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Salvaged style



A brick once so ubiquitous it was called Chicago common is now prized for its softer look

By Laurie Grano
Special to the Tribune

Chicago contractor Nonda Kourkouvis' specialty is building new houses that look old, so when it came time to construct a house in Lake View, he knew just the trick to give the place an instant aged look: used brick.

The limestone-faced, neoclassical-style house blends into the decades-old streetscape because, like the vintage buildings sur-

rounding it, the house is wrapped on three sides with antique Chicago common brick. It sits on a lot-and-a-half and was finished this summer.

"I like the appearance, it's got more of a rustic feel," Kourkouvis said of the buff-colored brick. "And I wanted the house to blend in with Chicago, to blend in with the history of Chicago."

"Chicago commons," as the familiar clay blocks are called in the trade, also come in pink shades and are no longer made. They were used somewhere on most structures built in the city and nearby towns from about the 1850s to the early 1940s, when area brick-making operations closed as concrete block became the popular—and cheaper—building material.

Today, common and other old brick can be reclaimed from salvage yards for a range of home improvement projects, from wall patching on historic homes, to new fireplaces in family room additions, to entire new houses such as Kourkouvis'.

"The Chicago brick has a nice color and texture to it," said Chicago architect Dan Sutherland, who has used the brick to make older-home additions match the original structures. "It has a softer look than the more formal face brick, so it can be used to take that 'urban' edge off a building. Inside, when paired with a compatible wood such as pine, it creates an inviting, casual feeling."

Because of limited supply, area homeowners planning a project with reclaimed Chicago commons can expect a hunt for their treasure and, if



"Chicago commons" were widely used on city structures from about the 1850s to the early 1940s. Now they're no longer made.

they find it, to pay a premium above new brick.

As a construction company owner, Kourkouvis was able to buy his brick from a wholesale supplier, Chicago Antique Brick. Even so, collecting the 38,000 bricks needed for his project in the right color and condition took almost three months and was double the cost of new brick, he said.

"It was hard to find it," said Kourkouvis, adding the effort and money spent on the old brick were "totally worth it. It's probably the best money we spent on the house."

He added with a laugh: "I get more compliments on the sides and back of the house than on the Vienna limestone front."

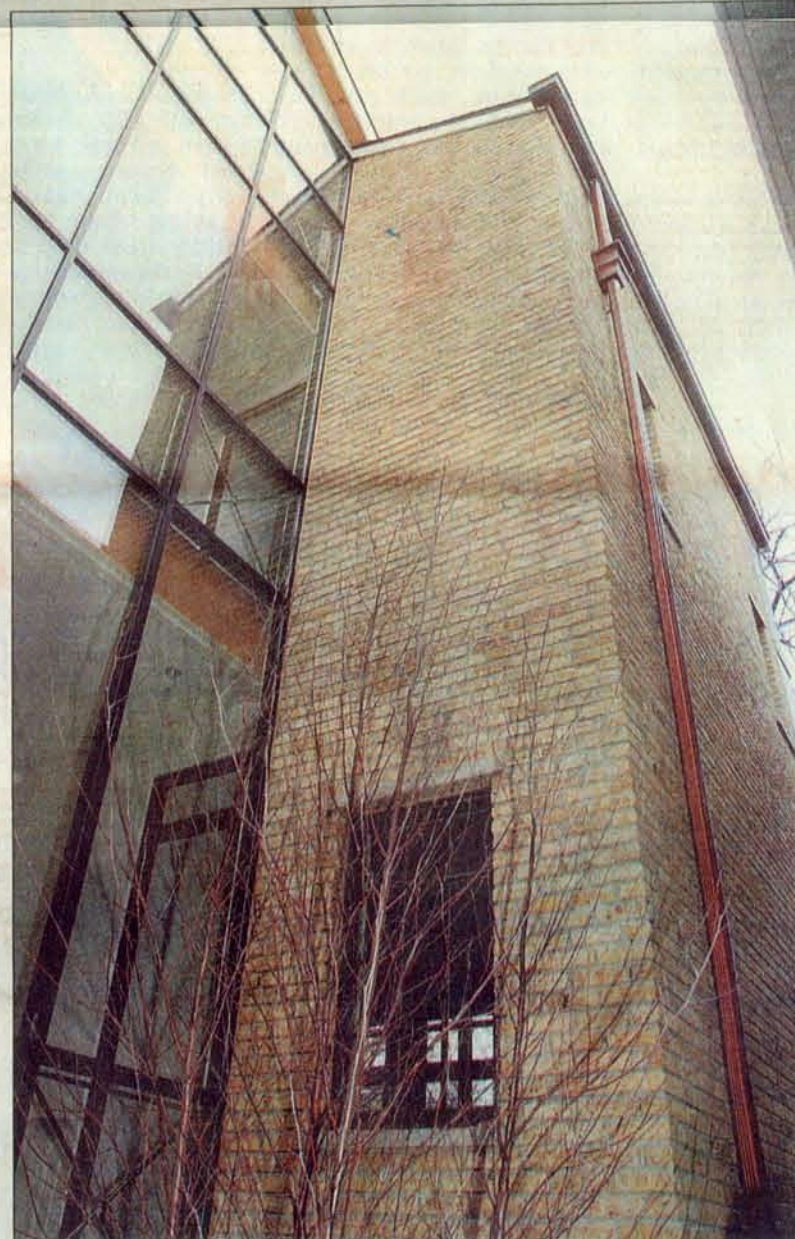
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Rick Oswald of Colonial Brick Co. in Chicago salvages Chicago commons from demolished buildings.



