

Steam baths to return

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The Russian and Turkish Bath House in Wicker Park, a sweaty part of Chicago's immigrant history, has been sold and an alderman said Wednesday the steam baths and saunas will be fired up again.

Ald. Proco Joe Moreno (1st) said the new owner of the building at 1914 W. Division will reopen the bathhouse and provide a restaurant. Moreno, whose ward includes the property, said that in a throwback to the bathhouse's original design, there will be separate facilities for men and women.

The bathhouse closed a few years ago and the building has been empty. It was among the last surviving examples of public bathhouses that were common decades ago in teeming neighborhoods.

They were a place to socialize, relax and sweat off a few pounds, and perhaps make a few illegal wagers in card games. The Division Street baths provided material for such writers as Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow and Studs Terkel.

Moreno, who said he used to patronize the Division Street business along with notables such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the late U.S. Rep. Dan Rostenkowski, took his own stab at describing the ambiance.

"It's an experience that's very unique and communal," he said, "an environment with no cell phones going off. It's a working-class relaxation spa."

Property records show the building was sold Oct. 14 for \$1.65 million to a partnership run by Alex Loyfman of AM Realty Management Inc. in Skokie. Loyfman could not be reached.

The seller is American Chartered Bank in Schaumburg, which had taken over the building in a foreclosure but is providing Loyfman a mortgage. The Colucci family ran the business for years, but some believe it went into decline after owner Jimmy Colucci died in 2003.

Doug Fisher, managing director at Essex Realty Group Inc. and the broker in the sale, said the building dates from 1908. Above its commercial space are five two-bedroom apartments that Loyfman will renovate, he said.

He said Loyfman will preserve the façade. It's possible the building will get official landmark designation, Fisher said, although a city official said no such application has been made.

The old bathhouse had a connected restaurant and bar, making it the only place in Chicago where it was possible to get a drink or a meal clad only in a towel, or maybe not even that. It's not known if the new version will have the same level of informality.
