

TO: Madison Landmarks Commission  
FR: Michael Bridgeman, 106 S. Franklin St.  
DT: December 16, 2011  
RE: Downtown Plan and historic preservation

I have reviewed the Downtown Plan and there is much to support: stronger connections to the lakes (including the Mendota lakeshore path), enhancing livability for a variety of residents, and transportation options, though I think the needs of pedestrians need more attention.

In reading the plan, I paid particular attention to historic resources. I am especially concerned that Frank Lloyd Wright's Lamp House and its surroundings be preserved, so have devoted much attention to Bonus Area G as described in Appendix C.

I believe that preservation and development are not mutually exclusive. With imagination, cooperation and a commitment to quality, the people of Madison can use historic resources to make this a better place to live.

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### **Notes on Appendix C Maximum Building Heights—Bonus Story Criteria**

I am wary of bonus stories for two reasons. First, I am not entirely sure how decisions to award bonus stories have been made in Downtown Design Zone 2, an area in which they are currently permitted. I have read the Zoning Ordinance, talked with Al Martin of the Planning Department, and reviewed the design criteria in Resolution 58533 which Mr. Martin sent me. I am *still* unsure about city practice in awarding bonus stories. Second, it is easy to see how bonuses could become routine, not exceptional, even though the plan states that bonus stories should not be considered "by rights" heights. Based on recent examples in Downtown Design Zone 2, I find the results unimpressive.

In addition, the Downtown Plan proposes two bonus areas—Bonus Area D and Bonus Area E—that are within the boundaries of the suggested Langdon local historic district. I think these two ideas are mutually exclusive and priority should be given to establishing the Langdon historic district rather than establishing the Bonus Areas.

### **Lamp House (Bonus Area G)**

The integrity of the Frank Lloyd Wright's Lamp House and its context are threatened by Bonus Area G. The Plan acknowledges that the Lamp House sits in (near) the center of the block in this transition area, but then proposes guidelines that undervalue its importance and undermine its integrity.

The Downtown Plan needs to give greater protection, not less, to the Lamp House and the views to and from the house. Doing so has the potential to deliver cultural, economic and quality-of-life benefits to the city and the state, as well as the national and international cultural communities. The City of Madison should honor and celebrate Wright and his work.

### ***Why to protect the Lamp House and related views***

- a. The Lamp House dates from 1903 and is the earliest extant work by Wright in the city of Madison. The house and related projects for Robie Lamp are thoroughly described by Jack Holzhuetter in “Frank Lloyd Wright and Madison: Eight Decades of Artistic and Social Interaction” (1990, Elvehjem Museum of Art).
- b. Holzhuetter sent me this note on December 13, 2011, emphasizing the importance of the house’s siting and the resulting views.

“In addition to his skill at designing buildings, Frank Lloyd Wright was equally gifted at designing their sites to maximize their exposure to the sun, to views, their visibility, and their privacy. In the case of the Lamp House, a very urban dwelling in the midst of pre-existing structures, he placed it at the extreme rear of the lot because that was the highest point available. He then raised the water table to a height of nearly 3 feet (uncommon for his work) to give the house even more height. These two decisions guaranteed that both Lakes Mendota and Monona were clearly visible from the third-story roof garden. (The owner, his best friend, was a sailing enthusiast and wanted to be able to watch races from the roof. Lake Mendota still is clearly visible from the third story, and also from a sliver of the side yard.) Wright achieved privacy for the downtown site through elaborate fencing, walkways, hardscape retaining walls and stairs, and creation of several landscape and hardscape terraces from Butler street to the front door. It is safe to say that the Lamp House’s siting and landscaping/hardscaping were as important and cunning as its interior plan—one of Wright’s most economical designs. “

- c. The southwest part of the block has been built up to the detriment of the Lamp House, its site and its views to Lake Monona. The northeast part of the block remains as it was in 1903. This is a unique opportunity to protect the Lamp House, what remains of its immediate environment, and preserve the views to Lake Mendota. The older buildings adjacent to the Lamp House property on Webster, Mifflin and Butler Streets appear to be in generally good condition and prime for re-use and rehabilitation.
- d. The Lamp House is one of seven Wright buildings in Madison including Monona Terrace and one of three Wright designs that has been given local landmark status. It is also important nationally and internationally.
- e. Madison is Wright’s “home town” as detailed by David Mollenhoff and Mary Jane Hamilton in “Frank Lloyd Wright’s Monona Terrace: The Enduring Power of a Civic Vision” (1999, University of Wisconsin Press). Wright had a long personal and professional relationship with Madison over his long life, starting when his family moved to the city in 1878 and continuing until Wright’s death in 1959. It’s a relationship that was sometimes fruitful, often testy, and undeniably significant.

### ***How to protect the Lamp House and related views***

Madison’s connection to Wright is a mark of distinction and the city and its citizenry should do all they can to preserve, protect and promote the association with Wright. The current Downtown Plan fails to do so and this oversight needs to be remedied.

