

**From:** Whitney Gould [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, February 16, 2011 3:57 PM  
**To:** Scanlon, Amy  
**Subject:** sager house

2633 N. Stowell Ave.  
Milwaukee, WI 53211  
16 Feb., 2011

Members of the Madison Landmarks Commission  
City of Madison Planning Unit  
215 Martin Luther King Blvd., Suite LL100  
P.O. Box 2985  
Madison, WI 53701

Dear Landmarks Commissioners:

As a former Madisonian who served on the Madison Landmarks Commission for seven years, I am writing in support of Matt and Julie Sager's plans for a house designed by Johnsen Schmalig Architects for an empty lot at 209 N. Prospect Ave. in the University Heights Historic District, adjacent to the famous Ely House. My family's home was in University Heights, not far from the Ely House, when I was in high school and college and I have fond memories of the neighborhood.

For many years, until my retirement in 2007, I was the architecture critic for The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and wrote extensively about the built environment, with an eye toward encouraging both historic preservation and innovative, sustainable contemporary design—as often as possible in the same neighborhood. The Sager project fulfills both of those goals, adding new vibrancy to a treasured old neighborhood while doing so in architectural language of its own time and place.

As is typical of Johnsen Schmalig's work, this is not a flashy, "look-at-me" house but rather a sober, disciplined building that grows out of detailed studies of the setting. Stepped back from the street, the house is sensitively sited in order to protect cherished views, green space and mature trees. At 2,000 square feet, with a mere 900 SF footprint, it is also beautifully scaled so as not to overwhelm or intrude on its neighbors; its tall, floor-to-ceiling windows are friendly to the street; and the colors of the wood and brick skin, ranging from russet to mottled gray, will reflect the changing seasons. Its modest size, tightly insulated building envelope, high-efficiency glass, hydronic heat, passive solar features and infill construction make this house a fine example of "green" design.

Nevertheless, you have doubtless heard objections that this geometrically rigorous house will not "fit in," that it is too different from its neighbors to be considered appropriate under Landmarks Commission guidelines. I have read those guidelines—indeed, I helped write earlier versions of them when I was on the commission from 1977 to 1984, a period when we approved the first of several contemporary homes on side lots in University Heights—and I do not believe that any but the most literal-minded could find the Sager

project to be an outlier. Consider, for starters, the wonderfully eclectic nature of University Heights, its architectural styles ranging from turreted Queen Annes and majestic Georgian Revivals to Tudor Revivals, Colonial Revivals, Spanish Colonials and examples of the Prairie School and Arts and Crafts; roof profiles run a dizzying gamut from gabled (both steep and shallow) to gambrel, hip and flat.

Each new building form must have looked a bit startling at the time it was built: Imagine the shock that some staid residents must have felt when Frank Lloyd Wright's boldly cantilevered Gilmore House, at 120 Ely Place, announced itself from its hillside perch in 1908! But such is the charm of University Heights today, where you can experience the whole sweep of American domestic architecture from the 1880s to the 1930s and beyond.

My point here is that historic preservation is not taxidermy. This area has never been frozen in time. It has been an evolving showcase for work by some of the most distinguished architects of the day, from Wright and Louis Sullivan to Claude and Starck and Keck & Keck, and for lovingly crafted dwellings by lesser known practitioners, as well. In 2011, it would be an insult to those architects and their legacy to attempt to replicate their work. Such imitations almost inevitably end up cheapening the real thing—and, in this case, would signal that despite its famously progressive political traditions, Madison is averse to inventive ideas in design.

With the Sager House, Brian Johnsen and Sebastian Schmaling are helping to write the next chapter in the rich history of University Heights. These young architects have already compiled an impressive body of work that has earned a long list of awards and admiring notices from the American Institute of Architects (both the national organization and AIA-Wisconsin), Architectural Record, Dwell Magazine, Metropolis Magazine, Custom Home Magazine, Residential Architect and many other groups and publications. I profiled one of Johnsen Schmaling's most recent projects, a jewel-like modernist house in Racine that has just won the national AIA's Housing Design Award, for the October 2010 issue of Metropolis. (You can find the article, "The Anti-McMansion," at [www.metropolismag.com](http://www.metropolismag.com); click on Archive). That home, like the Sager house, is located in an historic district, yet it has been overwhelmingly embraced by its neighbors, the preservation community and the city.

I am confident that the Sager House, too, has the potential to become one of tomorrow's landmarks. I hope that you will give it favorable consideration.

Sincerely,

Whitney Gould

P.S. Please note that I am not being compensated by the architects, the Sagers or anyone else. I'm speaking for myself as a private citizen and longtime student of architecture and preservation.