



# PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61820

"The Past Has A Future"

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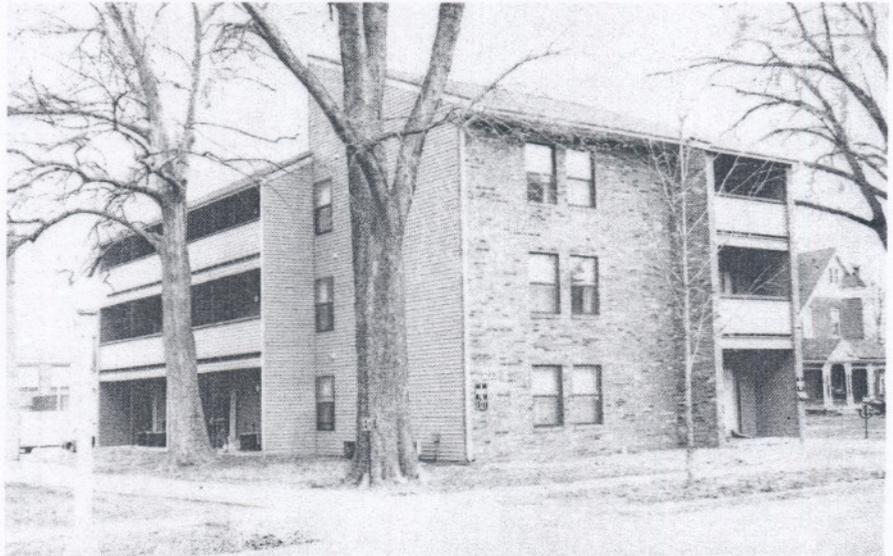
Number 4

## WEST MAIN STREET DOWNZONING

For the last year PACA and the residents of West Main Street, Urbana have been working for the preservation of their historic neighborhood through zoning channels. The construction of an R5 apartment building in the 500 block of West Elm Street in the spring of 1985 showed the residents the vulnerability of their neighborhood under the current R5 zoning category (Medium to High Density Multiple Family Residential).

The building on West Elm Street has two problems from a neighborhood preservation viewpoint: it is out of scale and the set back is inconsistent with the surrounding building stock. The new building is blatantly out of character with its neighborhood. West Main Street residents became concerned when they realized that the 600 block as well as parts of the 500 and 700 blocks of their street were zoned R5 and thus were at risk for the same incompatible type of construction. One way to protect their neighborhood and their investments in rehabilitation would be to change the zoning.

The reinstatement of the average front yard set back in the R5 zoning category was the first step so that the Elm Street situation could not happen again; such a set back is required in R1-R4 classifications. On investigation, it was discovered that prior to 1979 such an average set back was required in R5 type zones; however, when the current zoning categories were instituted in 1979, the average set back was changed to be merely 15 feet. For the majority of R5 areas this requirement is appropriate but there are a few areas in Urbana where the houses are set back much further than 15 feet from the street and where an average front yard set back would make a great deal of difference. West Elm and West Main Streets are



506 W. Elm St., Urbana  
View to the Northeast

two such areas whose unique streetscapes would be affected.

Fortunately, PACA was in the midst of an architectural and historical survey of that area of west Urbana and was equally concerned about protecting the character of these historic neighborhoods. PACA worked with the residents and testified before the Plan Commission; unfortunately, the Commission voted against the average front yard set back. The Urbana City Council showed great concern for this issue and it was discussed at length at many committee and council meetings. Finally, a compromise was agreed upon — the average front yard set back would be reinstated in the R5 category, where this would require a set back greater than 15 feet, the additional set back area could be used for parking with appropriate screening. This compromise helps developers meet Urbana's stringent parking requirements while still preserving the streetscape. In addition, the Council instructed the Plan Commission to investigate the downzoning of parts of West Elm and West Main to R4 as an additional means of preserving these historic areas.

