

# PRESERVATION MATTERS

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## Castles in the Air: Three Unbuilt Projects

In the course of researching the history of the built environment of Champaign-Urbana, I often find myself working page by page through faded newsprint or peering at microfilm in hopes of finding the pertinent facts about a particular building. With diligence, I usually succeed in finding the facts or at least a clue where to continue the search, but every now and then I find a treasure that is totally unrelated to the matter at hand. Often it's just a reference to a long gone building, previously unknown to me, or, if I am really lucky, a photograph or drawing that fills one of the holes in the streetscape. The best discoveries though are plans or schemes that, for one reason or another, remained unfulfilled and exist only on paper. In some cases, the buildings are obviously just "pie in the sky," but several of them have been intriguing and you can't help but wonder what if . . .

### The New Hamilton

In 1917, C.F. Hamilton, the well-known Champaign businessman and hotelier was busy with his latest project. Hamilton had been a major mover in the development of downtown Champaign and in concert with others had helped build and finance any number of businesses in the area. At the time, his most ambitious project was the establishment of The Grand Hotel. Located at the southwest corner of University Avenue and Neil Street, the Grand occupied a large three-story structure with a bay window that overlooked the busy downtown corner, opposite City Hall.

But now C.F. Hamilton was about to begin a project that would outshine all his others, a project so magnificent that it would make him a household name not only in Champaign-Urbana, but throughout the state of Illinois. The plans had been drawn, the financing was in place, the necessary

permits and bids had been received and approved and Mr. Hamilton had finally secured the ideal property for his new building. It had taken months to secure the location, but Hamilton had persuaded the last holdout to move his long established business so that the site could be cleared and construction begun. The location was the southwest corner of Church and Neil streets, the venerable Metropolitan block, and the new building was to be a magnificent twelve-story bank/hotel. It would have towered over everything in the city and provided an awe-inspiring visual terminus when viewed from the east end of Main Street. Granted, taller buildings existed in Chicago, but nothing like it existed south of the Loop and certainly no other small city in the state would be able to boast of such a magnificent edifice.

The Champaign Gazette published an elaborate description on April 24, 1917:

The new hotel will have 150 rooms, all with bath, and will cost approximately a quarter of a million dollars, building and grounds. It will be completed within ten months. . . . The new building is to be of reinforced concrete, fireproof throughout and thoroughly modern.

The Neil St frontage on the street was to be the home of a new Savings and Loan company that was being organized under Mr. Hamilton's auspices. The hotel office and lobby would be at the rear of the building with a main entrance off West Church St. The lobby dimensions of both the hotel and bank would be nearly equal in size, 33 by 54 feet for the hotel and 33 by 48 feet for the bank. Both would have 24 foot ceilings, which would permit a mezzanine balcony. The front of the third floor would be devoted to parlor and reception rooms suitable for all social occasions and the extreme rear of the floor would provide several parlor/bedroom suites. From the fourth to the twelfth floor, each

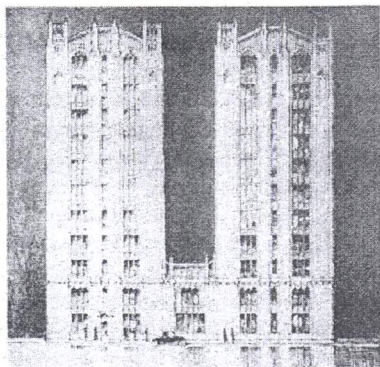
floor would be identical. A large hallway would run through the building with large rooms on either side, all with outside exposure. There were to be no windowless interior rooms in the building. A double passenger elevator would run from the basement to the top of the building. On the twelfth floor of the hotel was to be a magnificent roof garden that would be in operation year round as it would be enclosed completely by a moveable glass roof in winter. The hotel was also to be run on the European plan, with no café or restaurant and it would provide a free bus that would meet all trains for the convenience of the guests.

Unfortunately, no drawings or plans for this building have been found and despite a lengthy search of the local papers for the subsequent months, no other mention of the "New Hamilton" can be found. Obviously, the project never got off the ground, despite Mr. Hamilton's detailed arrangements. Until last year's devastating fire, the old Metropolitan block was still with us and we can only assume that some other circumstance put an end to the project. A possible reason may be the entry of the United States into WWI later in 1917 and the diversion of all steel production to war needs. A similar fate met the new Robeson Building just down the street. It's half finished steel frame languished until well after the war's end when construction resumed. By the time steel was available, C.F. Hamilton was involved in other business and his magnificent hotel exists only as a description in the newspaper.

