

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



THE MIRACLE HOUSE

2001 N. NORDICA AVENUE

Final Landmark Recommendation adopted by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, February 4, 2021



CITY OF CHICAGO
Lori E. Lightfoot, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Maurice D. Cox, Commissioner

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Map	4
The Galewood Neighborhood in the Austin Community Area	5
Building Design and Construction	5
The Contemporary Style of Mid-Century Modern Residential Architecture	10
Belli & Belli Architects and Engineers, Inc.	11
Criteria For Designation	14
Significant Historical and Architectural Features	15
Selected Bibliography	16

The Miracle House

2001 N. Nordica Avenue

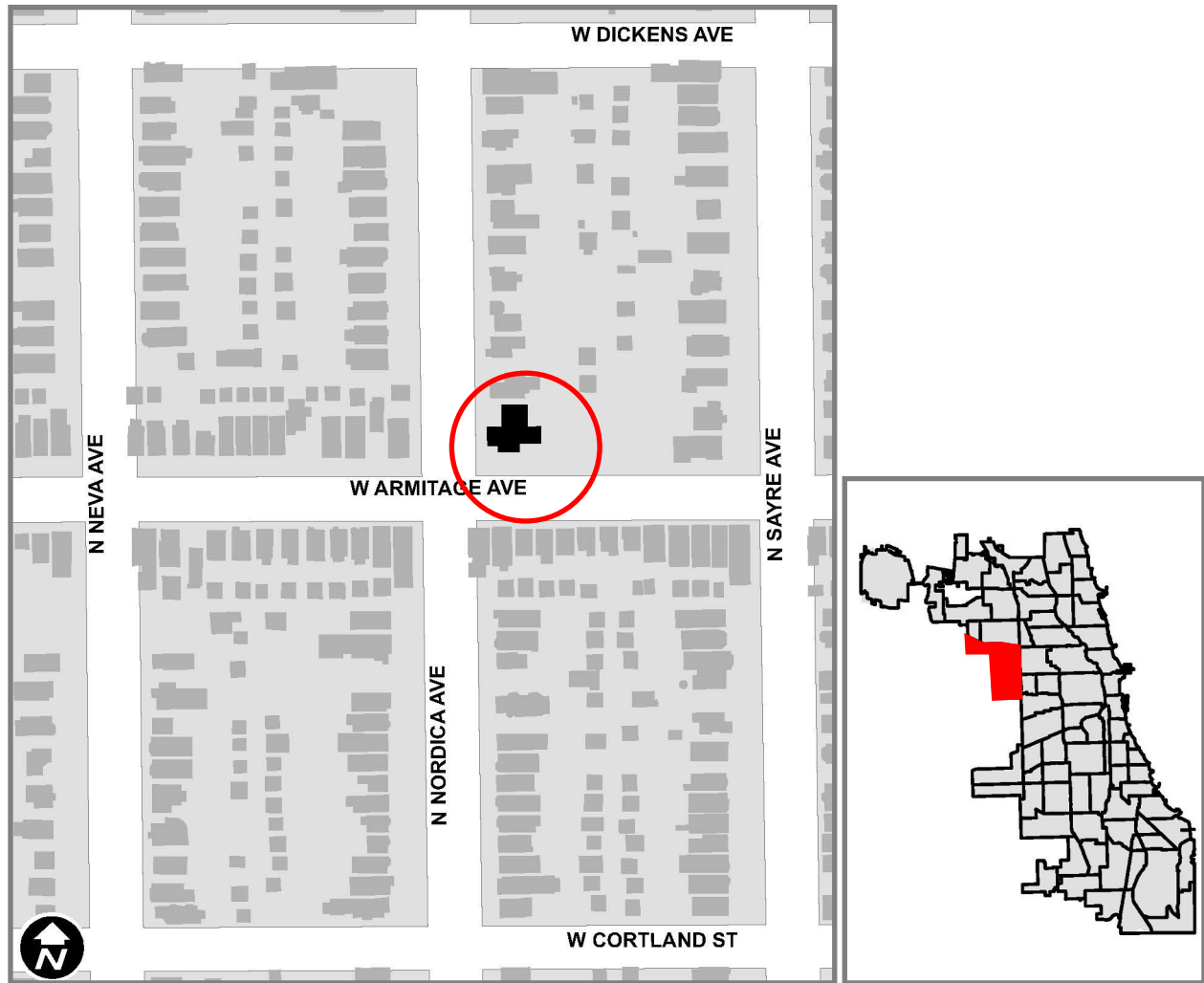
Built: 1954

Architect: Belli & Belli Architects and Engineers, Inc.

