

Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission
August 27, 2019 - Meeting Minutes
Oak Park Village Hall, Council Chambers, 7:30 pm

Roll Call

Present: Chair Payne and Commissioners Jennifer Bridge, Sandra Carr, Lou Garapolo, Darrick Gurski, Rebecca Houze, Laura Jordahl, David Sokol, and Noel Weidner
Absent: Commissioners Tom Abrahamson and Aleksandra Tadic
Staff: Susie Trexler, Historic Preservation Urban Planner
Attorney: Gregory Smith, Klein, Thorpe & Jenkins

Agenda Approval

Motion by Commissioner Sokol to approve the agenda. Second by Commissioner Jordahl; Motion approved 9-0.

Non-Agenda Public Comment

None

Minutes

None

Chair Payne stated that he previously made comments on social media but will make an unbiased judgement. He then noted that there are two items on the agenda and any commenters are welcome to address both in one statement. Commenters will be given three minutes each and are encouraged to concur with previous speakers when appropriate rather than repeat.

Chair Payne opened the public hearing.

Regular Agenda

- A. HPC2019-43: 931 Chicago Ave Public Hearing (Frank Lloyd Wright Trust):** Public Hearing on the Certificate of Appropriateness application to remove additions on the east and south elevations to diminish the building footprint and allow for visitor flow (Frank Lloyd Wright-Prairie School of Architecture Historic District).

Planner Trexler gave an overview. Council swore in all speakers.

Bob Miller, Chair of the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust (Trust) Board, spoke on behalf of the applicant. He introduced several Board members also in attendance. Mr. Miller explained when the Trust acquired the house at 925 Chicago Ave, the intended use of the visitor and education center, and the process through which they came to the plans now proposed.

Celeste Adams, President of the Trust, said 931 Chicago Ave is first documented in 1873 and they will restore it to this date. The tour content will not change and 931 Chicago Ave will serve as a library by appointment only.

Karen Sweeney, Preservation Architect for the Trust, addressed the architecture of the building. South and west facades will stay, north and east facades will be restored in 1873. She said it is clear where the original building is due to the unique construction technique. Most additions appear to be porches on wood pier foundations.

Commissioner Garapolo asked if an area program was developed with information for the new visitor center such as square footage. Ms. Adams said there was a conceptual design competition but not a detailed program. They requested approximately 8,000 square feet. Commissioner Houze asked if any of the plans proposed reuse. Mr. Miller said they could not get their designed square footage without moving the house. The Commission asked the Trust about meetings held with stakeholders and neighbors. The Trust noted these meetings started on May 14, 2019.

Chair Payne said that the Ordinance states change over time is historic and asked if the Trust has any new evidence that what is proposed to be demolished is not historic. Ms. Sweeney said no. She then said if that rule had been used with the Home & Studio, nothing would be left. The true significance of 931 Chicago Ave is that it is an early Oak Park home. Chair Payne noted that the Historic District establishes the period of significance. Ms. Sweeney said presenting Wright in 1909 was most important for the Home & Studio and this doesn't meet the Ordinance. Commissioner Sokol said the Guidelines and preservation have changed since then. Today's Guidelines are what we have; they are more nuanced.

Members of the public were invited to comment.

Jim Peters said he is a member of the Society of Architectural Historians and volunteer for the Trust but his comments are his own. He confirmed that the project at 931 Chicago Ave is partial demolition, not full demolition. He suggested that the house be restored to pre-Frank Lloyd Wright as this would be what Wright would have seen when he bought the land. The neighboring houses show contrast and context. 931 Chicago was a prominent farmhouse.

Barbara Gordon said she represents the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, which is responsible for the UNESCO World Heritage Site nomination. She noted the importance of ordinances and that Wright buildings are significant for the places in which they are located. Historic districts are important and feature all levels of heritage. This district includes a portion of the UNESCO site buffer zone for Unity Temple.

Lisa DiChiera, Landmarks Illinois. Ms. DiChiera said she understands the education mission but the project sets a bad precedent she referenced the Ordinance and said needing a visitor center is not a qualification for demolition. It is the responsibility of the Trust to follow the Ordinance.

