

TO: Madison Urban Design Commission
Al Martin

FR: Michael Bridgeman, 106 S. Franklin St.

DT: December 21, 2011

RE: Downtown Plan Remarks

I have reviewed the Downtown Plan and there is much to support: stronger connections to the lakes including the Mendota lakeshore path, enhancing livability for a variety of residents, protecting views to the lakes, and establishing building height standards that reflect the underlying topography.

Nonetheless, there areas that I think require further consideration for improvement.

Bonus Story Criteria (Appendix C)

I am wary of awarding bonus stories. Perhaps the criteria laid out in Appendix C for each of the proposed Bus Areas will be adequate, though I think they lack adequate guidance.

I am not entirely sure how decisions to award bonus stories have been made in Downtown Design Zone 2, an area in which they are currently permitted. I have read the Zoning Ordinance, talked with Al Martin of the Planning Department, and reviewed the very detailed design criteria in Resolution 58533 which Mr. Martin helpfully sent me. I confess that am *still* unsure about city practice in awarding bonus stories.

It is easy to see how bonuses could become routine, not exceptional, even though the Downtown Plan states that bonus stories should not be considered “by rights” heights. Based on recent examples in Downtown Design Zone 2, I find the results unimpressive.



Langdon Street Bonus Areas

In addition, the Downtown Plan proposes two bonus areas—Bonus Area D and Bonus Area E—that are within the boundaries of the suggested Langdon local historic district. I think

these two ideas are mutually exclusive and priority should be given to establishing the Langdon historic district rather than establishing the Bonus Areas.

Lamp House Bonus Area

The integrity of Frank Lloyd Wright's Lamp House and its context are threatened by Bonus Area G. The Plan acknowledges that the Lamp House sits in (near) the center of the block in this Bonus Area, but then proposes guidelines that undervalue its importance and undermine its integrity.

The Downtown Plan needs to give greater protection, not less, to the Lamp House and the views to and from the house. Doing so has the potential to deliver cultural, economic and quality-of-life benefits to the city and the state, as well as the national and international cultural communities. The City of Madison should honor and celebrate Wright and his work.

I described my reservations about Bonus Area G to the Landmarks Commission at their meeting of December 19, 2011. Rebecca Cnare of the Planning Department was on hand to provide further information and explanation of Bonus Area G and the goal of providing economic incentives that might help rehabilitate the Lamp House. While I understand and appreciate a market-driven approach, I think it will not protect the Lamp House and its context.

- a. The proposed 6+2 building heights for Bonus Area G are too tall. Using the maximum measurements described in the Plan (p. 41) would allow for a structure 88 feet tall as measured "from the highest point of a front lot line along a street adjacent to the site." (p. 42). These heights would effectively build a wall around the Lamp House and destroy its context.



By way of comparison, the Odessa Apartment building (above) to the southwest of the Lamp House property is seven stories including its penthouse. The Capitol Hill apartment building (below), across from the Mifflin Street corner of the Lamp House block, is four stories tall. The current plan allows for a baseline building height half again as tall adjacent to the Lamp House and twice as tall if bonus stories are awarded.



- b. Jack Holzhueter, a writer, historian and authority on the Lamp House, sent me this note on December 13, 2011, emphasizing the importance of the house's siting and the resulting views.

“In addition to his skill at designing buildings, Frank Lloyd Wright was equally gifted at designing their sites to maximize their exposure to the sun, to views, their visibility, and their privacy. In the case of the Lamp House, a very urban dwelling in the midst of pre-existing structures, he placed it at the extreme rear of the lot because that was the highest point available. He then raised the water table to a height of nearly 3 feet (uncommon for his work) to give the house even more height. These two decisions guaranteed that both Lakes Mendota and Monona were clearly visible from the third-story roof garden. (The owner, his best friend, was a sailing enthusiast and wanted to be able to watch races from the roof. Lake Mendota still is clearly visible from the third story, and also from a sliver of the side yard.) Wright achieved privacy for the downtown site through elaborate fencing, walkways, hardscape retaining walls and stairs, and creation of several landscape and hardscape terraces from Butler street to the front door. It is safe to say that the Lamp House's siting and landscaping/hardscaping were as important and cunning as its interior plan—one of Wright's most economical designs. “

- c. The city has a unique opportunity to protect the Lamp House, what remains of its immediate environment, and preserve views to Lake Mendota. The southwest part of the block (which is in Bonus Area H) has been built up to the detriment of the Lamp House, its site and its views to Lake Monona. The northeast part of the block remains as it was in 1903. The older buildings adjacent to the Lamp House property on Webster, Mifflin and Butler Streets appear to be in generally good condition and prime for re-use and rehabilitation.
- d. The Lamp House is one of seven Wright buildings in Madison including Monona Terrace and one of three Wright designs that has been given local landmark status. It is also important nationally and internationally.

Protecting the Lamp House

Madison's connection to Wright is a mark of distinction and the city and its citizenry should do all they can to preserve, protect and promote the association with Wright. The current Downtown Plan fails to do so in my estimation.

I believe that preservation and development are not mutually exclusive. With imagination, cooperation and a commitment to quality, the people of Madison can use historic resources to make this a better place to live.

1. *Landmark Districts* — The best protections would be provided by creation of a Local Landmark District and National Register District with identical boundaries. Ideally, the district would encompass areas to the northeast to protect views to *and from* the house. National Register status also has the potential to deliver benefits and incentives to property owners.
2. *Viewshed* — At minimum, the Plan should create of a unique viewshed for the Lamp House. The Plan acknowledges that among the factors to be considered in developing building height recommendations are “important view corridors and viewsheds [and] the presence of historic buildings” (p.41). Such an approach for the Lamp House is useful if it decreases the allowable maximum heights of buildings on the block to those that already exist. This would permit appropriately scaled new construction and potential infill. With clear and carefully developed design standards, this has the potential to better retain the environment of the Lamp House than the current proposal for Bonus Area G.

Existing Out-of-Context Buildings (p. 29)

Superior Architectural Design — This section allows for existing buildings to be replaced with new buildings of a similar height, density or volume provided that they are of “superior architectural design.” I do not support this recommendation in the plan.

There are few buildings of any age in Madison that demonstrate, in my opinion, *superior* architectural design. Nonetheless, if this were to become the standard for replacing existing eyesores, especially in historic neighborhoods such as Mansion Hill, the Landmarks Commission needs to play a role in creating standards that help replacement buildings at least approach superior design.

Building Heights (p. 41-42)

Reflecting topography — The Downtown Plan includes factors that should influence building height decisions: “topography, important view corridors and viewsheds, the presence of historic buildings, the use and scale recommendations for an area, and the existing scale of buildings in the vicinity...” (p.41). The Plan goes on to state that “height is measured from the highest point of a front lot line along a street adjacent to the site.” (p. 42) Given the slope of many downtown parcels, these two ideas seem to be in conflict. Recommendation 44 (p. 41) needs to resolve this apparent conflict in favor of rules that reflect underlying topography.

Build on Historic Resources (p.91)

Predictability — The narrative refers to providing “a degree of predictability for the development review process.”(p. 91) This is a common request from the development community. The final Downtown Plan should be clear, however, that predictability is important for all those vested in historic districts: residents, property owners, developers and the community at large. This diversity of interests should be stated explicitly in the final document.