

Kurt Schwichtenberg  
314 Ryan Avenue  
St. Paul, Minnesota

**February 14, 2021**

Commissioners  
St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission

RE: 300 Ryan Avenue Proposal

Dear Commissions,

I have resided in the house at 314 Ryan Avenue since 1975, studied at U of M (BA (Arch) 1973) and been a licensed contractor in St. Paul since 1972. It's been a pleasure and a privilege to work with a wonderful group of neighbors and committed others over these decades toward re-establishing the oldest residential neighborhood in the Twin Cities. As a contractor, I've worked on almost all of the District houses (completely rebuilding four of them).

Your correspondent would appreciate HPC consideration of the deliberate, if imperfect, process employed to fill the numerous "missing teeth" in the District in such a way as to promote interpretation of the urban dynamism that is the bottom line story being told here.

#### **The "Infill" Process In The Irvine Park District 1974-1984**

I believe it was around the turn of the year '73-'74 that The National Trust established the Irvine Park National District recognizing the area as containing the largest remaining group of pre-Civil War buildings in the Twin Cities. It was obvious from the earliest preservation efforts that there were not enough territorial and Victorian era buildings remaining to make a coherent and financially feasible neighborhood.

And so it was that planning for and production of the necessary "infill" development went forward simultaneously with restoration of the truly antique houses. (Please note that I didn't take notes at the time and my recollections may be incomplete, or wrong in some specifics. My best resource is the Irvine Park Walking Tour Guide) The SHPO designated a committee of the MN Chapter AIA (that being before St. Paul HPC) to supervise the restoration of buildings and the planning for the missing teeth sites within the District where many important old houses had been lost to acquisition/demolition by HRA and an arson epidemic of the 60s and 70s. Grace-Mannheimer House was lost to arson and subsequent demolition as recently as '98(?). The committee included Bill Scott and Foster Dunwitty from AIA, Charlie Nelson from MHS, Ken Gauthier for HRA and Barb McCormick (35 Irvine Park) liaison to The Historic Irvine Park Association, the neighborhood group. The real estate was owned/being acquired by St. Paul HRA, which I believe was completed in '76. HRA chose not to acquire four residences owned and occupied by senior women and the Cossetta Store.

That Committee decided that Wood House and Parker-Marshall House, two pivotal pre-Civil War houses, would be moved to the Park square, both to enhance the Park frontage and consolidate sites for “infill” development. Three early 20<sup>th</sup> century four square houses on Sherman were planned to be moved to outside the National District to allow for vacation of Sherman and an approximately one+ acre redevelopment site. Elm Street was moved about 100’ NE to allow for Little Sisters expansion.

By mid ’75 planning for four resulting infill sites was proceeding. Site A was the entire Panama Flats block (Panama Row was scheduled for demolition to allow for SWly widening of Chestnut Street). Site B was the Park frontage between #50 and #59. Site C was Ryan frontage between the back side of #35 IP and the “move in” site at 310 Ryan Avenue (Delmonte House at 302 Ryan was considered to be not feasible of repair or supportive of the District). Site D was the NW side of Ryan from Elm Street to the backs of Park houses. Site B was found to be too sensitive for commercial development and Site C was found to be too small for the same. Both were designated move in sites. The move in strategy at Site B was successful with the 1853 Eaton House and 1875 McDonald House being relocated there when development pressures at their original locations threatened their demolition.

Several proposals from commercial developers were entertained for both Sites A & D. At site A, a partnership of David Brooks and Len Lilyholm proposed the four six unit condo buildings now built. The six-plexes were chosen since each had massing and detail of form deemed consistent with individual 19<sup>th</sup> century houses surrounding the Park, even though the design is unabashedly modern. Brooks-Lilyholm also went on to restore the Panama Row. One competing design for site A was a mid-rise apartment slab (of “rabbit hutches” as Dave Thune opined at the time) seen all over the metro in the period; another was for four 11 unit 2½ story central hallway walkups built by the hundreds in the decades after WWII.

The Site D competition came down to Dick Schwatz’s plan of two four double house “pin wheel” site plans of simple vernacular design with each building being of mass and complexity similar to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century move ins across the street on Ryan Avenue; and a very suburban looking proposal by Wall Corporation of two townhouse buildings, one facing Elm and the other Ryan, with double garage doors per unit toward the street and entries recessed from garages.

In ’79 Fred Schmidt bought 302 Ryan Avenue from the Delmonte Estate without any public involvement or redevelopment plan contracted under the HRA/AIA Committee auspices.

At the turn of the year ’79-’80 a fifth infill site was created by the tragic loss to fire of the Second Empire Rogers House at 302 South Exchange Street. Within months of demolition there was an interesting and, at that time, innovative “plenum envelope” design with simple modern vernacular detailing and massing similar to that of 278-280 Sherman but smaller than 306 South Exchange. In that case new construction was rejected in favor of a third move in site. In the first HPC consideration of infill in the District in early ’82, it approved Ramsey Court Condominiums, a relocation of ca 1875 Wiesinger House from 411 Selby Avenue and 1881 Dreher House from 187 Grand Avenue. Both were threatened with demolition by development in their original locations. Each is a variation of Victorian bracketed styling. In the same application a very plain new construction building of two condo units above eight garage units was approved.

