

From: Branton Kunz [mailto:brantonkunz@gmail.com]
Sent: Monday, February 27, 2012 12:31 PM
To: Verveer, Mike; edit@isthmus.com; Scanlon, Amy; Martin, Al; Murphy, Brad
Subject: A Resident's View of the 100 Block of State St.

To:

Alder Michael E. Verveer
Amy Scanlon - Landmarks Commission
Al Martin - Urban Design Commission
Brad Murphy - Plan Commission
Editor of The Isthmus

Please find below an open letter to all parties concerned with the future of the 100 block of State St. It is written by myself, a former resident of the Franz Vallender building (2009-2011) at the address of 119 N. Fairchild. St, which is the apartment above Vic's Popcorn Shop. I currently serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer abroad, but I am still registered to vote at that address and consider my hometown to still be Madison, Wisconsin. I appreciate your time to consider this matter.

Branton Kunz
+506 8659-8533
branton.kunz@gmail.com

The 100 Block of State St. & The Franz Vallender Building – A Resident’s Perspective

By: Branton Kunz

The Capital Times delighted me by publishing an article about the Franz Vallender building, built two years after the Civil War ended, and better known to people today as: “That popcorn shop on the corner by the Overture.” To learn that it’s destined for the wrecking ball disappointed me more than a little. Jerry Frautschi’s plan to redevelop the block is exciting, but not thought out well enough. With some genuine creativity we can reconcile our need to improve the usefulness of the block with our desires to preserve its history and character.

From 2009 – 2011, I walked rent checks over to Marty Rifken’s office on the capitol square. Write the checks to Central Focus LLC, they told me and my two roommates. None of us realized the significance. As recent graduates of the University of Wisconsin in 2007, people who too often flee Madison for the suburbs or other cities entirely, my roommates and I had a genuine affection for living in downtown Madison. The two-floor, 3 bedroom apartment we rented above the popcorn shop on the corner of State & Fairchild was the best of any place we had lived in Madison. I walked to work every day at the Madison Concourse Hotel. I walked to buy groceries. I walked to see my friends. I didn’t need a car. I learned that the only thing you couldn’t find to buy living downtown was underwear. Who knew? The two years we lived there were some of the best of our lives. So, when I read a quote in the Capital Times from Susan Schmitz of Downtown Madison Inc., “ ‘Those buildings need to be fixed up. They need some help. They've lost their usefulness. The one on the corner is just awful,’ she says, referring to the Vallender. ‘I don't think they ever could rent that building.’ ”, it becomes apparent that decision makers are lacking some perspective. (Cap. Times – Jan 25) I wish we would have had the chance to invite Ms. Schmitz and Mr. Frautschi over to that apartment to have a beer on our fire escape. Or wine, we were classy people of course, living by the Overture Center.

Former Mayor Dave wrote on his blog entry about the 100 block (Jan 30) that “Fire escapes are romantic. They're urban art, and they wait for adventure.” And he’s right. We spent countless hours hanging out on the fire escape when the weather was nice watching people on State Street. It was a front row seat to the Walker protests a year ago. One night we had our own fun with the people walking below with a fishing pole and a dollar bill taped to the end. And they are romantic too. I told a special woman that I loved her on that same fire escape.

So it’s not that people don’t want to rent these buildings. My roommates and I even dreamed of buying the Vallender after we had made our fortunes in life. We were told that we would not be able to renew the lease after August 2011 and we sadly packed up our belongings and looked elsewhere. I will agree that the buildings on the block need work. But should we tear them down? Can’t we build something beautiful with what’s there without destroying history? Of course we can if we stop to think creatively. Let’s learn from the design of the Overture Center itself. My favorite parts of the building are the rooftop restaurant and the outside terrace. They are absolutely wonderful places. What if we saw more of that? What if you could walk from the second floor of the Overture over Fairchild St. to a multi-level urban rooftop park with art installations? The views of the Capitol would be the best in town. What if we refurbished all of the buildings and commissioned murals? For a project that’s meant to complement the Overture, an arts and cultural center, the current ideas are pretty dull. Tear down historic (read cultural) buildings and put in some dressed up concrete to call a park? That’s boring. Uninspired. And we can do better. Let’s follow the lead of organizations like the Madison Trust for Historic Preservation, that have plans that are thinking along this line of creative, not destructive, progress.

One question that hasn't been asked enough is why are these building in such a state of disuse and decay? It is largely that a decision was made a decade ago by Mr. Frautschi when he decided to buy the block under cover of Central Focus LLC. While I have nothing but good things to say about the couple who managed our apartment, they provided us with the friendliest and most prompt service we've experienced as tenants in Madison, it was evident that Central Focus LLC had no intention of investing any money in the building. Our managers who did the repair work were hamstrunged from doing quality work by the meager budget they were allowed. Our crumbling ceiling work was painted over instead of replaced. One of the fire escapes doors was replaced with an ugly plain door that lacked a window that was there before. When we needed a new exhaust fan in our bathroom, we didn't get one. The secret intentions of Mr. Frautschi took their toll on the buildings through ten years of neglect at his hands. He had already decided the fate of the block before the public had any idea of his plan.

Let's take a step back and think more about what this place could be. People living and working downtown is essential to its vibrancy, essential to the continuing success of the Overture. We can make the block attractive to the high rolling patrons of the Overture Center while preserving the mixed use residential and commercial that has made State Street a special place for so many decades. The 100 block buildings are an asset to the downtown, not an obstacle. Let's get creative and fix this block up for everyone.