

To: The Members of the Madison Landmarks Commission

From: Neighbors of 25 North Prospect Avenue

Margaret Alferi	Jennifer Edgoose	Bernard Micke	Christine Pawley	Larry Shriberg
Damon Bourne	Julian Edgoose	Linda Micke	Jim Pawley	Linda Shriberg
Richard Brualdi	Ivan Ermakoff	Bill Niedermeier	Karen Pridham	Florence Vatan
Fred Coleman	Eugene Kim	Mary Niedermeier	Walter Pridham	Mona Wasow
Wendy Coleman	Joyce Knutson	Raj Nijhawan	Tamara Schlessinger	

CC: John Balz and Erica Simmons, Owners                      Shiva Bidar-Sielaff, Alderperson  
Tom Phifer and Partners, Architects

Re: Proposal for 25 North Prospect dated January 30, 2012.

Date: February 12, 2012

On Saturday, February 11<sup>th</sup> the occupants of eleven houses either within the 200 foot radius of 25 North Prospect, or with direct views of the site met to discuss the proposal sent to you by Tom Phifer and Partners of New York City on January 30, 2012. During the course of a two hour meeting we found ourselves to be in almost complete agreement in our reactions to the proposed design. This letter outlines our sense of the strengths of the plan, as well as our substantial concerns about it and our suggestions for addressing these concerns. The owners of two other neighboring homes who could not attend the initial meeting have since added their names to this letter.

Everyone appreciated the multi-unit concept behind the design, with its courtyard-like space at the back, and its preservation of many trees and much green space. We also all expressed our openness to a modernist design on this site. We do, however, have the following three main concerns that we feel make it unacceptable in its present form:

1. The house presents a dark featureless face of plate steel, stained wood or black glass on all sides – materials that clearly do not meet the requirements of ordinance 33.19 (12)(f)1.b that they should be “the same as or similar to materials prevalent in the University Heights Historic District.” Apart from what we take to be very thin vertical windows in the corners of each building, there are no windows visible from Prospect Ave. The slab-like featureless walls make this house seem uninviting. Indeed, while we understand that privacy was one of the owners’ main concerns, this house seems to turn its back on the street and, we fear, would result in the owners missing out on this neighborhood that is for them, like us, of such great appeal. We would like to welcome John and Erica into our neighborhood and hope that the final design will seek to interact with the neighboring houses with more sensitivity and creativity.
2. The proposed building consists of one unit with a height of 19 feet, containing day-use rooms (living, dining, kitchen), and a 31 foot tower containing three stories of bedroom and study space. We were disappointed to read that the Landmarks Commission’s “[s]taff has determined that this as a 2 ½ story structure,” as such a judgment rests upon a 19 foot height being normal for a single story – and we would strongly encourage the staff to reconsider that determination. Again, with no windows, other detailing or roof transitions to soften the impact, the building thus presents a 31 foot high dark slab-sided face to the north and east, and would stand out as a highly-visible anomaly in all directions. It was likened to a fortress, or to a misplaced 1980s office monolith.

3. The architects seem to imagine that this is a thickly-wooded lot, and thus they claim that, “[b]y using dark finishes, [they] intend to enhance the connection and blend into the existing surrounding trees as well as provide a quiet presence on the site which will have the visual effect of receding into the landscape.” Indeed, all their claims to integrate this plan with its site seem to stress the imagined landscape features and not the architecture surrounding it. We wish to stress that this is a thinly-wooded lot; many of the plantings that look like trees on the satellite photos and plans are actually bushes and shrubs. As a result the house will largely sit in the sun throughout the year and will be highly conspicuous year round, but especially during the long winter months when it will stand like stark black cubes against the snow.

So while we believe there are aspects of this design that are promising, we all share the strong objections to its core features that we have noted above.

We imagine this must be a difficult process for John and Erica and so, in the interests of helping as much as we can, we would like to make the following suggestions in the hope that they will be of some use:

1. Using the footprint of this design, but making both units of the building two stories in height (with walls topping out at 20 feet or so), the owners could have a greater interior space without the three story tower that is such a problematic feature of this design.
2. We have seen Tom Phifer’s other designs on his webpage and feel that they are far more appealing, inviting and interesting than this proposal. We understand that this would be his first house built on a city lot (as opposed to exurban locations) and appreciate that the glass-walled designs he usually employs might be in tension with the owners’ desire for privacy. Nevertheless, with a more thoughtful design and good use of interior design features (such as blinds) the two goals might be able to be reached.
3. The house makes some gestures towards so-called “green design,” yet in terms of its operating efficiency it is far from ideal. The multi-unit design results in a larger surface-area-to-volume ratio, resulting in the potential for greater heat loss, and the use of a 19 foot single story building would result in a lot of ceiling space to be heated in winter and cooled in summer, especially with unshaded south facing windows on the bedroom tower and, apparently, in the front door. We would welcome greater innovation toward a more energy-conscious design.
4. We were unsure whether this house would have a basement, but we would encourage the construction of one, especially given that this is a tornado-prone area and the corners of each unit appear to be vertical glass windows, thus lacking the structural rigidity of solid corners. In addition, if the current “study” were moved to the basement level it would offer another way to diminish the height of the bedroom tower. While digging a basement could impact the root structures of trees, it is unlikely that this would be much more disruptive than the digging of foundation walls that the current design would require.
5. Furthermore, while we applaud the architect’s sensitivity to the trees on the site, we do not all believe that the preservation of every mature tree should outweigh all other design considerations.

We hope that John and Erica and their architect will find these suggestions useful as they move forward.

Finally, we want to emphasize that we all look forward to welcoming John and Erica into our neighborhood. As we move forward with the continuing conversation, we want to be supportive as we begin a long-term relationship with them as neighbors and friends. We too all want the project to succeed.