

Regarding: 210 Langdon Street – Demolish the existing building and construct a 3-story fraternity house adjacent to a designated landmark (Chi Phi Fraternity) and in the Langdon Street National Register Historic District.
 2nd Ald. District
Contact: J. Randy Bruce
 (Legistar #28485)

Date: December 10, 2012
Prepared By: Amy Scanlon, Preservation Planner

General Information:

The Applicant is requesting to demolish one structure that consists of a contributing structure and a noncontributing addition in the Langdon Street National Register Historic District and adjacent to a designated landmark to construct a new fraternity house.

Relevant Landmarks Ordinance sections:

- 28.04(3)(n) Any development on a zoning lot adjoining a landmark or landmark site for which Plan Commission or Urban Design Commission review is required shall be reviewed by the Landmarks Commission to determine whether the proposed development is so large or visually intrusive as to adversely affect the historic character and integrity of the adjoining landmark or landmark site. Landmark Commission review shall be advisory to the Plan Commission and the Urban Design Commission.
- 28.12(12)(c)1.d. The Plan Commission shall consider the report of the City’s historic preservation planner regarding the historic value of the property as well as any report submitted by the Landmarks Commission.

Background Information:

The Langdon neighborhood has a distinctive character that is based on the development pattern of the area and the architectural trends of the time. The Langdon neighborhood was originally part of the Mansion Hill neighborhood and was home to prominent businessmen and University faculty. As the University population grew, the Langdon area became a popular neighborhood for Greek letter societies and housing for students. These Greek letter societies established chapter houses in existing stately structures or constructed new high-style period revival buildings. With significant growth in University enrollment, the neighborhood transitioned from a prestigious neighborhood of professionals to a student enclave that is known for its buildings of high-style period revival architectural styles.

The building at 210 Langdon Street was constructed in 1875 during the early phase of development in the Langdon area as the Congregational Church Parsonage. The building later served as the home of A.L. Sanborn, an Attorney and US District Judge from 1894-1919. As the neighborhood became oriented toward student housing and Greek letter societies, the building was largely remodeled in 1927 by Frank Riley for the Delta Sigma Phi Fraternity house. It is believed that this remodeling included the regularization of the undulating original floor plan perimeter and the addition of a full third story. The building was used by Phi Sigma Sigma Sorority from 1933-1937, as a men’s boarding house from 1937-1949 and became the Theta Chi Fraternity House in 1949.

The front portion was constructed in 1964 and is considered a non-contributing structure in the Historic District.

The building's chronology spans the early development phase and the change to a student enclave and "Greek Row" associated with University growth.

Plans and programs including the Langdon Street National Register Historic District, the Downtown Plan and the 2006 Comprehensive Plan have been put in place to protect the context and character of the Langdon neighborhood.

The Langdon Neighborhood National Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. The nomination form is linked to Legistar. The National Register nomination states, *"The Greek letter societies along with landlords and developers cashing in on the demand for student housing, demolished or altered most of the older buildings in the district. But, they also erected some distinctive high-style replacements, executed in the latest period revival architectural styles by some of Madison's best architects. This new construction of Tudor, Georgian, Colonial and Mediterranean revival buildings, alongside the older styles, resulted in an eclectic mix of buildings which distinguishes the Langdon Street historic district from any other area in the city."*

The statement above suggests that the buildings built during the period of historic development, between 1900 and 1930, are significant to each other and to the overall character of the neighborhood. While the specific building proposed for demolition has individual historic value due to the significance of the architect, architectural style, and early development history, it is most valuable as part of the collection of buildings in the unique context of the Langdon neighborhood.

The recently adopted Downtown Plan features the Langdon area in Key 4: Maintaining Strong Neighborhoods and Districts and in Key 7: Build on Historic Resources. The historic preservation related objectives, recommendations, and discussion points that relate to this proposal have not been provided for this Staff Report, but include pages 56, 57, 92 and 93 of the draft plan. Excerpts of the 2006 Comprehensive Plan that relate to historic preservation issues have not been provided in this Staff Report, but include Objectives 34, 40, 41, 42, 44, and 51. It should be noted that Staff believes the proposal is largely in compliance with the preservation-related issues in the Downtown Plan and the Comprehensive Plan.

