

PRESERVATION MATTERS

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PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

Some thoughts on PACA and the Central High expansion

By Thomas Garza,
Executive Director

Generally the coming of the new year is a time when people like to reflect on the year gone by, and look ahead towards the year to come.

This is especially true for groups like PACA, who must plan ahead in order to adequately allocate resources and mobilize volunteers for our activities.

With the start of this new year however, PACA finds itself still locked in an important struggle with the Unit 4 school district over the Central High School expansion, and the whole process must, for good or ill, play itself out before we will really be able to stop, breathe, reflect, and move forwards.

Still, this particular effort has generated more press and stirred more public opinion than anything we've done in quite awhile, so I feel compelled to share some thoughts with you about the situation.

First, as a preservation organization, the work that we've collectively chosen to do is seldom easy. We live in a society that tends to ascribe value mainly according to cost, despite the fact that this is a very limited and notoriously fickle metric. My modest home, for example, would be worth a fortune in some places and would be

hard to even give away in others. Same house, same condition, just a different market.

Cost is location specific, supply specific, and can change from one day to the next like any fad or fashion. A preservationist therefore, must take a wider view of what constitutes 'worth' than seems to be the norm for society at large, and that sometimes leads us to take positions that may be at odds with the prevailing public sentiment.

Now ordinarily I would attempt at this point to simply outline the Central High situation and explain the various perspectives involved for the sake of those who haven't been keeping up with the news, and then go on to comment a bit on what we've done and hope to do next. In this case however, it's difficult for me to do that because I want to try to be objective, yet I simply do not understand the position of many of those who support the school district's plan and so I'm going to have to focus primarily on aspects of this topic about which I am confident and don't think there can be any serious argument, and then let the readers judge the rest for themselves.

While I would like to think that

people are generally rational, from all appearances that doesn't seem to be the case here, and it appears that quite a few people are first and foremost guided by their emotions, and only rational to the extent that it doesn't conflict too much with their existing inclinations.

So let's begin by answering a question that has been implicit in much of the press regarding this issue, and which I've actually been asked by more than one person - how or why did PACA end up switching sides on the Central expansion?

The answer to that is, we didn't. When Unit 4 first proposed abandoning their current location and moving Central out to the edge of town, PACA joined forces with the Keep Central central folks and encouraged the school board to keep Central at its current location, and to make whatever alterations were necessary in order to ensure that it would remain a first class school. (see Preservation Matters <http://pacacc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Vol35Special-Champaign-Schools.pdf>)

We supported that idea then, and we whole-heartedly support it now. Where we part ways with the

proposed expansion plan is with its disregard for the character of the neighborhood generally, and the fact that it includes unnecessary demolition of important buildings, the Burnham house in particular.

Objectively speaking, and using every metric that I know how to use, the Burnham house is, and to a somewhat lesser extent the Phillippe and Bailey houses are as well, uniquely historic buildings in fine condition. Further, all three of these buildings are important anchors in their current locations. They help to define their neighborhood every bit as much as they each individually embody important architectural, local, and even national history. So again, speaking objectively, it makes perfect sense that PACA would take the stand that we did on their intended demolition. That is in fact what this organization was created to do, and it should have been no surprise to anyone that this is exactly what we did.

There are several other perfectly sound and historic buildings which are also slated for demolition as a part of this plan, but we elected to only speak out about the Burnham, the Phillippe, and the Bailey houses because the district's plans for them cross a very clear line.

Demolition for the sake of progress is one thing; demolition for the sake of convenience is something else altogether.

And yet despite this there has been a strong push-back to our doing so.

What apparently makes this situation different from others -- instances

where a developer is aggressively pursuing a vision of change and growth vs preservationists seeking to retain the personality and character of an existing neighborhood -- is that the developer in this case is the local school board, and their vision is for a new and vastly improved Central High, itself a historic building, and also an important part of that same neighborhood.

This vision is also shared by many former, current, and future parents of and students who attend that school. Because of those ties and this shared dream, there appears to be a fierce loyalty involved that changes the way some people are viewing this question, and how they are judging the various factors involved.

That's the only way I can think of to explain the ensuing conflict and bad feelings this campaign has engendered, but as I mentioned earlier, I do not entirely understand this contrary point of view, so I am only speculating about what lies behind it.

