



A bathroom at the Opera Lofts. Occupancy is under way.

## Echoes of arias at opera warehouse

**PREMIERE OF HOMES** | Designed to accommodate large-scale sets

A five-story warehouse at 26th and Dearborn served as a storage facility for the Lyric Opera of Chicago (and its preceding companies) for many years. Ninety-three lofts are planned in a conversion of the vintage building. First occupancies are under way.

The building, built in sections between 1912 and 1924, was specially designed to accommodate the unique demands of large-scale opera sets — with oversize ceilings, concrete floors and huge freight elevators. Over the years, hundreds of sets, backdrops, costumes, equipment and staging were designed, rigged, repaired and stored for use by opera firms, notes the Web site for the Opera Lofts at 2545 S. Dearborn.

"Seamstresses, fitters and dyers created colorful and exotic apparel. Metal- and woodworkers manned sturdy lathes. Painters turned out drops 70 feet wide and 40 feet high, operating in a cavernous space in

which the drop could be raised and lowered through an opening in the floor," an article from Chicago magazine's December 2004 recalled. The materials would be trucked, scene by scene, downtown to the Civic Theater in those days in the early 1920s, when utility mogul Samuel Insull oversaw the Chicago Civic Opera Co. (Insull also built the Vernon Hills mansion now known as the Cuneo Museum.)

Insull's aspirations for his opera company ended abruptly during the Great Depression. The warehouse was abandoned for 22 years — until it was rediscovered in 1954 by staffers from the new Lyric Opera of Chicago. They found costumes from as far back as 1910 layered in dust.

In 1966, Lyric decided to stage a production of Georges Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers." The setting called for a giant statue — 30 feet high — of a Sri Lankan god.

"The massive structure of steel wire and foam required 16 men to hoist it on and off stage — one of the largest props in Lyric's

history," Gale Kappe and Britney Blair wrote in Chicago magazine. When the production was over, the giant god was stored in the warehouse, lying on its back in a corner, long forgotten.

After the building was sold to a developer, Lyric held a sale of the remaining items. "For hours, thousands of bargain hunters stood in lines four and five blocks long," the magazine said. "They bought spears, oars, trunks, chairs, sofas, statues and costumes." The proceeds of the sale totaled more than \$77,000.

*Bill Cunniff*