Doug Gilbert, 220 S Maple, said he will speak twice, once for each item. He said restoration must be to the period of significance. 1909 made sense for the Home & Studio and would still make sense today. Anna Lloyd Wright's time at 931 Chicago Ave is the most significant period for that building. Removing portions associated with Anna Lloyd Wright removes her from the site, which is an injustice to her and that history. It would also create a false sense of history. He asked for a more scholarly study of the house including evidence, design evolution, and a historic structure report. Only general history was provided. More documentation is needed.

Frank Lipo, 535 N Ridgeland Ave and Executive Director at Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest, urged rejection of both COAs. He said both buildings are contributing and the changes are not necessary. The Home & Studio currently handles 90,000 visitors per year successfully. He has met several times with the Trust but there has been resistance to flexibility and putting preservation back into the Trust. They should invest in both existing buildings. John Thorpe worked

closely with the community in developing the Home & Studio. A new visitor center could be a model for reuse. Do not set a precedent for demolition.

Frank Heitzman, 213 S Euclid Ave, said he is opposed. Moving 925 Chicago would be the same as demolition. The Ordinance allows demolition for non-contributing buildings, economic hardship, and public health. None of these apply. The Ordinance is a basic preservation tool.

Nancy Nemetz, Oak Park resident, read a statement from Wendy Greenhouse, another Oak Park resident. Ms. Greenhouse stated that demolition is not needed and preservation has led to a thriving tourism industry in Oak Park. The Trust must follow the same rules. Ms. Nemetz added that the context to the Home & Studio is amazing and she wants others to experience that.

Andrew Elders, Oak Park resident and preservationist, said he has advocated against three demolitions in Oak Park since he moved here three years ago. He is surprised. Contributing buildings cannot be demolished. There must be another way.

Joshua Klayman, 300 block of N Marion St, said he is not against development but exceptions to the historic preservation rules must be extraordinary. Architects must take context into account and the community should be involved.

Bruce Lehman, 1045 Pleasant St, said he is against demolition and moving.

Gary Schwab, 316 N Oak Park Ave, said the COAs must be denied to preserve the Ordinance.

Elizabeth Berg, 616 N Kenilworth Ave, said she agrees with those who encourage denial. She worries about the charm and character of Oak Park being eroded and feels the Village, itself, is our visitor center.

Jennifer Sandy, on behalf of the National Trust, expressed strong opposition. She said the buildings are significant on their own and as context. The National Trust partnered with the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust in gaining the Home & Studio. Changes to 931 Chicago Ave deserve careful consideration. She appreciates accommodating visitors but believes a better solution may be found. She offered that the National Trust is available to assist the Historic Preservation Commission and the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust in finding a better solution.

Jean Guasino said she is opposed to both projects. They diminish the experience of the Home & Studio and render the Ordinance meaningless. Oak Park is an outdoor museum.

Frances Figg, 1105 S Highland Ave, said she moved here 30 years ago because of the heritage. John Thorpe often talked about creating a visitor center but never suggested tearing something down in the process.

Brad White, resident of Evanston, Illinois, disclosed that he is the Chair of the Unite Temple Restoration Foundation, one of four managers of UTP, LLC; the Associate director of the Alphawood Foundation; and a member, appointed by President Obama, of the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. He said he is here to speak on behalf of himself. Mr. White said he opposes both proposals. The Trust submitted two insufficient, incomplete reports. Neither identifies the contributing status of the buildings. There is no supporting evidence for the conclusions of significance. There is no discussion of the potential involvement of Frank Lloyd Wright in the additions at 931 Chicago Ave. Approval would set a dangerous precedent. Alternatives should be implemented.

Paul Sakol, 1009 Clinton Ave, urged rejection as previously stated by others.

Kitty Conklin agreed with former speakers on denying the applications. The rules must be applied consistently.

Mark Todd, 518 Forest Ave, said he lives 300 feet from the Home & Studio and heard about the project from the newspaper. He urged rejection and agreed with former statements.

