

Opinion



Patrick McIlheran

The real losers if a project fails

Nov. 21, 2010

You know who least needs a \$50 million Marriott hotel on a tatty-looking block of downtown Milwaukee? I mean aside from Ald. Bob Bauman and the historic preservationists who are trying really hard to stop it.

The people who least need this project are the moneybags who are putting up the \$50 million. The investors are foreigners who gain rights to live in the United States if they make job-creating investments. But the investments don't have to be in Milwaukee. They can be anywhere. The investors don't have to live here. To them, we're just another place.

On the other hand, the developers who hope to build the four-star hotel wrapped around the southwest corner of Wisconsin Ave. and Milwaukee St. are more committed to Milwaukee. Wave Development is local. They did the Aloft on Old World 3rd St. and Waukesha's Country Springs Hotel water park, among other projects.

And they really, really want that downtown site. They say they can't squeeze the 10-story hotel, with restaurant, pool, meeting spaces and 200 rooms, into the very old, mainly vacant buildings. They have to rip those down.

Bauman and the preservationists say this is unacceptable and are holding up the one thing the developers need from the city, permission to raze. Find some empty downtown lot, says Bauman. He suggested N. 4th St. and W. Wisconsin Ave.

That's a graveyard of big projects. And it's west of the river: The Marriott isn't aiming at conventioners but at business travelers, says the developers' spokesman, Evan Zeppos. The business district is mainly east of the river. Wave wants Wisconsin Ave. prominence, and the obvious weak spot on E. Wisconsin Ave. is the plastered-over abandoned Walgreens and the undistinguished piles behind it. That specific location makes the project work, says Zeppos.

The city wants the project: Mayor Tom Barrett's office backs it, since unsubsidized development that leads to 200 long-term jobs is very good.

The snag is that preservationists are even more location-specific. Behind those forgettable, altered facades, they say, is a marvelous block of 19th-century commercial architecture. There are rules demanding its protection, so in the three-block historic zone, demolition is "generally not permissible."

Preservationists are earnest and thoughtful. Ask what makes the buildings historic - what, did Lincoln sleep in one? - and Anna-Marie Opgenorth, head of Historic Milwaukee Inc., replies, "It's a much more rich issue than whether a president stayed in the house."

The buildings look undistinguished? Ah, but they contain unique materials and craftsmanship. We have lots of 19th-century buildings restored nearby? "It's also about the context, creating that neighborhood feel" on a whole block, she said. Developers offered to preserve, even restore, the facades, but preservationists point out that the backs of the buildings add to the integrity.

E-mails from preservationists to the city are full of such phrases suggesting an ability to see hidden worth and a dedication to saving it. These qualities are admirable, and it's true that the buildings' history is good for the city.

But it's not the only good thing. Saving history, however undistinguished, is a luxury for a wealthy society, but it's not a sacred principle - other than in historic preservation rules that granted Bauman the ability at the Historic Preservation Commission meeting last week to stall the project until December and perhaps for a year.

Those rules, a kind of veto, fail to recognize that this is a trade-off. Preservationists say they're not anti-development, but they plainly see it as optional and history as non-negotiable. They don't need the Marriott at all and can wait until someone comes up with plans that fit buildings that have sat empty so long.

In this, they're as take-it-or-leave-it as the investors. Those who most need the project are the as-yet unidentified 200 people who will make a living at the hotel. They weren't at the meeting, though they're the ones with the most at risk.

The developers, meanwhile, can find a spot outside the reach of Bauman, a perpetual obstructionist. The investors can find another city entirely, one more flexible. It will be Milwaukee's loss.

Patrick McIlheran is a Journal Sentinel editorial columnist. E-mail pmcilheran@journalsentinel.com

COMMENTS

[letstrytobepolite](#) - [Nov 20, 2010 7:27 PM](#)

Pat, you write as though preserving historical building is both important and unnecessary. Perhaps you might share more about the rules protecting these buildings. Tell us more about the Historic Preservation Commission and its history, please.

[Maximilian77](#) - [Nov 21, 2010 2:52 AM](#)

Pat, you're forever the fool. If you had it your way, there'd be a gas station on every corner downtown. Go crawl back in your myopic hole.

[DavidPC](#) - [Nov 21, 2010 3:54 AM](#)

There are cities that have no zoning laws & no historic preservation codes, such as Dallas, Houston, & Las Vegas. These cities are junk, frankly. Sprawling, generic, messes. I'll take Milwaukee any day...

