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Subject: Knoebel/Cullenward opposition to 209 N Prospect Ave Proposal

We are Michael Cullenward and Joan Knoebel, the current occupants of 1712 Summit Ave, a house once called home by the author Sinclair Lewis. We realize our presentation might be construed as a classic example of NiMBYism, Not In My Backyard, but unfortunately that's precisely where the applicants wish to site their house. From the outset, we'd like to emphasize this isn't about the individuals lucky enough to call these grand houses home as we're all just current occupants. Rather, it's about whether this proposed house design "marries well" with the adjacent homes as well as the overall character of the University Heights historic district. Indeed, we proceed from the notion that all of us should consider ourselves stewards of these homes and this beautiful neighborhood, a la Aldo Leopold who lived in the Regent neighborhood for over twenty years. That this generates "preservation passion" is as it should be because these houses will be here long after we're all gone. Indeed, this is what we understood to be buying into when we purchased our home fifteen years ago--- historic preservation

It is our sense that the primary focus of inquiry has been on impacts to the Ely House, and to Prospect Ave more generally, with little attention paid either to impacts on other historic homes adjacent to the lot, especially those on Summit Avenue, including homeowners who will see this house from across the street, or to the University Heights

district as a whole. Given that the owners of the Ely House were the ones who chose to cash in on the sale of the lot they cleaved off three years ago (earning \$350K on a lot the city assessed at 129K at the market's peak), it is somewhat ironic that their home is the one being given the greatest attention. There was a simple way to preserve the grand appearance of that home: don't develop the lot.

Although their home and ours both sit on double lots (now), the Ely House is 2000 sq. ft larger and with a newer garage than ours--- yet the assessments are almost identical, theirs probably more recent than ours since the recalculation following their lot's subdivision. Our Summit Ave neighbor whose lot is also adjacent to the proposal is on a single lot with half the square housing footage but is actually assessed higher than the Ely House. The point: if the city's valuations accurately reflect the importance of these different homes, it is simply wrong to give priority to The Ely House over others in the line of fire. Additionally, we very much fear the value of our home will go down if this house gets built on top of ours.

As to the specific design itself, the applicants tout its small footprint on the ground. However, their vertical presence, especially where on the lot they want to build, deleteriously impacts our home much more than a larger, sprawling single-story ranch might. Why? Because our yard sits anywhere from 5-12 feet lower than theirs, the 2.5 story house looms more than that when the topography is included. Moreover, another siting impact, the city's arcane zoning calculation for lot setbacks also allows them to be

less than 40 ft from the our lot line. It bears mentioning that the new proposed city zoning ordinance would eliminate this calculation whereby these applicants can effectively "take" about 60% of the 40-ft setback from OUR property.

Let us also correct a misapprehension making the rounds: this is not about them "stealing" our lakeview (peeps we have primarily only when the leaves are down.) Rather, this is about imposing on our very traditional home a dominant view of their rectangular, flat-roofed contemporary, the primary windows of which are directed into our house and yard. The alder has told us taking advantage of the lakeview, which of necessity means building higher, was a factor in their siting decision, however.

As to the design itself, we are not opposed to all contemporaries, indeed we have designed and built one on a northern Wisconsin lake. We took great pains to build that contemporary into the site, to minimize our visual impact from the lakeside, to keep the "woody" appearance---the house is virtually invisible from the lake while we still enjoy panoramic views from inside. By contrast, the applicants' design does not blend, it sticks up in the air and in our faces. Not only does it not nestle into the site, it clashes, does not "marry well" with the other historic homes.

In fact, the placement of the house deep on the lot from the street is at glaring variance from the rest of the block as well as the visually related study area. It disrupts the overall character of the neighborhood and the relationship of all other houses to one another in the area; the frontage

of all other houses in the area can all be connected to one another along a gently curving line, close to the front of their respective lots. Until now.

Another meme making the rounds is that all our existing homes were contemporary designs when they were built. That is patently incorrect. Our house is a Tudor revival, there are Georgian revivals, Queen Anne, Victorian, Four over Four, just in the "square" block surrounding this lot. Nor are all contemporary designs equal--back in the 70s, geodesic domes were considered the wave of the future; they're not being built much anymore and surely not in historic districts. This is an unremarkable, flat-roof structure, basically a two and half story rectangle, a box. If you ask whether this design will stand the test of time, ask if there will be a "Box Revival" generations out.