Eric Davis, 112 N Lombard Ave, encouraged rejection. He said he first visited the Home & Studio as an architecture student and believes the small additions at 931 Chicago Ave are an important educational opportunity. He noted that architects don't just do large, solo projects, but also build additions for their mothers. The scholarship must be done to understand the pieces.

Paul Harding, owner of Frank Lloyd Wright's Davenport House in River Forest, said he has been the restoration architect for three Frank Lloyd Wright houses. He showed pages five and six of graphic analysis, noting the size of the proposed visitor center and that this is not a binary choice. He proposed that minor alterations on the rear of 925 and 931 Chicago Ave that would allow a visitor center to be built behind.

Richard Katz, owner of 711 Clarence Ave, said we all want what is best for the community and encouraged looking at why there is disagreement. Most agree that a visitor center is needed. He said the specifics are up for debate but the uses are appropriate. He expressed concern that reuse of 925 Chicago Ave would be a false façade and look like Disneyland. There is not a slippery slope as there is only one Home & Studio. He said all projects can be improved but he doesn't see adaptive reuse.

Jan Dressel said she gave tours of Forest Ave in 1972 and was the first caretaker of the Home & Studio. She expressed concerns about this project. Saving the Home & Studio was a community project. Frank Lloyd Wright thought up ways to solve problems and we have a problem. The project is off-scale and there is a school across the street. She expressed hope for community input and problem-solving. She urged preserving the buildings and finding a better solution.

Wendy Wyatt, 427 N Kenilworth Ave, said her back yard is one yard away from the house in question, her house has been on the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust tour twice, and she has lived here for over 30 years. She agreed with previous speakers and said she believes it is a community problem. She said she would have appreciated more transparency. The first thing she received was a notice from the Village. She expressed concern about the school across the street and traffic.

Ron Polluck, 426 Forest Ave, said he is a direct neighbor of the Home & Studio and urges rejection. This is a double-standard issue. He and his wife won an award from the Historic Preservation Commission last year for the restoration of their historic siding. He received a note from the Trust but was out of town and felt the Trust did not engage with them.

Susan Caudell, owner of the Frank Lloyd Wright remodeled H. P. Young House, said she is supportive of the Trust. The house is part of the walking tour. She agreed with all previous points against the projects. The Trust benefits from the community working together within the Guidelines. She said that she has been before the Commission for projects; homeowners are putting in the time and work. The neighborhood tours bring in money for the Trust. Wright Plus is also a money raiser that takes a lot from homeowners. She first heard about the project in the Chicago Tribune. She noted similarities between the H. P. Young House, a known Wright renovation, and 931 Chicago Ave, and said they would not restore the H. P. Young house to 1873.

Barry Corin, 312 N Grove Ave, said wonderful points have been made tonight. He also is opposed to the projects. He said the size of the proposed visitor center is immense and he doesn't want that massive commercial space in this neighborhood. He said the visitor center should be somewhere where the whole Village can benefit, not necessarily next to the Home & Studio.

At the direction of Chair Payne, Planner Trexler read in the evidence. Chair Payne then closed the hearing and opened discussion with the Commission.

Commissioner Garapolo said it didn't sound like the process was really three years. It seems superficial and inadequate. There was no historic structure report and he is concerned about the impact on the Ordinance. He does not support the project.

Commissioner Gurski asked for confirmation that there are 90,000 visitors per year and asked how many are expected after the new visitor center. The Trust confirmed. Ms. Sweeney said they currently use a seasonal tent to accommodate visitors and the plan is to deal with the people coming now. Commissioner Gurski asked about the budget and Ms. Adams said there isn't one as this is still a concept.

Commissioner Jordahl said full demolition has become a more frequent request during her time on the Commission. The Commission has thoughtfully absorbed and denied these COAs. 931 Chicago Ave is a contributing building. The project must conform to the Ordinance. There is no hierarchy and no economic hardship. She is opposed to the project.

