



THE SOUTH STRIKES BACK

You'll find no prairie ghosts here. Development on historic Prairie Avenue and the surrounding neighborhoods is booming at an unprecedented pace, and once-rarefied addresses are again among the most envied in Chicago

BY MATT LEE PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATRINA WITTKAMP

The Gold Coast might as well be a million miles away. Three or so miles south of the city center, it's a fall Sunday on Prairie Avenue, and people are out and about. A short-haired man in a sweatshirt steps out of his car in front of a sparkling new high rise to take his black lab for a walk. A bit south, a girl chats on her cell phone while passing the Glessner House Museum, one of only a handful of original mansions left on Prairie since its luxe heyday in the 1890s, when the richest of Chicago's rich, like Marshall Field, George Pullman and Philip Armour, called it home. With its enticing blend of historic and new architecture, and possessing an evasive quietude smack dab in the middle of the city, it's hard to imagine wanting to be anywhere else.

Lake access? Check. More housing options than you can dream of? Check. A friendly neighborhood atmosphere? Check. In short, what's not to love?

A good many people have reached the same conclusion in recent years. Take Oscar Tatosian, owner of Oriental rug importers Isberian Rugs, for example. When he decided to move from his River North loft in 2000, he made a list of things that were priorities to him: "Reasonable parking, some outdoor space, something architecturally interesting and nearby highway access." Tatosian ended up buying the 112-year-old William H. Reid house at 2013 South Prairie in 2002 and getting even more than he bargained for. Like so many others who've flocked to this near-south enclave over the last several years, Tatosian was bewitched by the stunning architecture, the peaceful neighborhood and Prairie's proximity to the lake and everything downtown and the South Loop have to offer.

"It's residential living in the heart of downtown Chicago," says John McClendon, a government contractor and nightclub owner who lives with his partner, Keisha McClellan, creative services director for the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, and their 8-month-old son, Rogan, in a four-story town house on Indiana just south of 18th street. "We know our neighbors, we have a ton of trick-or-treaters and we're within walking distance of everything, from the daycare center to Grant Park to our favorite restaurants."

McClellan agrees. "I lived in New York for numerous years, and coming to the South Loop, I thought, 'This is a gem that a lot of people haven't capitalized on,'" says the Boston native, whose roomy yet cozy house is filled with fine art

THE RISE OF THE SOUTH: These recently built town houses on Prairie Avenue marked the beginning of the neighborhood's transformation.



from galleries across the country. "There's more space; you can have a parking spot for your car. I fell in love with it immediately."

Given the upside, the mystery isn't so much that the near south side along the lake has popped so explosively; the mystery is that it took as long as it did. While the wheels behind development in this part of town have been turning for years, little could prepare those familiar with the area two decades ago—when it was littered with dilapidated houses and abandoned factories—to imagine it today, packed with refurbished and new mansions, high rises, and condominium and town house developments. Similarly, it's hard to picture what the neighborhood—as defined by the lake to the east, Michigan to the west, Roosevelt to the north and Cermak to the south—will look like in 2010, when, according to real estate consulting firm Appraisal Research Counselors, there will be 10,500 residential units, up from just 500 in 1990. According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, there are no less than 14 major residential projects in various stages of development within a half mile of the historic district.

"It's amazing," says Nadine Ferrata, a realtor with Coldwell Banker who lives on Prairie and handles sales for one of the area's most unique properties, six luxury condos carved out of the refurbished Marshall Field Jr. mansion at 1919 South Prairie. "It has a neighborhood feel within the city. It has a lot of historical significance. And the proximity of the lake, the park and Museum Campus are huge drawing points."

They were for Kevin and Christine Flaherty, who began building their dream house on Prairie in 2002. The couple, both Chicagoland natives, originally considered buying in the neighborhood in 1998, after learning that the Marshall Field Jr. house was for sale. A walk through the then-dilapidated 30,000-square-foot mansion, however, revealed how much work it would take to restore. They instead decided to buy the lot directly south of the house and build what's turned out to be one of the street's most striking residences, old or new.

Their four-story house was conceived by Christine, designed by local architect Tim Levaughn and built, from 2002-2004, by Kevin's father's and brothers' company, Flaherty Construction. With an outdoor pool, large backyard and interior space to spare, it's an ideal environment for their 3-year-old son Declan to come of age. The neighborhood itself also has a lot to offer. "Having a young child, we can shoot over to the museums and be home by lunch," says Christine. "And we go to the lake all the time. I feel like we do a lot more than we used to."

