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March 4, 2026

Bridgette Ganter, Senior Civil Manager
Landmark Construction, LLC
315 Oconee Street
Athens, GA 30601

Re: Historic and Architectural Review for:
415 W. Gilman Street
Madison, WI

Dear Bridgette:

The following is an assessment of the history and architecture of the property at 415 West Gilman Street in Madison, Wisconsin, prepared by Legacy Architecture, Inc. One of four properties that are planned for demolition to make way for redevelopment to meet the local demand for private university student housing in the heart of the city, the City of Madison Landmarks Commission reviewed the project, and two of the properties along the east side of the 400 block of West Gilman Street were found to possess architectural and historical significance that led to a recommendation to avoid demolition or mitigate its effects.

415 W. Gilman Street, known as Master Hall, was constructed as a seven-story dormitory of small studio apartments intended for students near the center of Madison in 1965. It was built as a response to the rapidly growing student body of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and possesses a high modern, even brutalist architectural style designed by notable Milwaukee-based architect Jordan Miller.

Summary

Master Hall, located at 415 W. Gilman Street, is a notable architectural example of the modern, brutalist style; however, it is not alone in this regard in the city and has not been identified by the Wisconsin Historical Society as potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and it likely lacks the significance to be listed. Neither has it been previously identified by the Madison Landmarks Commission as a possible local landmark. With its concrete construction and cubic design, mitigation to document and acknowledge the building's architecture and history would be appropriate.

Historical Context

Master Hall was constructed in 1965 as a private men's dormitory intended for university students with 108 studio apartments with additional amenities such as showers, shared kitchens, maid and linen services, dining areas, and laundry rooms. It replaced a surface parking lot and a single two-story wood-frame duplex. In 1968, the first floor was remodeled for office use, and by 1970, the building also included a University Counseling office. Initially, the off-campus dormitory followed the lead of on-campus housing and was segregated by sex, as was common up through the 1960s. In 1973, the dormitory switched to mixed-gender occupancy, and the upper-level sleeping rooms were converted into studio apartments for individual students. The population of students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison tripled during the decade. Three larger dorms were constructed on campus between 1964 and 1968, and private development off campus followed, attempting to keep up with demand. However, changing social standards and a rapidly growing and diversifying student body led to mixed-gender housing on and off campus. The footprint and use of the building have not changed at all since its construction, and Master Hall is still used as single-occupancy student apartments.

Milwaukee-based architect Jordan Miller designed the striking form of the building. A modern architect, his work is widely recognized in the Milwaukee area, and he was the partner of the large firm of Miller Meier Kenyon Cooper Architects and Engineers Inc., often simply known as Miller-Meier. Notable examples of work include the Mitchell International Airport terminal, the Milwaukee Main Post Office, the UW-Milwaukee Golda Meir Library addition, the Milwaukee County Mental Health Complex, the Milwaukee Area Technical College Student Center, JCPenney Catalog Centers in Milwaukee and Atlanta, Broward County Main Library in Fort Lauderdale, the folded-plate concrete roof design of Treasure Island discount stores, and several modern homes in the northern suburbs of Milwaukee from earlier in his career. Master Hall in Madison is in keeping with Miller's work, which can generally be described as not only modernist, but also expressive, with the frequent use of folding roof forms and reinforced concrete. However, the dormitory apartments are not his largest or most notable work. By the 1970s and 1980s, Miller-Meier was best known for large civic projects all over the country. He was a member of the American Institute of Architects



Master Hall, 1974. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

from 1959 to his retirement and served as the president of AIA Wisconsin for several years. Married with two children, Jordan Miller lived most of his life in Whitefish Bay. Miller retired in 1989 and died in 2009 at the age of 82.

While some of Jordan Miller's architectural drawings are held at the Wisconsin Architectural Archives through the Milwaukee Public Library, they do not include records of Master Hall. His work was primarily in the Milwaukee area, and perhaps there are more, yet unknown, resources that could assist in this endeavor.