There are several tools that can be deployed in place of the unfortunate proposals outlined for Bonus Area G. My own order of priority is:

1. *Create a Local Landmark District* — That portion of the Lamp House block that retains its original structures should be designated a City of Madison landmark district. Preferably, the district would encompass areas to the northeast to protect views to *and from* the house in response to (b) above.
2. *Create a National Register District* — Were the city to simultaneously create a National Register district with the same borders as the local district, it would elevate the status of the area for rejuvenations as opposed to redevelopment. National Register status would also make contributing structures eligible for certain tax benefits.
3. *Protect Views* — The Plan acknowledges that views can “protect and enhance visual connections to the lakes” (p. 36) and identifies key vistas. The Lamp House is worthy of a unique viewshed toward Lake Mendota. Among the factors to be considered in developing building height recommendations are “important view corridors and viewsheds [and] the presence of historic buildings” (p.41). This alone supports the elimination of Bonus Area G.
4. *Reduce Building Heights* — As currently proposed, Bonus Area G would allow for six story building heights. Using the maximum measurements described in the Plan (p. 41) would thus allow for a structure 88 feet tall as measured “from the highest point of a front lot line along a street adjacent to the site.” (p. 42).

By way of comparison, the Odessa Apartment building (above) to the southwest of the Lamp House property is seven stories including its penthouse. The Capitol Hill apartment building (below)—across from the Mifflin Street corner of the Lamp House block—is four stories tall. The current plan allows for a baseline building height half again as tall adjacent to the Lamp House and twice as tall if bonus stories are awarded. This would effectively build a wall around the Lamp House and destroy its context.

I suggest that the Landmarks Commission, *at a minimum*, propose lowering the allowable maximum heights of buildings on the block to those that already exist. This would permit appropriately scaled new construction and some possible infill. With clear and carefully developed design standards, this at least has the potential better retain the general environment of the Lamp House than the current proposal for Bonus Area G.

- a. *Disallow Bonus Stories* — Bonus stories should not be allowed on those parts of the block that have not been redeveloped. Since the proposed building heights described in the paragraphs above are already too tall, adding bonus stories makes a bad situation untenable.

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## **Other remarks on the Downtown Plan**

### **Existing Out-of-Context Buildings (p. 29)**

*Superior architectural design* — This section allows for existing buildings to be replaced with new buildings of a similar height, density or volume provided that they are of “superior architectural design.” This is a subjective standard that is hard to define and evaluate (see the images on page 2).

There are few buildings of any age in Madison that demonstrate, in my opinion, *superior* architectural design. I do not support this recommendation in the plan. Nonetheless, if this were to become the standard for replacing existing eyesores, especially in historic neighborhoods such as Mansion Hill, the Landmarks Commission needs to play a central role in creating standards and making sure that replacement buildings are truly superior in design.

### **Building Heights (p. 41-42)**

*Reflecting topography* — I am pleased to see that the Downtown Plan includes specifics about building heights. I concur with the factors that should influence such decisions: “topography, important view corridors and viewsheds, the presence of historic buildings, the use and scale recommendations for an area, and the existing scale of buildings in the vicinity...” (p.41). The Plan goes on to state that “height is measured from the highest point of a front lot line along a street adjacent to the site.” (p. 42) Given the slope of many downtown parcels, this two ideas seem to be in conflict are not clarified by Recommendation 44 (p. 41). The City of Madison needs to discontinue and discourage “table topping” of the skyline (p. 36). The Landmarks Commission should be sure that these apparent conflicts are resolved in the final plan in favor of rules that reflect underlying topography.

### **Build on Historic Resources (p.91)**

*Predictability* — The narrative refers to providing “a degree of predictability for the development review process.”(p. 91) This is a common request from the development community. The final Downtown Plan should be clear, however, that *predictably is important for all those vested in historic districts*: residents, property owners, developers and the community at large. The Landmarks Commission should ask that this diversity of interests be stated explicitly in the final document.

*Maintenance* — While increasing inspection frequency is a worthy goal, it does not go far enough in ensuring the maintenance of historic properties. The Landmarks Commission should take a lead role in assisting property owners to maintain historic properties through grants, loans or other means as described in Recommendation 162 (p. 92). Of particular concern is the preservation of Madison’s early sandstone structures, many of which have suffered from years of winter salt and other depredations.

*Landmark nominations* — The Downtown Plan recommends that the city complete the nomination process of potential landmarks identified in the Downtown Historic Preservation Plan of 1998. It is unclear how this will be achieved and the role, if any, that the Landmarks Commission might play in making this happen. This needs to be corrected in the final Plan.

*Landmark Buildings and Local Historic District Recommendations* — I support Recommendations 166 through 170 (p. 93), though the role of the Landmarks Commission is unclear. I also support creation of a Lamp House Historic District as noted above. I further encourage a city policy of matching the boundaries of local districts with National Register districts for simplicity, clarity and predictability. This is especially true of the Mansion Hill district.

*National Register of Historic Places* — I support Recommendations 171 through 174 (p. 95) and the creation of a Lamp House district. While National Register status creates some incentives for property owners, the city needs to do even more and pursue actions such as those described in Recommendation 162 (p. 92).