During the investigation, PACA and the Main Street residents testified before the Plan Commission. PACA's architectural study of the area showed that Elm and Main streets had a significant concentration of historically and architecturally important buildings worthy of preservation. The residents spoke of their love for the neighborhood and its streetscape and of their heavy investments in rehabilitation. There were only a few dissenting voices — current apartment building owners (these buildings were exempted from rezoning), a developer wishing to build a large apartment complex, and a home owner who wanted to sell to a developer. After much heated debate, the Plan Commission produced a tie vote and sent the Council no recommendation with regards to the rezoning of Main and Elm streets.

A majority of the Council appeared to be in agreement about the need for rezoning Main Street. However, Elm Street posed a number of problems: the new apartment building had destroyed

the streetscape, two large parcels of land were owned by churches and thus would not be affected, there were very few single family home owners in the blocks under discussion, and Buena Vista Court did not fit into any current zoning category. After some debate, the Elm Street area was dropped from consideration. After a number of delays, intense lobbying by both preservationists and developers, the issuance of a building permit for an apartment building in the 600 block of West Main Street and continued testimony of the residents before the Council, the rezoning of Main Street was passed.

The neighborhood has a measure of protection now, but the residents know that it is not enough. Incompatible apartments can still be built and other changes not in keeping with the historic character of the area can still happen. The next step is the creation of a historic district that will give the Main Street corridor the protection it needs. Generally, a historic district controls new construction and exterior changes to existing buildings through the issuance of a certificate of appropriateness by an architectural review committee. This assures that proportion, scale, texture and other such features are taken into consideration when changes are made to significant buildings. Buildings located within certified historic districts are also eligible for certain tax credits. PACA is continuing to work with the residents toward this goal and the first historic district in Champaign County may appear in the near future.

The issue of neighborhood preservation is important and is gaining increased visibility. The West Main Street issue is but one in a series of initiatives to preserve neighborhood cohesiveness. The High & Dry Neighborhood Association fought to have their R2 zoning enforced, Hessel Boulevard residents sought to have their single family covenant recognized, and the residents of the Washington-Hill area of Champaign are pushing for a rezoning study of their neighborhood. PACA is there to help and support these endeavors.

## U. OF I. CAMPUS SURVEY UNDERWAY

For the third consecutive year, PACA has received a survey and planning grant from the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. This year, PACA is undertaking a comprehensive architectural survey of the University of Illinois campus. The IHPA grant is a 70% reimbursement program; PACA is providing a 30% matching contribution with a \$1,000 allocation from the University of Illinois. The total grant amount is \$9,000.

Bret Johnson, a graduate of the Masters of Architecture program with a historic preservation emphasis, has just completed fieldwork involving written architectural descriptions, photographs and basic historical research of each building on campus.

The results of this survey will be available to the University administration and planning staff. These results should prove valuable to the University as it begins planning for the future building projects especially those using Build Illinois funds. A Governor's directive instructs that all Build Illinois projects must be reviewed by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency for effect on historic resources.

In conjunction with the survey effort, two National Register nominations for University buildings have been submitted to the Illinois Advisory Council for consideration at their September meeting. The Observatory, located to the north of the Morrow Plots, was built in 1896 and was the site of the development of the selenium cell and photoelectric photometry. These were revolutionary discoveries for the field of astronomy. A thematic nomination involving all of the buildings designed by Nathan C. Ricker is also under consideration. Nathan Ricker was the first graduate in architecture from the University of Illinois and continued as the first professor of architecture, developing the curriculum and department. He designed many of the University's early buildings including Altgeld Hall (1897), Natural History (1893), Harker Hall (1878), Military Drill Hall, now the annex to Kenney Gym (1890), and the Metal Shops, now Aeronautical Engineering Lab B (1895). In addition, the University has established a Campus Committee on Historic Sites to advise the administration on preservation matters. Lachlan Blair, PACA past president and long time director, is the chair of the committee.



