well-known 11-story building that's been vacant for nearly seven years.

Known to many visitors around the country as the "EBONY/Jet building," for decades, it was the corporate headquarters of the Johnson Publishing Company.

In its glory days, it was the engine



Affectionately known as the "EBONY/Jet building," the former headquarters of the Johnson Publishing Company is now prime real estate in Chicago.

behind *EBONY* and *Jet* magazines that sat on millions of coffee tables in the homes of Black America.

Once a proud symbol of achievement, the once Black-owned building still stands on one of the most prominent

streets in America.

It's now empty and perhaps the most vulnerable building to hungry developers.

In several years, the EBONY/Jet building will be wedged between two fresh skyscrapers.

To the north of it will be the 620-foot "Essex on the Park" skyscraper, which officially broke ground on Jan. 19. When completed, the skyscraper overlooking

of real estate that's stuck in the past.

Its uncertain future depends on what happens in the present, in trending neighborhoods and in corporate America, where big buildings are in and smaller ones are out.

Sitting on prime real estate where the demand for multi-million dollar skyscrapers is showing no signs of slowing down, the EBONY/Jet building will meet the wrecking ball if developers

We honor the many accomplishments of African Americans.



It is our primary goal as a labor union to **better the lives of all people working in the building trades** through advocacy, civil demonstration, and the long-held belief that workers deserve a "family wage" - fair pay for an honest day's work.

A family wage, and the benefits that go with it, not only strengthens families, but also **allows our communities to become stronger**, more cohesive, and more responsive to their citizens' needs.

Our family wage agenda reflects our commitment to people working in the building trades, and to workers everywhere. In this small way, we are doing our part to **help people achieve the American Dream**. This dream that workers can hold dear regardless of race, color, national origin, gender, creed, or religious beliefs.

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“My father started Johnson Publishing Company to inform, empower and uplift the African-American community” —Linda Johnson Price

Grant Park and Lake Michigan will have 479 luxury rental apartments. The deal also includes rehabbing and expanding the neighboring Essex Inn Hotel to 271 guest rooms.

Two blocks south of the EBONY/Jet building will be an 86-story glass skyscraper that will resemble a stack of giant ice cubes.

Reportedly named the Jahn Tower, it will have 506 units; 308 will be condominiums.

There is the 515-foot tower at 1326 S. Michigan and the planned twin skyscrapers on Indiana Ave., which at 76 stories high, will be third tallest building south of the Willis Tower.

And this is just the South Loop. Skyscrapers are going up on the North Side, too.

As the city experiences a boom in new skyscrapers, the house that EBONY/Jet founder John H. Johnson built remains a decaying relic that's up for sale as hungry developers push the limits of their projects into uncharted waters.

The buzzards of urban progress are closing in while the EBONY/Jet building stands increasingly vulnerable to extinction as space grows tight on South Michigan Ave. and demands for bigger, stylish skyscrapers climb to greater proportions.

For the EBONY/Jet building, an edifice whose history and important contributions to Black America has inspired generations for decades, the warning signs are there.

With its EBONY/Jet marquee still beaming at the top, it's a valuable piece

seeking to make the next statement on Michigan Ave. have their way.

On Feb. 2, Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced that the building would be considered for preliminary landmark status by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks — a nine-member group that has granted similar status over the years to over 370 historic sites in Chicago, including the homes of writers Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry and Richard Wright.

The group's latest move capped a month of researching and writing a preliminary report about the history of the EBONY/Jet building.

“My father started Johnson Publishing Company to inform, empower and uplift the African-American community,” Linda Johnson Rice, chairman of Johnson Publishing Company and chairman emeritus of Ebony Media Holdings, said in a statement. “With my mother Eunice by his side, they built an iconic brand. I am thrilled that the building housed our company for so many years and is being considered for landmark status. It's a true testament to the hard work of my parents and all the people who called Johnson Publishing Company home for decades.”

A member with the city's Historic Preservation Division whose staff sits on the city's Landmark Commission said the group could take up to nine months to decide whether the EBONY/Jet building should be an official Chicago landmark.

The commission has seven requirements for landmark designation.