### The Melton Building

After WWI, the campus town area was experiencing a building boom of sorts. The University was expanding and along the old fraternity row on East Green Street, many of the old frame houses were being replaced by commercial structures. Fraternities were moving south to be near "Fraternity Park" (Washington Park) and they were building elaborate new houses

in a variety of styles. At this time the only dormitory on campus was the Women's Building (Busey-Evans) on Nevada Street; there were no dormitories for men until after WWI. Most men lived in fraternities or in private boarding houses, however, E.L. Melton had a plan. He proposed a New Hotel Dormitory for Young Men. It was to be built on the northwest corner of John and Sixth streets in the very heart of campus town.



Architect's drawing of the Melton Building. Source: 1918 Illio.

The single known drawing of this dormitory depicts a large twin-towered building, each tower with twelve stories linked by a two-story lobby. Steel-framed and completely fireproof, the exterior was designed in a modified Gothic style, resembling a small-scale version of the new Tribune Tower in Chicago. An airy lighted basement and the first floor were to contain a first class restaurant, barber shop and haberdashery and space for other commercial ventures. A well-established campus photography business, the Howard Studio, was to occupy a large space off the main lobby. The upper floors were to be modern up-to-date single rooms with private baths and a telephone in every room. Rents would be \$10 and up, presumably by the week. It seems likely that such lavish quarters were aimed at the well-heeled gentlemen on campus who were used to the luxury of big cities.

The Melton Building generated a good deal of interest on campus but was never built. We can only hope that, unlike the trusting students of today, no one in 1918 had signed a lease in advance and was left high and dry when the Melton Building never broke ground.

#### Phi Pi Phi Chapter House

In 1932, Phi Pi Phi Fraternity was comfort-

ably established at 305 East Green Street, occupying the old Tau Kappa Epsilon house, a large imposing Victorian structure. Founded at Northwestern University in 1915, Phi Pi Phi had chartered a chapter at the University of Illinois in 1923 and now, after nearly ten years, there were plans to build a new house.

A rendering of the new house was published in the 1932 Illio, no doubt in hopes of breaking ground soon. The new Phi Pi Phi house would have been a radical new presence, not only on Green Street, but anywhere on the University campus. Instead of the popular period revival Georgian or Tudor houses of Fraternity Park, the new Phi Pi Phi house was to be an exercise in the *Arte Moderne*, a gleaming collection of cubes with a smooth surface and bands of wrap around glass-block windows. The main block was three stories tall with two lower wings, which probably formed sun terraces. The whole structure seems to have a completely flat roof, which would have been a maintenance nightmare in the snowy mid-west.

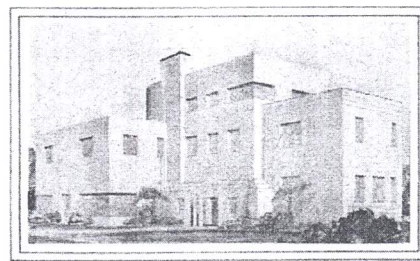


Old Tau Kappa Epsilon House. Source: 1918 Illio.

The Phi Pi's would have certainly been at the forefront of fashion. Strongly influenced by the Bauhaus and the Art Deco of the 1920s, the chapter house would have seemed pure Hollywood to the conventional eyes of Champaign, similar to the Great White Sets of Busby Berkeley's movie musicals or the elegant home of Berkeley's favorite designer, Cedric Gibbons. The use of glass block and the continuous banded cornice are all taken from the cinema sketchbook. Even the recessed front door looks as if it could open at any moment to reveal a gleaming black and white interior and a glamorous Hollywood party.

Unfortunately, the United States was in the depths of the Great Depression and

1932 was to prove the second worst year of the era. The Phi Pi's probably decided to make do with the old house on Green Street and put their radical new design aside until better times. By the time the nation had recovered from the Depression, the Phi Pi Phi fraternity had been dissolved and consolidated with Alpha Sigma Phi in 1939. The Alpha Sigs were more conventionally minded. Their house on Armory Avenue was a perfectly ordinary exercise in the classical revival and Green Street never got its little bit of Hollywood. We could only wish that these three



Architect's drawing of the Art Deco Phi Pi Phi. Source: 1932 Illio.

projects had seen the light of day. Each would have been a stunning addition to the landscape of Champaign, but for some reason, they all remained just designs on paper, castles in the air.

*This article was researched and written by Mark Chenail, architectural historian and retired UIUC librarian.*

### Save the Date!

**The PACA Annual Meeting  
will be held on Sunday, April  
18th at Edison Middle School.**

### Volunteer Spotlight

Mark Chenail was born in northeast Connecticut. His great-grandfather and two of his brothers bought three adjoining farms and ran a big combined dairy business. His great grandfather had thirteen children and his two brothers were equally prolific, so his childhood was filled with old-maid aunts, bachelor uncles and cousins without number.

