

PHELONY JONES

The phone, the tea, and the News of the World

Saturday, November 6, 2010

Historian Bob Baumann

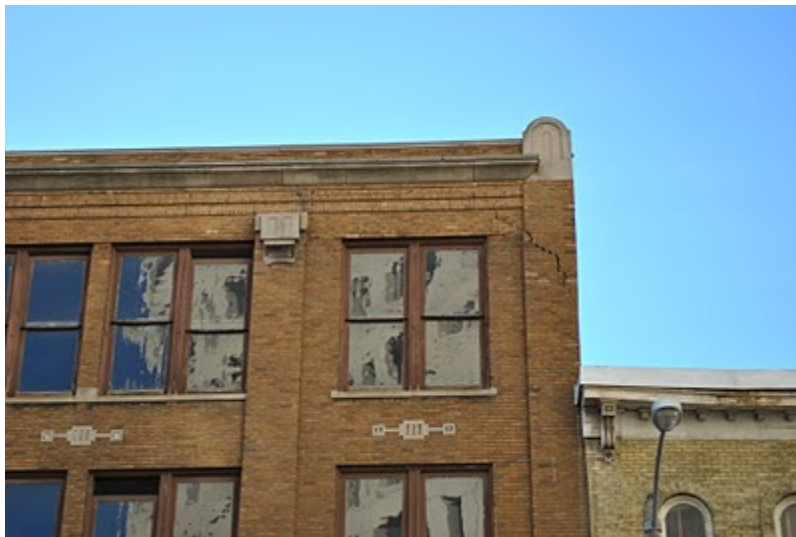
Milwaukee has a long history of tearing down some beautiful structures. In the "Making of Milwaukee," a series created and narrated by John Gurda, he describes many turn of the century structures that were torn down during the 60s and 70s. On more than one occasion, citizens protested the razing of historical buildings and houses, only to have the city tear them down in the middle of the night. Schwartz book stores used to carry an impressive selection of books about architecture in Milwaukee. I'll bet you didn't know that the landfill that Summerfest is built upon contains the ruins of the mansions once located in the Yankee Hill/Juneau Avenue area.

I wasn't here to witness this myself, but through conversations with relatives and other longtime Milwaukeeans, I've heard story after story of history's destruction. From what I can gather, the attitude at the time was that these buildings were simply... "old".

The construction of the Milwaukee freeways in the 50s and 60s meant the clearing of many buildings and homes, and unfortunately, they never finished the job of building the freeway. It's hard to justify the destruction of some property over another, but we would have a more functional freeway system today if we hadn't had "environmental studies" and former Mayor Norquist standing in the way of progress. [Take a look at this map](#) and tell me that the Park and Stadium Freeways wouldn't have helped you out on many an occasion, not to mention encourage movement throughout the city. It made sense, it was an example of good demolition for a strategic purpose.

[2010: Marriott Hotels proposes a new hotel site in downtown Milwaukee](#), on a city block that is convenient to the financial institutions and Summerfest grounds. Upscale, modern, excellent brand, JOBS, and much needed hotel space could be ours. Instead, [Alderman Bob Baumann](#) has decided that this crumbling dump is more valuable than progress:

(all photos are clickable)



Let's look at this building. We aren't looking at anything *special*. Other than the excellent poured glass windows, it's rather generic. There are many signs of alteration and shifting...half of the storefronts are bricked up on the low end, the upper right corner is separating from the building and is going to fall off, and hardly any of the windows are plumb anymore (shifting). There isn't anything significant about this building that I can find, and from what I understand through third party, there isn't anything left on the inside. If there are a few things, Baumann can get salvage rights.



The other buildings that would be torn down to make way for the Marriott are the gray roof buildings above, and the "tile" building and cream city brick buildings below. Now, those cream city storefronts are nice - the facades are in decent shape. And small enough to be put together as one storefront and relocated.



Bob Baumann argues that other "historic" buildings in the area have been renovated. Below are

pictures of the buildings he's referring to, which are on other side of Milwaukee Street, north of Wisconsin Avenue. There's a very clear difference between the **types** of buildings that should be cleared for development, and what should not:






And my last point is the heart of my argument: does Bob Baumann understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate demolition? I'd have to argue that he doesn't. And it aligns with other anti-business decisions that he's made in the past, such as hiking the street parking rates in his district to \$1.50/hr. For all of the business exposure he has as a representative, I have to conclude that Baumann is either genuinely ignorant in his assessment of what's good for his district, or he knows and purposely does not want to jump at a brilliant opportunity to upgrade the area. And it could use it.

Below are photos of the exceptional Milwaukee Depot, which would be about the same vintage as the cream city storefronts that you see above. It was razed to make way for a key segment of the Milwaukee freeway - a segment that would have linked the Park East Freeway with the Hoan Bridge and then extended to the Airport/Belt Freeway. What's there today? Not the Freeway... it was never built because John Norquist et al insisted that we stop building the freeway. Instead, we have the the O'Donnell parking structure. With a few additions and renovations, this would be a pretty nice intermodal station at the heart of downtown, no?



You can argue whether the above is good or bad demolition. This is the type of situation that calls for second thoughts - how to integrate the old and the new - and preserve our history.

Ten years from now, the crummy buildings at the proposed Marriott site will still be empty, condemned, or demolished. Bob Baumann will be long gone as an Alderman, if we're lucky. And Downtown Milwaukee will have lost out on a grand opportunity to transform a key business district. We could argue it's the last business district in Downtown Milwaukee.

Posted by Phelony Jones at [7:47 PM](#) 

COMMENTS

 [asianbadger](#) said...

Outstanding post, Phel. Well done.

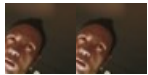
[November 6, 2010 10:28 PM](#)



[yoSAMite](#) said...

Great info and right on target.


[November 7, 2010 12:00 PM](#)



[David Casper](#) said...

Great post. That area south of Wisconsin around Broadway and Milwaukee is an embarrassment. Development never seems to take off there. So now someone actually wants to invest money in it rather than living with a crumbling building and this genius challenges it. Nice.

[November 7, 2010 1:59 PM](#)

 [LGD](#) said... You've convinced me. Unfortunately I'm not the Alderman. Or a Milwaukeean any more. But I'm passing your link to a few who are.

[November 7, 2010 4:07 PM](#)



[Phelony Jones](#) said...

Thank you everyone for your comments. I was talking with my parents this evening and they remarked on how many truly great buildings were quickly bulldozed in the 60s and 70s. There were a lot of tsks and head-shaking.

[November 7, 2010 7:06 PM](#)

 [C. G. Smith](#) said...

Just heard about this on Jay Weber's show and wow! This is a fantastic post! I will be reading more entries from you.

[November 9, 2010 5:24 AM](#)

 [Chris](#) said...

It's simply incredible to think of the top-notch freeway system we'd have right now had we actually FINISHED the freeways that were proposed and/or already being built. Folks could get to jobs all over the area via car/bus in short order thus making Milwaukee even more attractive to businesses looking to relocate. But oh no, we certainly can't have progress in our fair city!

[November 10, 2010 1:42 PM](#)