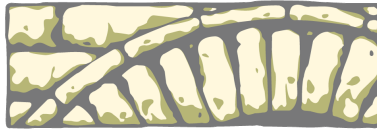


MADISON TRUST



for Historic Preservation

Advocacy News

June 2021

The Wonder Bar, 222 E. Olin Ave.

Last month, we covered the ongoing status of The Wonder Bar, located just off John Nolen Drive near the Alliant Energy Center. The Wonder Bar sits in the middle of one of two adjacent parcels that are slated for development by McGrath Property Group. Because of its unique Prohibition-era history, efforts have been made by various people in the community and by the Madison Trust to encourage preservation of the building. Recent reports in the local media have delved into the distinctive history of the building and the possibility of relocating and preserving the building at another site. Kurt Stege, former Madison Trust president, notes that significant cost and coordinated effort will be required to move the structure to another location. He states that success is contingent on someone promptly stepping forward with an appropriate use for the building as well as access to a suitable site near the current location and necessary financial resources before the move itself can be carefully planned. He notes that each of these conditions pose a significant challenge and the developer has a very tight schedule. The proposed Alliant Energy Center campus redevelopment slated for just across the street from the Wonder Bar might eventually supply an appropriate location, but the County has yet to even select a development firm. Stay tuned for more on this “developing” story.

619 and 621 N. Lake St.

Introduction:

The buildings that were proposed for demolition at 619 and 621 N. Lake St., now fraternity houses for Alpha Chi Sigma or AXS (a professional, co-ed chemistry fraternity with over 50 members), were originally built as fraternities: 621 N. Lake St. was built in the 1890s and 619 was built in 1909. They are situated within the Langdon Street National Historic District; almost all other 19th century buildings between Park Street and Lake Street have been demolished.

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Currently these two buildings are in a severe state of disrepair. Photographs suggest the interiors have been trashed. Reports on file with the city cite a bowed and leaning foundation wall as well as cracked walls and ceilings.

Proposed development:

Ownership of the properties appears to currently be shared by the fraternity and proposed developer, Patrick Properties. They intend to demolish the existing buildings and erect a new 8-story, 81 unit building that would house the fraternity on much of the first and all of the second floor and rent units to “outside tenants” on the remaining six floors to provide other residential housing.

Action by the Landmarks Commission and decisions by the Plan Commission and the Common Council:

In October 2020, the Landmarks Commission considered the request to demolish these two buildings with the responsibility to make a recommendation to the Plan Commission. Landmarks unanimously determined that both buildings have very significant historic value and that they contribute to the Langdon Street National Historic District. The matter then went to the Plan Commission, which considered both the demolition request and whether to approve the conditional uses necessary for construction of the new building. The Plan Commission voted unanimously not to approve the project, stating that the necessary standards for demolition permits and conditional uses were not met.

The design firm for the project promptly appealed this decision on behalf of the fraternity and developer to the Common Council. However, the applicant delayed the public hearing on the appeal for nearly five months, presumably to curry favor with the replacements for a large group of alders who were not seeking re-election. One day in advance of the public hearing and Council meeting on May 18, 2021, the Madison Trust issued a letter to the Common Council, opposing the appeal that noted:

- the Madison Trust supports the findings of the Plan Commission and recommends that the Common Council deny the appeal regarding the proposed demolition

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- the Madison Trust feels that allowing this demolition would promote additional bids to demolish buildings within in the district, it would severely alter the character of the neighborhood, and overall, the proposed development would run counter to the principles set forth in the Madison General Ordinances that apply to the demolition of aging, historic structures: the need to “protect neighborhood character, preserve historic buildings, encourage the reuse and/or relocation of existing buildings...[and] discourage buildings falling into a state of severe disrepair from lack of maintenance by the owner...”

After listening to comments from the public, the Common Council voted 15-4 to grant the appeal and allow the development to proceed on the condition “the developer is required to preserve and incorporate the facades of 619 and 621 N Lake Street to the greatest extent possible.”

It is quite unusual for an action taken by the Plan Commission to be overturned by the Common Council, especially when the Commission’s vote was unanimous. The Council’s vote reflects a new level of activism that rejects deference to its subordinate governmental bodies.

Incorporating the facades of the two buildings into the design of an 8-story building will be an interesting exercise and, if accomplished to “the greatest extent possible,” will result in a startling result.

Comments by Bob Klebba, Madison Trust Advocacy Committee member who testified at the May 18 public hearing:

It's important to note that the Landmarks Commission and Plan Commission both acknowledged the larger issue of demolition by neglect of contributing buildings in a national historic district by recommending against and denying the request for a demolition permit. The fraternity documented that they were charging below-market-rate room rentals, which resulted in a lack of the regular maintenance required to maintain their buildings.

At the hearing, the developer and the fraternity appealed to the Common Council's sensitivity to social equity by promoting affordable housing and inclusivity in their membership. The Council ignored the City Planning Division's staff report, which stated that the conditions of approval for both the demolitions and the 8-story apartment building could not be met.

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This evaluation was based on the Downtown Plan, the Comprehensive Plan, and the Historic Preservation Plan, which city staff, elected officials, and community members worked for years to develop. Unfortunately, the proposed building does not provide any increase in affordable housing, and 81 percent of the housing will be at market rate.

The loss is deep. Of the 6 buildings on North Lake Street in the historic district, 5 were contributing. These buildings define the western face of the district and show how this historically collegiate neighborhood interfaces with the UW-Madison campus. Soon only 3 buildings will remain, and the proposed 8-story building will impose great pressure to destroy what remains of our shared 100-year-old historic resources in this neighborhood.

For more information:

[Click here for more information](#) on the trajectory of this development plan.