The bold, mid-century modern “Miracle House” stands at 2001 N. Nordica Avenue in the Galewood neighborhood within the larger Austin Community Area. The genesis of the house is perhaps unlike any other in Chicago for it was built as a grand prize for a raffle sponsored by the St. William Catholic parish located nearby. The name Miracle House first appeared on the raffle tickets and it has stuck with the property. In 1953, Fr. Frank Cieselski of the expanding parish conceived of a house raffle to raise funds for a new church, school, convent and rectory. Edo Belli, a 36-year-old Chicago modernist architect, and a Catholic who had attracted the backing of Archbishop Samuel A. Stritch for other diocesan commissions, offered to design the house free of charge and was given complete freedom of design. Indeed, Fr. Cieselski urged the architect to produce a boldly futuristic design that would capture attention and boost ticket sales.

Today the house stands as a unique work of modern residential architecture in Chicago with a structural system based on two giant steel arms that act as a suspension bridge rather than load-bearing walls and columns. The Miracle House is unique for its almost all-glass exterior, making it innovative in its openness and connection with its exterior surroundings

The Miracle House was the result of a campaign to raise capital funds for the expansion of a Catholic parish complex that resulted in not just the construction of the house itself, but also St. William parish a mile away, thus it reflects the important contributions religious communities made to Chicago neighborhoods. The futuristic design of the house also reveals the cultural optimism for novelty and the future that captivated America in the 1950s, even as the Cold War menaced. The house is also significant as the work of Belli & Belli Architects and Engineers, Inc., a small, family-run architecture firm founded in 1946 in Chicago, which by 1953 was a booming office with 45 employees. Belli & Belli played an outsized role during the modern era in Chicago and throughout the nation. The firm’s designs were marked by structural innovation and an expressive modern aesthetic that was arguably more popular than the austerities of the International Style.



The Miracle House is located at the northeast corner of Armitage and Nordica Avenues in the Galewood neighborhood within the Austin Community Area, seven miles west of the Loop.

THE GALEWOOD NEIGHBORHOOD IN THE AUSTIN COMMUNITY AREA

The Miracle House is located at the northeast corner of Nordica and Armitage Avenues in the Austin Community Area, seven miles west of the Loop. The Galewood neighborhood is located in the northwestern portion of the Austin Community area and it is bounded on the west by the city's boundary with Elmwood Park marked by North Harlem Avenue, on the north by the Milwaukee District West Metra rail line, on the east by North Narragansett Avenue, and on the south by the city's boundary with Oak Park marked by West North Avenue.

Galewood first developed as a 320-acre frontier farm settled by New York transplant Abram Gale in 1838. In 1899 a portion of the farm was leased to the Western Ho Golf Club which remained there until the late 1920s. In 1927, the golf club and what remained of the farm were subdivided for residential development by G. Whittier Gale, grandson of the original settler. Many of the homes in the neighborhood are bungalows, as well as a variety of revival styles of architecture including Tudor, Georgian, and French eclectic from before World War II, and Cape Cod and Ranch-style homes from the postwar era. Galewood has a distinctly suburban feel with the houses deeply set back on large, manicured lots.

BUILDING DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The Miracle House has an important tie to the Galewood neighborhood of Chicago and the local St. William Catholic parish. The idea of selling \$1 tickets for a raffle with a chance to win a futuristic house was motivated by St. William's need to expand its campus, an expansion that the raffle succeeded in funding. To that extent, the raffle not only added the Miracle House to the neighborhood in 1954, but eventually by 1961 also a new church, convent, school, and rectory at the four corners of the intersection of Sayre and Wrightwood Avenues. Belli & Belli designed all these buildings in the modern style, and for the church Edo Belli employed a thin-shell concrete wall and roof structure, a new technology of which Belli & Belli was an early adopter. Coincidentally, Belli & Belli's offices were located in the neighborhood.

When Edo Belli agreed to volunteer to design the Miracle House, Belli & Belli had already designed the first of what would become a large number of churches, institutions, and hospitals for the Catholic church in general and the Archdiocese of Chicago in particular. In addition, the firm took on commercial work, but Edo Belli had not yet designed a single-family dwelling other than for himself and his family. The Miracle House was a project that Edo Belli actually had to be talked into taking on by Cardinal Stritch, as residential design was not a common part of his firm's practice.

The house would be located on a large lot (100' x 200') at the northeast corner of Nordica and Armitage Avenues. Exactly how this property was identified or the decision-making that led to its purchase is unknown, but its proximity one mile south of St. William parish was certainly a factor.