Now this would certainly make more sense to me if any of the houses under discussion were actually in the way of the school expansion itself, but this is not the case. No part of the expansion and improvement of the school would be blocked by keeping any one of these houses. It's true that an argument can be made that there is a pressing need for sports fields, and that they cannot be created with either the Phillippe or the Bailey house remaining in place (this is not actually the case, but it is at least an arguable point), but the Burnham house -- the most important and historic of them all by far -- is only in the way of one

small portion of a surface parking lot, and there is no credible argument that I can conceive of which pits the school expansion against the continued existence of the Burnham house, unless one assumes that in order to survive and thrive, the school must have total control of everything immediately adjacent to it as well.

That notion is belied by the fact that the proposed plan shows two of the apartment buildings on that block, as well as one or two of the existing single family homes, remaining right where they are. The continuing existence of these holdouts apparently doesn't bother anyone.

In any event, while it may make some sense for the district to take such a position -- from a strictly self interested perspective -- I fail to appreciate why this would also be an attitude shared by anyone else. I can imagine supporters of the school maybe being willing to give this notion more weight than I would, but in any final analysis surely even the most ardent pro-school supporters must see that they do not absolutely need the particular lot where the Burnham house stands in order to accomplish their goals, and that our asking for them to change this one small aspect of their much larger plan is not some sort of an attack on the school, its heritage, its supporters, or the children who will someday attend it.

And yet, that is apparently not the case.

Because of this, I'd initially toyed with the idea of providing PACA members with a detailed account of what all we've done in hopes of saving these

houses as a way of counteracting some of the uninformed but widely disseminated critiques that we've received about our stance and actions, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the basic outline is already pretty well known to anyone who's even been marginally following this story, and information about the various details wouldn't change anyone's understanding much.

To put it simply, we regularly attended meetings with the district, made our point of view known in both public comments and written statements -- as well as the local press when we could get their attention -- and then we ultimately nominated the three buildings for local landmark status. Why we took that approach is pretty easy to summarize too. We initially hoped and wanted to work with the district and help them formulate a plan that would both benefit the school and respect the neighborhood. As it slowly became apparent that they had no interest in working with us, and were clearly not intending to take the integrity of the neighborhood into account on their own, we eventually opted to go it alone, and take our case directly to the community and the local government.

Again, there is nothing unusual about this process. PACA has taken similar approaches to other such conflicts in the past, and will doubtless do so again in the future. These are the only tools currently available to us. We are not a wealthy organization and can't match our opponents efforts dollar for dollar, so all we can do is simply attempt to energize the public through informing them about what may be lost, and try to influence the local government to act on behalf of its

own stated objectives of supporting and promoting preservation in the community.

So I think that the main point I want to make here is that in terms of our opposition to the Central High expansion plan, PACA has done and is doing what it was created to do in the face of a situation that all but demands some sort of action on our part. I'm sure there are things we could have done better, and when this is all over I know that we will certainly examine our processes in hopes of learning from our mistakes, but those will only, at best, be a fine-tuning, and not a major shift in either our focus or intentions. PACA was, in the words of our constitution, created to "foster and encourage the preservation and conservation of the natural and the built environment of Champaign County and East Central Illinois" and that is exactly what we have been trying to do in this instance.

In closing let me just say this . . . when we work together, we are able to accomplish great things, but it requires all of us, and we need to be clear in our purpose and unified in our efforts if we hope to succeed. Public opinion is capricious. The crowd may love us one day and hate us the next, but that just goes with the territory. This group was created for a definite purpose, and as PACA members we should all be working to promote that vision, not worrying about how popular we are.

A number of people have counselled me over the years that PACA needs to learn how to 'pick its battles'. This is of course sound advice in a general way, but it can

be a misleading concept if you try to apply it too literally to the work that we do, since the direct implication is that we should only be putting our energies into fights that we can expect to 'win', and steering clear of those we cannot.

But it bears remembering that PACA has neither the size nor funding to put us in a position where we can be assured of winning very often all on our own steam, and if we operated simply according to the 'pick your battles' dictum, we would probably never bother to fight for anything.

Even as lofty and aspirational a document as our constitution merely defines our purpose as being to 'foster' and 'encourage' preservation, not demand or ensure it.

What this means is that we are first and foremost educators, we are the community's preservation conscience if you will, but not its saviors. The local government has a vital role to play as do the members of the community itself. Our job is mainly to try to get them to do it.

Therefore we have to be willing to get out front and take the hits in order to inspire, encourage, or perhaps even embolden other like-minded people to join us. Then we can fight for what we believe in together.