The Landmarks Commission reviewed the demolition notices for 210 Langdon on October 15, 2012. At that time the Commission provided a recommendation to the Plan Commission that the building has historic value. The motion follows:

A motion was made by McLean, seconded by Rummel, convey to the Plan Commission that the Landmarks Commission is opposed to the demolition of the rear portion of the structure for a number of reasons including the loss of a historic/contributing structure in a National Register Historic District in relation to the recommendations in the Downtown Plan, the structure's proximity to a local landmark, and the c. 1920s remodeling by master architect, Frank Riley. The motion passed by voice vote/other.



Bing maps image

Staff Comments and Recommendations:

After the Landmarks Commission provided a recommendation on the demolition request on October 15, more information about this building has been revealed. A discussion about the preservation-related issues in response to this development proposal follows:

The National Register nomination determines that the rear portion of the building is contributing to the Historic District. Staff believes the building was found to be contributing because the original structure was a high style residential form that relates to the historic context and because the major alteration in 1927 was completed during the period of significance (1900-1930) and was designed by master architect Frank Riley. The noncontributing addition that was added to the front elevation in the 1960s masks the contributing structure from the streetscape. A concrete block stair tower was constructed on the rear elevation presumably in the 1960s which obscures the rear of the original building. The 1927 alteration and the subsequent additions diminish the architectural integrity of the structure and its relationship with the historic context.

Staff had the opportunity to tour this building with architect, Randy Bruce, and preservation architect, Charles Quagliana. Staff noted the conditions that are documented in the attached letters from Mr. Quagliana and structural engineer Kurt Straus. Mr. Quagliana states that “the architectural integrity of the property is very low” and Mr. Straus states that “there are significant structural issues present”.

Given the compromised nature of this building, Staff suggests that while the building has historic value the Landmarks Commission should soften the previous motion regarding demolition given the new information.

The proposed building is similar in mass and scale to the building that is being removed and to other buildings within the context. The form and architectural treatment is compatible with the character of the neighborhood and respectful of the adjacent landmark. Staff recommends that the Landmarks Commission advise the Plan Commission and Urban Design Commission that the proposed building is not so large or visually intrusive that it adversely affects the historic character and integrity of the adjacent landmark.

Staff finds that some architectural details could be modified to enhance a historically appropriate architectural character. In addition, Staff requests that modern interpretations of traditional styles in historic neighborhoods should have details that are based on traditional construction methods. While outside of the purview of the formal Landmarks Commission review, the following design suggestions could be forwarded to the Urban Design Commission so the concerns of the Landmarks Commission can be understood:

1. Use brick instead of stone. Staff is concerned that the proposed stone is too similar to the stone of the adjacent landmark.
2. Simplify the use of the segmental arch. Historically appropriate buildings typically have the same radius for all segmental arches on a façade. While the proposed building is a modern interpretation of a traditional style, the use of the arch should be simplified and used to denote a hierarchy of the elevation. Staff suggests that the same arch (height and width) be used at three places on the front elevation and that the other fenestration be changed to flat wood heads as used on the fenestration on the side and rear elevations.
3. Make the chimney masonry. Historically appropriate buildings have masonry chimneys.
4. Revise the lintels. In traditional construction methods, the lintel or header actually supported the load of the wall above and would extend 4 - 8 inches past the jamb of the window or door.



CHARLES QUAGLIANA

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December 4, 2012

Mr. J. Randy Bruce
Knothe & Bruce Architects, LLC.
7601 University Avenue
Middleton, WI 53562

Re: Theta Chi Fraternity House
210 Langdon
Madison, WI

Dear Randy,

The original portion of the Theta Chi Fraternity House was built in 1875 as the Congregational Church Parsonage. It was remodeled in 1927 by architect Frank Riley giving it the Tudor influenced exterior. The contemporary street side addition and north stair were added in 1964.

Based upon my walk through tours, it is evident that the majority of interior spaces within the original structure have been significantly remodeled and modified to accommodate student housing. The floor plans of the basement, first, second and third floors have all been modified to accommodate additional bedrooms, corridors, closets and bathrooms. The majority of this has been subtractive, some additive.


The vast majority of any original or 1927 era detail, such as stairs, trim, doors, built-ins, pocket doors and decorative work, have been removed. Some isolated fragments of decorative base and trim do remain as well as one first floor fire place. All original windows have been replaced with aluminum units. One original interior door was found on third floor. Most ceilings have been furred with drywall.