But this all begs the point on which this project falters most seriously from a regulatory standpoint: the flat-top roof. The commission has two distinct charges for the University Heights district---the first contemplates the scale of a new home vis a vis the adjacent houses--it clearly presumes infill would occur streetside, as has almost universally been the case. (However, we don't believe those comparative impact issues go away if the owners site a house back from the street.) The second criterion pertains to roof style, stating unequivocally that the roof shall be similar in pitch and shape to the homes in the visually affected study area. The visually affected area, notwithstanding the architectural gymnastics of the applicants' professionals, does not contain any flat roofs on the principal buildings. Sure there

are some on porches, or porches that have been converted to year-round use, but the roofs themselves have a pitch, and nearly universally a decent pitch because as we all know too well, we live in snow country. We don't see how the commission gets around this clear ordinance language. The applicants have said they were trying to protect the neighbors' views by holding to a flat roof. We have not yet seen their architects' comparative elevations, unfortunately. Our daughter does mapping for the development of wind farms, however---based on the data we have seen thus far she estimates the house could be at eye-level from our third-floor bedroom. What's left to block, we must ask.

Finally, we must express our profound concern about the process before Landmarks. Without notice, the applicants made an informational presentation to the commission during which they asserted broad neighborhood support for the design, especially the flat-top roof. They were aware of our concern when they made that blanket assertion; moreover, that they “heard” no objections doesn’t mean there weren’t any; the other neighbors we spoke to said they didn't feel the informal coffeeshop concept presentation was the time or place to raise objections, it was too preliminary. Subsequently, when we got notice this had gone beyond the "coffeeshop" phase, having called Landmarks directly, we read the application requirements and fully expected when this went to formal consideration the applicants would have to provide information critical to a fair evaluation of the impact on our home---comparative elevations. However, at the neighborhood meeting our alder hosted only a few days ago, your staff person claimed

ignorance of those requirements and has subsequently written to say they are merely "guidelines". We need to see those elevations and seeing something for the first time on the day of the meeting, not three weeks ahead of the meeting and vote on this project, violates our right to be heard and to advocate for the protection of our home, to be those good stewards. We must also take general issue with staff interpretation--like any administrative body, there is formal ordinance language and then there is the rulemaking side wherein the commission spells out how it will do its work, eg., what information applicants must provide in their application, what notice and opportunity there will be for others affected to be heard, when meetings are held and the like. Due process is not optional, left to the discretion of the applicants or a staff person. We have worried from the first we heard of this application that the deal had been struck and frankly, haven't seen much to disabuse us of that concern to date. Staff, for example, has made recommendations based on incomplete, inaccurate, misleading and missing information. It's hard to imagine a different outcome even if the applicants finally produce the missing elevations and correct their mistakes.

Landmarks is charged with taking the long view, with preserving the historic character of our beloved neighborhood, yet might be swayed by the fact the architects have received high praise for their OS House in Racine. Here's a photo:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/noblejoanie/TheOSHouseInRacine#> At first blush, one might find it a whimsical design,

but the second level of inquiry is where and how it's sited--- it sits between a Tudor and a ranch and sticks out like a sore thumb. What those owners did not have to do was persuade a Landmarks Commission of the wisdom of this infill and its impacts on adjacent homes because there is no historic preservation district in Racine.

There is here. We hope you will weigh the impacts on existing homes and the overall historic character of our neighborhood when you decide on the request for a certificate. This house will be here long after we are all gone. Will those who follow be asking, What could Landmarks have been thinking in approving this design? We hope that question won't even have to come up, that you will decide this is the wrong design, uninspiring, and the wrong siting for the good of the historic district. Landmarks holds us to high standards in maintaining and repairing our homes as our part of the bargain for living in this historic district. We hope you will be no less exacting in considering what new construction to allow. And finally, we hope you will commit to having an open and transparent and fair process for applicants as well as for those of us already invested in and committed to this neighborhood.

Respectfully submitted February 27, 2011,

Joan Knoebel and Michael Cullenward
1712 Summit Ave