[SkunkPrince](#) - [Nov 21, 2010 7:26 AM](#)

I'm as big a preservationist as anyone, but is it true that these buildings are basically junk inside? If the majority of the structure is garbage, then I can see saving the facade and rebuilding the insides. We have enough backs of old buildings, I can't see where a few more would matter.

Save things unique and in good enough condition that major rebuilding isn't necessary. if you basically have to gut it anyways....

[frostybambi](#) - [Nov 21, 2010 9:02 AM](#)

History can be a funny looking at a tiny timeframe. Milwaukee river area was once home to indian villages and we don't see that heritage protected where we don't even know if a building sits on the former site of an indian chief. Maybe TRex roamed around the area. City tends to protect its golden era buildings as if the heyday of manufacturing will make a return, whole of Milwaukee lake front will be wanted for the super billionaires to make the area into midwest Malibu.

There were plenty of historic houses and buildings in the city torn down over the years to make room for progress. Unless investors want to pour in millions to renovate buildings with issues like high ceilings, poor weatherization and maybe lead paint we can't save all of history and especially not just some history. If we really are true to history much of what is in museums was sold because people fell on hard times. Milwaukee needs jobs. The whole city is not at risk of losing its many and ample fine examples of old world craftsmanship to sacrifice for this project. Its just like when as a kid had to separate with beloved treasures that were dust collectors and learn one can not be a pack rat in life. Took plenty of pictures from the old brownie camera and

treasures went in the trash. Writing new history today, protecting the city's ability to sustain itself.

Badger68 - Nov 21, 2010 10:10 AM

Preservationists don't care about anything but their own clout and would probably want to preserve a decorative outhouse if one still existed.

mcormack - Nov 21, 2010 12:01 PM

I watch the local city channel on a regular basis, and in the committee hearings Alderman Bob Bauman has been known to distort facts and bend the truth in order to get his way (I wonder if he's a Democrat?). It's a very unbecoming way for an elected official to act, and it doesn't surprise me that Bauman would be an obstructionist in regard to bringing much needed business to the downtown Milwaukee area.

Bob Dobalina - Nov 21, 2010 5:14 PM

What's truly more conservative than preserving our history? Except for the Calatrava, what parts of Milwaukee's built environment do you show off to visitors? The historic ones -- Historic Third Ward, Brady Street, Downer Avenue, City Hall, Milwaukee Street, Jefferson Street. That's where the city's economy is strongest. With all the vacant sites available for new construction, including one lot sitting empty across from the convention center for more than 30 years, why tear down something the experts say is historic, something that with investment could also add real value to downtown and generate jobs?

basho1975 - Nov 21, 2010 6:09 PM

. Historic building and districts are great, but they're even better in the context of a vibrant, active city. Redevelopment of these historic buildings appear to be too costly for a private developer to take on without subsidy – do we have the money to subsidize renovation? If this opportunity is passed by, how many more years will these buildings continue to be dead zones on the life of the street and a whole in the tax revenues.

Take a look at downtown Minneapolis for example. Historic buildings can coexist with new development. Downtown is not a museum, but should be a living, breathing, evolving creature, which is how it was built and became great.

Let them build. Milwaukee, quite frankly is the beggar, not the chooser these days... and besides, this development looks like a good one.

basho1975 - Nov 21, 2010 6:11 PM

er, that would be "hole," not "whole."

leftwisconsin - **Nov 21, 2010 8:45 PM**

Milwaukee is so desperate for jobs they might have to sell the city itself. Maybe AZ would take it off your hands for a buck. Come on the other 49 states get in there to bargain them jobs out of Wisconsin. Left Wisconsin and sure glad got out of there.

honesttruth - **Nov 22, 2010 4:39 PM**

Bauman is a moron. Left to him, this site will sit just like the freeway corridor that sits empty and dead, except for the trash, seagulls, and parking lot con men.

sanselmo - **Nov 23, 2010 9:12 AM**

To the Bob Dobalina's of the world: Please think through your argument when you state that they should just build on an existing empty lot such as 4th and Wisconsin. Do you not see why that lot (and others) are empty? Either there is not sufficient market demand, or government is in the way. Think what the developers are saying: this is for business travelers, not convention folks. Under your reasoning, why not build at 27th and Wisconsin; that's been an empty lot for years. THERE'S A REASON WHY A LOT IS VACANT.

sanselmo - **Nov 23, 2010 9:15 AM**

Last I checked, the US economy is market-driven (although this is eroding quickly). With SOME constraints from government, let the market decide.