The original 1875 exterior form and fabric was likely removed and/or heavily altered to accommodate the 1927 reconfiguration into a Tudor influenced exterior style. Based upon 1902 Sanborn map information, it appears the original building footprint was modified and expanded in 1927 with in-fills and additions. It is likely the third floor was added at this time.

The 1927 era building lost its street side entry and porch when the 1964 addition was constructed. Also in 1964, the interior of the original Parsonage was further remodeled and all windows were removed and replaced with aluminum units. Several new windows were added. These curiously contrast with the Tudor exterior detailing.

In my opinion, the overall architectural integrity of the property is very low. Much of the original character defining elements have been removed or covered over. I estimate that less than 5% of the original character defining features or elements remains intact on the interior. On the exterior, of the original 1875 Parsonage, only the foundation stone remains visible. On the 1927 Tudor exterior, 30% of its original facades have been altered or are buried behind additions.

Sincerely,


Charles J. Quagliana, AIA, NCARB
Preservation Architect



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December 4, 2012

Mr. J. Randy Bruce
Knothe & Bruce Architects, LLC.
7601 University Avenue
Middleton, WI 53562

Re: Theta Chi Fraternity House
210 Langdon
Madison, WI

Dear Randy,

This letter outlines our opinions of structural conditions based on our walkthrough on Friday, November 30, 2012. We noted several structural concerns having to do with the wood framed original portion of the Theta Chi Fraternity House built in 1875 as the church parsonage, and remodeled in 1927. We understand that the original parsonage was a two-story building. The present building is a three-story wood framed structure. The presence of interior and exterior finishes prevented us from getting complete access to the framing, and the attic space was closed. We are not aware of any existing plans. For the sake of simplicity, we will call the rear of the building the north side.

We were able to see a portion of the first floor framing from the basement. The framing generally ran north to south in the middle third of the building, but changed direction in the northern third of the building to run east west (inaccessible in the southern third). We believe that the framing changes direction in the middle third and runs east west in the second and third floors.

The discussion below pertains to issues relating to the middle third of the building. For the upper floors, the west wall of the corridor appears to be the original bearing wall for the entire height of the building. There were fragments of the original trim found only on the west wall of the corridor. The east corridor wall appears to have been added sometime later; at least from the first to second floor.

The floor framing of second and third floors slopes considerably across the central corridor of the building and the joists are likely significantly overstressed. The magnitude of the floor deformation is in the range of 2" to 3" across the corridor. The floors slope back upwards on the other side of the corridor walls in the eastern bedrooms. So, the second floor, third floor and possibly roof loads are being transmitted downward through the building through both sets of corridor walls. But only the west wall is truly a bearing wall, causing the significant deformations in the relatively soft floor joists of third and second floors. Although further investigation would be required, sagging in the floors may yet be ongoing.

Noting that the original building was two stories and that it is now three stories, we have a major concern that the third floor framing may not be contributing much (or any) to the support of the eastern-most wall stack. Since at one time the third floor was framed as a ceiling joist system or a lightly loaded attic, it is logical to believe that the framing supporting third floor may contain the smaller members left from the ceiling construction or attic floor, rather than stouter members typically used in the floor systems (present in second floor). It follows that second floor joist framing may be supporting both the second, and third floors, and part of the roof, all by itself.

These significant floor deformations were not present in the first floor framing. Actually, the sloping in the first floor appeared to be about 1/2" and running the other way, east, downward to the west, across the corridor. We attribute this sloping to likely settlements in the foundations due to long term loads from the true west corridor bearing wall.

We also noted that the gable roof framing was sagged in some of the roof planes but also along the ridge. The ridge sagging was more prevalent in the middle third of the building.

In summary, we believe that there are significant structural issues present; overstressed floor and roof framing, and loads that do not transfer adequately through the building to foundations.

Sincerely,



Kurt Straus, P.E.
Structural Engineer
Structural Integrity, Inc.



Image showing the east exterior of the building. The floor deformations are occurring generally in the longer joist spans of the middle third of the building; in the section under the east west framed gable.



Image showing the sloping in the corridor of second floor from west downward to the east.