I'm proud of what PACA stands for. We may not always come out on top, and we will seldom please everyone, but I think that what we do is worth the effort, and I hope that you do too.

New Building Regulations for Champaign's Old Town Neighborhoods

By Tod Satterthwaite

Over the last couple of years, the Champaign Planning Dept. has been instituting new rules for building in the core area of the City. This area consists of four parts, Downtown, Campustown, Mid-Town and In-Town. Mid-Town is the area between Campustown and Downtown and the In-Town area is described by the Planning Dept. as "the neighborhoods west and south of Downtown Champaign extending roughly from Columbia Street on the north, Randolph Street on the east, John Street on the south and Prospect Avenue on the west. An additional area of In-Town zoning extends south along the Randolph and State Street corridors from John Street to Avondale Avenue. Many residents also refer to these neighborhoods as 'Old Town' although the name of the zoning districts refers to 'In-Town.'"

In an effort to raise the visual standards of Campustown and Mid-Town buildings, some new building regulations have been put in place.

These include provisions that new buildings:

- Require that the front entry to the building face the street (so sideways buildings are not allowed)
- Require a certain minimum coverage of windows on any exterior wall
- Require a mix of building materials (for visual variation)
- Require that long walls must have some articulation (they can't

be flat)

- For multi-family, require that no parking can be under the building at ground level (no buildings on stilts)

Now, with the revitalization of the Downtown area, developers are looking for properties in the In-Town area since apartments that are close to both Downtown and the U of I campus are increasingly attractive to tenants. Unfortunately this puts pressure on existing historic neighborhoods since the new buildings seldom have the same character as the existing homes. The new buildings that have gone up at 308 S. Prairie and 509 S. Elm are examples of campus-style apartments that don't fit into the neighborhood very well.



308 S. Prairie



509 S. Elm

Residents in the In-Town zoning districts have been talking with the Planning Dept. to see what kind of

building regulations can protect these older neighborhoods. Right now, Champaign does not regulate the orientation of the building, building character and architecture, parking location and design or the types of building materials that can be used in the In-Town zoning districts. Most residents feel that the basic regulations adopted for the Campustown and Mid-Town areas aren't strong enough for these historic residential neighborhoods.

Stronger regulations, such as those in Urbana's Green St. corridor between downtown and campus, require that new buildings be similar in character to those around it.

In that part of Urbana, building designs are encouraged to include:

- the use of various decorative details and exterior materials to add interest, scale, and dimension to a building,
- a combination of roof lines with varying heights and pitches that are used to break up the mass of a structure,
- an adequate amount of windows and doors on each exterior wall,
- front porches and balconies,
- long-lasting and durable exterior materials such as brick and wood clapboard.

Features that are discouraged include:

- the location of mechanical equipment (such as air compressors and utility meters) that can be seen from the street,
- sliding patio doors that can be seen from the street,

• any street façade that consists of a single plane.

(See all the design guidelines for this area at: <http://www.urbanillinois.us/sites/default/files/attachments/MOR%20DESIGN%20GUIDELINES%20-%20FINAL%20-%202nd%20pdf.pdf>)

In a December 7, 2017 Listening Session that was attended by 70 residents, the Champaign Planning staff gave an overview of the In-Town zoning districts that included the history of development in the area and the current zoning regulations. The staff also asked meeting participants for their input regarding building designs that would fit in with the neighborhoods.

It is estimated that changes to In-Town zoning district regulations will be ready to present to the City Council in the summer of 2018 and residents will be involved with the process as it progresses. People interested in following the

discussion can do so at: <http://champaignil.gov/planning/zoning/intown/>

Stay tuned for more on this important neighborhood issue as 2018 gets underway!



Baby it's Cold Outside!

By Alice Novak

Sub-zero days have you shivering at home? Options for interior storm windows are increasing. PACA has plenty of brochures from Indow (or see Indowwindows.com). Innerglass and Allied Window, Inc. are other interior storm window companies.

For great information on window repair, check out the National Park Service's Preservation Briefs (nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs.htm), including Brief 9 on the Repair of Historic Wooden Windows and Brief 13 on the Repair and Thermal Upgrading of Historic Steel Windows.

Looking for more help? Check out the Window Preservation Standards Collaborative facebook group (<https://tinyurl.com/y8trd8q8>) which shares information and techniques for the refurbishing, repair, and rehabilitation of historic windows.

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