



Save the old Gettelman Brewery site

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The historic Gettelman Brewery at the MillerCoors campus on Milwaukee's West State Street.

This is a response to recent news of MillerCoors' threat to demolish the heart of the former Gettelman Brewery on West State Street.

I write as an architectural historian whose primary interest has, for many years, been the architectural history of pre-Prohibition Midwestern breweries. I am firmly convinced of the historic importance of the Gettelman buildings as a group, and I strongly support their designation and careful protection – in situ – where they have been since 1856/1858.

At a neighborhood meeting on Sept. 6, MillerCoors revealed a new proposal calling for the relocation of the building that had served initially as the Schweickhardt/Gettelman family home. Company officials would then proceed with their plan to demolish the other structures and re-develop the current site for truck parking.

This is neither a "compromise" nor a "solution" in any way, and it doesn't begin to approach anything that could legitimately be called historic preservation.

Indeed, for MillerCoors to rip the house away from its moorings, and then destroy the other Gettelman elements would be to obliterate entirely the historic integrity inherent in the close relationship among the parts of this small complex. Such a proposal suggests that MillerCoors officials lack an understanding and respect for the already established historical significance of this last remaining example of the beginnings of the brewing industry in Milwaukee. Trucks trump history, apparently, even brewing history.



Appel

In its special hearings in April and May, the Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission approved the permanent historic designation of the Gettelman buildings and Milwaukee landmarks. That decision is being appealed by MillerCoors at a meeting of the Zoning, Neighborhoods and Development Committee on Tuesday at 9:00 a.m., in City Hall.

If the committee caves in to the arguments of the multinational corporation over those of mere individuals who recognize the historic worth of the Gettelman structures, those structures and their direct ties to the origins of brewing in Milwaukee will be lost. And corporate power is strong – no mistake about it.



What else could be done? MillerCoors could certainly integrate the Gettelman structures into their own visitors tour, thereby strengthening the sense tourists develop of the history of brewing in Milwaukee. Or, as in other early brewing centers like St. Louis and Cincinnati, this complex, with its underground lagering cellars, could parallel efforts elsewhere to use the rediscovery of old beer vaults to stimulate tourism and bring people and money into those cities.

In Cincinnati, particularly, this effort is raising funds to renovate and revitalize an old brewing district, while also paying homage to the significance of brewing to that city's history.

Certainly Milwaukee, though often proudly known as "Brew City," would do well to take more notice of the remnants of the great industry that once was so prominent here. Too many of its great breweries have been allowed to deteriorate and disappear. The Pabst complex, at least, is demonstrating that there are alternative possibilities.

But the industry that eventually produced enormous plants like Pabst's really rose from earlier efforts by brewers who started small, and whose first structures are perfectly represented by the Gettelman buildings and the underground lagering cellars below them. Almost every Midwestern brewery before the later 1870s began in much the same way. All of the others that gave birth to Milwaukee's many breweries are now gone – except for the original structures at Gettelman's site, which remain, all of a piece.

That is unusual. It is special. And it should not be allowed to be wasted.

Milwaukee has an impressive program that promotes the preservation of its diverse architectural resources and helps make the city a good place to live. But the reputation of that program will take a real hit if this proposal to discard Gettelman is allowed to proceed.

To let it do so is to accept the notion that a major multinational corporation is in such need of parking space that it can find no other way to get it other than by eliminating a small group of structures that are, ultimately, fundamental to its own history and to the history of the area in which its own plant stands. Far more deference to that history is in order here, both from that corporation and from the local authorities who must review the proposal.

A small number of people concerned with brewing history and historic preservation have for several months tried to publicize the historic importance of Gettelman's. Many more are needed to support Gettelman's preservation. The next step is the Zoning, Neighborhoods and Development Committee's review of the historic designation on September 19. Please write to or call the members of that committee and express your concern for the intended waste of these historic resources.

Remember: Very few breweries from that early stage of the industry's history are still around. Milwaukee has in its hands the power to ensure that this rare example may continue to exist and provide a direct link to the origins of an industry that helped make the city what it is today. Please help!

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