

Date: November 25,2003
To: Madison Landmarks Commission
From: Alum Dick Wagner

I understand you have another proposal on your agenda for a project in Manison Hill. Knowing you may have many speakers I chose to write a note. I have not reviewed the project and offer no specific comments on its merits. I am concerned though about two issues that it raises.

First, is the preservation of sites related to gay history in Madison. While I believe the city's preservation program has been very strong on architectural issues I think at times the historical has not been balanced. The town's business is politics and education but I do not believe we have sorted out what are the truly important sites in some of that history. As Wisconsin was the first "gay rights" state and to date is the only state to elect three LGBT congress members, the sites of LGBT history here would seem important. The City of London has done better with their pink plaques history markers. Likewise while sites of some past worthies, mainly 19th Century, have been designated, the late 20th Century history of the city as a progressive hotbed and its sites appear less well known. As the generation passes which brought this political reality the sites of their history should not disappear. So I particularly hope the David Clarenbach house can be preserved.

Second, is a broader question about Mansion Hill and preservation. I was involved with the citizens committee that did research on the late 19th Century history of the Mansion Hill area and its importance as the residences of the big bugs of the town. Our work back then was to reverse a series of land use and zoning assumptions of the 1950s that saw much of the downtown and the near-east side of town as almost throw away zones fit for any bulldozer. These areas, and I might observe their residents, were little valued and thus massive places of private disinvestment. Restoring a view of their unique historic character and urging their preservation was a tool to stop the throw away culture and encourage limited public improvements and hopefully much private re-investment. I think in some places like Third Lake Ridge the re-investment has exceeded our expectations. However, for Mansion Hill the question remains open. Thus, I think the larger issue for the city is how well after several decades have historic districts served us and what adjustments do we need in our preservation strategies. This is more than a question of designation and regulation. It seems (though this will date me) we have not moved much beyond the Mapleside debate. I would hope a new generation of policy makers could renew and improve the preservation discussions.

Wishing you all well in you civic work.

Sincerely,

Dick Wagner