Commissioner Houze said it is clear that the Ordinance does not support the project as these portions of 931 Chicago Ave were built within the period of significance. In addition, Anna Lloyd Wright's story is important. Commissioner Houze said she is opposed to the project.

Commissioner Bridge concurred and said changes would compromise the historic integrity of the Home & Studio's context. There is no hardship and they cannot allow the Trust to be an exception to rules homeowners in the district follow and the Trust benefits from.

Commissioner Carr said she would be in favor or restoration to 1909, like the Home & Studio, or 1920, when the Wright family sold the house, but doesn't support the project as presented.

Chair Payne said changes over time have historic integrity. Demolition would open up the site in a way that doesn't exist today. The proposed site plan would be out of character. Growth over time is visible in the landscape. There are multiple reasons to deny the proposal. He said there has been a resolution pre-drafted. The Commission confirmed that they are prepared to vote on the resolution.

Motion by Commissioner Weidner to pass the drafted resolution denying the Certificate of Appropriateness for alterations at 931 Chicago Ave. Second by Commissioner Jordahl. Motion approved 9-0.

AYE: Commissioner Bridge, Commissioner Carr, Commissioner Garapolo, Commissioner Gurski, Commissioner Houze, Commissioner Jordahl, Commissioner Sokol, Commissioner Weidner, and Chair Payne

NAY: None

- B. HPC2019-44: 925 Chicago Ave Public Hearing (Frank Lloyd Wright Trust):** Public Hearing on the Certificate of Appropriateness application to move or demolish the house at 925 Chicago Ave (Frank Lloyd Wright-Prairie School of Architecture Historic District).

Chair Payne introduced the next hearing and Planner Trexler gave an overview.

John Rafkin, Board member for the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust, commented on behalf of the applicant. He noted the previous comment on the UNESCO buffer zone and said it is incorrect; the 925 Chicago Ave is not within the buffer zone. He provided a map. He said there are preservationists who support this project and it is not black and white. The Ordinance needs to be flexible and needs to evolve. Education is an important part of their mission. He said the Trust considered a full range of options and have tried to incorporate 925 Chicago Ave but found they could not incorporate the building into the project due to building code and ADA concerns. The Trust understands objections but believe flexibility is needed. They will enhance the legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright. The full site plan needs to be considered. There is no danger of a slippery slope as there is only one Home & Studio. The plan benefits Oak Park and beyond; we all have the same goal.

Commissioner Weidner said the proposal will alter the context.

Kurt Neumann, a Trust Board member and Oak Park resident, said he lives in the Hemingway boyhood home and has seen neighbors seek variances from the Historic Preservation Commission that changes the neighborhood context. Chicago's best architects were engaged in this process and the Trust tried to be open about the process. He noted that the school was recently expanded. There are many other Italianate houses in the area and many are more distinguished. 925 Chicago Ave is not visible from Frank Lloyd Wright's door; you have to cross the street.

Commissioner Gurski asked about neighborhood outreach. Ms. Adams said they left a letter for neighbors before they announced the project publically. They included all Chicago Ave neighbors and two on Forest Ave. They spoke with homeowners on the phone. She said she is surprised by this testimony. They wanted to keep the information contained but maybe should have asked more neighbors. Commissioner Sokol said that neighbors should have been involved three years ago.

Don Rosenwinkel, a Trust Board member, said they used the Hasbrouck-Sprague Survey from 1970-1974. This survey ranks houses by quality, significance, etc., and 925 Chicago Ave is not mentioned. New architecture of the highest quality should be added.

Peter George, a Trust Board member, said they welcome the inclusive nature of the Historic Preservation Commission process. This is a simple and elegant design solution. They received unsolicited revisions that are not accurate or authorized by the Trust. He strongly supports moving forward with the Trust design.

Ms. Adams also spoke on behalf of the Trust. She said the trust acquired 925 Chicago Ave in 2017 and reused design attempts were not successful. She outlined the proposed uses of the new visitor center. The Trust proposes moving the house, which has been done before by the National Trust. Demolition is a last resort.

Commissioner Gurski said the number of visitors will increase. The area is growing. The project would strip away continuity of the area, which is no different from high-rises. He advised the Trust think about how to fit in.