It took Chicago contractor Nonda Kourkouvis three months to find enough used brick for his Lake View house.



Photos for the Tribune by Margo Cohn

Kourkouvis' newly built house in Lake View is clad in Chicago common brick. The softer look of the brick helps it blend in with the older houses on the block, says Kourkouvis.

BRICK: Used brick in demand nationwide

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Although demand for the Chicago-made brick is constant, the only source—demolished old brick buildings—is dwindling, said Rick Oswald, general manager at Colonial Brick Co., the country's oldest and largest wholesale and retail used brick dealer. "There's just less and less available brick out there," he said.

Making matters worse for local buyers, Oswald and other industry experts say, is that the material is sent to warm-weather states, including Florida, Texas and California, where the blocks are used to pave driveways and terraces of high-end homes. (Experts recommend against using the brick for outdoor paving in the Midwest because they are easily damaged by the freeze-thaw cycle.)

Chicago-made brick was once as taken for granted in these parts as concrete is today. Brick-

making plants dotted the city and surrounding area, producing millions of the soft, solid bricks from the region's seemingly endless clay deposits.

"Chicago common brick was considered a real work-horse brick," said Tim Samuelson, cultural historian for the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs. "It was thought of as a cheap brick for utilitarian purposes."

Chicago brick usually covered a building's sides and rear. For the facade, a fine-quality, more expensive brick or stone was imported from other parts of the country, Samuelson said.

In their heyday, the local bricks were known as "Chicago pinks," Samuelson said. The minerals in the clay and the bricks' haphazard firing lent to the varying tones of pinkish-buff, he said. (The occasional burnt black ones were known as "clinkers" but came to be desirable for the interest they added, Samuelson said.)

Sun, rain and other environmental elements only enhanced the bricks' color and character, and by the 1930s, the humble Chicago pink was promoted to the front of buildings by such maverick architects as Frank Lloyd Wright and Keck & Keck, Samuelson said.

By the late 1960s, even-cheap-

er concrete block had become the building norm, and the local brick makers had all but disappeared. "At the time, most people in Chicago were so used to the pinks that nobody paid any attention to them," Samuelson said. "People in other parts of the country, particularly in California, saw the beauty in them, and then there was this salvage brick market."

A few savvy salvagers—most notably Colonial Brick Co. founder Phil Mumford—rose to meet the demand, which included supplying used commons for local building repair and restoration. By the 1980s, people in Chicago began to recognize the homegrown brick's decorative appeal, Samuelson said.

Today, there still are only a few area used brick suppliers. At Colonial Brick, labor crews assembled at wrecking sites sort, clean, stack and cardboard-wrap the bricks on pallets. The 500-piece, 2,500-pound pallets are trucked to Colonial's two-acre brickyard to join an ever-changing inventory.

Although contractors are Colonial Brick's primary clients, home delivery is available. A homeowner with a small wall-patching job, for example, is expected to pay for a full pallet, Oswald said. (He suggests bringing sample bricks from the pro-

ject site for easier matching.)

Old Chicago commons sliced into ½-inch tiles also are sold online at Brick Floor Tile, www.brick-floor-tile.com. The tiles are installed on floors in the same manner as unglazed ceramic tile, and the average cost is \$4 to \$4.50 per square foot, according to owner Jeff Gavin.

Tuckpointer Richard Davies, owner of United Masters Inc. in Schaumburg, has spent 25 years

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Tim Samuelson of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs

working with Chicago and other old bricks on new and restorative projects, he said. He recalls buying used bricks off the city's South Side streets then hauling them to Barrington Hills, where they were used to build fireplaces in new homes.

"The homeowners didn't even want them cleaned," Davies said. "They wanted them the way they were, with the bits of old billboard and paint on them."

Davies said that when it comes to having the Chicago commons professionally installed, homeowners might face resistance from their mason. "A lot of masons want to take the easy way out on a project, and the easiest way is to use new brick," Davies said. "Even if the brick is 80 years old, in my opinion it's better than any new brick. New bricks are brittle."

Labor costs vary depending on the project, but in general, a homeowner can expect to pay from about \$800 to \$1,200 a day for a three-man bricklaying crew, not including the cost of the brick, he said.

For most exterior projects, the bricks should be laid with a soft mortar, preferably colored with a pale buff dye to blend with the brick, Davies said. For interior projects, he often dyes the mortar a darker shade to highlight the brick.

In most cases, Chicago commons should never be sealed, painted or sandblasted, he said. Sealants and paint trap moisture, suffocating the brick and causing it to crumble and peel. Sealants will change the brick's color and eventually yellow, and sandblasting will pit the soft clay surface, he said.

To strip paint from old brick, Davies recommended using a non-abrasive chemical paint re-

mover designed specifically for brick, and then power washing.

Kourkouvis has been wise to the charm of salvaged brick for some time. His Athens Construction Co. started using reclaimed Chicago commons in 1986, and since then he has used them on dozens of client projects, including fireplaces, interior walls and new above-ground foundation facing.

To get the clean look he was after for the Lake View house and detached three-car garage, he handpicked the bricks from the pallets to make sure they "were solid, with four good sides," he said. He also didn't want any painted bricks.

"But if they had small imperfections, that was OK because that's the look of it," he added.

The two-story, five-bedroom house is a frame structure with a brick veneer, Kourkouvis said. He paid close to \$20,000 for the salvaged brick and said it cost twice as much as new brick in part because he used only the best, or about half, of the old bricks he ordered.

Turns out those recycled Chicago commons have done their job to make the new house look as if it has been around for 100 years. "Everyone who sees it, they think it's an old house," he said with a chuckle. "I think it looks like an old house."