Construction began as soon as Belli's design was completed in late 1953. As word of the planned raffle to win a futuristic house got out, donated labor and material started pouring in to assist with the construction, for a good cause and for the publicity. The Chicago Bridge & Iron Company contributed the massive steel arches, and General Electric donated all the necessary appliances making this an all-electric house. Sol Polk, of Polk Brothers, a famed Chicago appliance and electronics retailer, provided all the furnishings, free of charge. Sol Polk also led the promotion of the raffle. Trade unions offered their services *pro bono*. Jim Belli, Edo's son, be-



A raffle ticket from which the house derived its name. Purchasers were entitled to a tour of the house in the months leading up to the drawing.



An architectural model of the house built by Belli & Belli clearly showing the unique structural system that suspends the house from bridge-like trusses. The structure allowed the architect to reduce load-bearing walls and columns and open up the house to more light and free-flowing interiors.



The raffle succeeded in raising funds for the nearby St. William parish to build this church, as well as a new convent and rectory, also designed by Belli & Belli in 1957.

believes the only thing not donated was the windows.

When construction of the Miracle House finished in late 1954, purchasers of a \$1 raffle ticket were entitled to a house tour in the months leading up to the drawing in December of that year. The raffle was also promoted with custom-made glass ash trays depicting the house. The raffle drawing was held at the old Lion's Club in Chicago in December of 1955. Movie star and former neighborhood resident Kim Novak announced the winning ticket. She had attended St. Williams and her parents lived on Sayre Avenue, a half block away from the Miracle House site.

The winner of the house was a Joseph Novelle, who lived a half block away on Nordica. He owned the house briefly, selling it in 1957 to the Marano family, who put on a compatible addition in 1965 as their family grew. The Maranos remained in the house until 1989, when they sold it at auction to Alexander Fletcher, a Chicago fireman, who lived there for 10 years. In 1999, Dr. David Scheiner, M. D. bought the house and still lives there today as only its fourth owner over the house's 65-year history. (Dr. Scheiner had a long-established medical practice in Hyde Park, Chicago, where one of his patients was Barack Obama in the years before he became President.)

When it was completed in 1954, the house measured 20' x 56' with the primary elevation facing south onto Armitage Avenue. The house is suspended from two 36-ton steel arms spanning 100' in an east-west direction. The bridge-like structural system eliminated the need for load-bearing walls, allowing for ample glazing and an open interior free of columns. The exterior at the second floor consists of a glazed curtain wall while at the first floor the exterior is rendered in Lannon stone which is also used on the interior of the first-floor living room.

The first floor is a split-level with the ground level layout occupied by a living room and a recreation room (originally bedrooms) on the lower level. The kitchen and dining rooms are located on the second floor. A main bedroom fills the third floor. The large expanses of glass create a light-filled and spacious interior with terrazzo and travertine floors. Perhaps the most incredible room is above the south-facing carport - the kitchen, a beautiful projecting room with three walls of glass emitting light on the south, west, and east.

To accommodate a growing family of eight children, the Marano family added a bedroom addition to the house in 1965. Belli & Belli was offered the commission but declined due to the substantial number of hospital and commercial commissions on the boards at the time. A neighborhood architect, Ray Basso, took the job and generally respected Belli's original design, containing his work to the north side of the house, where the unique, original design stands on its own as approached from the south.

For years, the Miracle House was a drive-by destination for locals in the Galewood community and fans of modern architecture. Postcards were printed and celebrities visited, including Hugh Hefner, who grew up in the neighborhood. Today, the Miracle House is still recognized as a local landmark in the Galewood community.



The primary elevation of the house facing south onto Armitage Avenue. The second-floor kitchen with glazed curtain wall is suspended over the driveway creating a carport, reflecting the centrality of the automobile in residential architecture in America in the postwar era. The first floor is clad in coursed Lannon stone, a widely used material in the mid-twentieth century.



Detail of the pair of 36-ton steel trusses from which the house is suspended. They were fabricated by the Chicago Bridge & Iron Company which like many suppliers donated their services to the project.



In addition to the prominence of the automobile in residential architecture, outdoor living also became a new priority in the postwar era. At the west elevation of the Miracle House, sliding glass doors lead to a patio. A canopy over the terrace were added at a later date.

Lannon stone walls on the exterior carry into the interior of the first-floor living room. Floors are polished travertine. The short terrazzo stairway leads up to a split-level recreation room.



