

TO: Madison Plan Commission Working Session

FR: Michael Bridgeman, 106 S. Franklin St.

DT: March 29, 2012

RE: Downtown Plan and Appendix C

Bonus Area G and the Lamp House

In Memorandum 4, I am pleased to see that staff support removing Bonus Area G in the vicinity of the Lamp House. I made this argument before the Landmarks Commission and was glad to see the letter in the file from Frank Lloyd Wright Wisconsin on the same topic.

While this is a good step, I am concerned that simply removing the Bonus Area may continue to expose the Lamp House and its context to negative developments.

Looking at the Maximum Building Heights map on page 42 of the Plan, it appears the Lamp House block would still be permitted to have buildings of 8 stories which is still too tall in this particular case. The proposed 4-story limits of the James Madison neighborhood would probably not be problematic.

The Plan needs to be more specific in protecting this important resource. Madison's connection to Frank Lloyd 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. Protecting and preserving the Lamp House 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.

Protecting the Lamp House and related views

The intent of the Bonus Area was to provide an economic incentive toward preserving the Lamp House. The city can incentivize preservation through other means. The following ideas could be incorporated into the Downtown Plan as part of Key 7, "Building on Historic Resources."

1. *Create a Local Landmark District* — The western part of the block retains structures from 1903, the year the Lamp House was built, and should be designated a city landmark district. Preferably, the district would encompass additional area to the northeast to protect views to and from the house since siting is essential the house's historic context.

There exists a unique opportunity to protect the Lamp House, what remains of its immediate environment, and preserve important views. 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. Carefully crafted standards for a local district could help achieve multiple goals of preservation an respectful development.

2. *Create a National Register District* — Were the city to simultaneously create a National Register district with the same boundaries, it would mean potential tax benefits for rejuvenation of the Lamp House and the area around it.

3. *Protect Views* — As a first step, the Plan should recommend a protected view corridor from the Lamp House toward Lake Mendota. The Plan acknowledges that views can “protect and enhance visual connections to the lakes” (p. 36) and identifies other key vistas.

Jack Holzhueter, who wrote the chapter on the Lamp House for “Frank Lloyd Wright and Madison: Eight Decades of Artistic and Social Interaction” (1990, Elvehjem Museum of Art), 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.”

The letter from Frank Lloyd Wright Wisconsin also describes the importance of the Lamp House’s context.

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.

It is worth noting that the Downtown Plan proposes that Law Park be reinvigorated with, among other amenities, a park shelter suggested by Wright’s Lake Monona boathouse design from 1893. I ask that the Downtown Plan provide more guidance to preserve and protect the Lamp House—the earliest extant structure by Wright in the city—as an important historic and cultural resource.

Bonus Story Criteria

Recognizing that Appendix C may be deleted from the Plan (per the note on page 5 of Memorandum 4), I am wary of bonus stories however they come to be. 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 also recognize the challenge of creating guidelines that become overly restrictive.

It is easy to see how bonuses could become routine, not exceptional, where proposed designs, are, like the children of Lake Wobegon, all “above average.” Given recent examples in Downtown Design Zone 2, I find the results unimpressive:



I find none of these designs truly exceptional. In the Downtown Plan there are several references to improving architectural quality, a goal I strongly encourage. I am skeptical that bonus stories provide much incentive toward that goal.