Commissioner Bridge asked if there have been serious offers to move the building. Ms. Sweeney responded that they have talked to two anonymous people and one is still viable. Chair Payne noted that a previous Oak Park house move had been discussed at the July meeting and clarified that this house was not in the historic district. He said moving is considered through the same process as demolition in the Ordinance. He asked if the Trust discussed the process with staff and Mr. Miller confirmed that staff explained the COA process. Chair Payne asked if the house is occupy-able. Mr. Miller said it is not currently occupied and Ms. Sweeney said the furnace is currently broken. Chair Payne asked if efforts have been made to protect against demolition by neglect and Ms. Sweeney said they have tightened up the exterior.

Members of the public were invited to comment.

Karen Doty, 175 N Euclid Ave, said the Guidelines serve a broader purpose. The Frank Lloyd Wright Trust fails to see educational benefits of the two houses. Demolition would set a precedent.

Doug Gilbert said the Historic Preservation Commission has consistently said no to demolition by people still regularly ask. He asked how you can tell those people “no” if you tell the Trust “yes.”

Barbara Gordon, from the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, clarified her statement about the UNESCO buffer zone for Unity Temple. She said the house in question is not in the buffer zone but a portion of the historic district is. The strength of enforcing the historic districts protects the buffer zone as well. As the buffer zone also extends to the Ridgeland-Oak Park Historic District, she would be here for that district as well.

Frank Lipo said that 1970 was the dawn of preservation and the Hasbrouck-Sprague Survey was a windshield survey that included no research and is outdated. He also said that it is dangerous to create a laundry list of Italianates and say some can go if others are “better.” They should not be ranked.

Brad White said he didn’t hear anyone say that 925 Chicago Ave had to be the visitor center and it just needs to be included. The Home & Studio is not unique: the Unity Temple congregation owns the Gale House and could ask to tear that down. Churches and other groups own houses. This request is a dangerous precedent. He said he has never seen a Certificate of Appropriateness with a concept plan. Other communities review full plans and details get discussed. In addition, concept plans evolve, but not this one?

Chair Payne offered the Trust a chance to respond; they did not have any additional statements. At the direction of Chair Payne, Planner Trexler read in the evidence. Chair Payne then closed the hearing and opened discussion with the Commission.

Commissioner Weidner said the proposal would be removing context and eroding the district from its core. He is opposed to the proposal. Commissioner Garapolo concurred.

Commissioner Houze said she doesn’t support demolition of relocation. This is a contributing resource. They received over 50 letters from the public largely in opposition and these pointed out two main problems: that this would weaken the Ordinance and erase the context of the development of the Prairie style. She quoted from the National Register nomination, which references the presence and importance of Italianate style houses in the district.

Chair Payne reiterated the issues in direct relation to the Ordinance. He said the building was purchased to be used for something it wasn’t created for, so they created their own issue. They do not have to just save the façade. There are other options for reusing the building and they should

be able to make it ADA compliant. Chair Payne said this should be a trend-setting building, not demolition and a blank slate like every other developer does. They can maintain the streetscape and have a building behind it. He said there has been a resolution pre-drafted. The Commission confirmed that they are prepared to vote on the resolution.

Chair Payne asked that an edit be made to item 27, clarifying that the house has arched window frames but not arched windows.

Motion by Commissioner Sokol to pass the drafted resolution denying the Certificate of Appropriateness to move or demolish 925 Chicago Ave with an edit clarifying that the house features arched window frames not arched windows. Second by Commissioner Garapolo. Motion approved 9-0.

AYE: Commissioner Bridge, Commissioner Carr, Commissioner Garapolo, Commissioner Gurski, Commissioner Houze, Commissioner Jordahl, Commissioner Sokol, Commissioner Weidner, and Chair Payne

NAY: None

OTHER BUSINESS

None

ADJOURN

Motion by Commissioner Weidner to adjourn.

The meeting adjourned at 10:30PM.

Minutes prepared by Susie Trexler, Urban Planner Historic Preservation.