

Comments on the revision of the Landmarks Ordinance

City of Madison Landmarks Commission

May 19, 2014

Sue Pastor - [REDACTED], Madison WI [REDACTED]

It is my understanding that you will be not be putting forward recommendations to the Common Council, or its ad hoc committee as a result of this evening's meeting, and I am immensely relieved by that.

Interest in the issue of the Clarenbach House at 123 W. Gilman, and attendance at the April 8 Council hearing on the Steve Brown Apartments appeal have raised my awareness of the stakes involved in this ordinance and in issues of historic preservation. I want – and this community deserves, an ordinance that supports preservation broadly. We should incorporate, and even exceed, the best of what is in practice elsewhere. And first we must know what those best practices are.

The volume of testimony in opposition to the SBA appeal is evidence of this community's investment in preservation. At the same time, the vehemence of the appeal supporters, in rejecting valuation of any consideration except market forces was noteworthy. Lobbies connected to economic resources – or that cultivate the perception that they are connected – have disproportionate access to policy-makers and policy-makers, as well as to political processes.

You must balance that reality, and drawing from best practices across the country, create a strong statement of the value of preservation, noting that not everything worth preserving is currently in an historic district.

I would encourage you to convene a broad public process to explore what people value – and perhaps this should be done periodically. I remember Mr. Levitan's question to me in relation to my remarks at the February 17 meeting of this commission. At the time, I was nonplussed by the question, but in retrospect, it was a good, and an important one. Mr. Levitan wanted to know why I was only then stepping up to address the social movement history of the Clarenbach house. It is because the current process leaves such discoveries to times when the political process puts an issue on the table, and for the best preservation of our history in the built environment and beyond, we should collectively call for a preservation vision – not only in relation to our social movement history, but that should be included in the call.

Thank you for adding more time for consideration of these issues. As the stewards of a vital community resource, I trust you will ultimately fill the gaps in what we have for revision so far, especially in the need for that strong statement, and for addressing demolition by neglect. We possibly have a unique role to play nationally, in valuing the landmarks of our rich social movement history, and I would like to see that acknowledged. We simply cannot allow our cultural and historical resources to be held hostage by our short-sightedness prior to the Landmarks Ordinance, or by a unilateral construction of the public good that considers only short-term economic gain. I appreciate your time and attention and I look forward to following your ongoing work.