Building Description

Master Hall is a seven-story apartment building on the west side of the 400 block of West Gilman Street in downtown Madison. It is primarily composed of offset interlocking reinforced concrete rectangles of varying widths, each a single story in height. At the exterior, these rectangles cantilever, alternating to create an expressive effect of shifting cubes, like a teetering tower of wood blocks in six bays. On the main façade, facing Gilman Street, some of the rectangles are blank painted white concrete, while others have an inset wall of a brick masonry bulwark with a mechanical vent inserted and a band of sliding metal windows. This outward expression indicates the division of interior uses, mostly of individual small dormitory units. The first floor is set back under the cantilevered second floor with angled brick piers, or pilotis. Behind these is the main entry and bands of fixed glass storefront windows across the entire main façade and most of the other three as well. The text: "Master Hall," and "M.H.," are present on the second floor, blank concrete above the main entry. Each façade is symmetrical, though this is obscured by the in-and-out of the cubic exterior. The articulation of concrete cubes is most pronounced on the main façade, while the other three also share the same architectural language, with less cantilever and more bands of brick and fenestration. The interior has a main vestibule, stairs, elevator core, and public rooms on the first floor, and small dormitory units on the upper levels. The condition and type of interior finishes are unknown currently, but it is presumed to continue the materiality of the reinforced concrete walls, brick, and metal windows. There is no indication of significant alterations to the exterior.

Comparative Analysis

There are other modern movement apartments in Madison besides Master Hall, and about thirteen other examples remaining from the period. None are listed as landmarks or in the National Register of Historic Places.

The expressive nature of the offset concrete façade of Master Hall lends its design to be compared to Brutalist architecture, popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Brutalism is understood as a sub-category of modern architecture popularized in the late 1950s through the 1970s. The style is typically marked by exposed and rough concrete and masonry, the expression of structure on the exterior, the division of services and functions on the interior, repetitive organizational systems, and a general massiveness derived from the work of architects like Le Corbusier. The term Brutalist was coined by the architectural historian Rayner Banham, who distinguished the new approach by its valuation of materials, expressiveness, and formal and functional legibility.

Many examples of the Brutalist style in Madison are located on the University of Wisconsin campus. Such examples include Vilas Hall, built in 1972; Helen C. White Hall, completed in

1969; Lewis G. Weeks Hall, constructed in 1974; the Bell Telephone building on West Washington Avenue, finished in 1972; the Steenbock Memorial Library, completed in 1968; the Hydrobiology Lab, built in 1961; and the Wendt Engineering Building, constructed in 1976. None of the campus buildings are dormitories. Perhaps the most significant example of Brutalist design in Madison is the Mosse Humanities Building and the adjacent Elvehjem Building, now the Chazen Art Museum, both designed by Harry Weese and completed in 1968. However, the Humanities Building will likely be demolished in the next couple of years. In comparison, Master Hall is not the only brutalist-style building in Madison; it is also not the best local example.

The brutalist mode of Modern Architecture is comparatively uncommon in Madison and Wisconsin. All the previously mentioned examples are institutional buildings rather than apartments. A couple of contemporary apartments of the mid-1960s were built, Allen Hall and the Towers at 502 North Francis, also off State Street, were completed with the express purpose of catering to a growing student population in 1964, just like Master Hall. Both also included small, segregated apartments. However, both are simple masonry-clad modern towers and lack the expressionist design of Master Hall.