By ’84 construction at four of the five infill sites was substantially complete. (In a very real sense the Ryan Avenue four squares were also infill, although the extension to 1910 of the HPC District “period of

significance” for the purpose of illuminating the continual rebuilding of the City was considered important in its own right.)

I believe that the two sites dedicated to move ins have been successful in their dual primary objectives of supporting the historic context of adjacent houses and avoiding imminent loss of the move in buildings themselves. The new construction sites have provided needed density and visual interest without dominating their relatively ancient neighbors. All four sites significantly contribute to the social fabric, economic mass and cohesiveness of the little District. That strength of the District has, in turn, provided a stable anchor for substantial private restoration and investment in all of Lower West Seventh.

The work is not done, however. Even now these structures require an unusually high level of ongoing investment and maintenance. At least one pivotal structure, Forepaugh House, is currently threatened. Now is not the time to relax or confuse the carefully assembled principles that have brought us this far.

At the three Ryan Avenue lots now under study, we don’t have all of the earlier tools for directing infill design available. There are no carrots or sticks that came with HRA contracts and the authoritative AIA sanctioned committee is long gone. There is no mechanism for reserving the lots for move ins of period houses from outside the District. What can be done is request that HPC not approve designs and configurations that overwhelm the twelve regulated buildings (four four-squares and eight double houses) already on the street.

There are several parts of the Irvine Park District: Commercial buildings on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, Ramsey House block and South Exchange Street, the Park square itself and the series of modest early 20<sup>th</sup> century four squares on SW Ryan Avenue. We argue that the context for infill at 300-304-308 Ryan Avenue is Ryan Avenue. In comments following the 1/21/21 neighborhood zoom conference, the applicant for 300 Ryan Avenue said that “details are based on the corner house” (35 Irvine Park), one of the largest, most complex and more heavily patterned Victorian houses in the District.

**Comments on the 300 Ryan Avenue proposed:**

- Massing, rhythm, materials and building elements: It is understood by us that current market conditions imply denser use of each zoning lot than 40 years ago. This is good and the objective is not to reduce investment in the community. We would only hope that the 21<sup>st</sup> century contributions would be respectful and supportive of 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings. In the early Italianate revival houses around St. Paul there were many balloon frame stem walls continuing above second floor ceiling joists by 18” to 30”. This resulted in one or two laps of siding showing above second floor window head trims. In the proposed, the height of total frieze and cornice appears to be accentuated beyond that local precedent. I also don’t find local precedent in Italianate revival where the main front block of the building is not rectangular. Many later Italianates had front gabled dormers, of greater pitch than the main hipped roof, centered on the rectangular building. I also don’t recall any local Italianate two story front bay with low pitched roof nested in a broken pediment of the main roof, offset or centered. The floor plan shape seems to me more suggestive of Queen Anne (like #35), the Queen Anne feel could be increased with a prostyle front porch simply added to proposed.
- Materials: We are happy to see the change from OSB siding to fibre cement. Corner boards, opening trims and rim trims could be made of width proportionate to traditional and consistent

on at least the three elevations of the front block of the house. (See 8xx Summit Avenue). I've never seen paneled box columns in any period before 2000. One lite windows symmetrically flanking chimney have stone sills on one side and not the other (?). Entry stair rail is not shown.

- Roofs: The low pitch hipped roof definitely minimizes visual mass at the top of the building; although front gable over projecting floor plan would be an arrow pointed upward. That part of roof could be a secondary hip with bay ending under cornice. At an inset of the floor plan on NE side of the front block of the house, the main front hipped roof could continue to form a rectangle (plus offset front gable). The "notch" in proposed would be clearly visible from the street.
- Chimneys/(masonry): There are no external chimneys on buildings in period of significance (1849-1910) in the district. The proposed paneled chimney chase on proposed ends below the roof plane above and does not "read" as a chimney at all. Paneled cladding draws the eye to this anomaly. If no internal option is available, chimney chase should continue above roof plane to appropriate height. At the same time, the external chimney chase presents an opportunity. If clad in brick veneer (as shown in detail 3 of sheet "a03" —which is drawn but elsewhere deleted from proposed) the chimney could unify front porch masonry, 12" to 24" veneer over floor trusses at building front and chimney height; also providing the masonry pedestal for the building. Some accommodation to end siding/rim about 2' above grade is being made at 8xx Summit Avenue *at front elevation only*.
- Windows and doors: Two over two, vertical, double hung window configuration described in proposer narrative is superior to six over one double hungs shown. One lite full view door onto second floor front porch is visible from street.
- Setback: Prostyle front porch could be added without otherwise changing the building or site plans. The guard for window well on NE side is very close to encroaching on 292, as excavation for construction of that window well certainly would.
- Garages and parking: Out of public view.

My respectful request of HPC is to work with the proposer on four small (in terms of difficulty) adjustments to the building design scheme:

1. Establish the masonry pedestal for the building at least across the front elevation (as at 8xx Summit Avenue).
2. Change the front gable roof to a hip and allow bay to end under the continuous soffit produced thereby.
3. Revise front porch first floor columns to reflect traditional Italianate solutions. I believe that the second floor paneled newels are very close to this already.
4. Add a chimney cap.

Periodic trips to Stoagies On Grand have provided opportunity observe progress at 8xx Summit Avenue. From the public way the work appears to be cutting edge, orderly, clean and deliberate. I have every expectation that Sharkey Design Build will build a great house.

Thanks very much for your time and consideration.

Kurt Schwichtenberg