Indeed, it's hard to pass by the path on Calumet leading to the lake, Soldier Field and Museum Campus without feeling drawn to take a stroll.

Restoring, as Tatosian is doing, or building, as the Flahertys have done, are only two out of a seemingly infinite array of housing options in the area. Scheduled to be completed in 2009, with units having gone on sale in November, is X/O, a highly modern pair of 35- and 45-story high rises on Prairie between 18th and 16th streets, designed by Chicago architect Lucien Lagrange. Priced up to more than \$2,000,000, units at the Frankel & Giles project will boast amenities such as a spa managed by American Leisure, which also operates spas at the Four Seasons Hotels and numerous Trump properties, private terraces and floor-to-ceiling windows. Twelve penthouses are available on the 43rd, 44th and 45th floors, and X/O will also offer 10 town houses.

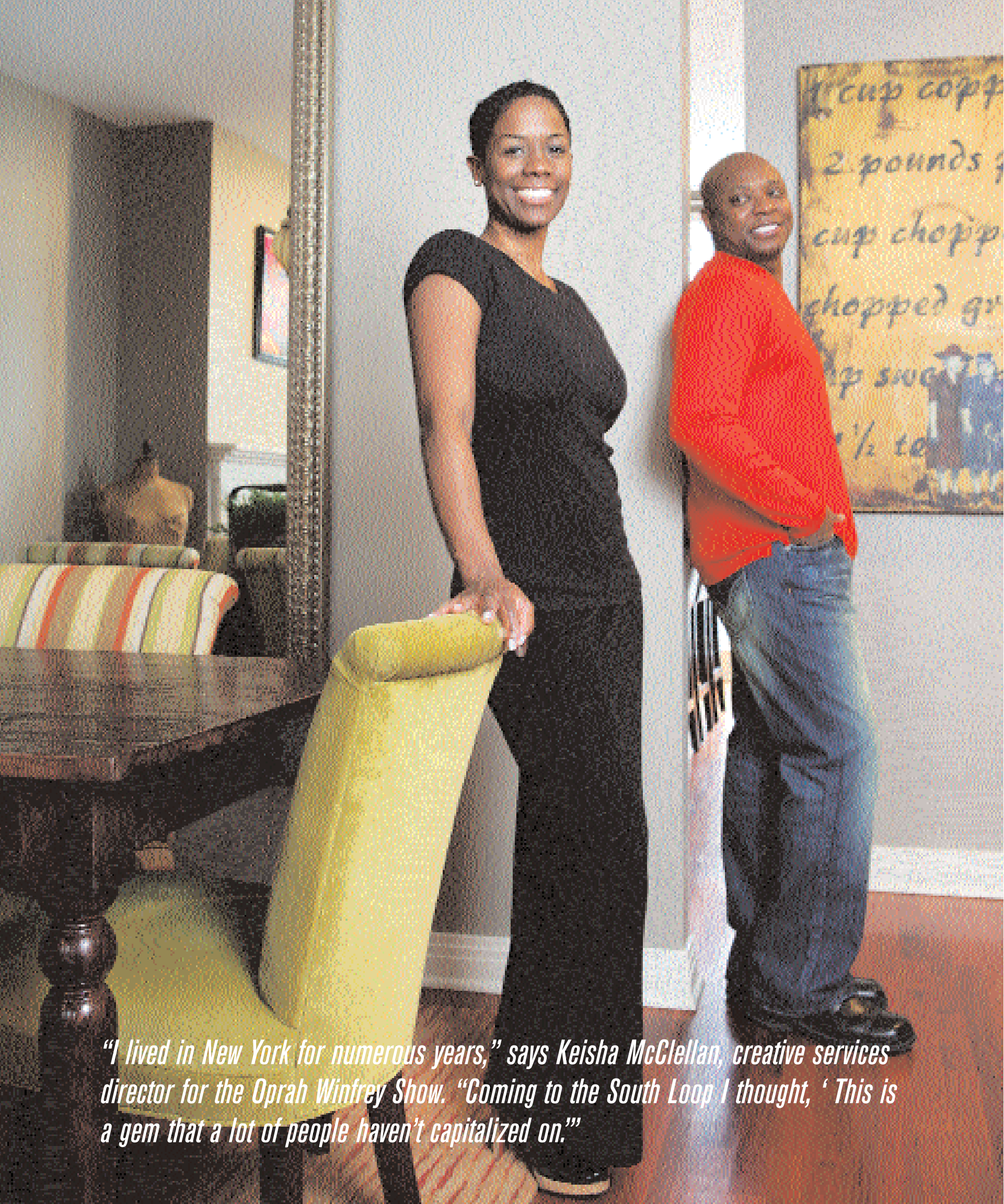


Left: Oscar Tatosian in his sitting room. **Right:** Tatosian's red African marble fireplace sits under a stained glass dome made by Chicago firm Healy & Millet.

To the south, stretching the entire block of Cermak between Indiana and Michigan, the Lexington Park development will rise 35 stories above the street, offering lofts and one-, two- and three-bedroom condominiums with spectacular views of the city skyline and lake. Other developments scheduled for completion over the next several years include the nine-story Prairie 21 property on the corner of 21st Street and Prairie, with 87 units, and the enormous Prairie Station, which will take up two blocks bordered by 21st Street, Calumet, Cermak and Indiana, as well as another block directly to the west. It will include a 25-story high rise, Aristocrat Tower, and an adjacent building, the Chess Lofts.

With this kind of housing boom, retail, restaurants and other businesses are never far behind. And, while not to everyone's complete satisfaction, this section of the South Loop already boasts a number of attractive boutiques, spas and destination restaurants, not to mention chain stores such as Whole Foods, Best Buy, and Home Depot, all scheduled to open by 2007.

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Opposite: Keisha McClellan and John McClendon in their town house on Indiana Avenue. Above, left: Kevin and Christine Flaherty's home, built from 2002-2004. Above: Declan Flaherty at play. Left: The Flaherty's dining room, designed by Christine Flaherty.