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## NATIONAL BUILDING MUSEUM

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The National Building Museum, mandated by Congress in 1980 to commemorate and encourage the American building arts, is a privately funded organization. The federal government generously supports NBM's mission by providing free of charge the historic and architecturally significant Pension Building for its base in Washington, D.C.

NBM's national program of exhibitions, films, and publications celebrates the nation's historic building accomplishments and brings news to the public about what is being designed and constructed all over America. NBM's documentation center collects and makes available both written and visual archives — correspondence, drawings, photographs, models and artifacts — concerning buildings of national significance. The museum's building information center is developing a national library and technical data bank that will serve the building world.

*Blueprints*, the quarterly publication of the National Building Museum, informs its readers about both the museum's programs and what is being designed and constructed all across the country.

An ultimate goal of NBM's program is to encourage the public to take part in the on-going debate over what relationship our society should establish between the built and the natural environments. By creating and endorsing the National Building Museum, Congress has shown that it believes an informed and alert citizenry is the best way to ensure a proper balance between our nation's natural splendors and its built environment.

For further information contact PACA or the NBM, Pension Building, Judiciary Square, Washington, DC 20001, (202-272-2448). Memberships are tax deductible.





## LIVING IN A LUSTRON

Last month's PACA Newsletter included an article on Lustron houses and the Lustron Corporation. Following up on that article is an investigation into how Lustron houses have withstood the last forty years, and what it is like to live in a Lustron. This investigation was facilitated by the assistance and cooperation of several local Lustron house owners who willingly shared their experiences and insights into living in this unique prefabricated housing.

Thus far, all of the Lustron houses identified in the Champaign-Urbana area are of the two bedroom design. Lustron did build one and three bedroom models, but the two bedroom model was by far the most widely produced and distributed.

The houses have remained in remarkably fine condition. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that they look much different than when they were originally assembled. The houses of those interviewed were all built sometime in 1949.

Of those interviewed, all indicate that the kitchens have been changed from the original — some more than others. Also frequently changed has been the heating systems, although the original radiant heating systems have generally remained intact. Another change that has occurred is the addition of carpeting. This is not surprising considering that the original asphalt tile on a concrete slab was probably less than comfortable, especially during cold Illinois winters.

Additional changes have varied from house to house. One has had its bathroom redone. Another has added a garage with a screened-in porch connecting it to the house. Some have air conditioning units, although the general consensus, even among those that have them, is that air conditioning really is not necessary. None of the houses still have the original combination dishwasher/laundry machine that was featured in Lustron houses.

Although the finish on both the inside and the outside of a Lustron house has permanent color, at one time the exterior

of one local Lustron was painted. To the relief of the current owner, most of this paint has been removed, once again revealing the permanent pastel finish that is the hallmark of a Lustron house.

Many features remain unchanged. Besides the basic floor plan, which is virtually impossible to alter, certain other features have remained untouched. Lustron houses were originally built with approximately two inches of insulation in the walls. Of those individuals interviewed, none have had occasion to add additional insulation. In many cases, at least one room still retains the original asphalt floor tile that appeared in all Lustrons, and as with the exterior, the interior permanent wall color (a very pleasant gray) has not been altered.

Because the color of the interior cannot be changed from its standard Lustron gray (yellow for kitchen and bath), changes to the interior decoration are achieved through the choice of window treatments (Lustrons originally had venetian blinds), furnishings, and floor coverings.

Of course, there are problems that are unique to living in an all-steel house. First to come to mind is how one hangs things on the wall. The general response is to use magnets and/or adhesive hangers. Also, holes can be drilled in the steel wall. One owner has designed "hooks" that can be slipped in between the space where the wall panels meet the ceiling, and hangs lines or wires from these hooks for hanging pictures.

There are also a few other complaints about these houses. The sliding doors on the storage space can rattle and be quite loud. Additionally, one individual has problems with the doors sometimes sticking. Another individual, although quite pleased with his Lustron, wishes it had a different floor plan. Specifically, the relation of the hallway to the other rooms makes it virtually impossible to pass from one room to another without going in full view of the living room (except when passing from the living room to the dining room or kitchen).