Conclusions and Recommendations

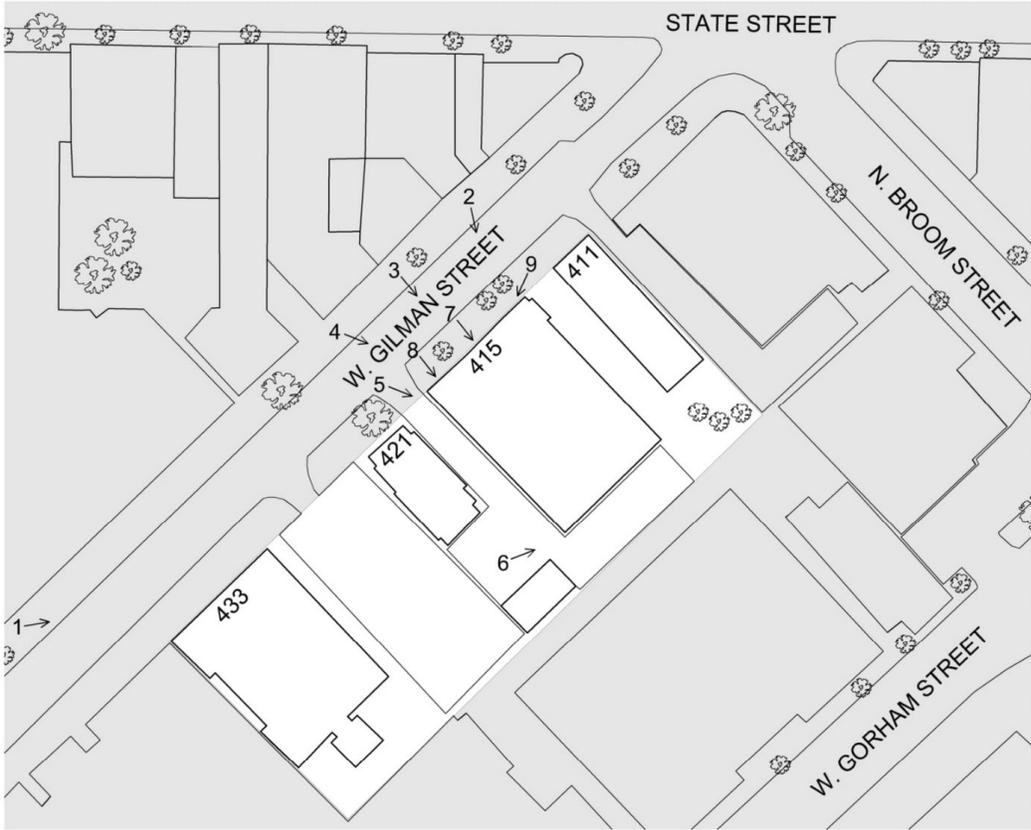
The Madison Landmark Commission recently found that Master Hall qualifies under Criterion A as a building that "...has historic value based on architectural significance, cultural significance, historic significance, as the work/product of an architect of note, and its status as a contributing structure in a National Register Historic District, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and/or as an intact or rare example of a certain architectural style or method of construction." In this case, the building would likely fall under the category of architectural significance as it lacks a strong case for historical or cultural significance.

The Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office's Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory has a record for the property (AHI# 109648) and makes no mention of its eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. The presence of other notable examples of the brutalist modern style of architecture in Madison, especially on the University of Wisconsin campus, makes it unlikely that Master Hall would meet the necessary level of significance for inclusion on the National Register.

Mitigation approaches that reuse, recycle, or recreate elements of the building into a new one seem difficult, given the structure of the building. Reinforced concrete cannot really be extracted and reused in its place or moved. Rather, an approach of recognition rather than direct preservation may be appropriate, similar to how certain federally funded projects under Section 106 guidance will record, study, and honor a historic property being removed. This can take the form of written and photographic documentation or the installation of a memorial, like a historic marker, plaque, or wall text, and images integrated into the new design, including, specifically in this case, some recognition of Master Hall's unique expressionist brutalist design.

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LEGEND

1 → PHOTO NUMBER & VANTAGE POINT

KEY PLAN DIAGRAM

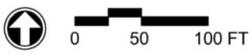


Photo 1: The west side of the 400 block of West Gilman Street shows all four subject properties.



Photo 2: 415 W. Gilman Street, Master Hall, facing southeast



Photo 3: 415 W. Gilman Street, Master Hall, facing east



Photo 4: 415 W. Gilman Street, Master Hall, facing northeast



Photo 5: 415 W. Gilman Street, Master Hall, facing east



Photo 6: 415 W. Gilman Street, Master Hall, facing north



Photo 7: 415 W. Gilman Street, Master Hall, façade detail



Photo 8: 415 W. Gilman Street, Master Hall, façade detail



Photo 9: 415 W. Gilman Street, Master Hall, façade detail