"In the last six years, this area has become really liveable," says McClellan, a longtime South Loop resident who owns two other properties in the area. "Our bank has opened up nearby; many of the major banks are within walking distance. And there's great sushi, Ousy on South Michigan, and Triad, just two blocks down." She and McClendon also enjoy Nuevo Latino hotspot Cuatro and the hip M Lounge, both nearby on Wabash, as well as Solo 1530 on State. The Flahertys, meanwhile, point to Italian restaurants Gioco, also on Wabash, and Cafe Bionda on State as their favorite walk-to destinations.

Restaurateurs aren't the only entrepreneurs privy to the area. On 16th Street between Michigan and Wabash, for example, an attractive string of storefront businesses have sprung up, including Flaunt women's boutique, Vi Sa Li salon, Heelz Chicago shoe salon and Abyss Salon. It's safe to say these are only the tip of a quickly rising retail iceberg.

As seems only right, the properties that will benefit most from the

neighborhood's rejuvenation may be the handful of residences that have stood steadfast since the days when novelist and meat-packing baron Arthur Meeker called it "the sunny street that held the sifted few." There are only a few mansions left from that time period, several of which are in the process of being restored to their original grandeur by loving owners. But it's not every home that offers nine fireplaces, a stained glass ceiling dome in the living room and a third-floor ballroom, as Tatosian's William H. Reid house does. When it comes down to individually cleaning the fittings from a pair of splendidly preserved Indian mahogany sliding doors in lemon juice one by one, it may require a special person to take on such a project. But the rewards, as Tatosian knows, are proportionate. And he, for one, can be counted among those who believe it just may be Prairie Avenue's destiny to be among the city's elite neighborhoods.

"I was in my Evanston store 20 years ago and a man brought in a bunch of rugs to sell," recalls Tatosian. "He said they'd been in storage for 50 years. I said, 'I'll give you X amount,' and we made a deal. He said, 'Now I'll tell you the story of these rugs.' It turns out they all came from the Marshall Field Jr. mansion. I knew a little bit about Prairie because in high school they brought us to Glessner House. I took the rugs and I thought, 'Well, this is my store... and I don't want to sell these rugs!' I rolled them up and put them in storage. Once in a while I sold a little Sarouk to a friend or somebody I was close with, but I kept the runner. And sure enough, 20 years later, it's back on the same street a few doors down. Isn't that great? It's like it's meant to be, come full circle." ■