

Preservationists win some, lose some in Nebraska

Wednesday, July 16, 2014 - McCook Gazette

You win some, you lose some. Folks in Lincoln have lost an important piece of history to the University of Nebraska's whims and preservationists in Omaha have apparently lost a battle to save a couple historic buildings from the Mutual of Omaha wrecking ball.

Meanwhile, the Saline County Commissioners are to be commended for agreeing to build an appropriate addition to their historic courthouse in Wilber instead of tearing it down and building a new one. Likewise, kudos to the folks in Omaha who are rehabbing the historic Flatiron building west of the Old Market.

Preservationists mounted a campaign to save the Clarinda-Page apartment buildings and several retail buildings earmarked for demolition so Mutual of Omaha can build an office tower and parking lot. But the Omaha City Council gave unanimous approval to removing the landmark status from the buildings, which will clear the way for the project in the popular Midtown area.

The University of Nebraska had already begun demolition of the original Cushman Motorworks plant (opened in 1913) when preservationist Matt Steinhausen started waving a red flag to save the building, which represented early manufacturing in Lincoln. The University had claimed the building was too unstable to save. When Steinhausen saw a 3-ton skid loader operating on the pre-cast concrete second floor, he knew the mission deco style building was better built than anybody thought.

A city planner threatened to halt the University's demolition because they didn't have a proper permit. But, a University spokesman responded that their action was based on past precedent with the city. He added that he would coordinate with the city in the future. The University further said it has no plans for the vacant land.

A 2005 UNL Campus Plan noted that Chancellor Harvey Perlman said the site could become home to an early incarnation of Innovation Campus, where the university would partner with the private sector on research and development in coordination with a research center at the remodeled Whittier Junior High School, which is nearby.

But those plans were later abandoned after UNL secured a new Innovation Campus site at the former Nebraska State Fairgrounds. Preservationists fought to save the Industrial Arts Building on that site after it was named one of the nation's 11 most endangered

historic buildings by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2011. New innards and a second story are being added to that building's first floor, which has been saved.

Perhaps learning a lesson from the well-publicized Innovation Campus plan that resulted in the historic 4-H and Industrial Arts Buildings being saved, the University was mum on plans for the Cushman buildings. It's hard to make the case for saving a building if nobody knows it's going to be demolished.

Saline County's plan to build a \$4.1 million addition to its historic courthouse was approved in May as a reasonable alternative to demolition and construction of a new \$12 million courthouse. They say the addition will satisfy modern requirements for safety, security and accessibility while maintaining the integrity of the 86-year-old classical revival style original structure ... and for about a third of the cost. That's the economic argument that is so vital for a positive spin on preservation.

Another positive spin comes from announcement that the historic Flatiron building in downtown Omaha will undergo a \$5 million renovation with unoccupied office space being converted into luxury apartments. A new plaza and lighting also are planned for the area. Now, that's pro-active. That's money spent locally on labor and construction materials.

Numerous studies have shown the positive economic impact of historic preservation. That's the message that needs to be delivered in Omaha and Lincoln. What would be even better is for preservationists to put their money where their mouth is and work with developers to finance a project to showcase redevelopment of a building. That entrepreneurial approach has worked in other states.

The other lesson here for preservationists is to be aware of their assets. That realization started when Cushman sold out to a corporate giant in another state, which then cleaned out and folded up shop. Keeping a wary eye on the University, encroaching on the neighborhood from the west, would likewise have provided some cues.

It's time for more wins before Nebraska loses more history.

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