These dislikes, however, are far outweighed by what the owners feel to be

positive aspects of Lustron houses. High among these is the low maintenance involved in owning such a house. The interior and exterior never need painting or tuck pointing, or anything else, unless one wants to give it a coat of wax. The roofing material, like the rest of the house, is porcelainized steel, hence, no need to re-roof. The houses do not burn (of course, their contents could), nor are they susceptible to infestation. In addition, there is a great deal of storage space in a Lustron house. No doubt, the list could go on — these are just some of the items that owners mention as reasons for their great satisfaction with their Lustron home.

There is one local Lustron that boasts a feature not found in any other Lustron in the area. Lustrons were originally built on concrete slabs, it was part of their design. However, one enterprising owner in the Champaign-Urbana area contracted to have his house built with a basement, virtually doubling his basic 1000 square foot house. The original owner never developed this raw space, but the subsequent owner did, adding a bathroom, bedrooms, and other rooms that were intended in the original plan. The construction utilized a flex-i-core floor system (also found in high-rises) which consists of reinforced concrete beams that are put in under pressure. Three dehumidifiers keep the space comfortable, and the owner has never experienced any flooding problems. This showed great ingenuity on the part of the original owner and makes this a very exceptional Lustron.

The owners that were interviewed are remarkably satisfied with their houses. When one thinks about it, such a low maintenance structure does have tremendous appeal. And there is always the sense of owning something special. As one owner pointed out, most people would dwell on the problems of an all-steel house. One must concentrate on its advantages and work with what it is, instead of what it is not. Certainly, for many Lustron owners, there are a lot of advantages. After forty years these advantages are still being enjoyed.

Angela Finet

**UPCOMING EVENTS**

The Cultural Arts Festival of the Champaign Park District will be held in West Side Park on Sunday, August 24 from 11 a.m.-5 p.m. PACA will have an exhibit on display and has compiled a historic walking tour of the Park and the surrounding area. There will also be a CPD 75th year photographic display, arts and crafts exhibitors and entertainment.

Grape Expectations is set for September 25-27 in downtown Champaign. Once again PACA will be conducting narrated tours of the downtown area on Saturday from 10-4 p.m. If things work out as planned, these will be horse drawn carriage tours!

The Illinois Historic Preservation Advisory Council will hold its next

session in Champaign on September 11-12. The Council is charged with reviewing all National Register nominations and advising the State Historic Preservation Officer on their worthiness. The sessions will be held in the Temple Buell Gallery (first floor, Architecture Building, 608 E. Lorado Taft Drive) and are open to the public. There will be a session Thursday evening starting at 6:00 p.m. and all day on Friday.

Barbara Rogowski-Kent  
David Phillippe  
Mr. & Mrs. R. A. Avner  
Trent Shepard  
Dr. & Mrs. Rex Kummer  
Jim Wuersch  
Dr. Norah Grady  
Rachel Foster  
Peggy Henderson

**NEW & RENEWING MEMBERS**

Robert & Helen Heins  
Charles Casad  
Eric Jakobsson Family  
Mr. & Mrs. Robert Espeseth  
Max Mitchell

**VOLUNTEERS IN PRESRVATION (V.I.P.)**

Angela Finet  
Bret Johnson  
David Garner  
Amy Cassens  
Shaunna Francissen



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Please submit material for publication in the next newsletter before 15th of month.

**Membership Application P.A.C.A.**



**MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:**

**INDIVIDUAL**

- Adult ..... \$10.00
- Student (1/2 time or more) ..... \$ 5.00
- Senior Citizen ..... \$ 5.00
- Family,(includes all members of a household with no more than two members being over age 21) ..... \$15.00

**CIVIC**

- Over 100 members ..... \$100.00
- 50-100 members ..... \$ 75.00
- Up to 50 members ..... \$ 50.00

**CORPORATE**

- ..... \$ 50.00

Additional Contribution \_\_\_\_\_

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