The family's two claims to fame were that they are descended from Leon Bouthillier, Duc de Chavigny, who was Cardinal Richelieu's right

hand man. The second claim is that Revolutionary War General Israel Putnam once owned the family farms. Putnam was the man who first said "Don't fire until you see the white's of their eyes." (Although others say it was Col. William Prescott.) However, Putnam's real accomplishment was that he designed a four-seat outhouse for the local church that was documented in HABS before being destroyed in a hurricane.

Considering these family connections, it's no wonder that Mark developed an interest in architecture and history at an early age. Coupled with a mother who was also an antique loving real estate agent, he spent a lot of time as a child wandering around old houses and attending auctions. Mark survived polio, but is confined to a wheelchair. Mainstreamed in local schools at his mother's insistence, he graduated from the local high school.

In 1970, Mark came to the University of Illinois, attracted primarily by the completely wheelchair accessible campus and the architecture school. But Mark soon transferred to Art History with an emphasis on the History of Architecture. After receiving his Masters in 1976, he went to work for the University



Library with the intention of getting a PhD and teaching. But thirty-two years later, he retired from the Library.

During those years he watched the twin cities change through urban renewal and missed seeing wonderful buildings now known only from photographs. He discovered PACA when he bought his first old house. With the help of PACA, a few good craftspeople, and a lot of friends who worked for food and beer, he managed to whip the house into shape. By then he was hooked and went on to buy other old houses and redo them. He eventually bought twelve acres of land in Missouri where he and his partner Jon have slowly been building a house. It's an amalgam of new lumber and truckloads of salvaged materials from PACA.

Mark retired in 2007 with every intention of moving to Missouri, but activities have kept him here. Currently, he and Tom Garza are creating an interactive online 3D map of downtown Champaign in 1914, using old photos and computer modeling. Mark also serves Champaign's Historic Preservation Commission and was recently appointed to the City's Sesquicentennial Celebration Commission. In his spare time, Mark is authoring the PACA Newsletter and volunteers at the warehouse.

### Calling All Volunteers!

There are several critical volunteer positions open with PACA. Three Board of Director vacancies will be filled in April. In addition, there is an opening for a webmaster. Warehouse and salvage volunteers are always welcome.

Contact [pacaexdir@gmail.com](mailto:pacaexdir@gmail.com)

## Medieval Architectural Fragments to be Auctioned

PACA is offering at auction a semi tractor-trailer load of 15th century carved, medieval limestone. Acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago in 1922, the stone was installed in the former Lucy Maud Buckingham Medieval Room at the Art Institute. The Buckingham Room was dismantled in 1965 and the stone relegated to storage. PACA acquired the stone from the Spurlock Museum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.



The grouping consists of over 200 pieces of carved limestone from a medieval quarry located in Normandy, France. The major pieces comprised three large Gothic window frames and two doorway surrounds. Two short 19th century columns and a niche are miscellaneous pieces included in the grouping. Currently, the pieces are set on pallets and loaded in a semi tractor-trailer; they are NOT separated into specific groups. The window frames' and door

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Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

surrounds' pieces are mixed together. Because of this mix, PACA cannot certify that all pieces for all five major components are extant. A numbered key to erecting the three window frames was provided by the Art Institute in 1965; there are no known keys to the erection of the two door surrounds. There are no accurate measurements available. The following will be included in the auction:

Gothic Window Frame A  
- three sashes (two stone mullions) in 45 pieces

Gothic Window Frame B  
- two sashes (single stone mullion) in 27 pieces

Gothic Window Frame C  
- two sashes similar to Frame B in 30 pieces

Elaborate Interior Portal with Engaged  
Entablature Finial (photo on preceding page)  
- 29 pieces

Simpler Interior Portal  
- 17 pieces

Miscellaneous Pieces  
- Part of a stone niche  
- Two 19th century short columns

The stone will be offered at auction on eBay starting January 15th with a minimum bid of

\$10,000. Closing date for the auction is Feb 25th. More information will be available on the PACA website. PACA is also preparing a brochure about the auction. PACA members' help in advertising this unique sale is appreciated.

### Images of America: Urbana

A new reference about the history of Urbana was recently published by Ilona Matkovszki and Dennis Roberts, both PACA members. The paperback contains many anecdotes of interest to historians and Urbana residents. The volume is chock full of rarely seen photos of early Urbana buildings. Many of these were used courtesy of the Champaign County Archives at the Urbana Free Library.

### New & Renewing Memberships (received since the last newsletter)

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### New Members

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Remember to check your mailing label for your membership renewal date. The date shown indicates when you last renewed; membership runs for one year from that date.

OR CURRENT RESIDENT



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