Another view of the living room showing a flitch-matched wood wall panel and clerestory windows. Unlike more austere forms of modern architecture, the Miracle House is a “Contemporary” style that held more broad appeal.



The suspended structure allowed for large areas of glazing, as shown in this view of the second-floor kitchen with terrazzo floors. Such opening up of exterior views of large manicured lawns was another characteristic of mid-century modern residential architecture.



THE CONTEMPORARY STYLE OF MID-CENTURY MODERN RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

The Miracle House is a clear example of mid-century modern residential architecture, a catch-all that includes a range of styles that are fluid and where commonly agreed-upon definitions remain elusive. Virginia McAlester's *Field Guide to American Houses*, revised in 2013, is regarded as the most definitive guide to American domestic architecture and it defines the "Contemporary Style" as best representing the Miracle House design.

While different styles fall under the mid-century modern umbrella, they all were responding to social and technological changes and new ways of living in postwar America. These transformations are well described in a 1960 issue of *House & Garden*:

Few periods in history can match the past decade in the number of spectacular changes it has witnessed in our daily lives. From a nation well supplied with automobiles we have turned to a nation living on wheels with the not too surprising result that the garage has become the real entrance of today's house. In a matter of months TV grew from a rather expensive toy into standard household equipment and in the process added to the house a new room—the family room. Insulating glass walls of the southern California house have become equally comfortable for the climate of northern Illinois. The whole country has succumbed to a passion for cooking, eating and lounging outdoors, but at the same time land on which to build, cook and lounge has become progressively scarcer.

Despite their stylistic differences, mid-century modern houses typically have attached garages incorporated into the building. Open floor plans and large living rooms for TV are commonplace. Large windows take full advantage of views of large, landscaped lawns. All these characteristics are visible in the design of the Miracle House.

The Contemporary Style rejected historical styles of architecture, however the style allowed for a greater variety of materials, textures, and forms making it more popular compared to more austere forms of mid-century modern house design.

The design of Contemporary Style houses is clearly influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian Houses which were built with natural materials, free-flowing interiors, and a blending of interior and exterior spaces. Contemporary Style houses were popular from 1945 to 1965 when they were designed by architects for individual clients or built in large numbers by developers, most notably by Joseph Eichler who built thousands of Contemporary Style homes in the San Francisco Bay area.

The Contemporary House style emphasized the convenience of open floor plans and the blending of indoor and outdoor spaces. The houses are typically two stories in height with flat or shallow-pitched and exposed roof structures. Exterior walls are clad in a variety of materials including brick, wood, and stone often used in combination. Entrances are often recessed or off-center. All these character-defining features are visible in the design of the Miracle House.

BELLI & BELLI ARCHITECTS AND ENGINEERS, INC.

The Miracle House was designed by Belli & Belli Architects and Engineers, Inc., a significant Chicago firm during the mid-century modern era and a practice that continues to this day. It was founded in 1946 by Edo J. Belli (1918-2003) and his brother Anthony J. Belli (1924-2007). The firm has designed commercial, ecclesiastical, institutional, and industrial buildings across the country and abroad and its work has been recognized with awards from the American Institute of Architects, the Association of Licensed Architects, and other professional and community organizations.

Edo J. Belli was born in Chicago in 1918 and began his education in architecture at the architectural program of Lane Technical High School. He graduated from there in 1936 in the middle of the Great Depression and began an architectural apprenticeship with Chicago architects Holsman & Holsman. His compensation included a paycheck of \$4.95 a week and tuition reimbursement for night classes at the Armour Institute, later the Illinois Institute of Technology. When work was slow, Holsman & Holsman “loaned” Belli out to other firms including Quinn and Christiansen, L.E. Janik, and Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. Belli completed three years of coursework at the Armour Institute, primarily in structural engineering. The historical record is unclear as to whether he earned a degree from Armour, but he successfully passed his state exam in 1940 and became a licensed architect.

At the outbreak of World War II in 1941, Edo Belli put his architectural training to use by joining the U.S. Naval Construction Battalions (the “Seabees”). His brother also served in the war as a B-17 Flying Fortress pilot, flying 14 missions in the European Theater with the Army Air Corps. After the war, the brothers returned to Chicago and established an architectural firm in 1946. In the early years, the firm started off doing small remodeling work until Marmion Abbey came along in 1949 and the religious work took off.

