

It is with great dismay that I read most of the proposals of the Special Facilities Committee for the renovation/reconstruction of Central High School. I am opposed to any plan which involves razing older homes and the former YMCA and the Christian Science Church because I believe it will have a deleterious effect on the neighborhood and because I believe it is irresponsible to destroy our history.

Regarding the neighborhood:

I have lived at 507 North Elm Street in Champaign for the last 28 years, and lived 5 years before that on Randolph Street. My husband and I chose to live in the older part of town to support the historic core of the city, to do our small part to keep it from becoming a wasteland of abandoned and poorly maintained buildings as so often happens when homes age. We chose to live and raise our three children in a diverse neighborhood because it offered so many possibilities: libraries, schools, swimming pools and parks not to mention its deep cultural roots and current cultural richness. We have seen an amazing revival of downtown Champaign over the course of the time we have lived here and an improvement in the quality of life in our neighborhood without gentrification. I might add that those improvements happened almost exclusively in older buildings adaptively reused.

Currently we live in a neighborhood with a healthy atmosphere, with a racially, culturally, and socioeconomically balanced population. The proposal to remove five (or more) imposing historic structures and to raze or substantially deface the beautiful Central High School will devastate the nature of this area permanently. The character and beauty of those older homes, the historic significance and visual charm, are well integrated into our \*now \*well functioning neighborhood.

I encourage you to consider the following: a beautifully renovated Central High School, updated, expanded –upwards perhaps-- with ball fields on the lots that you own, those lots north of Marketplace Mall. Why are we destroying the city core for sports arenas? Chicago, New York, Philadelphia—they do not do this. They build their sports facilities on available not necessarily adjacent land.

This may sound like a not-in-my-backyard argument, but it is in fact the reverse. My backyard is fantastic and it could be even better with a renovated and updated Art Deco Central High School building in the original footprint (or one ever so slightly expanded e.g. build the parking lot into a garage/additional classroom space). I fear there are many unexplored possibilities like this. Accommodating sports facilities (as something peripheral to learning) elsewhere, would allow this to happen.

Regarding historic structures:

High level learning takes place at the Sorbonne, at Oxford, at the University of Bologna in buildings as old as the invention of universities. How does this happen, and why does this happen? It happens because modernity is only revered in balance with cultural legacy. It happens because those places take pride in providing the best education in the world. It happens because learning takes priority over sports. It happens because “old” is not necessarily bad, and is nearly always redeemable, renovatable. And why renovate? The answer is to provide a continual sense of pride of place.

Americans tend to worship the new, the bigger, the more modern claiming it is the only way to learn, to do business or to live. It is not. It feeds our economy to continue to build, that is true. But In fact, scholars from economists to psychologists emphasize the importance of a “sense of place” to the well being of the economy and the individual in an increasing digital environment. The threatened properties, including the school itself, provide that sense of place, giving generations of students a legacy to be proud of, to own and to give back to in future years. Please consult the fine work of PACA and Landmarks Illinois for all the information you may need on these properties.

I urge you to consider this issue further, in consultation with other cities, towns, and school districts who have faced similar challenges. Please include (more) historic preservationists among your Special Facilities committee members. Consider what is at stake here. Future generations can see that we build on the good work of the past or they can see that we thought their past was worthless. They can see that we thought the way to solve a problem was by

destroying things and using up more precious natural resources or that we prudently maintained buildings, made necessary, innovative improvements and preserved resources. I understand that there are issues of equity with Centennial to be resolved. Equity within the sports arena I will not address any further than I already have because that is not the mission of the school. Students can “gain knowledge, skills and attitude” without sports; and an overemphasis on sports distorts the actual mission of any school. Equity within the learning environments should and can be addressed with renovation and smart additions to the existing school. Thank you for your attention,  
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