Edo Belli was a modernist who led the firm’s idiosyncratic and highly expressive aesthetic. Anthony, whose architectural education at the University of Illinois had been interrupted by the war, learned on-the-job and took courses at the Institute of Design in Chicago. His focus was on the technical and extensive construction administration of the firm’s “turn key” products. By the middle of the 1950s, in an age when many Chicago architectural firms pursued a corporate model, Belli & Belli stayed a family-owned practice, despite its great growth. In the 1960s Edo's sons Allen and James joined the firm.

Belli & Belli received a great many commissions for Catholic schools, churches, and hospitals in the mid-twentieth century in Chicago and across the United States. Belli & Belli’s cost-saving innovations in structural engineering and their idiosyncratic and expressive modernist aesthetic found favor in the Catholic world at a time when the church was opening up to all forms of modernism, including architecture.

Eleven designs by Belli & Belli have been recognized with awards including St. Patrick High School, Chicago (1955); St. Nicholas School, Aurora, Illinois (1955); and St. Gertrude Church, Franklin Park, Illinois (1957). In 1993 Belli & Belli’s work was also exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in “Chicago Architecture and Design, 1923-1993: Reconfiguration of an American Metropolis.”



St. Joseph Hospital, Chicago (1963)

St. Joseph's is characteristic of Belli & Belli's idiosyncratic, expressive, and colorful take on mid-century modernism. The form of the building consists of three slab-like wings clad in smooth limestone punched with a grid of window openings. The wing ends are clad in an eye-catching harlequin pattern of black and turquoise blue enamel panels. The design palette also includes a tinted-glass cylindrical curtain wall that extends the full height of the front facade, and contains elevator lobbies and lounges on each floor.



St John Bosco, Chicago (1966)

The St. John Bosco Church is in the Belmont Cragin neighborhood. The exterior walls are exposed-aggregate concrete panels and *dalle de verre* stained glass.

St. Francis De Sales High School, Chicago (1955)

Designed by Belli & Belli in 1955 in the Beverly neighborhood, St. Francis De Sales reveals Belli & Belli's embrace of curvilinear forms.



Frank Cuneo Memorial Hospital, Chicago (1959)

Cuneo Memorial Hospital demonstrates Belli & Belli's whimsical yet thoughtful approach to hospital design, including a roof line that resembles an artist's palette.



St. Gertrude Church, Franklin Park (1954)

Edo Belli claimed that this was the first church to employ a thin-shell concrete structure.



CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Section 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art, or other object within the City of Chicago if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for designation,” as well as possess sufficient historic design integrity to convey its significance. The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Miracle House be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion 1: Value as an Example of City, State or National Heritage

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.

- The Miracle House was the result of a campaign to raise capital funds for the expansion of a Catholic parish complex that resulted in not just the construction of the house itself, but also St. William parish a mile away, thus it reflects the important contributions religious communities made to Chicago neighborhoods.
- The futuristic design of the house also reveals the cultural optimism for novelty and the future that captivated America in the 1950s, even as the Cold War menaced.

Criterion 4: Exemplary Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- The Miracle House stands as a unique work of modern residential architecture in Chicago with a structural system based on two giant steel arms that act as a suspension bridge rather than load-bearing walls and columns.
- The Miracle House is unique for its almost all-glass exterior making it innovative in its openness and connection with its exterior surroundings.

Criterion 5: Work of Significant Architect or Designer

Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

- The Miracle House is significant as the work of Belli & Belli Architects and Engineers, Inc., which started out as a small, family-run architecture firm in 1946 in Chicago, but was a booming office with 45 employees in 1953.
- Belli & Belli played an outsized role during the modern era in Chicago and throughout the nation. The firm’s designs were marked by structural innovation and an expressive modern aesthetic that was arguably more popular than the austerities of the International Style.

Integrity Criterion

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and ability to express its historic community, architecture, or aesthetic value.

The Miracle House has excellent integrity retaining its historic site characteristics on its corner lot, overall form, massing, materials and detailing.

In 1965 the Marano family commissioned local architect Ray Basso (Belli and Belli were offered but declined the commission) to design an addition on the north side of the house, which did not compromise the original design. The addition accommodated four additional bedrooms, a maid's quarters, and a 2 ½-car garage.

Aside from the north addition, the only change to the original structure was the addition of a removable canopy over the west side second-floor balcony. This was done at an undetermined date prior to 1999.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURE

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based upon its evaluation of the Miracle House, Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as follows:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building.

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose eight members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual building, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development; Bureau of Citywide Systems, Historic Preservation & Central Area Planning, City Hall, 121 North LaSalle Street, Room 905, Chicago, IL 60602; (312-744-3200) phone; web site: <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dcd/provdrs/hist.html>

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within a designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

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